

THE LAST SCORE

©2026 *Sukoluhle Nontokozo Mdlongwa*

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DISCLAIMER: Everything in this story is a work of fiction. Real places, brands and artists will be used to make the story more relatable. Any resemblance to real life events is coincidental.

WARNING: The story contains the use of strong language, violence and explicit sex scenes. Reader's discretion is advised.

Prologue

Rain showers patter gently on the roof, creating a soothing rhythm that almost matches the steady beat of my husband's heart. I am nestling on his chest, tracing a finger on the contours of his ribcage. I scoot closer, wishing for a way to get under his skin and live under it. He wraps his muscular arms tightly around my tiny frame and then kisses my forehead. If it was up to me, I swear I would live in this position forever.

It's New Year's Eve and for once in five years that I have been married to my husband, we decided not to go home, opting to just spend the last hours of the year in each other's company. In the last five years that I have been married to this man, we always go to Ladysmith for Christmas and Easter Holidays. It's a family tradition that everyone gathers at their family home and celebrate together. With my husband's siblings married with kids of their own, the home is always full. Sometimes there can be 30 people under one roof and that makes my in-laws even happier. Seeing their children and grandchildren under one roof makes them happy.

This year we asked to be excused. We were both busy at work throughout the year so we decided to use the holidays as a bonding session. Just stay indoors, cook, eat, watch series, reconnect and just be ourselves. I must admit, it has been amazing and I think I gained a few kilos in the past two weeks. I'm really grateful for this time.

“MaSibisi,” he says as he brushes my hair softly.

“Mthombeni,” I respond.

“What are your resolutions for the new year?” he asks.

He always asks this question and I always have an answer to it. But today, I don't have an answer. I'm at a point in my life where I feel like I have achieved everything I ever prayed and wished for. I have everything I need and want.

“Peace. A peaceful year is all I'm asking for—”

My sentence is cut short by him untangling himself from me and sitting up on the couch.

“You haven't been at peace?” he sounds and looks alarmed.

“No, not like that, babe. There's nothing to fault in our marriage or in you as a person. I mean a peaceful year in every aspect of my life.”

“Oh,” he relaxes. “Still not in good terms with your colleagues?”

“I feel like we are all a bunch of pretentious individuals. We just pretend to like each other so we can get the job done and move on with our lives.”

“You can always resign, you know,” he suggests.

“And do what? Be a housewife?”

“I can afford that and I would love to come home to a kitchen smelling of cinnamon rolls, goat stew and a wife wearing her apron, barefooted in the kitchen,” he smiles.

His smile is charming but I'm not falling for that charm. My mother didn't send me to good and expensive schools so I can end up as a domestic wife. I can't imagine my life depending on a man's earnings. I like my financial independence very much.

“That's a dream that will never become a reality—”

“Come on, MaSibisi, you know I can and will provide for us and our families. I just got a promotion at work, we will be fine.”

“It's not about how much you earn, Mthombeni. It's about my sense of independence and importance. I don't want to be reduced to a wife who is only good at making stews, holding prayer meetings and being the first to arrive at family funerals because she is unemployed. People overlook the work the unemployed do and no matter how many pots of uphuthu you cook, you will still be seen like a useless somebody. I don't want that for me. I'm very much content as a wife who doesn't have too much time on her hands. Don't try to change me.”

“I hear you. It's just that it bothers me to see you stressed because of work. I was only trying to help.”

“You can help by helping me look for a better job.”

“Okay,” he pulls me back into his arms and plants another kiss on my forehead.

I take a deep breath and watch as the fire slowly burns out on the fireplace. I check the time on the wall clock and it's exactly twenty minutes to midnight. It is now drizzling outside, slowly easing off just as the fire is also burning out. It's as if everything belonging to this year will remain in this year and the new year will start on a clean slate.

As much as I don't have a vision board for the next year, there's something I'm looking forward to. I'm turning 32 this coming year and my husband and I agreed that we will start a family. We were not financially and emotionally ready when we got married, now we are and I can't wait for us to bring a life into this world.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he says.

“I'm just thinking about the season we are about to step into, I can't wait to be a mother,” I say and he squeezes me tight.

“I know you will be a good mother, and I pray our child takes your smile so he or she can brighten every room he walks in.”

“And have your spirit so that no matter what life throws at him, he keeps moving, believing that things do get better with more work and time invested in something,” I add.

You know it's almost midnight when the township becomes alive and fireworks start exploding from every nook and cranny of ekasi. I used to love this until I became older and less interested in the noise.

“It's almost time, let's go outside,” my husband says. As much as we don't invest in fireworks, we always watch others and take pictures and videos while at it.

“Let me put on my jersey,” I say as I sit up from the couch. I don't have to go to the bedroom for it, I had already brought it to the living room. I pick it up from the chair and slip it over my head. I take my husband's own and give it to him. He puts it on and leads the way to the door.

The stars are out, bright and shimmering as if the sky wasn't a gloomy blanket a few hours earlier. Looking at the skies now, you wouldn't guess that it was raining not so long ago. The countdown has started and you can hear the jubilation and hope in people's voices. I look at our neighbours and smile as their kids hold their 100-shooter fireworks up and giggle at every blast. This will be us in a couple of years to come, our kids will be this happy.

“5...4...3...2—”

I feel my chest tightening. I try to force out a cough, but I wheeze instead. I'm struggling to breathe, my eyes tearing up and my knees are struggling to keep my body up.

“Anele!” my husband's voice cuts through the noise. “Babe, stay with me,” he says cupping my cheeks.

I want to say something, to tell him that I can't breathe, but it seems like my ability to speak is affected too.

“Someone call an ambulance!”

“One! Happy New Year!” the fireworks explode just as people scream in joy, stepping into the new year.

“Babe, stay with me!” my husband is trying to keep me awake, but something is pulling me further into the dark abyss.

“I.. I.. can.. can't breathe...”

“Anele!”

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INSERT ONE

Time of death: 00:36

Date: 01-01-2025

The paramedic's words ring in Mthombeni's head, loud and deafening. He clasps his palms over his ears, but his efforts prove to be futile. He can still hear the fireworks exploding, people screaming 'Happyyy' and in the mix of the chaos in his head is his wife's strained voice telling him that she can't breathe. It rings in his head until it starts feeling like an echo that is making his head pound. Before he can deal with the voices, he's now moving in circles—desperately wishing everything to go away.

'Move away!' the paramedic's voice echoes in his head.

'Everyone please move away!'

'We lost her... We lost her...!'

"Sabelo!" someone screams his name, but he is way too occupied by the voices in his head to care about people calling out for him. "Sabelo, where's my sister?" he hears what sounds like Owethu—Anele's sister—asking.

"We lost her..." he echoes the paramedic's words and his voice cracks just as it sinks in him too. His wife is gone, Anele is no more.

"What do you mean she's gone? Gone where? What kind of a joke is this?"

“I...I...” his mind fails to form a coherent sentence and he just stares at her. He is no longer hearing what she's saying, her lips are moving but he can't make out the sound. He tries to shake his head, to bring himself back to where he is but fails dismally. The place has become mute, all he can do is watch as people move their lips and hands.

“Sabelo!” someone is calling out to him again, but he is unable to keep up with the voices in his head and the people around him. He feels like a prey being devoured from different directions and it hurts. “Sabelo, stay with me!”

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SABELO

I wake up to a room that is way too white to be our bedroom. Anele hates white so there's no way she could have woken up and decided to surprise me with a paint job. I try to move my left arm and it hurts. I look at it and almost jump off the small bed that I find myself on.

“What the hell? Hospital?” I pull the drip out of my arm and get down the bed.

“Where are you going?” that's my brother, Mthobisi. What is he doing here?

“What happened?” I ask. He's looking at me pitifully and I wonder what's wrong with him because he knows that I hate being pitied.

“Oh, Sabelo,” that's my mother coming in.

I'm still trying to figure out why I'm here and why my family is here when my mother's body crashes on mine and a tear-jerking sob escapes her lips. I'm not dead, am I? I rub her back until she calms down. All along I'm trying to silently ask my brother what is wrong but he's not helping. Only Anele knows how to communicate with me using her eyes. Where is she? She could have long helped me clear this confusion.

“What happened?” my mother asks as pulls out of my embrace and sniffs. Shouldn't I be asking them what happened? I just woke up in hospital and there's no scar on me, the only thing I'm feeling is a banging headache. “She didn't deserve to die just like that, she was way too young—”

“Who is dead?” I ask and they both look at me as if I'm speaking an alien language.

“Sabelo,” now my mother's voice is soft and low—almost like a whisper. “Sit down,” she says.

I hate how she's looking at me right now. The last time she looked at me like this was when my twin sister died and she had to break the news to me.

“What's going on, Ma?” I'm getting impatient now.

“My son,” she takes my hand into hers, she's shaking. “Your wife left us—”

“Left us and went where? Did she decide to take the annual trip on her own this time? Wait, what day is it?”

“The first of January,” Mthobisi says and like a gust of wind, memories of the previous day flood my mind and I feel my intestines freeze. My throat is parched instantly.

“Ma... Mama—” my voice gets stuck in my throat and tears fall down my cheeks.

'Peace. Peace is all I'm asking for', her voice echoes in my head and I can vividly see her smile. I reach out to touch her but there's nothing in front of me, just an empty space.

'I can't breathe,' these were her last words. I couldn't help her, I couldn't save my dear wife.

My brain is a bit foggy, I'm struggling to keep up with what's happening around me. Now I find myself in the bedroom, at our house.

"We have to move her to a private mortuary," someone suggests. I don't even feel like being part of this conversation because I'm not ready to accept that my wife is gone. It's unbelievable.

"I think we also need a private postmortem done. I don't understand how someone who was so full of life can be gone, just like that," someone else opines.

"We need a death certificate before we can plan anything further."

My mind drifts and I find myself in the kitchen. Anele is angry at me because I was late to pick her up from work. This is the first time that she's not talking to me because she's fuming. She's a chatterbox, so it's always hard for her to keep her mouth shut even when she's angry. She is standing on her toes and struggling to reach for something from the top shelf. I place my hands on her hips and pick her up so she can get whatever she's looking for.

"Put me down," she demands. How ungrateful is this wife of mine? I decide to toy with her emotions even more by not putting her down. "Put me down, Sabelo!" she hisses.

“No, accept my apology first.”

“You want me to forgive you for making me wait an hour for you when you had said you are fifteen minutes away? Why didn't you tell me to Uber?”

“I got a call from the office and I had to go back.”

“Put me down!”

I finally put her down but I don't let her go. I pull her to me and kiss her on the forehead.

“I'm sorry,” I tell her and I see her lips parting into a thin smile. I want to kiss her again but she just disappears and all of a sudden I'm in the bedroom surrounded by my family. It hits me again, my wife is gone.

“Do you guys have funeral policies?” Nokubonga, my sister, asks.

“Yes. But can we take this slow? Why are you all so quick to get things done?” I ask and they all gawk at me.

I ask to be excused and walk out of the bedroom. I regret my decision as I come to a living room that is filled with gloomy faces and their eyes turn to pitiful stares when they see me. I don't wait for any of them to talk to me. I just walk straight towards the main door and exit the house. I settle in the garden and take a deep breath. I take my wife's phone out of my pocket and log in to her banking App. I know she had policies, she always complained about debit orders chowing her money before she could do so. I always reimbursed her for those debit orders and more. My wife loved me, but she loved her salary even more. I didn't complain though, I would still do it again and again.

My heart breaks when my eyes land on a savings account saved as ‘For Our Baby’. She had saved over R200K for a

child that we were still planning for. She didn't want our child to lack anything. The other savings account is for our birthdays and it has a little over R100K. She loved celebrating our birthdays and would go all out—weekends away, lots of activities and gifts.

I stop looking at her savings account and go to policies. She does have a funeral policy that has a R150K payout. I'm about to log out of her banking App when I notice that there's another policy. I click on it and my fingers freeze on the amount.

“Three million seven hundred thousand Rand life cover?” words escape my lips even though I didn't mean to. I'm not dreaming, am I? I check again and the amount is still there, staring at me as if it is taunting me—equating my wife's life to six zeroes. Is this all her life was worth?

“Brother-in-law,” Owethu says as she sits next to me.

“Hey,” I rub her shoulder. I know the pain she's going through, her sister was everything to her.

“How are you holding up?” she asks.

“I don't know,” I shrug, putting the phone away.

“I wish I can say this too shall pass, but I will be lying to the both of us. This is something we will have to learn to live with,” she sighs. “Elders want to talk to you.”

“I don't know if I'm in the right state of mind to be talking to anyone. What is it about?”

“Money and stuff. We have to buy food to feed the mourners while burial preparations are progressing. As we speak, more are trickling in to pass their condolences.”

“Take my card and handle everything. It's in the bedside drawer. I'm sure there's enough money for everything. I just

want to sit here, alone, for some time. Apologise to the elders on my behalf.”

“Okay,” she stands up and pats me on the shoulder. “Qina s'bali.”

I watch her as she walks back into the house. My mind goes back the amount I just saw on Anele's banking App and my heart skips a beat. Why do people take life covers?

My phone rings just as I'm trying to come to terms with everything. It's my cousin calling.

“Cuz,” I answer the call.

“Hey. My condolences, bafo,” she says.

“It is what it is, hey,” I sigh.

“I'm calling to check how the preparations are going. I'm coming later tomorrow and I also wanted to let you know that she had policies with Old Mutual, too. Do visit their offices.”

“What kind of policies?”

“A life cover, if I'm not mistaken. I would check for you if I was in the office.”

“Thanks,” I end the call.

Another life cover? What the heck? I wonder how much that one is. What am I supposed to do with this money? Is it supposed to comfort me?

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INSERT TWO

NARRATED

Funeral preparations are in full swing. The Mthombeni house is a bustle of activity—every nook and cranny has someone doing something. If it's not a family member who just arrived and is sobbing bitterly in Mam'Sibisi—Anele's mother's embrace, it's an aunt sitting right next to the mattress and demanding tea with condensed milk and honey, or an uncle asking if people have decided to fast because he's not seeing any food being prepared. On the other corner is the Sibisi sisters—Owethu, Nomakhosazana and Sebenzile together with Sabelo and his sister Ndalo.

“The funeral policy she had offers a 3-tier coffin,” Owethu pauses before she can continue. “We were thinking maybe we can upgrade it. She deserves a better coffin. What do you all think?”

“Is there money for all that?” queries Ndalo.

“We can all contribute, they said we can add R30K to get the premium one,” Owethu responds.

“Okay, I have R15K,” Nomakhosazana says.

“I will pay the rest,” Sebenzile finally speaks.

“Well, since the coffin part is sorted, we need flowers. We can choose between fresh and artificial flowers. They range between R5K-R12K depending on the size and quantity,” that's Owethu again.

“Since you all have covered the coffin part, I will pay for the flowers,” Ndalo offers.

They continue planning and pledging money while Sabelo just sits there, looking lost. It is when they start talking about the menu that he looks up and speaks.

“I’m not a charity case nor am I suddenly unable to think for myself. My wife knew what she wanted, you all know how she would plan everything to the last detail. If she wanted a premium coffin, she would have chosen it when she signed up for that policy. We are not upgrading it—”

“But my sister is a well-known person, you want people to gossip about the cheap coffin?” Owethu cuts his sentence short. “We are paying, you don’t have to pay anything—”

“I have the money, Owethu. My objection to your idea has nothing to do with the money, it has everything to do with how you are making her demise be about you showing off how a great planner and spender you are. My wife’s passing is not some show, you can plan your Instagram worthy funeral when you die—”

“Sabelo!” Ndalo berates. “Owethu is only trying to help—”

“I don’t dispute that, I just don’t like how she’s going about everything. You people are even talking about a dress code. Is this a wedding to you all? You were all waiting for my wife to die so you can showcase your designer outfits?”

“I’m sorry,” Owethu sniffs. “Anele was more than a sister to me, she was my deputy parent, my confidant and best friend. I just want her to have a dignified funeral. I didn’t mean to undermine you.”

“A dignified funeral looks like a fashion show to you?”

“My sister already apologised,” Nomakhosazana speaks. “I understand how this many look from your point of view but we have always made sure that we bury our own with dignity and love. We were not trying to overrule you or make you feel useless in all this.”

“She is a Mthombeni, she will be buried the Mthombeni way and we are not turning this into a fashion show. You can try that somewhere else. Also, I would appreciate it if you tell me before spending your money on anything. I gave Owethu my card so we can avoid having to talk about money.”

“We were only trying to help—”

“Thanks, but I can handle this,” says Sabelo as he stands up and walks away before anyone can say anything.

“Please forgive him,” Ndalo says. “It is the pain talking, not him. Let's give him some time, I will speak to him.”

The Sibisi sisters just look at her and nod. Ndalo, as the oldest sister in the Mthombeni household, has always played the deputy parent role in her siblings' lives. As a result, her relationship with her siblings is more of a typical African mama and her kids. Her siblings—Sabelo included—respect and fear her. She has always used their fear of her to her advantage as the siblings find it hard to defy her.

She excuses herself and walks out of the house, her eyes scanning around for Sabelo. He sees him standing with bab' uSibisi and other family members. She makes her way to them.

“I don't understand,” Sabelo says. “I lived with Anele for five years and she never had an asthmatic attack. How is it possible that she was killed by one? She wasn't asthmatic!”

“Calm down, son,” Bab' uMthombeni rubs Sabelo's back. “I think this young gentleman here can explain,” he says referring to the man who just delivered the postmortem results. The young man looks around, as if seeking permission to speak. He clears his throat and speaks.

“It's possible that she didn't know about it either. People can develop asthma at a later stage in life and women are more at risk of this. There are a few causes and the most common causes in women being hormonal changes and estrogen treatments. It can also be caused by working in an environment with allergens and also the family health history can be a cause. There were traces of fertility boosting pills in her system which might have triggered serious hormonal changes in her body. I'm just speculating on the causes of asthma at a later stage but we are certain that she had an asthmatic attack. It was severe and due to it being attended to late, her body couldn't hold,” he concludes.

“I told her that she didn't need those fertility pills,” Sabelo says and a tear strays down his cheek. “I wasn't pressuring her into having a child, we had agreed that we won't stress about it and trust God. Why didn't she listen to me?”

“Hey, hey,” Bab' uSibisi pats him on the shoulder. “It's not your fault. She didn't know either. This is God's will and questioning it won't do any of us any good. Let's accept that she's gone and let her rest.”

“What am I supposed to do while she's resting? I feel lost, Baba, I miss her already,” he breaks into painful sobs and Ndalo pulls him in for a hug. She hold him tight until he's a bit calmer.

“This too shall pass, bafo,” she comforts him.

“I will go and inform her mother and aunts inside,” says Bab' uSibisi and walks away. Other relatives also walk away.

“Thanks for this, man,” Sabelo says to the guy who delivered the autopsy report.

“I'm just doing my job, sir. My condolences to you and family. I will be on my way.”

“I failed her, Sisi,” Sabelo says, defeated.

“Please stop blaming yourself. I'm sure she wouldn't want you to carry that burden. Accept this and allow her to rest.”

“I don't know what to do without her. She has been at the center of everything I did in the past five years. She's the reason I worked hard. She's the reason I bought this house. She's the reason I breathe. How am I supposed to continue without that one person who made everything make sense? How am I supposed to continue seeing a home in this house without her? Who am I supposed to work for? There's no meaning to this life anymore, she took all that with her.”

“God has a plan, one day all this will make sense. Be strong, bafo.”

After all the planning, the arguing and harsh words thrown at each other, today is the day to accompany Anele to her final resting place. Sabelo gave in to the suggestion of upgrading the coffin but not to the dress code. Most people are wearing black and he's okay with that—black has been the colour of mourning for a long time now. The one part he's yet to come to terms with is that the beautiful white casket sitting in the living room has his wife inside. He hasn't been brave enough to look at her and say his final goodbyes. He feels like

doing so will put an end to everything, including the memories that he is planning to keep forever.

The family is called in to say their last goodbyes to Anele before the coffin can be wheeled to the tent outside where the community and the pastor are waiting. The painful and muffled sobs fill the room as they all queue to see Anele's face one last time. Sabelo watches and tears burn his eyes as family members continue to say their goodbyes. It's his turn now and he feels like his feet are rooted to the ground. He wants to walk towards the coffin but his feet are not moving. His brother and father notice his struggle and help him by supporting him from both sides. Tears stream down his cheeks as his eyes land on Anele's beautiful and peaceful face.

“You can't, you can't leave me alone, babe—” his voice catches in his throat and pain chokes him. “I can't do this alone, vuka MaSibisi, wake up please—”

“Calm down, brother,” Mthobisi says rubbing Sabelo's back.

“Tell her to wake up, mvuse Mthombeni (wake her up),” he's now holding tight to his father, pleading with him to perform a miracle.

“Qina ndodana (Be strong),” his father comforts him.

SABELO

I'm sitting here listening to the pastor preach but my mind is not here, my heart is willing me to stand up and run as far as I can from this place but my body is too weak to do so. I don't know why God's will has to be this painful. Couldn't God ask me what I wanted for a new year instead of taking my wife away from me? She was supposed to bury me, not the other way around. We were not supposed to be gathered at the cemetery this early into the year. We were supposed to be planning our year, making plans and ticking off some things from the list. She wasn't supposed to leave me like this.

“For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.’,” says the pastor as he throws a rose into the grave.

I don't know if I'm ready for this, I will never be ready to let her go.

Her mother's screams pierce through my heart just as her sisters' sobs tug at my heart strings. I feel like my own heart is leaving with her and what's even more painful is that there's nothing I can do to save the situation.

“Anele!” Owethu's voice fills the cemetery and at this point, I'm ready to flee this place. I can't do this, I'm not ready for this.

“Come and say your last goodbye,” that's my brother saying.

I can't do this. He sensing my discomfort and holds my hand tight. The sun is scorching hot yet I feel cold—I'm shaking even.

“Come on, you can do this.”

No, I can't. I can't do this. I follow his lead anyway although it feels like being led to a hangman's noose that will end my life. We stand next to the grave and I feel like I will keel over.

“Babe,” my voice comes out as a whisper. “I'm not ready to let you go, babe... I'm not—”

“Let her rest,” my brother says it as if there's a button I can press in my heart that can make all the pain go away.

“Uyiphulile inhliziyo yami MaSibisi, but kulungile, phumula S'thandwa sami. Iyobuya ibonane (You broke my heart, MaSibisi, but it's fine, rest my love. Until we meet again),” I throw the rose and retreat.

I watch as more people throw in the roses you would swear someone said doing so will make her wake up in a garden of roses. Owethu is still a mess and I understand her pain, she was very close to her sister. She keeps forcing her way to the graveside but her aunts are restraining her. The pastor is the first to pour sand over the coffin and gives the shovel to someone else. I watch as more sand pile on her, my chest is constricting, I cannot watch this. I break free from my brother's hold and rush out of the tent. Tears are blurring my vision but I keep going anyway.

I'm almost running now when someone grabs my arm and for a moment, tears clear from my eyes.

“Zipho?” I don't know if I'm hallucinating... but she's here.

“Don't run, she would want you to be strong for her,” I think I hear her say.

“Ziphonke?” I still can't believe that she's here. Just then a boy who could be seven or eight years old joins her and I swear I'm hallucinating. I'm staring right back at a younger version of me while my wife is being buried right behind me...

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INSERT THREE

SABELO

I wake up with a banging headache that has me finding it hard to peel my eyes open. My forehead feels heavy. I stretch my hand to Anele's side of the bed and my eyes flutter open when my hand doesn't feel her. Her side of the bed is still made up, like she didn't sleep here. On her pillow, a framed picture of our wedding day lies. For the millionth time, it dawns on me that my wife is no longer with me, she's gone and it's for good this time. Not a holiday or weekend away—her absence is permanent now. I turn to my side of the bedside table and my eyes land on the half empty bottle of Glenfiddich. This explains the headache and the rubbery taste in my mouth. I pick up the bottle and continue where I left off. The burning sensation of the tears of the gods offer a temporary comfort to my parched throat. I take another swig, another one and another until I feel my headache being numbed, but the numbness isn't touching the part I want torpefied the most.

I'm about to get up and go in search of another bottle of whiskey when there's a knock on our bedroom door.

“Go away,” I respond to whoever is knocking. The person defies my instruction and pushes the door open anyway. I'm about curse but stop myself from doing so when I see that it's Ndalo. She's carrying a tray of food.

“Hey, little brother,” she greets with a smile that I don't even try to return. I don't even have the energy to return her

greetings so I just stare at her. “You have to eat,” she sits on the bed next to me.

“I’m not hungry,” I say as a matter of fact.

“Sabelo, you have been downing alcohol for two days now, you need something solid in your stomach. You can’t continue like this, man, I’m sure Anele is also not happy seeing you losing yourself like this.”

“How do you know that? How do you know what she would have wanted for me?”

“No, I’m not doing this with you again. I love you, little brother and I’m not about to watch you waste away. I know you loved her, I know you loved her, you worshipped the ground she walked on, I know you are hurting, but life has to go on. You still have a whole future ahead of you. Grieve but don’t let yourself go.”

“I don’t have a future, I don’t want one without Anele.”

“Open your mouth,” she orders, completely ignoring what I just said.

“I’m not hungry,” I repeat.

“Then I’m not leaving here. We are going to both sit here until you feel like eating this food.” Now she’s being ridiculous. What’s so hard to understand that I don’t feel like eating? Nothing makes sense without my wife and I don’t want a life without her. “There is also a family meeting that you have to attend.”

“What is it about?”

“I don’t know, but everyone is worried about you. You came from the graveyard, locked yourself in this bedroom and you haven’t gone out ever since. Does it all have to do with

Anele's passing or you are even more stressed about Zipho's return—”

“Wait? She was really there? I wasn't hallucinating?”

“No, you were not. Why didn't you tell anyone about your child?”

“That's because I knew nothing about the damn child and I don't want to know anything even now!”

“That's not how things are done—”

“No! I don't want anything to do with Ziphozonke and you all better respect that. I'm going to take a shower.”

I don't even want to entertain thoughts about the little boy I saw. Ziphozonke and whoever that kid is can go back to wherever they have been all along.

I leave her sitting on the bed and make my way into the ensuite bathroom and open the tap. It's a bit cold due to heavy rains—a good day for a hot bath but I will take a cold shower instead. I just need to feel something other than the stabbing pain in my heart. I strip naked and stand under the shower. My mind drifts to the first day I met Anele.

“Watch where you are going, Cheese boy,” she cusses and squats to pick up a pile of papers that she just dropped when I bumped into her. I squat to help and our eyes meet. She has the most beautiful, big eyes I have ever seen. They compliment her round face and for a moment, I'm lost in her eyes. There's something pulling me into them. “Staring is rude,” she reprimands, sounding like a no nonsense kind of a girl.

“Sorry, just appreciating God's gorgeous creation.”

“Are you trying to charm me? Bhuti wabantu, the only charming thing I'm looking for in a guy right now is someone

who understands the Jean Watson's Theory of Human Caring,” she says and I'm ashamed to say I don't know what she's talking about. We finish gathering the papers and I get a glimpse of her course study, it has to do with health. I stand up first and then she also jumps to her feet, showcasing the agility of her small frame.

“I don't know what that is, but I can buy your favourite drink and food and watch you as you study.”

“I can't say no to food, follow me,” she says and like a puppy, I follow closely behind her. My father would be ashamed of me if he sees me being ordered around by a girl. But this is a small price I'm willing to pay to get to know her, even if I get to know only her name.

She's leading me to White Campus Square—a restaurant I know too well. As a University of Johannesburg student, I always dine here when my pockets are warm enough, usually on month ends. We get in and she chooses a table at the far end of the establishment. I want to pull a chair for her but she doesn't afford me the opportunity, her small behind is already perched on the chair before I can exercise my gentleman ness.

“What is your budget?” she asks.

“Huh?” I'm confused.

“You offered to buy me lunch and from your accent, you sound like a Zulu man and I know you guys are taught that washing plates is a taboo. I'm trying to avoid a situation where we will both have to wash dishes to pay for this meal.”

Okay, she's the real one. A girl who thinks about the guy's pockets before thinking about her stomach, that's a rare trait.

“I have enough money, you can order whatever you want,” I say confidently

“Okay. I'm Anele,” she says.

“Sabelo,” I also introduce myself.

The waiter attends to us and this girl doesn't even look at the menu before ordering. She orders rice, chicken and some veggies on the side. I don't get the name of her drink but the waiter seems to have gotten it. The waiter then turns to me. I just ate, I'm not hungry so I just order coke. I would go for alcohol but I still have work to do.

“What are you studying?” I ask.

“Nursing and it's showing me flames. I would drop out of I could but I'm not a trust fund baby, so,” she shrugs. “It's my second year,” she adds.

“I'm guessing you are with Ann Latsky Nursing College?”

“Correct. Are you from around?”

“I'm with UJ,” I state simply.

“What are you studying?”

“A Master's degree in Computer science.”

“Wow, okay. I'm impressed. So, why did you offer me lunch?”

“I want to know you better.”

“You can say it, you know? That you just saw a girl you don't know around and you would like to smash. It's fine, everyone is doing it. You guys see us as toys so you might as well be honest while at it. We are emotional beings, so don't sell us dreams you can't fulfil.”

I have met so many girls ever since I came to Johannesburg but none of them have been so real with me like this girl has been in the last ten minutes or so. She is outspoken, confident, and it's refreshing.

“No, I don't want to smash, I really want to know you better and maybe change your surname while at it.”

She looks at me and smiles. Her smile is warm and her eyes hypnotic.

“I have exams coming up and a distraction is what I don't need. I will be done in three weeks.”

I stretch my hand to get my phone so I can get her number and all of a sudden I'm in the bathroom and water is flowing down my body. My heart feels like the physical part of it is in tatters too.

“Sabelo, are you still good in there?” that's my sister asking.

“I'm fine,” I lie and swallow a painful lump. I reach for the towel and dry myself.

I walk into the living room full of the Sibisi and Mthombeni elders. I can feel all their eyes on me as I make my way to sit on the empty chair.

“Ndodana (Son),” that's my father speaking. “How are you holding up?”

Can everyone stop with this question already?

“I'm okay,” I tell them what they want to hear. People just want you to say it even when you are not okay.

“Okay, I won't waste anyone's time. The two families have been talking,” my father pauses and looks at me. I can already feel it deep down that I am not going to like what he is about to say. “Every time when a man loses his wife to death, he grieves for her for a certain time and has to also wear

according to tradition. In our family, you are to pin a black cloth on your jacket and always wear a jacket during this period.”

“Okay,” I say. I don't mind wearing anything in honour of my wife.

“But,” he speaks and my heart skips a beat. “The Sibisi family thinks you are too young for that and since you and your wife were already planning a family, they are willing to give you another wife to fulfil those duties—”

“You are joking, right?” I can't believe my ears right now. It hasn't been a week and they are already thinking of replacing her? Who gave them that right?

“Son, it's culture—”

“To hell with culture! I don't want any replacement, no one will replace my wife and you all better understand that or ningiphumele ngesango (get out of my house).”

“Is it because of the other woman with a child?” that's Anele's aunt speaking. “You want to give what our child worked hard for to that woman and her illegitimate child?”

Ngisenhlane ngiyalingwa (I'm being tempted).

“We won't allow that! No other woman will reap where my daughter sowed!” now that's Anele's mother speaking. “The family has decided, you will marry Owethu and she will continue where her sister left off.”

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INSERT FOUR

SABELO

I don't know if I'm the one who's losing it or the people I call in-laws are the ones who should be on their way to the looney-bin. I don't care what they believe in, I don't care what culture says, I'm not about to disrespect my wife like that. She could be replaceable to them, to me she is not.

“So,” I clear my throat. “You all sat down and decided to disrespect my wife's memory just like that—”

“It's not disrespect, it's tradition!” the aunt persists. Sometimes I'm tempted to believe that one selfish and sick being invented these traditions because there's no way a sane person could have decided that shoving another woman down a grieving man's throat is a good idea.

“It may be, but none of you are thinking about me or your late daughter. You are all doing this for your own selfish reasons. How am I all of a sudden suppose to see a wife in Owethu? I have been nothing but a brother to her and you all want to erase that? You are so determined to erase my wife's memory so quickly that you are unable to even think rational. What makes you think I want another woman anyway? Did you even think about what I want?”

“Son,” my father politely says. “You are a man and you need a partner to help you move forward. God created Eve for Adam because He could see how lonely Adam was. We don't

want you to be lonely and end up doing things that will bring shame to this family.”

“You already brought shame into my house by suggesting that I should marry my wife's sister,” I respectfully respond even though I'm fuming.

“We can give you time to think about it—”

“I don't need time, I know what I want and that is to mourn my wife and try to figure out a way forward without another woman next to me. I'm fine on my own and I would appreciate it if you all respect my wishes.”

“But son—”

“But nothing, Mthombeni. We are done with this discussion, if I may please be excused.”

I stand up before any of them can say a word. I know they will say I'm out of line for walking out on them but I don't care what they think about me right now. They don't care about me, why should I care?

OWETHU

“Don't worry, I'm here for you and you will never be without family for as long as I live,” these were Anele's last words to me when we spoke on the 31st. I wanted to tell her something, something that I have been keeping a secret for months. I desperately needed her to tell me that I will be fine, that it's not the end of the world and it happens. She was my go-to person, you know. She was a best friend, a mother wrapped in a sister and she would do anything for me. Little

did I know that she would leave me to face this alone. I'm now sitting here, my feet deep into the pool and wondering if life will ever make sense without her.

My heart is broken beyond repair and I'm afraid it's affecting my physical being. I'm scared to go to the doctor even though I can feel that I'm not okay.

“Wethu?” Nomakhosazana joins me.

“Hey,” I lay my head on her shoulder and she rubs my back.

“Where to from here?” she asks and I think that's a rhetoric question because there's no way she expects me to know the way forward when I'm just the last born—one they have sheltered throughout her life. “I wish she can appear, laughs at us and tell us that this is all a prank. It's hard to believe that she is gone.”

“I always pray asking for God's will to be done but I never knew that God's will is this painful. I feel like someone ripped my heart apart.”

“We will be okay,” she says, more to herself than she is comforting me. We sit in comfortable silence, each to their own thoughts.

“How could you allow this to happen?” I think I hear Sabelo say. I turn my head and yes, he's standing right behind me. I have a terrible headache so looking up at him is a problem right now.

“Are you talking to me?” I ask. Trust me, if I had means to stop my sister from dying I would have done it. More for him

than for myself because I know how much he loved her. How is he even accusing me of letting this happen?

“Yes. How are you okay with marrying me when we just buried your sister—”

“What?” my head is buzzing. I shake it to try and get rid of this feeling but it stays.

“Why are you acting surprised? Your parents are in there shoving this remarriage thing down my throat—”

“No, there must be a mistake, this definitely has to be a mistake. Are you sure you are not drunk and creating scenarios in your head, Sbali—”

“I’m not crazy and I’m not drunk. I thought you loved your sister, I thought you respected me as a brother—”

“Woah,” I stop him before he can say things that he will regret later on. I balance on Nomakhosazana's shoulder and stand up. “I don't know anything about this, I swear. You know me, you know my boyfriend, I have always come to you and my sister for relationship advice, why would I want to do this? Do you have so little faith in me? You don't believe in the little sister who has always called upon you when she has a problem?” a tear escapes my eye. I'm hurt, honestly. How can he think so little of me?

“You really didn't know?” he asks.

“I didn't and I'm going to set the record straight with my parents. My sister was not some property that she can be replaced just like that,” I slip my feet into the slippers.

By the time I get into the house, I can barely breathe. I'm huffing like someone who just completed a race.

“Ma,” I call her out before I can even sit down. “What are you doing?”

“Sit down when addressing elders,” my aunt says.

“No! Why do you think I can replace my sister? She meant so little to all of you?” After what they just did, they don't deserve my respect.

“It's tradition and you are the only one who is not married. Shouldn't you be happy that you will be marrying a good man?” that's my aunt talking.

I laugh through my pain.

“Wena Aunt you shouldn't be the one talking about marriages and good men. If you had an eye for a good men and marriages, you wouldn't have given four men their first borns and still none of them saw you fit to be their wife—”

“Owethu!” my father berates.

“No man, you people misuse traditions just to suit your selfish needs! You are wondering who will be sending you money every month since Anele is gone and uSbali might move on. I pray he does and cut you all off completely because you don't deserve his kindness—”

“Owethu, shut up!” now it's my mother's turn to reprimand me but I'm not done talking. They have to hear the truth and they are going to hear it from their very own daughter.

“I'm not going to marry Sabelo, you can't even force me to. I'm an adult and the law allows me to make my own choices.”

“You are our daughter and you will do as we say!” my mother must get high on something.

“I won't! Do you think the Mthombeni family can accept a wife who is five months pregnant for another man?”

The silence that follows my question is eerie and too thick, it's suffocating even.

“W-what did you say?” my father is sweating.

“I'm pregnant for my boyfriend and my sister knew about it—”

“O..Owethu—” my mother clutches to her chest and this is my cue to leave. She is about to start with her theatrics. “How...how could you?” she's now kneeling on the floor and still clutching on her chest. I don't understand why she's fainting, I'm 26 for crying out loud and I'm definitely not a nun.

I leave the elders to attend to one of their own who's acting up. I feel hot, I'm sweating profusely and breathing is a struggle.

“Are you okay?” that's Sabelo as I bump into him.

“No, please take me to the doctor. My phone is in the spare bedroom, I need to call my boyfriend.”

“Okay, I'm coming, wait here,” he runs towards the house and I try and focus on my breath as Anele would advise me to. Now there's commotion coming from the house. I turn to see and my father supporting his wife while my aunt is also on the other side.

“What's wrong with her?” I ask, concerned.

“Stay away from her, you witch!” my aunt hisses. If my mother is dying because I refused to marry Sabelo, she might as well rest in eternal peace.

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INSERT FIVE

OWETHU

By the time we get to the private doctor, I'm in tears. My back hurts so much and my fear is losing my baby. I will not survive another loss, I am not one of God's strongest soldiers and this is the trial I would fail miserably. I am silently praying and begging God to keep my baby for me.

Sabelo parks at the emergency entrance and instead of waiting for the nurses to come and attend to me, he jumps out of the front seat and runs to the back seat. He yanks the door open and helps me out. My feet haven't touched the ground when he scoops me up and runs into the hospital, leaving the engine running and the door open.

“Nurse!” he calls out. “Doctor!”

“What's wrong?” a nurse pushing a wheelchair asks.

“Back pains, she's pregnant,” Sabelo says as he carefully makes me sit on the wheelchair.

“My gynaecologist works here, Dr Singh,” I say through gritted teeth. The pain now has me clenching my jaw—an effort to stop myself from screaming.

“Okay, we will call her,” the nurse says and pushes the wheelchair towards the emergency area. This baby better now come out now, it's not time yet.

I'm helped on to the bed and then I see Dr Singh walking in. She has a stethoscope around her neck and a file in his hand.

“How long have you been feeling the pain?” she gets straight to work mode.

“Since the day my sister passed away but they have been mild, they are worse today.”

“Okay. Let's see how the baby is doing.”

I'm scared but I'm keeping faith. I'm not a bad person, I don't hurt people knowingly, what would God be punishing me for? I want my baby to be fine.

“Relax, you are too tense and you are stressing the baby,” says Dr Singh.

I try to shift my mind to focusing on something positive instead of stressing. I start picturing myself and my boyfriend setting up our baby's room. We already jointly bought a three-bedroom apartment so we can have a separate bedroom for our child. I was going to tell my parents about the pregnancy on the 2nd of January. I had asked Anele to be there when I do so and she had promised to drive home and offer me support. I was also supposed to give them a lobola letter that my boyfriend's people sent. He's white, but they don't mind respecting our culture and traditions by paying lobola. Now everything has to wait and my parents already know about my pregnancy. It came out wrong, but a bigger part of me is happy that they know the truth now. I'm tired of wearing oversized shirts and dresses just to hide my growing belly. I have also been uncomfortable having to always be conscious of how I'm seated. Now I can be free.

“The baby's heartbeat is fine,” Dr Singh brings me back to where I am.

“Then why am I experiencing pains?”

“You have been stressing. It's a good thing that you came in early,” she continues explaining using her medical jargon. I don't understand most of the things she's saying but I'm just happy that the baby is fine. “I'm going to keep you in for a few hours and see how it goes. You will be moved to another room.”

“Hun,” my boyfriend finally arrives. I'm feeling much better but I can't help the tears that threaten to fall. “I'm so sorry, I was working,” he says as he hugs me. He's still in his blue scrubs and he smells like antiseptic. My boyfriend, Benjamin is a young practicing surgeon. He finished his studies two years ago and he's already working. Benefits of having a connected family. “I'm sorry,” he comforts me. “How are we doing? What did the doctor say?” he asks.

“She said we are okay. I'm hungry,” I say, he laughs.

“You are crying because of hunger not pain?” I glare at him. “Okay, fine. What do you want to eat?”

“Toast, avocado and sticky wings.”

“Cool. Let me order then.”

“Did you see Sabelo when you came in?”

“Yes. He's still waiting. I will go and let him know that you are feeling. He looks like he can do with some sleep.”

“Yeah. He's going through a lot.” I cannot imagine the pain he's dealing with and now having to deal with my parents forcing him to move on just a week after buying his wife. That's just plain evil.

Just then a familiar face walks into the room. She's wearing glasses and carrying a number of files with one hand while the other is tapping the phone. She looks up, our eyes meet and we both stare at each other.

“I know you,” I speak first. “You were at my sister's funeral—”

“Uhm, Dr Singh sent me for this file. I will be on my way out,” she disregards what I said completely and walks out. “I know that lady, she was at my sister's funeral with a child that looks like Sabelo.”

“She looks like she works here. Let's leave the other matters to Sabelo, okay? We have our own child to worry about.”

“You are right,” I sigh.

SABELO

I feel like I have been sitting here forever and these walls keep reminding me of the day that I lost my wife. The events are so vivid in my head, they are making me dizzy. I have been trying to block the memories but they just keep on coming. My phone vibrates in my pocket and I take it out of my pocket. I unlock my phone and my heart skips a beat. I look again and the notification is still there, starring at me. I wish it could disappear. I wish it wouldn't exist but no matter how I will it to disappear, it's still there. I log in to my banking app and the money is there. Three millio seven hundred Rands. My heart is breaking by just looking at my bank balance.

I look up and I come face to face with Ziphozonke. What the phuck? She's in a nurse uniform and is looking right back at me. The universe must really be conspiring against me today.

"Sabza," she speaks and I feel all the alcohol I have been drinking forcing its way up to my throat. I force it back down and burp instead. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she's now moving closer.

"Why?" I ask her.

"Why what?"

"Why reappear eight years and just after my wife's death? What do you want from me? Why are you back? Couldn't you stay wherever you were?"

"I can explain, but I am at work right now. Please can we have dinner later and talk?"

I laugh. She must be high on something.

"Your are crazier than I thought. Did you temporary forgot that I just lost my wife? What will people think of me seeing me eating dinner with my ex barely a week after burying my wife?"

"It doesn't matter what people will say, you know you truth, I know mine. We have unfinished business and we have to talk."

"No, we don't. You can go back to wherever hole you crawled out of."

I stand up and leave her standing like a lost spirit. What could be so important that she waited eight years to tell me?

I get home hoping to get time to myself but every corner of my house has a breathing soul and they all want my attention. Can't they see that I am so done with all of them?

"How is Owethu?" my mother asks.

"She's okay," I attempt to walk away but she grabs my arm.

"Singakhuluma Mthombeni? (Can we talk?)"

"I'm tired, Ma. Please let me try and rest."

"We were only looking out for you," she starts. "You are a man, you have needs. We were thinking about you when we spoke to the Sibisi family about you getting another one of their daughters to continue where their daughter left off. Please don't be angry."

"Are you done?"

"Sabelo—"

"Since you all really want to put me first in everything that you do, please consider seeing yourselves out of my house you will come back after ten days to cleanse me, that's if you want to. As far as my manly needs are concerned, you don't have to worry about that. When the time is right, I will do what a man has to do. I will see you after ten days."

I make my way to my bedroom. I want to lock myself in and sleep but I have a surprise, in form of a human being waiting for me. I'm irritated, but for this soul, I manage to greet her with a smile.

"Sisi Ndalo," I say with enthusiasm. She stands up and hugs me tight. Her hug is comforting and I feel myself close to tears already.

"You are a big boy now and you have cried enough. People are taking advantage of you because you are crying nonstop.

We grieve with hope for a better tomorrow. You are stronger than this.”

“Thanks. It's just... I miss her a lot.”

“I know and you are still going to miss her for more years to come. You have to learn to live by your own one more time. Let her memories carry you through and be comforted knowing that she loved you until her last breath.”

“I'm trying. Zipho came back and as much as I'm trying not to think about her, I'm curious. Why did she come back on the day of my wife's burial? What if... what if she killed my wife?”

“Why would she do that? She left you, you didn't leave her.”

“What if the grass wasn't greener on the other side?”

“And she's only noticing that after eight years of being away? Please don't fall for whatever this girl is up to. You are vulnerable now and people are going to try and take advantage of you. Focus.”

“I think she went away with my child.”

“She knows the right channel to let you know about that not what she's doing. This girl knows that you will be getting money from policies and all that. She will want to cash in big. Who have you told about the policies?”

“No one.”

“Good. Don't tell anyone, keep this to yourself.”

“I think her parents are entitled to some of that money.”

“Maybe, but please, don't tell them now. They will definitely find another desperate cousin to give you as a wife.”

My phone vibrates, I check it and it's an email from a sender that I don't recognise. I click on the email and there's an attachment. I open it and once again, I'm staring back at

the younger version of myself. The message reads: He is your son, Sabelo Junior.

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INSERT 6

Three Months Later....

SABELO

I had to voluntarily hand myself into a mental institution. It's a private establishment so they have a fancy word for locking people in here but the main point remains—this is a place for crazy people. I have been here for two months and as much as settling in was hard, I'm glad I listened to Ndalo and booked myself in here. They have the best of staff and their facilities are top notch.

After receiving that text from Zipho, things went from bad to worse. I was accused of killing my wife so I could be with my baby mama. A baby mama that I did not know existed until the day of my wife's burial. The fight between my in-laws and my family—who were trying to help me—was so tense that they ended up swearing at each other and promising to never talk again. I didn't have anything to prove my innocence except the postmortem results so I just sat there and listened to them labeling me a devil and a murderer. I don't know who kicked the Sibisi family out but they left and never returned. They didn't even come to the family cleansing ceremony—a traditional ceremony that usually takes place ten days after burying a family member. I was hurt, but there was nothing I could do to make them understand.

In everything that happened with the Sibisi family, finding out that Owethu had blocked me was the last nail on my coffin. I thought she would have my back. I thought she would believe me but she too chose to go with the narrative that I killed Anele. She knew that I loved her sister so much I couldn't even bear to see a cut on her finger, how was I the one to end her life? How could I have done something so cruel to the person I lived for? Realising that I was alone in this fight, I withdrew from everyone. I kept to myself, locked myself in the room but the silence in there was slowly driving me crazy. I could feel myself losing my mind and after Ndalo found me trying to end it all with poison, she convinced me to come to this place. I wasn't sure about how good it would be for me to be surrounded by crazy people but it turns out Ndalo was right, I needed this.

“Mthombeni, good morning,” Nomvula greets.

“Hey, Nomvula. How are you?”

“I'm good. I just finished reading that book you forced me to read.”

“Which one? There are so many that I forced you to read.”

“The Animal Farm by George Orwell.”

“What did you learn?”

“That we are all equal in the eyes of the Lord but here on earth, some animals are more equal than others. Equality is an illusion that those who are more equal than others want us to believe in but in actual fact, they would rather we stay beneath them.”

“You understood it well. Now you won't wonder why people behave the way they do after promotion at work,” I smile at her and we just sit in comfortable silence.

I met the gorgeous, kind and soft-spoken Nolwazi in this facility. It was my second week, I was struggling to settle in so I pushed myself harder in the gym. Yes, this place has a gym, a swimming pool, sports ground, but access is limited. I think they study files and assess patients before granting permission to access these facilities. There I was, busy releasing my anger on the punching bag when I felt someone's presence. I turned around and I'm not ashamed to say that her beauty stunned me to silence. Her dark skin glowed under the green string dress and her darker-brown eyes felt like they could see the future. I couldn't take my eyes off her until she cleared her throat.

“Anger doesn't solve your problems, it consumes you instead,” she spoke and I could have sworn an angel had spoken.

“I... I'm not angry,” I stammered. I don't know why I was even stuttering all of a sudden.

“I have been watching you. You are so angry you don't even believe in yoga and prayers that they subject us to every single day.”

“You don't know me, Lady,” I said.

“I googled you. You just lost your wife—”

“Why would you do that?!” I got angry because why the hell was she googling my wife?

“I have too much time in my hands, I guess,” she shrugged. “You see that woman sitting out there and knitting?” she diverted my attention. “She hasn't said a word in three years.

Apparently, her sister took her husband and she couldn't deal with the shock. You see that guy cutting the grass? He killed his father when he was fifteen, the family is trying to tap into a human inside him, you know. They want him to at least apologise to his mother for what he did but that guy gives zero phucks about his dead father. You see that one—”

“How long have you been in this place?”

“Six years—”

“What?” she didn't look unhinged, she still doesn't look like it even now.

“Yeah, into zomhlaba brought me here. But let's not talk about it. Do you want to vent?”

“That's female stuff,” I told her.

“If you really want to get out of here, you better start taking and releasing that anger. By the way, I'm Nomvula,” she said and left me wondering why a beautiful woman like her would be in this place for such a long time.

“Penny for your thoughts?” she says and I look at her. There's something about her face that forces one to stare.

“I'm just thinking about my time here. I'm going to miss yoga, the prayers and your dry sense of humour,” I tease, she laughs.

“I'm not that bad, you know. I would be a comedian if South Africa respected talent enough.”

We both laugh.

“I'm going to miss you, hey. You have been a good friend and for once, I felt like I belonged somewhere and someone is actually seeing and acknowledging my presence,” she says.

“Why are you still here, Nolwazi? You are not sick.”

“It's complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it for me, I have time.”

“No, not today. They allow visitors here every Saturday. When you go out, come and visit me and I will tell you. Bring me a Big Mac and their watermelon juice.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thanks. So, what's next for you? Going back to work?”

“Something like that but there are things I have to sort out before I can choose my way forward.”

“I wish you nothing but the best,” she says with a smile.

“Thank you,” I take her soft hand into mine and squeeze it tight.

It is 3 in the afternoon and I'm heading to my last therapy session in this place. The sessions have been good and I will forever be grateful to them for the work they do. It comes at a cost, but it is all worth it. I knock on the door and Dr Gumedede tells me to come in. I push the door open and walk in. Today he's wearing jeans and a t-shirt, setting the mood to casual before he can even speak.

“Qwabe,” I greet.

“Mthombeni,” he says standing up and then shakes my hand. “You can sit. How are you feeling today?”

“Like I'm ready to face the world again.”

“You know that the unsolved problems you left out there will be waiting for you out there? Are you ready to deal with them?”

“I am. I already set up an appointment with Zipho. I want to know if the child is really mine and why she stayed away for so long.”

“That’s good. Remember to keep your composure in all this. We don’t want you back here or worse, in prison.”

“I have never been a violent man,” I assure him.

“The policies, have you decided how you are going to spend the money and not feel guilty about it?”

“First, I’m going to erect a beautiful tombstone for my wife. There’s a property she was eyeing, I think I will get it in her memory.”

“Don’t you think that will hinder you from moving on?”

“I haven’t thought about moving on in a sense of getting another woman, but when the time comes, I will see how to navigate it.”

“Moving on doesn’t mean you loved her any less, always remember that.”

“I will, thank you.”

“All the best going forward,” we shake hands again and I turn and walk out of her office. I’m so going to miss this place.

ZIPHOZONKE

“Decide if you are going to stir that coffee forever or you are going to drink it,” my sister says in a harsh tone, as always. “Why do you look stressed? You didn’t lose your job, did you? God knows I can’t afford to feed you and your little brat—”

“His father is coming back and he wants to meet,” I finally tell her.

“He better start paying maintenance, that's if the child is his.”

“What do you mean? He looks exactly like him. It's his child.”

“Children can look like your ex boyfriend, especially when you left him yet you are still in love with him—”

“I don't love him!”

“I'm not a kid, Zipho. You went to his wife's funeral because you thought you could comfort him by showing up with a child you hid from him because you thought the grass was greener on the other side.”

“Why do you hate me this much?”

“I don't. I wish that for once you would use your brains not your clit and the love of money. You could be having a good life if you didn't fumble a good guy but no, you wanted a guy with flashy cars and expensive clothes yet you never saw him going to work even one day. What did you think? That he receives hard cash directly from his ancestors?”

“Sisi, I need your support. I know I messed up, but I need you.”

“Fix your mess, Zipho. I'm going to sleep, I had a long day,” she says and leaves me alone in the kitchen.

Sometimes I wish my parents were still alive, maybe they would care about me. I did not have a bad childhood, I had a good and protected childhood. Both my presents were still alive. My mother died when I was eleven and my father passed away when I was doing my final year at university. I

was already dating Sabelo but my father's passing felt like nothing made sense. He tried comforting me but it didn't help. I started drifting away from him. I sought comfort from loud places, places Sabelo would never want to be found in. I started going out a lot and alone. I met friends who influenced me into things I'm not proud and will not tell a soul.

I met a guy who lived the life I was craving at the time—loud, flashy and carefree. I craved a life loud enough to dull the pain that I was feeling. I wanted to forget that I'm an orphan and Sthembiso offered that and more. We started traveling to different cities in search of our next high. We were always too sloshed or too high to remember where we were. Whenever we were not too high, we would f#ck until we pass out. We would wake up, eat, bath and his drivers would take us to the next destination. Life was good, too good that I even forgot that I was a student and had a boyfriend. Sabelo tracked me down and found me in Pretoria. It was going to be better if he had found me in a decent position, he found me in a club, naked and lap dancing on Sthembiso's lap. Sthembiso's hands were all over me and when I saw the disgust on Sabelo's face, I knew he was done with me. He wanted to leave without saying a word but my ego wouldn't have that. I ran to him—naked—and told him how pathetic he was. I rained insults at him until I was out of breath. He left and I never saw him again.

Reality hit when I missed my period...

“Mommy!” Sabelo Junior comes running. He jumps on the kitchen counter and sits in front of me like he always does.

“Hey baby,” I kiss him on the forehead. “Shouldn't you be asleep?”

“I had a bad dream,” he says. He tells this lie every time he wants me to sleep in his bed.

“Okay. Let's go and sleep.”

I pick up my phone just as it vibrates. I check the notification and it's a text from Sabelo telling me the time and place for our meeting tomorrow.

‘Dear Lord, please help me. We have already established that Sthembiso is not the father, please let Sabelo be the father. Please Lord and I promise to praise and worship you all the days of my life.’

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INSERT 7

SABELO

Have you ever felt like you are lost in your own home? Have you ever stood in the middle of your own living room and felt like you are standing in a desert—the middle of nowhere? That's how I'm feeling right now and the silence in the house is too loud. I can feel myself slipping back into the depression that my sister saved me from. I look up and a picture of Anele smiling has me smiling back at her. Seeing her carefree face almost convinces me that she's not gone, but I know the truth. She's gone and she's not coming back. I shake my head and force my body to move towards the bedroom.

I open the door and I'm met by the stale and dry smell of dust. I put the small bag on the bed and open the windows. I should have called in some cleaners before coming back. I will definitely catch flu because of this dust. Everything is dusty, I probably should get cleaners to come in and take care of it. I can clean but I don't have the energy for it. I have other pressing matters to deal with. I fish my phone out of my pocket and dial my sister, Ndalo.

“Bafo, ubuyile? (Bro, you are back?)”

“I just arrived, and this house smells like a rural dusty playground. It's so dusty in here, I'm sneezing already,” I'm exaggerating, I know. I just want her to treat this matter with urgency.

“You want me to come and do the cleaning?”

“No. Call that company that Anele trusted. You still have my spare key, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure. Please come and oversee everything. I'm going to check myself into a hotel. Tell me when they are done. Don't let them touch my wife's clothes.”

“You know you have to let them go—”

“Not now, please, Sisi. I'm supposed to take this thing one step at a time, remember?”

“I understand,” she sighs. “Are you going to tell our parents that you are back?”

“No, not yet. I just need to figure out my life without anyone breathing down my neck,” I sigh. “I'm going to see Zipho tomorrow morning. She owes me the truth about this whole thing.”

“Okay, all the best.”

“Thanks,” I end the call.

I pick up the same bag I brought with me, get the car keys from the bedside drawer, and make my way out of the house. I was looking forward to spending a night in familiar surroundings, but I guess that cannot happen tonight.

I just checked myself into The Houghton Hotel when I received a call from my friend, Nhlamulo, telling me that he has arrived. I didn't want to be alone, so I called him. Being alone tends to make me think a lot and that leads to unpleasant thoughts. I just want to forget, even if it's for a while.

“Sho, dude,” I meet Nhlamulo by the reception area, and we fist bump.

“Sho, mfana. You are glowing, do you have a skincare routine now?” he teases.

“That place had me eating healthy, man. I haven't touched alcohol in three months straight.”

“Sex yona?” he asks and I stop and look at him. It's only registering to me now that I haven't had a hard on ever since my wife passed on. I haven't had time to think about it and honestly, I'm not worried about it.

“I'm not thinking about that, hey. I just want to get myself back in track before I can think of that. How are you and family?” I change the subject. I had enough heavy talks at that place, the last thing I want is to fall back into the trap of depression that I'm trying to run away from.

“We are good, hey,” he says just as we get to our room. I open the door and lead the way inside.

“The fridge is full and room service is just a button away,” I let him know.

“You know I can't drink without abantwana (ladies), right?” I'm reminded why I haven't been friends with this guy ever since my relationship with Anele took a serious turn. She never liked him and I truly understood her reasoning. Nhlamulo is a definition of a womaniser. I thought he had outgrown it since he's now married and have kids but I guess I was wrong.

“Did you check your surroundings? You think there are ladies who can't buy their own drinks here?” I try not to sound irritated already.

“I know a spot in Mamelodi, we can just drive there—”

“No. I came here because I want peace, not to be surrounded by people. You can go if you want to.”

“You are not funny anymore,” he says and laughs.

“I grew up, you should too.”

I already regret inviting him here, I shouldn't have but I hope he will behave.

“So, word has it that you are a millionaire now. Why are you not in Dubai already?” he opens the fridge and takes out a bottle of Corona.

“Says who?”

“Come on, I'm a friend, you can tell me.”

“Dude, I don't have millions. I have nothing, I lost the woman who meant everything to me.”

“I understand, man. But, boy, you have to let go.”

I wish people understood that you can let go of something that's in your hand, but not in your heart. Something deep down in your heart is not something you can wake up and decide to let go. If that was the case, there would no sadness and depression would be a myth.

“One day at a time.”

I woke up feeling suffocated and sweaty. I try to move but I feel like there's something heavy is on top of me. I pry my eyes open and my heart skips a beat when I see a woman lying on my chest, her hair spilling all over my body. I recover from the shock and push her off me.

“What the F!” she yelps as she lands on the floor. I didn't mean to push her that hard. “Are you crazy? Why are you pushing me?”

“Who are you?” I ask. I don't know her and I don't remember inviting any woman onto my bed.

“Are you for real? After groaning and growling on top and under me you wake up to treat me like this? You enjoyed my kitty yesterday—”

I feel bile rising and forcing me to dash to the toilet. I push the door open and bend over the toilet seat. My stomach growls as I empty it.

“Dude, are you okay?” that's Nhlamulo.

“What is that woman doing in my room?”

“You had a meltdown and I suggested that we call some girls over to make you forget for a bit and you agreed.”

“I was drunk! You shouldn't have—”

“Your friend hurt my friend!” it's a red haired girl with a face smudged with mascara budging into the toilet. Didn't anyone teach these people about privacy? “You hurt my friend, motherf—”

“Nhlamulo, get out and take these floozies with you—”

“Come on, Sabza, morning glory-nyana—”

“I said get out!”

Realising my heated temper, Nhlamulo raises his hands in surrender and walk out of the toilet together with the red haired girl.

“What did I do?” I feel my heart breaking into pieces. The heaviness of what I did has me sinking to the floor and tears fall down my cheeks.

“I'm sorry, Anele, I'm sorry S'thandwa sami.”

ZIPHOZONKE

My heart is pounding against my ribcage as I make my way to Mugg & Bean. I can feel the sound of my own heart behind my ears. As I inch closer, I look around for a familiar face and I'm a bit relieved when I don't see him. I take a seat and immediately order coffee, I desperately need it to calm myself down. I take my phone out to check if I have messages, I have none except a reminder that my assignment is due in two days. My life is that lonely.

I'm on my second cup of coffee when Sabelo—still dashing as ever—arrives and sits opposite me.

“Saw'bona, Zipho,” the calmness in his greeting reminds me of why I had fallen for him in the first place. It was his calmness that remained in place through it all.

“Hi Sabelo,” I respond, my stomach is in knots and not the good kind.

“Tell me why I shouldn't strangle you to death right here and right now—”

“W... what?” I stutter.

“You cheated on me, disappeared and you have the guts to show up at my wife's funeral with a kid that looks like me. Do you know what picture you painted for everyone out there? People think I killed my wife to be with you and your brat, you must be happy—”

“I didn't mean to cause any trouble, I'm sorry.”

“What was your game plan? Why at my wife's funeral? You wanted to outshine her?”

“No... no—”

“You will never outshine her. She's still a thousand times better than you even in her grave. You can't compete with her even in her death.”

“I wasn't competing, I wanted you to see your child.”

“And you thought the best place to do so was at the graveyard? Uphile kahle la ekhanda (Are you crazy)?”

“I was wrong, I'm sorry.”

“You can keep your sorry because I know you are not. I'm going to do a DNA test with that boy and if it's mine, I'm going to give up my parental rights—”

“What?” I can't believe him right now. “You can't do that, you can't deny your blood, Sabelo.”

“I will be the first man to do that.”

“Please. Our son doesn't have to suffer because of my sins.”

“In his next life, he will negotiate with the Creator not he born by a whore of a mother. I will send you details about the DNA test.”

Just like that, he stands up and leaves my jaw on the floor. Did he just call me a whore? Did he just walk away from me without even looking at me and remembering the old times?

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INSERT 8

One Week Later...

SABELO

I am back at work today and I honestly couldn't function. Everything on my desk reminded me of Anele. Her face is everywhere—my desktop screen, my laptop screen, my notebooks, my coffee cup and I can almost hear her laugh in my workspace corridors. I work with 90 percent men—my floor only has men except for the receptionist and every one in this floor saw Anele as their younger sister. She used to be off duty on Thursdays and she would bring home cooked lunch for all of us. I would hear her laughter reverberating around the building and butterflies in my stomach would flutter. For my colleagues, the smiles on their faces were because they were about to get free food, but my smile meant something different. It meant that I was about to see my favourite person in the entire universe and no matter how hard the task at hand would be, her smile made everything seem easier. Anele was not just my wife, she was my lucky charm. With her, everything made sense.

Now I'm standing here by my office window, watching traffic and in a way, the hustle and bustle of the streets mirrors my mind. At least there's order as far as traffic is concerned,

there is chaos in my head. I turn back and look at the desktop on my desk, the files next to it and the other files on the bookcase, all carrying not just information but people's lives and fate. When I joined this The ABM Attorneys, I did not know that I would end up falling in love with law more than computer science. I did LLB, completed my articles, worked for a year and went back to university to pursue a Masters in Computer Science. I wanted to see how beneficial the two degrees would be when paired. It turned out that was the best decision I made for myself. I was head-hunted by a number of law firms before I even graduated. I later settled for the ABM Attorneys because of the salary and the benefits they offered.

I have been with this company for five years now. We deal mostly with properties. I have seen families losing or reclaiming their properties and I have experienced how it feels like to be happy for a stranger who just got his/her property back. I have fallen in love with the job, but right now, I don't have the drive or inspiration to continue. I typed my resignation letter earlier but these files are holding me back. I feel like these families depend on me, the decision I take about my future will affect them too.

"I think I found something to make you stay with us," that's Astrid bring me back to where I am. You heard me right, her name is Astrid. I used to wonder why her parents gave her a name suitable for a cartoon until I learned that her parents are from Sweden and the name is familiar there.

"Who said I was leaving?" I raise my eyebrow.

“You haven't worked on anything today. I have been holding my breath and waiting for a resignation letter. I'm glad you haven't sent it though.”

“I don't know what to do with my life right now,” I sigh. She rubs my shoulder.

“This might sound selfish, but here is a new case and I think it can make you stay,” she puts a file on the table.

“What am I looking at?”

“A lady's parents died six years ago. She couldn't take the pain, got depressed and the family were quick to throw her into a looney-bin. She has been there for six years and she says she feels okay but somehow the owner of the place always finds a way to keep her locked up. She recently found out that her paternal uncle took over her parents' assets after convincing the court that she's incapable of handling such. She wants the properties and businesses back.”

“Sounds interesting. Where do I find her and what's her name?”

“For security reasons, she didn't give her full names. The address is in the file. Will you go and see her ASAP?”

“Sure. I'm suffocating here, anyway.”

“Great. You can work from home until you are ready to return. We will handle your other cases.”

“Thank you. You are the best.” She's one of the best female managers I know. Most women are petty, power drunk, but Astrid is different. She's a leader who doesn't mind to be led too. A leader who values her team's well-being.

I grab the file and put it in my laptop bag. I switch off my desktop, grab the laptop bag, car keys and make my way out. I'm hoping this case will put my mind off things for a while.

The envelope on the passenger seat reminds me of another reason why I have not been feeling great. I received the DNA test results three days ago and I haven't opened them. Deep down I know the boy is mine, he looks exactly like me. The only problem now is that I'm not ready to father him or anyone for that matter. Ziphozonke on the other hand has been sending me messages and calling. She received the same results and I'm sure she opened them the moment she received them.

I ignore the envelope once again and punch in the address Astrid gave to me onto my screen. Wait a minute, this is the address of the wellness center I was at.

I start the engine and drive off. Now I'm eager to see the lady in question.

ZIPHOZONKE

Sabelo has another thing coming for him if he thinks he can give away his parental rights just like that. I raised this child on my own for seven years because I didn't want to disturb his marriage. I was eventually going to tell him. When I saw on social media that his wife had died, I thought it was the right time for him to know his son. Shouldn't he be grateful that he lost a wife and gained a son? A son is his blood, not some whôre who would even cheat on him. A son and father relationship is forever. He can't be angry at the entire world

simply because his dear wife is dead. He will have to get over it and continue with life, we have a son to raise.

I put my phone back into my pocket after trying to call him for a millionth time. I make my way back into the ward and continue checking on patients. I hate these routine checks, in fact, I hate everything about nursing. I only studied nursing because my sister said it would be good for me and since she was the one paying, I listened. If it was up to me, I would be in my office with an air-conditioner and a personal assistant just a call away or starring in *The Reals Housewives of Jo'burg*. Being a rich housewife would suit me better than an office, but ke, we move. We do whatever it takes to put bread on the table.

“Is everything okay?” a colleague asks.

“Yeah, why?”

“At the rate you are visiting the toilet and checking your phone, you will get us all fired if you don't stop now.”

“I wasn't checking my phone!”

“All I'm saying is, be careful,” he says and leaves. This one is bitter because I turned him down when he asked me out. He can go to hell with his useless advices. Who asked for them? I continue with my work even though my mind is on my phone. I'm tempted to post Sabelo on social media and expose him, it's only a smaller part of me that says I should give him some time to get used to the idea of him being a father. He shouldn't take long though, his son needs to be taken care of. That boy spends every cent I earn and I'm exhausted already.

SABELO

I drive through the Wellness Centre gate and head for the visitors parking area. There isn't many visitors so parking isn't a struggle. I kill the engine, grab my laptop bag and get down the car. I approach the security guard who searches my bag and then me. He asks who I'm here for and I tell him that I'm here for the manager. He nods and then gives me a tag written 'visitor'. I pin it on my shirt pocket and head for the manager's office. I know my way around this place so I don't have to ask where the manager's office is.

The door to his office is open but I knock anyway.

"Mr Mthombeni!" he greets with enthusiasm.

"Sir," I greet back.

"To what do we owe this visit?" I'm glad that he's not asking me how I am doing and all that.

"I'm here on duty. With your permission, I would like to talk to Ms N. S. Mzolo. It's important and urgent."

"Okay. She was here when she made that call. I just didn't know it will be you coming to her rescue. Please be careful, her case is sensitive and I believe some people don't want her to get out."

"Why?" I probe.

"Inheritance, I guess. This might get me in trouble, but I think the owner of this place is being paid off to keep her here. I don't think it's safe for her to start pursuing this whilst in here, they will harm her. They used to drug her—"

"What?" I'm alarmed.

“Yes. Do you think you can help take her out of here before you start working on this case?”

“Can I see her first?”

“Okay,” he says and presses a number on the telephone. It rings once and someone from the other side greets. The manager tells her to bring Ms Mzolo in. “She will be happy to see you,” he says to me.

“Do I know her?” I ask. I don't remember anyone with that surname. He doesn't respond, he just looks at me and smiles.

It doesn't take long before there's a knock on the door.

“Come in,” the manager says.

“Good afternoon, Sir,” a familiar female voice says and I turn my head. My eyes lock with that of Nomvula and I don't know what and how it happens, she is in my arms in a split second. Her body is shaking, is she crying?

“Hey, are you crying?” I ask and gently untangle her arms around me.

“No, I'm not,” she smiles through tears. “Where is my burger? I thought you forgot about me. Wait, what day is it? We don't have visitors today, what are you doing here?”

So many questions, which one I do I answer. Yes, I did forget about her. I never thought I would see her again but here we are again.

“I didn't forget about you,” I lie. “And instead of bringing the burger, I thought why not take you to the restaurant itself—”

“You will do that for me?” she's so excited that she's crying again.

“Yes, but first, let me reintroduce myself. I'm Sabelo Mseleku, your lawyer—”

“What?” now she's confused.

“You called The ABM Attorneys, I'm here to answer that call.”

“You...you are a lawyer?” she is still confused and I understand. I speak more about information technology than I speak about law.

“Yes. Do you have a problem with me being your lawyer?”

“No, no, it's just... I didn't think of you as a lawyer. Do you think you can help me?”

“I'm not sure yet, we need to talk deeply about the issue.”

“Okay. Did they tell you that taking this case might be as good as you signing your death sentence?”

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INSERT 9

SABELO

I stare at her for a moment and she holds the stare, her eyes begging and her body language screaming with defeat and hope at the same time. Her eyes start to shine with tears, I release a deep sigh.

“I have a gun, but it must be dusty wherever it is. Who do I have to kill first since it doesn't look like law will help me this time?”

“You will help me?” now she's crying real tears. A natural reaction has me pulling her into a hug and I let her sob. “Thank you,” she sniffs.

“I will give you guys space to talk,” the manager says and walks out. He closes the door on his way out. Nomvula is about to say something but I quickly put my finger on her lips and signal for her to keep quiet. I take my phone out and dial Astrid.

“Sabza?” she answers on the second ring.

“What day is it today?” I ask her.

“It's Monday, why?”

“Thanks, got it,” I end the call and type a message for Nomvula.

‘This place is bugged’ I show her my screen.

She takes my phone and types.

‘How do you know?’

‘That call was me checking if the place is bugged. If a place is bugged, there's a delay in communication, almost as if there's a network error’

‘What now? How do we talk?’

‘I have to get you out of here. Do you trust the manager?’

‘Yes. He's the one who told me to stop taking pills that they used to drug me’

‘Okay. I will come and get you out tomorrow, I want to find counsel on how to do it legally. Hold on for a few hours. If they ask, I am a friend’

‘Okay, ngiyabonga’

‘Don't thank me yet, I might die before helping you’, I joke.

‘Anele will protect you’

‘Thank you’

If Anele was here, she would look me dead in the eye and ask:

“Where should I bury you and which one of your suits do you want to rest in peace wearing?” and laugh about the whole thing. She was a strange one—in a good way. She never allowed stress to rule her life. She used humour to go through everything and I'm hoping her memories will carry me through this. I don't know if I'm ready to die for a stranger but I'm excited about this case. It's been a while since I used violence to solve a legal case.

“I will see you next week,” I lie to Nomvula. If they are listening in, they won't know that I will be here tomorrow and it's always a good thing to be a few steps ahead of those that you are trying to outsmart.

“Okay. Thank you.”

I grab my belongings, open the door and make my way out. The manager sees me coming out and raises his hand. I wave back and continue walking towards the gate. I have his number, I will create a secure line and call him.

I give the tag back to the security guard and walk away. In my mind, I'm thinking of legal ways to can do this but I'm not finding any. If the uncle already has her declared mentally unfit, I will have to challenge that ruling. I have to convince the court to do another mental evaluation on her and then rule based on the results. That will take forever and forever is the time I don't have. They might harm her before we can even get a court date. I trust my colleagues, but we are dealing with different people here. We are dealing with a thug and a thug with money that does not belong to him is dangerous. People can do despicable and scary things for money.

I unlock the car and get in. My phone rings just as I ignite the engine, it's an unknown number calling and I know it's Zipho calling. This woman is unhinged and it's not funny. I silence the call and reverse out of the parking lot. When the call ends, I connect my phone to the car radio.

“Siri, call Astrid,” I command. She answers on the second ring as usual. “You knew?”

“What?”

“Who we are dealing with in this case?”

“Not so much. So, are you ready to die?” she jokes.

“I can't win this the legal way and I don't know how Anele will feel about me polishing my gun and being that guy for another woman—”

“Whoa, what are you talking about? Isn't this business as usual? You are not in love with the girl, are you?”

“No, I'm not. What I mean is, I don't know if I want to die for a stranger. Is it even worth it? We usually take 25% of the estate for such cases. How much is the 25%? I think I want to know the figures and then decide how much millions my head is worth.”

“It's a multimillion estate but let's get an evaluation first and see.”

“We need to get her out of that place before they find out what she's up to. Ask Nontobeko to find a good place for her to stay. I will find a way of getting her out tomorrow, latest. It won't be the legal way though, so he ready to bail me out.”

“I have your back, go help that woman.”

“Sure.”

“Sabza?”

“What?”

“The kid doesn't have to suffer because his mother is a whōre. He's your blood and is innocent in all this. I understand if you are not ready emotionally, but I know you can afford to support financially. Don't add to the statistics of deadbeats. We have enough of those in the country already. I know you are a good man and this thing is eating you.”

“I hear you. I'm just not ready to deal with that woman.”

“Lawyers are there for such or you can just use your sister. I know she loves you and she would never do something to hurt you.”

“Okay, thanks. I will try to be rational about this whole thing. But first, I have to tell my wife about the case and also tell her about the son I never knew I had.”

“Sure. Take care of yourself.”

NOMVULA

For the first time in six years, I feel alive. I have a new found hope and purpose to live for. The accident that claimed my parents' lives didn't just leave me an orphan, it took with it my desire to live. I couldn't come to terms with their passing. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, a day before my 21st birthday and a month before my graduation. My father had just landed at the O R International Airport and as always, my mother went to fetch him. They were to come straight to my apartment and fetch me so we could drive to Durban together. I waited with excitement, looking forward to what they had planned for my birthday. I had also been missing Dad since he had been out of the country for two weeks. I was the only child—Dad's only and favourite girl. That man would drop anything for me.

I waited and waited for them to walk through my door but they were taking forever, so I called Mom and her phone rang unanswered. I called Dad, his went straight to voicemail. I had left them over twenty voicemail messages when I started feeling anxious. Out of the blue, I developed a running

stomach and I started sweating. I tried a cold shower but the feeling didn't go away. I called my father's PA and he told me that he had spoken to him a few hours ago. That gave me hope until I walked back into the living room and my heart skipped a beat when I saw my father's face on the screen. I dismissed the fear and attributed him being on the news to his outstanding work as a minister of foreign affairs. My relief was short-lived though. I unmuted the TV just as my mother's car came to view on the screen. My eyes could have been deceiving me but I did see two bodies next to the car. I did hear the reporter saying that Professor Mandlakhe Mzolo had been involved in an accident and unfortunately lost his life. I wished for my body to shut down but it didn't, instead it propelled me to run to the garage.

I don't know how I did it, but I arrived at the scene. I remember the police blocking my way. I remember screaming my lungs out, calling out to my parents as they were being loaded into the van. After that, everything became a blur. I only came back to feeling and seeing things for what they were when my parents had already been buried.

My parents had gone and they had left me with people who didn't hide their hate for me. Everything I did rubbed them off the wrong way. My aunt would always start her sentence with: "Your rich parents are dead now...", it almost felt like she had been waiting for them to die so I could experience life the way she wanted me to experience it. They started occupying my home, claiming things as if they deserved them. It then came to the cars and a lot more. I put my foot down when they

wanted to touch my parents' designer clothes and bags and that's when they started telling me that I was losing it. They shoved therapy down my throat—I needed it—but not like that. I needed a genuine therapist not someone they had coached how to deal with me. I started rebelling and against my will, they brought me to this place under the pretext of getting me the help I needed. I didn't feel depressed until I came here and I sunk deeper into the jaws of grief. For two years, I couldn't speak to anyone. I only watched as people went on with their lives.

“Hi Nomvula,” I'm brought back to the bench I'm sitting on by one of the patients here. She's a lovely lady, I don't know why she's still here. We call her the ‘Knitting Lady’ because she's always knitting.

“Hi Ma, unjani (how are you)?”

“Don't go, you will die,” she says.

“What are you talking about?” I didn't tell her or anyone about leaving this place.

“He will kill you,” she persists.

“Who?” I'm confused.

“Him. He will kill you after finding out how much you are worth.”

“He already has my money—”

“No, don't go. You will die,” she leaves me confused. I know my uncle hates me and I am done hiding, I'm going to face him head on. My parents didn't work hard so that I can be locked up in here forever. That's my inheritance and I deserve it.

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INSERT 10

SABELO

I drive through the cemetery and my heart breaks for all families who lost their loved ones. It hurts even more for the children who buried their parents and it hurts the same for the parents who buried their children. No matter who it snatches first, death leaves behind bleeding hearts. I park the car, grab the chocolates I brought and get down the car. Anele's grave is not far from where I parked, so this place doesn't get to depress me before I can reach it.

“Hey wifey,” I say as I squat next to the cross that bears her name. I know she won't respond but I wait anyway. “I miss you terribly. The world doesn't make sense without you... Arg, look at me getting carried away before giving you your gifts. I brought your favourite chocolates and since you decided to sleep forever, I will eat one on your behalf,” I tear open the box. I pick one chocolate, unwrap it and pop it into my mouth. I'm not a fan of chocolates, but for her, I can do anything. “Lalela ke MaSibisi wami,” my lips curve into a smile as I remember how she always melted when I called her ‘MaSibisi wami’. “Where do I even start? Kuningi, babe (It's a lot),” I release a deep breath. “Okay, it turns out I have a child with Ziphozonke of all people. That b!tch gave birth to a younger version of me and you know what pisses me off, it's the name she gave to him. I'm looking into a legal way of having that kid change his name, he doesn't deserve to be Sabelo Junior.

We had reserved that name for our child and I don't think I can use the name on someone else. I don't know, maybe I'm still angry but I don't see myself loving the boy or let alone bonding with him. Does that make me a bad man?"

I rub my face frustratedly.

"I will take the financial responsibility though, they boy will grow up and be his own man. He survived seven years without me, he can continue doing so."

Saying this out loud feels wrong and almost tugs at my heart strings but still, I'm not ready to father that child.

"Okay, enough about my bastard child. I went back to work and Astrid assigned me a new case so I can try and keep my mind occupied. I wasn't sure about it at first but now I am. It's a dangerous case, one that will need me to forget about law for a few moments. I know this is wrong but it also feels right. I don't know if I'm making sense. The person who needs help really needs it. Please allow me to help her and be my guardian angel from up there."

I wish she can respond and tell me that all is well, but it's okay even if she won't. I feel at peace after pouring my heart to her. I hope she's not mad at me.

"Let me go and start working on this case. Continue resting, I love you, Anele."

I'm tired and my eyes are complaining now. I check the time and it's 2 in the morning. This means I have been working for over ten hours. I stand up, stretch myself and make my way to the kitchen. I turn on the kettle and look for

a cup. I could do with a cup of coffee. I open the cupboards and they all look clean and empty. I forgot to buy groceries again. I have been surviving on takeaways and it has to stop. I need to go back to making food for myself.

By the grace of God I find coffee and sugar in the cupboards. I finish making my cup of coffee and go back to my work desk. I save all the files I have been working on and power off the desktop and the laptop. I reach for my phone and download the Woolies App. Anele had all these shopping Apps on her phone and she would force me to learn how to use them as if she knew that she would leave me sooner than I thought. I don't struggle using Apps, I develop Apps in my spare time so I wouldn't struggle to use one.

I add as much groceries as I can to my cart and save it. I will check out in the morning. Astrid said I can work from home and I will do just that. I just haven't figured out how to break Nomvula out of that place but what I know is that tomorrow she will be out.

I finish my coffee and retire to bed.

ZIPHOZONKE

People always say pregnancy is hard, try raising a child on your own. I wake up at 5 in the morning, every day, to help this little guy get ready for school. It was going to be better if all I have to do is prepare for him, I shout a million times

before we can be done with our morning routine. If he's not staring at the cartoons on TV, it's the phone. I try restricting him when it comes to electronic gadgets but my sister, Nomusa, always berate me and accuse me of abusing Sabelo Junior. She doesn't understand how distracting these things are, but why would she care, I'm the one who has to suffer the consequences of her being the cool aunt.

“Mom,” Sabelo Junior calls out.

“Yes, boy.”

“When are we going to visit Dad?” he asks and my stomach churns. Sabelo Junior knows Sthembiso as his father. Sthembiso turned out to be bad for me but I would be lying if I say he ever mistreated my child. He treated him as if he was his and he still does even up to date. I ran away from him but he found me. He forced me to accept money for Sabelo Junior's upkeep. I did, little did I know that I have to pay back that money using my body. Every month he shows up and tells me that it's time to pay. When I refuse, he threatens to stop sending money and the thought of my child at a public school has me continuing with whatever it is I'm doing with Sthembiso. I can't imagine taking my child out of a private school to some public school in Alex. That would be a great injustice to him. I'm tired of this life though, that's why I have been pushing Sabelo to accept and get to know his child. He has the money, he can afford him.

“He is out of town, we will see him month end,” I lie. He's happily married, that's why he only appears whenever he has time to spare.

“Okay. I miss him.”

“I know. I want you to meet someone.”

“Who?” he asks.

“Your uncle. He's a cool uncle and you will enjoy spending time with him.”

“Does he have games like my dad?”

“Yep. A lot of them.”

“Yay! When are we meeting him?”

“I will tell you, just be a good boy at school.”

I'm giving Sabelo a week to say something or I'm taking this child to his parents. He forgets that I know where his parents live. I will go and dump this kid there and that will force him to act.

The school transport finally arrives. Sabelo leaves and that means I gave two hours to myself before getting ready for work. I'm tired, so I will just go and sleep. I set an alarm and head to my bedroom.

My phone vibrates just as I enter the bedroom. It's an email and the subject is a bold 'CONFIDENTIAL'. I click on the attached file and frown at the Simelane & Co Attorneys logo. I don't have any legal battle with anyone so why would I receive a letter from lawyers. I jump to the letter itself and it reads:

Dear Ms Ziphonke Peters

I am Advocate Asanda Simelane, acting on behalf of my client Sabelo Mseleku. Following the DNA test results, my client has decided to accept responsibility as a father. However, he has terms and conditions. This news caught him at a bad time and he is asking for more time to adjust to this new

development. The other things he wants to discuss with you are the following:

1. The name of the child. He wants it changed. Reasons are stated below.

2. He doesn't want to meet the boy until further notice

3. He is not comfortable communicating with you, he suggests that you communicate through lawyers or not communicate at all.

His proposed financial assistance is as elaborated below.

He will pay for the following:

- School fees
- Extracurricular activities
- Private medical fees
- Month to month groceries
- Clothing
- Holiday trips
- A monthly allowance for emergencies

Please write read the proposal carefully and write back so we can discuss further. Do include figures for the child's expenses...

“Did he just say he wants to change his son's name? Is he for real? Ungijwayela kabi lo.”

NOMVULA

I'm nervous and I didn't sleep a wink. I kept seeing my uncle strangling me every time I closed my eyes. The micro dreams felt real, so I ended up reading a book instead of sleeping. I was up before everyone today. I took a bath and prepared breakfast for myself although I failed to eat it. I already packed my bags and I'm ready to get out of here. I hope Sabelo doesn't give up before he can even try. I need help and I'm hoping that he will help me.

“Can I come in?” the manager says standing by the entrance.

“Yes, you can.”

“Okay,” he comes in and closes the door. “I need you to swear to me that you will use this opportunity wisely and you will make your parents proud.”

“I will, I swear.”

“Good. Sabelo is waiting for you—”

“He is here?” I'm excited all over again.

“No. He sent someone and you can trust her, I verified her. You are leaving these bags, only take valuables if you have any. If the guard asks where you are going, tell him you were granted a day off. Here's a signed letter.”

“Won't you get in trouble with the authorities?”

“I would rather die for something good.”

“Thank you. I will never forget you.”

“Go and be the best version of yourself out there,” we hug and I thank him one more time.

I look around my room one more time and store the memories I have created in here not just in my mind, but in my heart too. I don't have any valuables with me, so there's nothing to grab on my way out.

I see others going on about their business. I wish I can say my goodbyes to some of them but it's not safe. I will carry them in my heart and pray for them to be well and get out of here.

“Hi Sisi Nomvula, where are you going?” the guard asks.

“Hi bafo. I finally got a day off and I'm going to just stare at the city,” I smile nervously.

“You deserve that day off. Have fun,” he opens the gate and I exit.

I'm even more anxious now as I approach the car that is waiting for me. I open the passenger seat and get in.

“Hi,” I nervously greet the lady.

“Hi Nomvula. I'm Nontobeko, Sabelo sent me.”

“So, I have been told.”

“Ready?” she asks.

Am I? Does the world still look the same after six years of being locked up in one place?

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INSERT 11

NOMVULA

“Hey, are you okay?” panic cannot be missed in Nontobeko's voice. I'm sobbing inconsolably and my body is shaking. “Please talk to me,” she begs. She has had to park on the side of the road. What started as a silent tear falling down my cheeks has turned to full blown gut-wrenching sobs. “Nomvula, you are scaring me,” her panic is getting worse. I want to tell her that I'm okay but these sobs just won't stop. She picks her phone and dials someone.

“Nonto?” a male voice answers.

“Bhuti, she's crying so bad and I don't know what to do. I'm scared.”

“Put me on loudspeaker,” he says. It's Sabelo.

“You are already on loudspeaker. She can hear you.”

“Nomvula, please calm down. You are safe, I sent her. I was busy with something, you will find me waiting for you. She won't harm you, she's harmless.”

“I...I...” a painful lump rises from the core of my stomach and clogs my throat.

“It's okay, you don't have to say anything now. We will talk when you are ready to. Nonto, drive.”

“Okay, Bhuti,” she says while looking at me. She looks like she wants to cry too but she has to be strong, she has to drive

us out of here. She takes a deep breath and reignites the engine. I shouldn't have asked her to buy me a McDonald's meal.

My eyes land on the McCafe cup that I'm holding and my chest constricts. I can hear my mother calling out to me from the entrance of my apartment.

'Nono, come on I brought your favourite,' she would say, her heels clicking against the tiled floor. She was an elegant and stylish woman. She didn't need a special occasion to dress up, she was always on point and she emphasised that clothes have a way of earning one respect or disrespect. I would come out of my room, still in my Pjs, tired from studying and she would look at me disapprovingly. 'What happened to waking, taking a bath and looking presentable for the day?'

'Come on, I'm in my apartment,' I would defend myself, already rummaging through the shopping bags. She knew that Watermelon McFizz was—still is—my favourite. One sip melts away every problem of mine but right now it's taking me back to the memories I have tried hard to bury.

'Be a lady, Nomvelo, just because books are showing you flames doesn't mean you should let yourself go. How are you going to find a man looking like this?' she would add as a joke because she knew I was restricted to partake in anything that has to do with dating.

'Leave my daughter alone, Sphe!' my father, always coming in later because he had to answer an important call would come to my rescue. 'She is not allowed to date until her 22nd birthday and if men looked for clothes, we both know you and I wouldn't be here,' he would tease her.

'What do you mean?' she would fake ignorance.

'I met you wearing your grandmother's pinafore and unmatched socks,' he would say and laugh softly. They would go on to talk about their first meeting and I would bask in their love while enjoying my food...

"We are here," Nontobeko brings me back to where I am. I might be wrong but this suburb looks and feels like Sandhurst. I know because I have—had an apartment in this suburb. Memories of how I lost it all want to force their way back onto the surface but I push them back.

"Where are we?" I can see that we are in front of a gorgeous mansion but I want to know whose mansion it is.

"I don't know, Bhuti Sabelo sent me the location. He is inside."

"Okay. I'm sorry for scaring you earlier, I couldn't hold in my emotions."

"It's okay, no stress," she smiles.

Just then Sabelo comes out of the house walking alongside a blonde woman whose stride is timed, graceful and purposeful. I don't know her, but she looks like she can eat the runaway and leave no crumbs. I don't know if I should get down the car or wait for them to get to the car. Sabelo walks towards the passenger door and opens it. I don't know him that much, we only bonded as mental institution patients but I do fly into his arms and hug him tight. He's taken aback because he hesitates to hug me back.

"Sorry," I say as I pull out of the hug.

"It's okay," he smiles. "How does it feel being out of jail?"

"I can't explain the feeling, I feel like screaming in joy," I say in all honesty.

“I’m happy for you. Please meet Astrid, my boss,” he says. I’m shocked that this beauty is into law not the beauty and entertainment industry.

“Hey Nomvula,” Astrid shakes my hand. Her handshake is firm, just like how they teach you in private schools. “A pleasure to meet you even if it’s under the not-so-good circumstances. I trust my team to help you. I would love to stay and chat but duty is calling. Sabelo is here and you are in the safest hands you can ever fall and land on when it comes to property legal battles. See you around.”

And she’s gone before I can even greet her back. She is one of the people we can say have a ‘strong personality’.

“I will also be on my way, see you guys,” that’s Nontobeko.

“Thanks, Nonto, I owe you one,” says Sabelo.

“Don’t stress about it.”

We watch her driving off and then Sabelo leads me into the house. The interior design belongs to Top Billing. It’s out of this world and the fresh scent of lavender, heavenly.

“Is this your house?” I ask.

“I love clients but not enough to bring them into my house. My wife would haunt me if I do that,” he smiles. “It’s a rented place. Astrid thinks it’s good that you stay in a house not a hotel. Hotels have cameras and we don’t know how far your uncle is willing to go to hold on to your inheritance.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Thank you for taking the case, I once tried and people kept bailing out on me. I think my uncle paid them off.”

“Don’t thank me yet, also, I’m just doing my job.”

“Honestly, why did you take the case? I'm sure by now you know who my uncle is and how dangerous he can be. Why haven't you bailed out on me?”

“You want the truth or a general answer that will make you sleep better at night?”

“The truth.”

“Okay, sit,” he gestures for me to sit on the couch. He sits on the other couch and faces me. “I wrote my resignation letter the day I received your case. I was ready to go out there and just wander with the wind because I couldn't feel my purpose anymore. I'm telling you this because you already know me beyond being an advocate. My wife was my drive. Providing her with everything she needed was my motivation and her smile my charm. Without her, I don't know if I want to continue working hard. When Astrid assigned me this case, she told me that it's going to be dangerous. The danger part excited me, I need something to keep my mind off things and what a better way to do it than sleeping with my one eye open because some potbellied man out there wants to kill me?”

“You are brave.”

“Ngiyinsizwa (I am a man).”

“From the bottom of my heart, ngiyabonga.”

“Sure. Do you want to eat, bathe or whatever before we get into the case?”

“I don't have cosmetics or a change of clothes.”

“I got you covered. I hope I got it right,” he smiles. “Astrid helped,” he adds. “Come on, I will show you to the bathroom.”

ZIPHOZONKE

I have read this proposal a million times and I still don't understand why a man would be so nonchalant and insensitive when talking about his own flesh and blood. Why does he not want a relationship with his son? What kind of a father just throws money at a child and hopes that they child will be fine? For someone who grew up loved and cared for by both parents, he sure is a deadbeat.

“Can I ask you something and promise to respond to me honestly? Please don't judge,” I take a deep breath. My sister is still angry at me for what and who I became after our parents died. If murdering someone wasn't a crime, I bet she would have long killed me.

“Okay. Sounds serious. What's up?” she asks.

“Sabelo sent a proposal through his lawyers,” I swallow hard. “The proposal has terms and conditions. One of the conditions is that I change Junior's name and also I don't communicate with him. He also doesn't want a relationship with his child.”

“Okay?” she raises her eyebrow as if waiting for the real issue when I already handed her all the issues. She is not even shocked.

“You are supposed to be shocked.”

“No, I'm not. You are stressed because he doesn't want his name associated with his son or you are worried that he's not going to be your retirement home as you thought?”

“I didn't see him like that!”

“I'm not a kid, Zipho. You thought he will fall for the trap but he's not. Anyway, you said I shouldn't judge. From where I'm standing, this man is prepared to even give up this child and I know a stubborn lawyer. He has money to go to courts, can sue you for paternity fraud even. This child calls another man 'baba' and knows that man as his father. How will you explain yourself to the court? Why did you hide his child when you knew where he is and when you were sure about the paternity of the child?”

“But... but it's his son.”

“He is not denying that. He's refusing to be manipulated and used simply because it now suits you. Also remember that this man has been married for five years. Any wife would be proud to give her husband an heir, I'm sure they were planning for it and wena you rock up at his wife's funeral with a Junior? Do you know how emotionally damaging that is?”

“What do I do now?” I feel defeated.

“For once in your life, do what is morally right. He's accepting paternity and responsibilities of being a father. That's maturity on his side. Now, allow him to come to terms with all this and when the time is right, he will come for his child. You took your time, grant him the same grace.”

“Thanks.”

I don't know how I feel, but maybe this is the best I can do for my child. His future will be secured. I have to find out how to go about removing a name from one's birth certificate. I don't have a lawyer nor can I afford one, I will just write back to his lawyers myself and hear what they will have to say.

SABELO

I can't believe the amount of work I have done in the past five hours. With Nomvula's help, I have a list of what Nomvula believes to be her parents' assets. I can't believe they had so many properties yet their child has been staying at a mental institution for so long. They didn't have just cars, they had a fleet. They have depreciated over time but they are still hers. What I need now is to check with the deeds and Master's offices to verify these properties and also to be sure about who has the letter of authority. A few phone calls will put me a step further.

“Did your father have any other children?”

“Not that I know of.”

“No one showed up claiming to be his child after his demise?”

“No. I don't remember anyone showing up.”

“Any will stating his dependents and all that?”

“Yes. There is a will. My mother had one too. I know their lawyers, I just don't know if they are still alive or still working at the same offices.”

“That's perfect! Write their names down here for me, I will find them.”

“Okay.”

“I think I will be on my way. I'm not supposed to be doing this for a client but you begged me to help and Astrid is counting on me. I got you this phone so we can keep in touch.

Please don't post anything on social media or give away your location.”

“Thank you, I will behave.”

“Great. Just so you know, I can access the phone when the need arises. I wouldn't want to invade your privacy like that, but I value my life more than I value your privacy. You have to work with me, protect me just as I am protecting you.”

“I won't do anything to put you in danger, I promise.”

“Good girl. Here is my number, you can call me anytime you need to talk or help. And hey, cook and eat. Astrid bought food.”

“You guys are good people. Thank you so much for this.”

“Astrid is a good person, I'm not. I'm only doing my job so I can get paid. Tour the house or whatever, just don't get bored and be depressed. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I step out of the house and stretch myself. I feel unfit, I must go back to the gym. I am about to get into the car when a call from Astrid comes through.

“Hey,” I answer.

“They are looking for her. The uncle is fuming.”

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INSERT 11

SABELO

“Damn you, kid!” Austin, my colleague who is like a brother to me exclaims. I look at Astrid and I'm unable to figure out where her emotions and mind are at this moment. On her left side is Michael who looks impressed. “Astrid?” Austin taps her on the shoulder.

“Who are you, kid?” Astrid's lips curve into a smile. I breathe out in relief and finally relax. I have been holding my breath ever since I arrived at the office. “This is gold! I want to ask you if you obtained these legally, but I know you didn't so I won't ask.”

“So, you don't mind the route I have taken with this case?”

“Do I mind? No. Am I worried, yes. You are playing dirty and it tends to be dangerous. I don't want to lose you, we need you.” I don't like it when she becomes emotional. She is like a big sister to all of us and it's always hard to ignore her emotions.

“I won't die, they won't kill me. I will make them need me,” I tell them.

“How?” they chorus.

“Let me meet with the lawyers Nomvula referred me to first, then I will come back to you guys. This will work and it will be done sooner than it can be done should we go with it the honest way.” I don't know who I am convincing. Them or

myself, but that doesn't matter. I just want them to trust me with this.

“Okay. Always keep your location on,” Michael says. “We will push your other cases while you finish this.”

“Thank you,” I say and mean it.

“Okay then,” Astrid breathes out. “Go and make me proud.”

I drive through the gate of the address Nomvula gave me. The place looks unsafe to house people but the cars parked here are proof that there are people inside the building. There are no signs to show where visitors should park their cars so I just find a better looking space and park. I take my phone, turn it on and connect it to my laptop back at home to record everything that is about to transpire and get down the car. I check if my gun is tucked in properly and lock the car. This place is so unkept that even the air in the atmosphere smells stale. It is the kind of an environment that can have one suffocating to death.

It's a miracle that the automated sliding door still works. I walk in and another shocker is that the air conditioning system is also functional. The inside of the building looks way better than the outside.

“Good afternoon and welcome to the Mulaudzi and Co Attorneys,” an elderly lady behind the reception desk greets.

“Good afternoon, Ma'am. I'm here for Advocate Mulaudzi, we have an appointment,” I tell her.

“Your name, Sir?”

“Sabelo Mseleku.”

She types something on the desktop and looks at the screen for a moment before looking back at me.

“Follow me,” she says and I'm glad that I don't have to wait. I don't like waiting for people when I could be doing something better with my life.

She leads me along the corridor and stops in front of the door that is at the far end of the corridor on the left. She knocks and someone giggles inside before we are told to come in. The receptionist lady pushes the door open and we walk in just as some sluttishly dressed young lady fixes her top. I don't even know why she's fixing it because her breasts are still out for everyone to see. The room also smells like scented condoms and sex. Who has sex in the office just before an appointment with a client?

“Mr Mseleku,” Advocate Mulaudzi greets.

“Mr Mulaudzi,” I greet back. The two ladies excuse us and close the door on their way out.

“How can I help you? You said it was urgent,” he sounds so full of himself but that's okay. We will fix this attitude of his.

“I want the Mzolos' wills,” I go straight to the point.

“What? Why?” he sounds and looks alarmed.

“The original ones, please. I need them urgently.”

“How did you find me? They are not here, please leave,” he's already on his feet but I remain seated.

“I'm not leaving without what I came here for.”

“I'm calling the police on you for trespassing—”

“You really don't look stupid, but if you want to look stupid in front of the police, call them. I booked an appointment so this meeting can be formal, you can't turn around and call me a trespasser. You are smarter than that.”

“Please go, I can't help you.”

“Fine, I will go but I want you to see this first,” I say as I take my phone out of my pocket. I go to gallery and play a video for him. I watch as his eyes bulge, almost popping out of their sockets. Beads of sweat form on his forehead and his lips turn ashy-white.

“You..you...” he stammers.

“Do you have the wills?”

He dejectedly sits down and stares at me.

“I have enough to can make a thousand dollars in a day on Onlyfans—”

“Please, you can't do this to me. I have a wife and kids, this will destroy them. Come on, you are a man, a husband and a father. Surely you can relate. These women mean nothing, I love my wife. I love my wife, man.”

It must be my wedding band that gives him the impression that I'm married. This idiot didn't even Google me, what a stupid lawyer. How do you agree to meet with someone you don't know.

“First, I don't relate to having kids. Second, my wife is dead so I couldn't care less about hurting yours. So no, the moral blackmail won't work on me. Just give me the wills and you will never have to see my face ever again.”

“They will kill me man,” he's tearing up and I hate a weak man.

“I will humiliate you and you will die of your own shame. Which way would you like to die?”

“What's in it for you? Why are you doing this? No lawyer have ever wanted to help her. Are you screwing her?”

“I just told you that my wife is dead and I wouldn't equate my life to sex. I'm doing this because at some point, people have to be reminded that they are not all that. Feeling mighty after bullying a child shouldn't be something a man should be proud of. Where I come from, you fight your age mates to be glorified, you don't bully people and be glorified. You are giving that wimp too much credit.”

“He is not a wimp! They killed someone, I saw him die!”

“Why haven't they killed her if they desperately want to hold on to her inheritance? Wouldn't that be easy?”

“There's a clause on both her parents' wills that should she pass on, everything should go to charity,” he says and regrets it instantly. “Please go, you will get us all killed.”

“I don't mind dying, you do. So, do us all a favour and give me what I want. But before I leave, I have a few questions. I checked with the deeds office and all the houses are still owned by her parents. I also checked the cars, they are still owned by them. Why is that? Shouldn't that man have already transferred them?”

“He can't.”

“What's holding him back?”

“The Letter of Authority that he has grants him control over the properties but denies him the right to change ownership or sell any of the properties. He is more like a caretaker. He also doesn't have access to the company accounts. He only gets the money that is supposed to go to

Nomvelo. He only enjoys staying in a beautiful house, driving different cars and his girlfriend stays in Nomvelo's apartments since he can't kick out tenants in other properties.”

“What is his end goal?”

“I don't know, man. Maybe he's waiting for her to die, I really don't know.”

“Her death won't benefit him in anything. There must be something he is up to.”

“The only person who can sign things over to him is Nomvelo and we both know that she won't do that. I really don't know what he's up to. Please leave me out of this.”

“Just give me the wills and I will be out of here.”

“You will delete those videos?”

“Yes, when I'm done and she is free from all of you.”

“I will courier it—”

“No. I'm not walking out of here without them.”

ZIPHOZONKE

I have been mulling over Sabelo's proposal and my heart of hearts does not want to agree to this. What happens to my son when I die? What happens to him when his father dies? Does he get a share of his father's estate? What if he gets remarried and forgets about my son? I know I messed up, but I have to try and secure my son's future. I will counter this proposal with my own terms and conditions. My sons future has to be secured.

I pick my phone from the table and dial Sabelo. I have his number, don't ask me how I got it. It rings unanswered. I call again and he answers.

“My lawyers didn't make it clear to you that you will only communicate with them?”

“Please, I just want clarity and I know you can enlighten me.”

“I'm busy Zipho—”

“Why are you avoiding me? Do you still have feelings for me?”

He laughs—a laugh that's but a mockery and I feel sick in the deepest pit of my stomach.

“I haven't had sex ever since my wife passed on and I can promise you that I won't have a hard on even if I were to walk in on you naked.”

“You are lying!”

“There's nothing attractive about you Zipho. All the feelings I had for you died the day I saw you for a slut that you are. After that day, you never even crossed my mind, not even as a bitter memory.”

Tears burn my eyes. I knew he hated me, but not this much. I can feel the disgust in his voice.

“I'm sorry—”

“What do you need clarity on, Ziphozonke?” Sthembiso hates me but sometimes he pretends to like me and speaks to me nicely. Sabelo is not even trying to be nice.

“What happens to my son when you die?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean financially.”

“I will be providing for this child monthly, he will be part of my medical aid, that automatically makes him my dependant and you can claim from my estate when I die.”

“Okay. Will you pay inhlawulo for him?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Why don't you ask the man you chose to be the father to your child that question? You left for years and you want to come back and disrupt my life? No, it won't happen, Zipho. Like I said before, I don't mind giving up my rights as a father to that boy. The ball is in your court and let this be the last time you call me. I have no desire to interact with you in any sphere of my life,” he ends the call.

I feel like someone just punched me on the stomach, pissed and spit on my face. I blink away my tears. I look at the sandwich in front of me and I have lost my appetite already.

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INSERT 12

NOMVULA

I promised myself and Sabelo that I won't cry. I meant it but after setting up my phone, I logged into my Instagram and my profile looks like it belongs to some stranger. I don't recognise the happy and chatty girl on these videos and her smile is something I don't remember. Almost every video I ever posted, I mentioned my dad or my mom at least three times. I envy the smile that spreads on this girl's face whenever she mentions her parents. I love how she's lazy but when it comes to a push, she gets to business.

My head hurts from all the crying and my sinuses are misbehaving. I left everything including my nasal spray at the centre so I have to suck it up. I hear the door opening and I jump from the couch. I'm about to hide behind the coach when Sabelo announces his presence.

“Nomvula, it's me,” he says.

“Oh, it's you,” I relax.

“Who did you think it was? No one can access this house without my permission, that person will have to be Lwandle Ngcobo or his mentor.”

“Who is Lwandle Ngcobo?”

“A genius guy I read about on the dark web. He somehow influenced my desire to study IT and be good at it... Wait, you were crying?”

“N..no,” I stutter. I thought I had mastered the art of hiding my pain—not showing the world what I'm feeling but I'm failing dismally. “I wasn't crying, I promise,” just then a stray tear embarrasses me. He puts his laptop bag down together with the McDonald's takeaway bag and opens his arms for me. I don't hesitate flying into them. He hugs me tight just as my lips quiver and I break into painful sobs. He let me cry my heart out, keeps me in his arms until I feel a bit calmer. I slowly untangle myself from him and move to the couch shamefacedly.

“You don't have to be ashamed because of your tears. Crying doesn't make you weak, it makes you human,” he earns a smile from me.

“Are you quoting me?” I raise my eyebrow.

“It's the truth,” he shrugs. I said the exact same words to him back at the centre when he kept blinking away his tears whenever he spoke about his wife. “I came here to ask you a few questions about the case but you are not in a good mood, so let's get you fed and try to cheer you up.”

“You remembered that I love McDonald's,” I note.

“I pay attention to detail, that's why I am a lawyer.”

“I see. Should I dish up for you too?”

“No. I already ate and I don't like chicken.”

“What did chicken do to you?”

“Nothing, really. I just don't like it.”

I sit on the couch and start eating.

“Someone is staying in my apartment, a slayqueen of some sort,” I tell him and he just stares. I know I promised not to snoop but curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to know what is going on with my parents' assets. “I didn't give away

my location, I promise. I logged into my cloud server, saved a few pictures of my apartment and my parents' house. I did a picture search on Google and I was shocked to see my apartment there. Most of the deco is still the same but my pictures were replaced. That lady has turned my apartment into hers!”

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

“Huh?”

“You looked for things that will make you sad and angry without a plan? That's a stupid thing to do because what will you do with this anger now?”

“I just wanted to know what's going on.”

“I understand,” he sighs. “I got the original wills,” he says and I don't know whether to scream in joy or just sit here and admire him for the work he has done already. I never saw my parents' wills, they were hidden from me as if I'm going to steal them when I have a right to see them.

“Are they going to help us?” my heart is pounding in my chest as I think about the doors these wills can open for me. Doors that were closed on my face by my very own family.

“I know now that the wills are keeping you alive. If you happen to die, everything will go to charity—”

“What?”

“Yes. You are a sole dependent and no one has come forward to claim anything from their estates. It's been years which means the estate can now be released to you. Also, your uncle cannot sell or change ownership of any of the properties, he only can look after them. He gets maintenance money and the money that is supposed to go to you. That's all he has.”

“Okay, this sounds interesting. What now? What are we supposed to do?”

“Eat your food and let me worry about that.”

“Okay, I trust you. And to think you wanted to unalive yourself, who was going to help me?” I tease him.

“It's a good thing that rope wasn't strong,” we both laugh. “What happened to your maternal family?”

“My uncle banned them from visiting or talking to me.”

“Did you ever question why?”

“My aunts wanted me to claim my inheritance and he made me believe that they were after my inheritance. I believed him and started pushing them away. I hate myself for that.”

“You have to forgive yourself so you start healing.”

“I'm trying.”

“Good. This is not part of job description but can I take you out to get your mind off things?”

“I would love to feel alive and normal again. Where to?”

“Let's keep it a surprise,” he smiles.

He leaves after telling me a bit about his progress and that my uncle is looking for me already. I'm scared of him but I have a feeling that he won't kill me, not now when he knows that I'm coming for what's rightfully mine.

SABELO

Working from home is nice and all until you want to print something out and remember that your printer hasn't worked

in months. You turn it on and it tells you about updating the software and all. I suck it up and update everything. I click on print and the damn thing takes forever to print. I need to buy myself a new and faster printer.

I'm still busy working when I receive an email from my lawyers letting me know that Ziphozonke is willing to accept the offer but she has a request. Her request is that she continues using the Junior name. I don't care about the Junior name, I care about my name that she attached to that Junior. They can continue calling him that, they can even name him Junior Jesus, I really don't care. If one could wish some things or people away, I would wish to have never met Ziphozonke. That way I wouldn't be dealing with this mess. I don't know why the universe never sends you the right one from the onset, is it always a must to kiss a few nondindwas before meeting the one?

I give them permission to grant the request. I also instruct them to get a signed deal that is accompanied by a Non-disclosure Agreement. Ziphozonke is not disclose my relationship or whatever this is that I have with her son. She is also to refrain from posting anything that has my name on it. I don't hate what her egg and my sperm produced, I just hate—infact hate is way too mild a word to use when describing my feelings towards Ziphozonke, I loathe her entire existence.

I shift my mind to something positive. She doesn't deserve to occupy my mind, not even for a millisecond. My phone vibrates just as I'm gearing up for more work. Ever since I distanced myself from family, my life has been all work and

nothing else. I even forgot about my hobby. I need to get my groove back and do things that pump my adrenaline.

“Sabelo speaking,” I answer.

“B..Bhuti Sabelo, there... there are people at the door...”
Nomvula's voice fades on the other side of the call just as it echoes in my head...

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CHAPTER 13

SABELO

“Nomvula, who is at the door?” I ask for the millionth time and all I am hearing from her breathing. I quickly log in to my security App and check the camera. “F#ck!” I curse under my breath. This wasn't how I imagined this would go down. It's her uncle and his hooligans at the door. Even if I drive there now, there's nothing I can do. I'm outnumbered. ‘Think, Sabelo, think!’ I tap my head.

“They are breaking the door, the alarm is off—”

“I can see them. I'm going to open the door for them and you will do as they say—”

“W... what?”

“He won't kill you, they need you alive. Give me two hours max, I will be there to rescue you. Do you trust me?”

“I don't know,” she sniffs.

“I'm coming for you, just put your trust in me.”

I end the call and quickly bring my team on a conference call. They know shit has hit the fan when one of us calls beyond working hours and does a conference call. They are all here and waiting for me to speak.

“The uncle found her,” I break the news to them.

“How?” Astrid is confused. They all are because we thought the place was hidden and we thought my expertise in security will save us. But we forgot that there's always a better genius out there.

“I guess we were not careful enough,” I sigh. A thousand thoughts are running through my mind and I don't know why my heart is breaking already. I don't think I can stand seeing a dead body, it's too soon and somehow it already hurts imagining Nomvula as a body.

“Do you have a plan?” Austin asks.

“How quickly can you get to Sandton?” I ask him.

“Ten minutes, why?” he questions.

“His favourite daughter is in Nomvula's apartment. I need you to visit her. Michael, can you get to Mamelodi in the next 20 minutes?”

“Yeah, sure. Who am I killing?” Michael jokes even when the situation is tense.

“You are having dinner with this bastard's mother. I'm going to his house—”

“I don't like this plan of yours, Sabelo. We can call the cops or something,” Astrid chirps in.

“That bastard probably has the hawks, SIU, SWAT and every police you can think of in his pocket. Let's not waste our time trusting the law, we know it never favours the ordinary. The guy is everything disgusting but he loves his family. We will do a fair trade. His family for Nomvula and everything they owe her,” I reason with her.

“If this doesn't work?” she asks.

“Tell our families that we love them,” Michael says.

“I have a baby on the way, take care of her should something happen to me,” Austin adds.

“Tell my sister to claim my insurance policies—”

“Stop it, you all! Stop it!” she wipes a stray tear. “I will brief our guy in the police, stay alive and come back. This is the last dangerous case we are taking. Please be safe.”

“Thank you,” we chorus.

This is not our first dangerous rodeo, we have been here before. Austin's girlfriend was once kidnapped and the ransom was that we let go of the case we were busy with. To save her, we pretended to give up and the next court date we went in for the kill. The wife of the guy we exposed couldn't take the embarrassment, she unalived herself and that's when Astrid stopped taking dangerous cases. Astrid crashed out so bad that she was blaming herself for that woman's death. I felt bad for the woman but more for the kids. They had lost one good parent and left with their useless father. It didn't take long before the guy was found cold on the streets of Jozi. Lawfully, it was a win but morally, it did tag at the strings of our hearts. Their children were orphaned because of us. I don't wish for the same thing to happen, but one thing about me, my father raised no coward.

NOMVULA

Fear evaporates through the pores of my skin and anger bubbles under my skin as I land my eyes on the man who stripped me of everything, including my dignity. Nostalgia takes over as his scent fills the room. For a moment, I can see my father, I can almost here him speak but his voice is a

whisper. I blink and his picture disappears, and is replaced by his brother's. I can't believe these people have raided my father's perfume bar. What happened to respecting the dead? He's wearing my father's perfume with no shame at all.

He strides in, his hooligans surrounding as if he is someone of importance when he's just a useless dog.

“Nomvula, ngane yami,” my uncle says and I clench my fists. “Ayisakhulumisani? (Are we not talking to each other)?”

I have a lot to say to him. More than enough choice words to throw at him but I remain silent, rooted on the floor and counting down from ten. I taught myself this, I taught myself to stay calm and that is what I have to do now. My safety and life lie in my response to his presence.

“Bab'omncane,” I greet. I even force a smile.

“My child,” he opens his arms and I cautiously go in to them. I feel like kneeling his groin as my father's perfume continues to force memories on to the surface of my mind. “How have you been?” he asks as he breaks the hug.

“I don't know,” I shrug. I'm going to play this as ignorant as I am.

“What do you mean you don't know?” he asks while scanning the house. “Why are you here? Whose house is this?”

“My friend's,” that comes out of my mouth before I can think it through.

“Your friend? Your friend now undermines my authority? Why did you leave that place?”

“I didn't leave, I just wanted a break and they granted me that. I have a form signed and stating exactly that. I was given a week break since I'm showing signs of getting better.”

“You are not getting better, Nomvula! You are out here with strangers who might be taking advantage of you. That is getting better?”

“I needed this, Bab'omncane. It's been six years since you left me in that place. You didn't even bother checking up on me!” I breathe. I'm getting angry and this wasn't the plan. I need to stay calm and not give him a reason to harm me in any way. “I apologise for my tone, I get highly frustrated when I haven't taken my medication. Can I go and get it?”

He stares at me, long and hard, as if trying to figure out where my mind is truly at. He might be a thug, but I have perfected holding it all in and look like all is well even when I'm threatening to explode from the inside.

“You can go. Don't try anything funny,” he adds as a warning. I just nod and make my way to the stairs. I'm silently praying for him to not change his mind. “Wait, where is your phone?”

“P-phone? I don't have one,” I attempt to lie.

“Please don't push me.”

The confirmation of my parents' peaceful rest that they are enjoying while I'm suffering comes through as a ringing phone. I was in denial, but now I know that no ancestor of mine is looking out for me. I look at the ringing phone and my heart pounds. Only one person has this contact number.

“Answer it,” my uncle orders.

“No, it's fine. I will talk to her later—”

“I said answer it!” he roars and my body shakes. I shakily pick up the phone. Sabelo is video-calling me. “Answer it!”

I do as he says and my eyes almost pop out of their sockets when Sabelo comes to view. He is at my parents' house—I

know because the walls are still the same—and has a little girl on his lap.

“Sabelo?” my voice comes out as a whisper. My uncle snatches my phone and I see his forehead creasing as soon as his eyes land on the screen.

“Baba Mzolo,” the cocky Sabelo says on the other side.

“You son of a bitch!” my uncle is fuming. “Don't you dare touch my kids! Move away from my daughter!”

“Calm down before you suffer hypertension. And before you call my mother a bitch, just know that your wife here can wear that crown with pride—”

“What are you talking about?” he's confused.

“Ooops, sorry. I forgot that her bitching ways were a secret—”

“What are you talking about, kid? My wife is not a whore!”

“Oh, poor innocent you,” Sabelo laughs. “Those fantasies you chase in the clubs, your wife gladly offer them to your friends on a silver platter. You should see her riding skills—”

“Enough!” my uncle hisses. “What do you want?”

“What are you looking for in my house, Sir? Did you lose something and it miraculously landed in my house?”

“What?” he is confused. “Nomvula said her friend is a girl—”

“Stop acting dumb and bring your fat belly here. If you dare touch even a hair on her head, just know that you will watch your family burn to ashes. Not just your kids and wife, your first born daughter and your mother too—”

“You are lying!”

“Watch this,” Sabelo says and whatever it is, it is not good. Beads of sweat are forming on his forehead and his hand is shaking.

“Let's go! Bring her along!”

SABELO

If you are a man with something to lose, you shouldn't go around pretending to be an immortal. A man with something to lose is the weakest man to ever walk on earth. I don't know what this man was thinking. I'm sure he didn't think someone who can challenge him is helping Nomvula. He was probably told that a woman came for her and he thought he would intimidate the woman and get his way.

He is here in less than 30 minutes, I commend him on the punctuality part. His wife has cried herself to hiccups. She doesn't even react when he comes in.

“You son of a b!tch!” he charges towards me. I release the safety button and point the gun at his little girl. She has no idea what is going on because I came prepared. I brought noise cancelling headphones and a tablet for her. She's so invested in Tom and Jerry right now. “You wouldn't dare!”

“Ever heard a saying that no one is more dangerous than a man with nothing to lose? That's me. I'm not even scared of dying right now. Wena, do you want to die?”

“She's just a kid!” he shouts.

“Nomvula is someone's kid too. Where is she?”

“She is safe. What do you want?”

“I'm glad you asked. You see, Nomvula is my client and my clients pay me big money. I'm Sabelo Mseleku, by the way. You can Google me when you are broke and back to your mother's house in Mamelodi. What was I saying? Oh, yes. Nomvula is my client and my clients pay me big. The problem is that you are holding her inheritance hostage. I only have one request for you, give her what belongs to her so she can pay me and you will never see my face again.”

“I have the court's order—”

“An order that you got fraudulently! You knew that she wasn't sick, she was just grieving and you took advantage of that. Awunamahloni? What do you think your brother is saying right now? Your father? Do you think they are resting in peace?”

“This is a family matter.”

“If she was really family, you would have checked on her at least once. So, let's not insult eachother's intelligence and do what's lawfully and morally right.”

“You have no proof of what you are saying!”

“I have their original wills,” I state. He opens his mouth and closes it again...

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CHAPTER 14

Four Months Later...

NOMVULA

I stare back at my reflection on the mirror and for the first time in six years, my resemblance to my mother doesn't make my eyes teary. My dimples—the only facial feature my father contributed to my face brings a smile to my face. He loved me, but he loved his dimples on my face even more. I apply setting spray on my face and almost scream 'Stella just got her groove back!'. I don't remember the last time I dressed up, let alone dolled myself up like this. I had forgotten who I am and the little things I used to do for myself almost became forgotten memories.

It's been four months since my uncle held me hostage and refused to release me. He had one demand—sign over everything to him. A part of me almost gave in when I watched his guys torture Sabelo. I don't know how they overpowered or outplayed him. But one thing was certain on that day, my uncle would choose money over anyone in his family any given day. He didn't care if his daughters were slaughtered like goats or his wife slain; his focus was on the money. It was shocking and frightening to witness the extent to which people would fight for something that wasn't theirs to begin with. He sounded like someone who was convinced

that he deserved to inherit my parents' wealth more than I did. You would swear he was their child that they had hidden.

I was on the verge of giving up everything my parents worked hard for when a gun fire filled the room and my ears rang so loud I felt my own scream echoing throughout my body. More shots were fired, the place rumbled and I swear I felt the walls and floors shake. The firing went on until I felt my body becoming numb. I couldn't feel or hear anything. My vision blurred and as a survival tactic, my brain took me back to the day I hate the most; the day I buried my parents. The next thing I remember I was being baptised with a bucketful of water. The deep breath I took felt like I was coming back to life—like I had died a little. I wanted to ask what had happened but seeing blood and the fury in Sabelo's team's faces had me keeping quiet. It wasn't the moment and my questions could wait. At that moment, all that mattered was to appreciate that we were all still alive. Some wounded, but wounds heal whereas death is final.

But wait, the TV on the background said otherwise. My uncle's face filled the screen and *déjà vu* coursed throughout my body. My body shook involuntarily and a deafening scream escaped my lips. I didn't mean to scream for that man or let alone shed a tear for my uncle, but I found myself mourning. Not for him but for my parents and all the pain he had caused. He was dead, wrapped in a foil like a useless body he had always been yet I still felt like he had not been punished enough for what he had done. I felt like watching him being devoured by animals while I watched would be

better. Another thought crossed my mind and watching him being hunted down by men like in those Mexican telenovelas would be a better option. But then, he would still end up dead. Maybe a life of suffering is what he deserved, but then he would still be wasting oxygen. I hope he doesn't find rest and suffer for his sins.

Enough about bad things. I finally got everything my parents worked hard for back. It all felt like a dream when the lawyers presented me with all the papers. I thought the chaos that erupted the day my uncle died would land us all in jail but it turned out the police were more than happy to sweep the case under the carpet. I don't know why, but the case didn't go any further than two hearings. The company Sabelo works for took a certain percentage from the estate but it did not dent the estate. I'm still sitting on multimillions that I haven't decided on what to do with them. I just want to get my mind in the right state before jumping into anything. But one thing is certain, I must pursue a postgraduate degree and also learn the ropes about my father's businesses.

My phone vibrates on the bed just as I apply lipstick. I look at it and smile as my cousin's name flashes on the screen. In everything that happened, I'm grateful to be reunited with my maternal family. They all love me as if they are making up for the lost time and this particular cousin—her name is Nandi and has this uncanny resemblance to my mother. She cares and looks after me as if she's a reincarnation of my mother. But that wouldn't be possible, people don't reincarnate until

they die. My mother died six years ago and my cousin is two years older than me.

“Hey,” I answer excitedly.

“Open your gate, I'm here,” she says. It's strange that she even sounds like my mother. Or am I reading too much into it? Maybe I just miss my mother so much that I see her in everything around me.

I rush to the kitchen where the gate remote is and open the gate for her. I need to upgrade the security system of this apartment. I need to be able to lock and unlock everything using my phone.

It doesn't take long before her scent fills my apartment and her smile brightens it.

“Cuz,” I crush into her body and she holds me tight.

“I hope you are not crying because girl, I'm going to smack them off of your face,” she teases.

“I'm not crying, I just missed you,” I pout.

“It's only been three days, stop exaggerating,” she smiles at me but her smile is quickly replaced by a frown. “Girl, what are you wearing?”

“A dress—”

“We are not going to church, we are going to a club. A club, Nomvula!”

“But there's nothing wrong with my dress—”

“Have you ever been to a club?”

“Uhm...no,” embarrassment flashes on my face.

“You really listened to your father when he told you not to date or go clubbing?” she asks, I nod. “Come with me,” she's dragging me back to the bedroom.

Five minutes later, I'm wearing the shortest dress Nandi could find in my closet and my cleavage is exposed. I only wore this dress once and my father made me vow to never wear it again because of how men were looking at me. Now that I'm wearing it again, I can confidently say that the dress suits my body.

“Now you look like someone going to a club, let's go.”

“We will have food first, right?”

“Of course, I'm not planning on downing BJs on an empty stomach.”

“Great!” I smile nervously. I'm not nervous because I'm going to the club the first time, I'm nervous because I don't know if I can handle my alcohol. I have never had shooters or more than one glass of wine. I have lived a disciplined and sheltered life throughout my existence. Now I want to do this, I want to go out and find myself but I'm scared at the same time.

“Relax, the world won't swallow you whole unless you let it,” Nandi says as she unlocks her car. One thing about Nandi, she will plan an outing, pay for everything and drive us around in her Hyundai i10 despite knowing my bank balance and seeing the fleet of cars my parents left. She's one person I can confidently say that she loves me for me not because of what I have. She gives zero phucks about my money, she's okay with her salary as a detective.

“Okay, okay,” I take a deep breath. This is it, you can live again Nomvula.

SABELO

“Do you really want to do this?” Ndalo asks for the millionth time ever since she arrived.

“No, but I keep seeing my wife and she's not happy about how I dealt with this matter. The kid is mine, and a tiny part of me wants to try this father thing but a larger part of me is not ready to accept that I procreated with Zipho of all people,” I sigh.

“Have you tried to think about this kid as his own person not Zipho's son?”

I look at her blankly. I don't know the kid, it's even hard to picture him as a person. This whole thing still feels like a bad dream.

“Maybe you should try that. Stop punishing your own seed for someone else's sins. That kid is yours, you proved it. Don't do things that will anger your ancestors.”

“I hear you. I hope I won't suffocate and die during this so called introduction dinner,” I tease.

“Mxm! Awukahle nedrama (Stop being dramatic). Where is your lover?” she changes the subject.

“In the garage.”

She smacks me on the shoulder, I laugh.

“I mean a person not car! What's wrong with you?”

"I'm single," I remind her.

"So what were you doing with Nomvula?"

"Nothing. We kissed and that was it. I remembered that I'm still grieving and decided to put a stop to whatever we were trying to start."

"You won't grieve forever, you know that, right?"

"I know, but until then, I will wait."

"If you say so."

There's something about Nomvula but the feelings I have for my wife are still too pronounced to ignore. She's in my mind and my life is still centered around her. Time will tell if there's something to pursue with Nomvula.

The restaurant is air-conditioned but I feel hot already. I'm on my second glass of beer and there is still no sign of Zipho and her child. I hate people who set appointments and be the ones to come late. If you invite someone, respect their time.

"Are you still good, Sir?" a waitress asks.

"Can you get me something stronger? Whiskey?"

"Sure. Which one?"

"The strongest you have," I say and she walks away with a smile. Just then I see Zipho walking in, the little boy's hand in hers. They look good together, she almost looks like a model mother. She looks up, our eyes lock and she smiles nervously. The boy on the other hand looks oblivious to everything that is about to happen. I watch them as they walk towards my table. A part of me wants to stand up and walk out but I choose to listen to my sister's reasoning. I stay.

“Hey,” Zipho greets.

“Hi,” I greet back. I want to tell her that she's late but the boy staring at me has me changing my mind. “Hey, little man,” I force a smile. The boy looks at me hard and long.

“My mom says you are my father, are you?” the question punches the air out of my lungs. I'm still trying to recover when he says, “My father doesn't meet me empty-handed, he buys me gifts every time he visits. You are not my father.”

Okay. We have a problem, a big one. Not only does this kid look like me, he has my attitude too.

“I.. Can you sit down?”

“No. My dad said I shouldn't trust strangers.”

Is he blind? Can't he see that I'm the older version of him? Also, why didn't Zipho tell him the truth already?

“Sorry, he can be difficult,” she says.

For some reason, my eyes are drawn to the entrance and, lo and behold, the stunning Nomvula struts in. I want to ignore her, turn my attention back to the two people. She looks up, her eyes sparkling with life and excitement and I get swallowed into her world, without her even noticing it...

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CHAPTER 15

SABELO

It takes all the dignity and self-respect left in me not to stand up and go to Nomvula. I can tell by just looking at her that she doesn't just look good, she smells good too. She's so engrossed in whatever they are talking about that she doesn't even notice me. I turn back to the people I'm with only to notice that Zipho saw what just happened and she doesn't look impressed. I don't care about her though; I'm only here for this little man.

“Are you going to say something to him?” Zipho asks and I swear if this kid wasn't here, I would walk out. This woman just knows how to push the wrong buttons.

“Uhm, what's your name, boy?”

“Junior,” he mumbles. Okay, I will take that.

“I'm Sabelo,” I tell him even though he doesn't seem to be interested in what I'm saying.

“Mom, do you think Dad can send us money for food? I'm hungry already,” Junior says and my blood boils, I keep my composure though.

“I can buy you food,” I offer.

“I don't want help from strangers,” he says sharply. If this boy and I are going to have a relationship, we will have to deal with his attitude first.

“Uhm, Junior, Sabelo is not a bad guy. Dad said you shouldn't accept help from bad strangers. He's not a bad stranger,” Zipho explains.

“Why is he saying he is my dad? Strangers lie so they can steal people,” the boy continues. I give it to him for his debating skills though, he can be a great asset if trained well.

“Okay. How about we call him Uncle Sabelo and get to know him?” Zipho reasons with him.

“Okay,” the boy shrugs.

I call the waiter and order another drink while Zipho and her son order something to eat. I'm hungry but I will eat later. This boy ruffled my emotions and I need to get them back to normal before I can eat.

“So, Uncle Sabelo, are you married?” the boy asks.

“I was.”

“You are divorced like my mom and Dad?”

I can't help raising my eyebrow at Zipho. She made this boy believe that she was married to that thug? The things women can do for a soft life are not just shocking; they are bone chilling.

“No, I'm not divorced. My wife passed away,” I stare at my wedding band briefly and then back to the little guy.

“I'm sorry.” Shockingly, he reaches for my hand and rubs it. I guess beyond the attitude is an empathetic little man. “Mom says her mother passed away and she gets sad every time she speaks about her. Do you also get sad?”

“Yes, but I'm learning not to get sad.”

“Do you think she's an angel now or she went to hell?”

I laugh. Because there's no way my wife would have gone to hell even if there was such a place in existence, she was too good and honest for it.

“She is definitely an angel,” I say with a smile.

“That's good, she will look after you.”

We eat in awkward silence until Zipho breaks the silence.

“When do you think we can visit you?” she asks and I choke on my beer. What? Visit me where? Her and who? “I would understand if you don't want us to visit, it's okay.”

“Can we focus on me getting to know the boy?” I try to sound kind and understanding as I say this but I'm definitely going to send her a message telling her where to get the F off.

“I understand.”

By the time they say their goodbyes, I am up in my throat with them even though the boy is warming up to me. He even allowed me to snap a few pictures of him, we even took a selfie. I'm looking at the selfie now and I still can't get used to how alike we look. I don't know what the universe was trying with this resemblance but it is uncomfortable, really.

“Someone decided to give fatherhood a chance?” Nomvula brings me back to where I am. Her cleavage is distracting, in a good way, but I still don't like how it makes me feel down there. I haven't had sexual feelings for anyone until her. “Sabelo?”

“Uhm, sorry, you were saying?” I'm embarrassed that I was caught staring.

“I'm glad you reconsidered. The boy looks like and you two will soon be twinning as father and son,” she adds.

“Why do you care about what happens in my life?”

“Sir, you are the one who kissed me and later decided that I wasn't worth you disrespecting your wife's memory, and went AWOL on me. Don't act as if I'm the reason you blocked me on WhatsApp and everywhere else.”

“You are a distraction and distractions are not good for any man.”

“But a man needs to release some tension—”

“What?”

“Come on, you know you want me—”

“Are you drunk, Nomvula?”

“Maybe tipsy. So, what do you say?”

I have never had a girl ask me out and here is Nomvula, she's not just asking me out, she's inviting me to her bed. This all sounds so wrong but the guy down there is excited. I hope I don't have to stand up now because the guy down there is standing on business already.

“Will you say something or should I go back to my cousin?”

“What's your definition of fun?” I ask her.

“I don't know, that's what I'm trying to find out and I want to know if you will fit in my definition of fun,” she winks.

“Your house or mine?” I ask.

“Mine. We don't want your wife joining in, do we?”

If someone else had said that about my late wife, I would have lost it but this girl here is turning me on by mentioning my dead wife in the same sentence that she uses to lure me to her bed.

“You drive, I'm a bit tipsy,” she suggests.

“Won't you say goodbyes to your friend?”

“She's my cousin, don't worry about her.”

NOMVULA

My titties are freed the moment we step into the house, Sabelo's tongue twirls around mine as our hands both struggle with my tight dress. It takes the zip tearing for the dress to finally come off me.

“No underwear?” the smile on Sabelo's face has my clit developing a heart of its own. I can feel it breathing and aching for a touch.

“I'm not a fan...” my sentence is cut by a moan. His left hand caresses my butt, our lips are glued to each other as he carefully leads me to the couch. We reach the couch and he carefully lays me down and briefly stares at my naked body. His stare has me hot in all the right places.

“You are gorgeous,” his eyes carry a lot of desire and lust. He loses his shirt and I swallow hard looking at his defined torso. He looks so good if he wasn't breathing this close to me I would say he is a sculpture. He grabs my leg and raises it, his fingers leave a trail in their wake as his hand moves towards the sacred part of my body. His hand continues playing their magic on me while his eyes hold mine in a stare that's making me even hotter.

“Touch me more,” I beg and moan at the same time.

“You are such a glorious sight,” that's all I hear before his face disappears between my legs. I don't know what is more

wetter, his tongue or my folds but whatever it is, the slippery exercise taking place down there has me speaking in tongues; something I never did even when my mother took me to church every Sunday.

“Ooh...” I arc my back, giving him more access to my honeypot. His tongue twirls and I have never felt this good in my entire life. Not even getting my first car felt this good. “Oh my God...” my toes curl just as I try to find a place to hold on. I feel like this feeling will take my body to another universe but I'm not ready to leave this tongue here. I need to stay grounded. “Sabelo,” my hands fly to his head and push him further down. He introduces his thumb to my clit and I explode. My body shakes just as I scream his name...

I wake up feeling sweaty and something heavy is weighing on me. My eyes flutter open and for a moment, I freeze as they land on a human's head. I touch it and it moves. The heavyweight on me stirs and Sabelo lazily opens his eyes. What the hell did I do?

“You don't regret this, do you?” he asks and sneaks his finger between my folds.

“Stop,” I giggle as he tickles me.

“Girl, you were on fire,” he teases and my cheek burn in embarrassment. “I thought you were a virgin?”

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CHAPTER 16

NOMVULA

“Ask no questions and hear no lies,” I say coyly.

“No, you owe me some answers.”

“I never said I was a virgin, where did you get that?”

“I’m not sure but between your strict parents and trying to be an exemplary girl, where did you get the time to date?”

“My parents were strict but they didn’t supervise my cookie and who said anything about dating?”

“Nomvula! You were a smash and pass kind of a person?”

“No, I’m not a whore, Sabelo. I had a brief thing with some guy, he broke my virginity and I don’t know what made everything boring between his excess saliva and his shaking hands, but something about that whole ordeal made me conclude that sex wasn’t nice and it was overrated.”

“You didn’t enjoy it?”

“No. It was just an exchange of saliva and body fluids that didn’t bring me any satisfaction nor pleasure.”

“And then you came on me hard like that? What changed? Sex still overrated?” he raises his eyebrow, I blush just as my clit throbs—despite me being sore down there.

“Let’s just say you managed to redeem your gender,” I softly push him off me and run to the bathroom. I’m not running because I’m pressed, I’m running because I just let my

gender down. We are not supposed to tell the opposite gender that they are good in bed.

I get in and slam the door behind me. I sit on the toilet seat and empty my bladder. I wipe myself and it's not shocking that I still have slippery juices down there, a lot of juice exchange happened. I was sore the first time he entered me but as we continued, my vagina walls got used to his length and I really enjoyed him. I stand up and flush the toilet. I walk towards the mirror and notice that my wig is no longer on my head. I installed it yesterday, and this guy pulled it out? I don't blame him though, I also broke his zip because I was impatient. I smile as my eyes land on the hickeys on my neck. This guy literally marked me.

The door opens and I'm not quick enough to reach for the towel and cover my body before Sabelo can wrap his arms around me, his manhood poking my back and making me excited all over again.

“MaMnisi,” he says softly and I swear this guy has a direct line of communication with my clit. “I don't know what you are doing to me but I like it,” his hands fondle my titties before his fingers can tease my already hard nipples. “You have me at a disadvantage and this guy doesn't want to sleep.”

I turn around and lock my eyes with his, the lust in his eyes a mirror of my own desire and need. His lips are inviting, and his manhood now poking my stomach only makes me want him even more.

“I want you too.”

By the time we finally order lunch, it's way past lunch time and all we have been doing is the business that only the sheets and the couch got to witness. We took a shower earlier and decided to rest a bit but we did more of the adults business than we slept. We are now sitting on the bed, stark naked and enjoying our food. It's strange that I have only been briefly naked for one guy but here I am comfortably sitting with a stranger in our birth suits and it is not awkward. Instead I feel like I have known Sabelo forever.

When I asked him to come with me yesterday, I thought it was the wine talking but now that I'm sober, I can say that I needed this. I feel lighter and happier.

"We need to get you a morning after pill," he speaks.

"Yeah. Daddy is still trying to build a relationship with his firstborn we cannot afford to bring another cocomelon into the mix, can we?" I tease.

"What are you doing to me, Nomvula? What are we?"

"I don't know but I wouldn't mind replaying the past few hours over and over again."

"Meaning you like me?"

"Yes, I do. You are a good guy and now I have just confirmed that your goodness extends to the other things too—"

"Girl, shut up before I make you my second baby mama." His threat does things to my abdomen but let's contain it. Too much of everything is never a good idea, no matter how nice and exciting that thing is.

"The last time we kissed you left me with an excuse that you couldn't go further because you had not been cleansed. Have that been done?"

“Yes. My in-laws somehow came back to their senses and did the ceremony for me.”

“That's good. I was scared that I will need to get cleansed too for sleeping with you.”

“I'm good now. I had just not thought about sex until you happened. I have been worried about other things, you know.”

“What things?”

“I don't want to overshare,” I shrug.

“Come on, you know everything about me. I won't judge.”

“I have been trying to live, you know. To try and find new hobbies and a purpose but everything I try makes me feel guilty. I love cars, fast cars and I also love Motorsport. If I would swap careers, I would go for that. I have always badly wanted to see them in real life, but time and finances were never on my side. I also love collecting nice cars, but now I feel like these hobbies will make me forget what my wife and I built.”

“Your wife is late, Sabelo, and stalling your healing and time to move on won't change anything. As much as loss is painful, we have a duty to live on and continue chasing what makes us, us. You are not an extension of your wife's life, you are Sabelo, an individual who also had dreams before marriage and loss. Find that Sabelo within you and live again. Life is too short to stop living because you lost someone. You will be doing injustice to yourself, you were also born for a purpose. Anele's journey ended, but yours haven't. Don't die with regrets.”

“Thanks, I guess I needed to hear that. Would you come with me?”

“Where to?”

“You will see. I don't want you to say no.”

“How should I dress?”

“Comfortably. Now let me go to my house before my sister sends out a search party. My phone is off.”

“Okay. I will call my cousin and catch some sleep.”

I watch him dress up in his now wrinkled clothes. I offer him my father's clothes but he refuses to wear them. Zulu men and pride! It's just clothes, okay?! He kisses me on the forehead and says his goodbyes. I'm left blushing like a schoolgirl.

SABELO

The smile on my face disappears when I get home to a sight of blue lights and blue shirts. My heart starts pounding hard against my ribcage, a number of worst case scenarios running through my mind. The one scenario that is more pronounced is of my sister having been a victim of burglary but I push it out of my mind as I park the car. I literally run towards the entrance.

“Sabelo?” I don't get who says it but it sounds like a well rehearsed chorus.

“What's going on?” I ask and just then Ndalo comes out of the house.

“Where are you coming from?” she punches me on the chest.

“What is that for?” I'm confused.

“For disappearing and switching off your phone! Do you know how many people go missing per hour in this country?” she's angry.

“You called the police because you thought I was kidnapped or something?” I don't know why but I find this amusing.

“It's not funny!” she punches me again.

“Officers, there have been a confusion, as you can see I'm here and well. My battery died and I had left my charger at home,” I explain.

“It's good that you are okay,” says an officer. “Please always stay in touch with your people, the number of people disappearing is scary and your sister is right for worrying.”

“I understand. It won't happen again and thank you for your swift response.”

“Keep safe,” and they leave.

“Where did you go? Don't tell me you slept with Ziphozonke again?” she's staring daggers at me.

“I didn't—”

“Where are you coming from?”

“Can we at least go inside? I don't want neighbours eavesdropping.”

I love how she cares about us but sometimes she's just extra, there was no need for her to call the police. I am a grown ass man and she knows that I can protect myself.

“I was with Nomvula,” I confess and I see a smile forming on her face.

“Why didn't you call me?”

“I was too busy to think about that—”

“Sabelo!”

“I'm not telling, don't ask.”

“Boy, I hope you used a condom because God knows fatherhood isn't in your bones.”

Phuck! The morning after pill!

“I will be back in a few minutes—”

“Sabelo!” she calls out but I'm already outside...

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CHAPTER 17

One Month Later...

NOMVULA

The last month has been a rollercoaster. One moment I'm sweating and moaning under or on top of Sabelo, the other I am busy with my assignments for my online Business Course and the next in busy trying to be an adult that I am. One thing that still shows me flames is grocery shopping. I suck at it. My mother used to do it for me and now I have to do it myself. Nandi has been helpful though in my journey to becoming me. She told me to write a list of the foods I normally eat and then list the ingredients. The online shopping Apps have been lifesavers too because the business of pushing a trolley is just so not me.

My relationship with Sabelo is everything I never thought relationships are made of. We haven't established how serious we are about this but we are officially dating. I have met his colleagues and his sister. I haven't been to his house though, that's one place he is still not comfortable to introduce new memories to. We spend most of our time at my house or in hotels and restaurants. I'm not worried about him not taking me to his place, I understand that the place still holds sacred memories for him. And if I must admit, he makes me happy. I

believe I make him happier too. He's even adding a few inches to his waist.

I have also been pushing him to build a relationship with his son beyond financial responsibilities and he is progressing well. He spent the last weekend with the boy and from the pictures he shared, they were both happy.

The only thing I'm not getting used to is Sabelo's kind of fun. This guy loves cars so much he researches and reads about them as if he's an aspiring car seller. He knows history of so many cars and his wishlist is mostly made up of cars. I have never seen someone whose idea of fun is that expensive.

He's taking me to one of his favourite places and he insisted that I buy a gown worth R57K just for this event. Of course his bank card was used to pay for it. There was no way in hell I could have purchased that with my own money. He also bought shoes and a clutch. The money used to buy the three items is enough to buy a four-bedroom house ekasi. I'm here smelling like all kinds of gold and money and it does feel good.

“Let's add this to complete your look,” Sabelo says as he stands behind me. He stretches his hands in front of me and puts a necklace on my neck. It's a golden chocker that compliments my black gown. “Now you are good to go,” he pecks me on the cheek.

“Thank you, babe,” I say as I run my fingers on the necklace. I spray cologne on my neck and arms as a finishing statement to my attire and I'm ready to go.

“Ready?” he asks. He is so excited he cannot hide it.

“Ready, Sir.”

He takes my hand and off we go.

NARRATED

The atmosphere is electric. The room is filled with high rollers, celebrities, and serious car enthusiasts, all gathered around the sleek, high-performance machines on display. These are the kinds of people who don't need to check their bank balances before bidding – they are here to indulge in their passion, and they have the wallets to match.

The crowd is dressed to impress, with designer suits, sleek dresses, and statement accessories – Rolex watches, tailored blazers, and shoes that cost more than most people's monthly salaries. The air is thick with the scent of luxury, and everyone is looking their best – after all, you never know who might be watching.

Conversations are hushed but buzzing with excitement. People are discussing the specs, the history, and the potential resale value of the cars on offer.

"This 1967 Ferrari 275 GTB is a real barn find – I heard it's been sitting in a collection for decades," says one barrel-sized balding man with an anorexic barbie standing next to him. At first, Nomvula thought the woman was surprised at the prices pasted on the cars, until she realised that is her permanent look, one of those plastic surgeries gone wrong.

"The provenance on this Porsche 911 GT2 RS is insane – imagine owning a piece of history!" said another enthusiast, taking a measured sip on his whiskey.

The whispers are interspersed with the occasional burst of laughter, as old friends and acquaintances catch up and share stories.

“Babe, this is one expensive hobby,” Nomvula says absent-mindedly, her eyes wondering with admiration from one glittering sports car and vintage models to the next. “I wouldn’t even come here for sightseeing.”

“Sight-seeing? No, you definitely can’t come here for that. To even be here, you have to pay an advance deposit of R50 000. You can’t just walk in as if you saw an item you liked on the window outside.”

“What? R50K?” Nomvula is astounded.

“Refundable, of course. But if you had bid on something and won the bid, the deposit would be added to your purchase. If you had bid on something that costs, for example, 150K, you then only have to pay 100K. Spoiler alert: nothing here costs 100K. That’s pocket change to these people.”

She laughs. “I noticed.”

They continue walking amongst the cars, viewing and listening to the car expert salesmen explaining the specs in the type of jargon only petrol heads like Sabelo would understand.

“And these two Lambos... I think I have seen them before,” says one car enthusiast, directing the salesman and his audience to a pair of roadsters on a revolving stage at the centre of the room.

“Oh, yes,” says the salesman, smiling sheepishly. “Those are the only second-hand cars on the floor, as you can see even by the prices. These are the Hybrid V8 Lamborghini Temerarios, retailing at R7,5 million brand-new. Starting bid today will be R3 million. These two have driven less than a

1000km each. The previous owner basically used them only to go buy the newspaper every morning.”

“Sorry, but... did you say ‘owner?’” Nomvula asks, one eyebrow raised.

“Yes Ma’am, both these mean machines were owned by the same person.”

“But... they look so alike. They are essentially the same car. Why would anyone--”

“Buy the same car twice?” the salesman chuckles. “Why did Mandla Mthembu and Khanyi Mbau buy similar yellow Porsches back then when they were high rollers?”

“His and hers. Got it,” says Nomvula, embarrassed by her ignorance.

“No Ma’am, the previous owner is a bachelor,” says a man within the throng. All eyes turn to look at him.

He is white, tall, and dressed in a white tuxedo. His face is deeply tanned like someone who has been in the sun too long. His long, glistening dark hair is pulled back and tied in a neat ponytail. His well-trimmed beard gives him an exotic Jason Momoa look.

“Uhm... ladies and gentlemen, the identities of the previous owners of the vehicles...”

“Highly confidential,” the ponytail man cuts in, sips on his glass and walks away.

Sabelo tugs on Nomvula’s arm gently, leading her away towards other cars on display.

“Don’t you remember the Eskom tender scandal that has been on the news?” he asks. “That 25-year-old minister’s nephew who got the R5 billion tender through a company that

had only been registered a month before the tender was issued?"

"Oh, yes. I remember that. He bought two R7 million mansions in Sandton, tore them both down and built a new one on the two stands. I remember he also bought these cars."

"Yep. That's why these cars are here. They are being auctioned to recoup the money the state lost in that corrupt tender. He also tried to conceal the purchase by not registering both cars in his name. They are still in the name of the dealership he bought them from. I won't be surprised if the dealership's representatives are here to bid on the two cars."

"My goodness, the corruption that is in this country."

As the auction gets underway, the energy in the room ratchets up a notch. Bidders are laser-focused, their eyes fixed on the auctioneer as they raise their paddles and make their moves. The room falls silent as a particularly pricey car comes up for grabs – a LaFerrari, perhaps, or a Bugatti Chiron. The bids fly back and forth, the tension building with each vehicle that is brought out, until the decisive "Sold! To the gentleman in the back, for R20 million!" rings out.

Soon, it is the two blue Lambos going under the hammer. As the salesman had predicted, the starting bid is R3 million for each car. Nomvula is shocked when she sees Sabelo's hand goes up, raising the paddle.

"Haibo, Sabelo!" she says under her breath, her eyes wide. "R3 million? Do you have that kind of money?"

He is grinning at her, and then whispers, "Of course I don't."

"Then what are you doing?" she retorts, chastising.

“Relax, there will always be people outbidding me. No car has ever gone at the first...”

“Do I hear R3,1 million?” the auctioneer shouts.

“R3,1 million,” shouts the gentleman in the ponytail.

“Do I hear R3,2 million?” the auctioneer challenges.

“R3,2 million!” a voice rings out in the back.

“May I remind you, ladies and gentlemen, that this is no ordinary vehicle,” says the auctioneer. “It barely left the showroom floor. With less than a 1000Km on the clock, it is still a brand-new car. Do I hear R3,5 million?”

“R3,5 million!” shouts the ponytail gentleman with so much bravado, a number of people turn around to glance at him.

“Do I hear R3,6 million?”

Silence descends on the floor, the audience now using their paddles to fan their faces.

“R3,7 million.”

Nomvula has to look up to be certain the voice she heard indeed came from Sabelo. Haibo, this man! He even has his paddle up. Stunned silence lingers in the room. From the corner of her eye, Nomvula can see the gentleman in the ponytail eyeing them through his blue, squinted eyes.

“Do I hear R3,8 million?”

The ponytail gentleman and Sabelo exchange stares like poker players across a table at an illegal gambling den downtown.

“R4 million,” the ponytail gentleman blurts out, drawing a deep sigh of relief from Nomvula, who grabs Sabelo’s hand that is holding the paddle and holds it firmly between her thighs.

“No more!” she orders through gritted teeth, and Sabelo simply smirks. He looks over at the ponytail gentleman and gives him a nod of resignation.

The auctioneer rambles on, calling for more bids above a room that seems to have fallen deaf and mute. Eventually, the gavel rings out on the bid, securing the ponytail gentleman’s winning bid. The second car is also purchased by the same gentleman in yet another competitive bid that Sabelo abstained from, much to Nomvula’s relief.

The successful bidders are beaming with pride, shaking hands and exchanging congratulations with the auction house staff. The losers are already planning their next move – “I’ll get the next one, mark my words.” As the auction winds down, the room erupts into a hubbub of chatter, as people discuss the highlights of the evening and make plans to meet up for a spin in their new toys.

“What on earth was that, Sabelo? You nearly gave me a heart attack. What if that man hadn’t outbid you?” Nomvula is still visibly livid, and cannot understand why Sabelo still finds all this amusing.

“Just for the adrenaline,” he says, grinning. “I promise, there was no way I wasn’t going to be outbid on this. For these guys, it is not only about the cars, but it is about winning. About pride. They don’t mind forking out a billion just because someone said a certain old and stained ceramic cup is the actual Holy Grail.”

“But what if he hadn’t outbid—”

“The auctioneer would have offered the item to the second highest bidder – me,” comes a voice from behind them. They turn around and find it is the ponytail gentleman. “Worst case

scenario, the winning bidder would have been held liable for the full purchase price, forfeit his deposit and potentially face legal action.”

Nomvula instinctively punches Sabelo on the shoulder, fuming.

“Name is David... David Jacobsson,” the ponytail gentleman says, extending his hand for a handshake.

“Jewish?” says Sabelo rhetorically.

“Swedish, actually, spelled with two ‘Ss’,” he says. “But yes, my family is of Jewish descent. My grandfather became a citizen of the world, so was his son, who eventually settled in Sweden. Hence I am Swedish.”

“I’m Sabelo Mseleku, this is my girlfriend, Nomvula.”

“Nice to meet you, folks.”

“Well, Mr Jacobsson with two ‘Ss’,” says Nomvula quite sarcastically, stressing on the ‘S’ so it sounds like she is saying ‘asses’, “I don’t see a ring on your finger. Who is the second ass... I mean, who is the second car for?”

David laughs good-naturedly, taking the obvious sarcasm in his stride. “How about I tell you two all about it over dinner. My treat. Call it my way of bandaging your battle scars for having outbid you. My hotel is down the road.”

“YOUR HOTEL?” Nomvula is scathing.

“Well, it’s where I have booked for the next couple of weeks—”

“Unfortunately, we will have to take a rain check on that, Mr Two Asses,” Nomvula cuts in.

“Uhm... yeah, it’s been quite a long day, David,” says Sabelo, squeezing Nomvula hand, non-verbally telling her to take it easy. “Some other time, perhaps?”

“Now that you have mentioned it, yes,” says David, digging into his pocket and coming up with a business card. He hands it to Sabelo. “A Cape Town businessman friend of mine will be hosting some friends from the United States next week. You two can be my guests. Plenty of opportunities for networking and expanding your entrepreneurial cycle. Think it over and give me a call. I will have my PA book the tickets. First class.”

“Let’s go, Sabelo,” says Nomvula, pulling Sabelo away.

As the crowd files out, the cars are carefully prepared for their new owners. The lucky few who scored a rare gem are grinning from ear to ear, knowing they have just added a serious piece of automotive art to their collection. And the rest? They are already counting down the days until the next auction – the thrill of the chase is just too intoxicating to resist.

“What was that all about?” Sabelo asks as they walk towards the parking lot. “One minute you are angry that I am bidding, and the next you want to bite David’s head off for having outbid me. What’s up?”

“Oh, please, that had nothing to do with the auction,” says Nomvula curtly. “That man just rubs me the wrong way. There’s something off about him.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. He just seems... shady.”

“David just forked out R8 million for two luxury cars. A forex trader doing his bidding online is shady. A man doing business openly, in a room full of equally wealthy people—”

“Then why is he talking to us instead of those wealthy people?”

Sabelo scratches his head, looking stumped.

“Stay away from him, Sabelo.”

And she gets into the passenger seat and slams the door shut, sulking.

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CHAPTER 18

NOMVULA

“And then? Why do you look like you just dodged a missile in Iran?” Nandi asks the moment I drag my tired and troubled self into her apartment. The aroma of freshly baked scones and coffee has my stomach grumbling, reminding me that I last ate during lunch yesterday.

“Can I have food?” I ask, ignoring her questions completely. “Make my coffee stronger.”

“O-okay.”

She doesn't pry further, she starts preparing breakfast for me. A few minutes later breakfast is served and taking my first bite feels like heaven. I feel like I have been starved for days when it only has been a few hours. I eat until I feel my stomach stretching and that's when I stop even though my heart still wants me to continue.

I take my plate to the sink, wash it and sit back down.

“Should I be worried?” Nandi asks.

“No.”

“What's going on with you? You look troubled.”

Where do I begin? I feel like my relationship with Sabelo started on the high and now it's a bit bumpier than I expected. We haven't argued about us—per se—but our arguments about his money spending habits are affecting us. Yesterday we had a heated argument, and he ended up telling me that I'm not his wife, so I have no right to question his financial

decisions. I picked my unmarried self from the couch and went to bed. He was not in my house by the time I woke up and I didn't bother calling him. But why does it hurt so much?

"I don't know if I'm overthinking and overreacting," I sigh. "Sabelo is into cars, expensive cars and I feel like that's a hobby he can't afford."

"Why do you think he can't afford it? For a lawyer with his record, I think he has a good head over his neck and wouldn't do something that will put him in trouble. I'm sure he can afford it."

"No one with a day job can afford to spend millions every week in the name of having fun and pumping the adrenaline. Something is not right, I can feel it."

"Did you talk to him about it?"

"I did and he told me that I'm not his wife so I shouldn't be questioning his financial decisions."

"Damn!" she bites her lower lip. "Ulimala phi wena (Where does it hurt) when he's spending his money?"

"Nowhere but how do I see a future in a man with such spending habits?"

"Hebanna! Kante wena o catchile already? (You are in love already?)" she laughs. "Girl, wait, wasn't this supposed to be you getting your groove back, trying to live and all that shit?"

"It was at first but now... now it's..." I fail to put it in words.

"You mean the cucumber is so good that you want to claim it as your own already?"

"Something like that," I shrug and she bursts into laughter.

"Okay, I get you now. Maybe you should talk to him and see if you guys are on the same page. Maybe he still thinks you guys are playing, no future plans and all that."

“Do you think I'm being unreasonable?”

“I know people with an expensive taste of fun. Just like your father, you know. He loved classic cars and he bought them just to wake up every day, admire them and get into another car and drive to work. Such people do not only find fun in collecting these things, they also take pride in owning such collections. It makes them feel alive and content.”

“What do you suggest I do then?”

“Talk to him. Maybe he has a side hustle that is bringing in more money. You know some people go to work simply because they are passionate about their work not because of money. You might find out that he has millions just chilling in his bank account.”

“Okay. Maybe I overreacted, I should have spoken to him and understood him before judging him.”

“Yeah,” she takes a sip of her coffee. “In all this, protect your inheritance, Nomvula. Don't be the kind of a woman who is desperate for love to a point of sponsoring a man's lifestyle. I know my aunt didn't birth a fool, don't make her turn in her grave. The most you can do for a man is a sneaker and a leather jacket if he is into that, don't go further. And... and maybe a Patek Philippe watch—”

“Never! Asoze! A what? I might as well buy him a Ferrari mos? Do you know how much those watches cost? Boma 500 drillion for entry level models. I remember my mother fainted countless times after asking my father what he wanted for his birthday and he said a Patek Philippe watch,” we both laugh.

“The guy knows you have the money so he might want a Lamborghini for his birthday.”

“I love me some cucumber but I love my parents more, I'm not about to let them down just like that.”

Coming here really helped, I feel like a heavy weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I'm ready to make that call and apologise to Sabelo for being harsh.

SABELO

I'm busy with a client when my phone vibrates and Nomvula's name flashes on the screen. I silence the call, to respect the client. I know I would be frustrated if someone would be checking his phone in the middle of a meeting. She doesn't call again and I appreciate that. She sends a text instead. It reads:

‘Babe, I'm sorry about yesterday. I said things that I shouldn't have said. Can I cook dinner for you tonight and apologise properly?’

I put the phone down and focus on the meeting. The meeting drags way longer than I expected. By the time we are done, I'm not in the mood to be still in this office.

“You look happier than the man who walked into the office in the morning. What happened?” Astrid asks.

“Let's just say what I was worried about is sorted. I'm out of here—”

“Wait. Someone was calling you and she said it's urgent.”

“Who is it?”

“I don't remember but I noted the number down,” she hands me a piece of paper.

“Sure, thanks. I will call her.” I grab my bags and walk out of the office. I love the freedom that my job affords me. I don't have to be suffocating in the office the whole day, I can work from anywhere.

I dial the number just as I drive out of the office premises.

“Old Mutual Offices, hello,” a feminine voice says.

“Cuz, is that you?”

“Oh, Sabza, yes. I have been looking for you.”

“Did you try my house and my workplace?”

“No, silly! When are you visiting us, by us I mean Old Mutual.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I saw that you haven't claimed the money—”

“Isn't that against work ethics?”

“I'm only looking out for you, here. You don't want to come here and find out the money has been claimed by someone. Insurance fraud is real in these companies.”

“I'm in the middle of something, I will call you back.”

I won't call her back, I just don't like people meddling in my business.

I sit in the car outside Nomvula's house. My eye keeps wandering between the entrance and the business card that David gave me. I don't know why Nomvula thinks he is a bad guy because everything in me says David is just being friendly.

I love cars and if I could be taught the ropes on how to acquire these machines, I would be the happiest man alive.

I never really participated in this hobby of mine when my wife was still alive because just like Nomvula, she did not play with money. She believed so much in saving for rainy days and investing in real estate. She had not bought another property but our house was fully paid for in less than five years due to her financial discipline. Now that she is gone, as sad as that is, I feel like this is the time for me to live the life I want. I have no responsibilities except Junior and Nomvula is not with me because of hunger so I should be fine. I will be fine.

I pick up the card, type the number on my phone and dial David. The phone rings unanswered. I call again and still, no answer. I decide to leave a voicemail. I have to be at the Cape Town auction.

I get down the car and lock it. I make my way towards the entrance thinking that I also have to apologise to Nomvula for what I said. It was uncalled for. I knock on the door and wait. It doesn't take long before the door is opened.

“Damn, girl!” I fail to hold myself when my eyes land on her. She's wearing an oversized shirt, the top buttons are undone leaving her cleavage out for my eyes to feast on. Her nipples are pointing under the shirt, exciting every part of my body under my navel.

“Hey babe,” she greets.

“Hey gorgeous,” I lean down and kiss her on the forehead.

“Come in,” she turns and leads the way. My brain is on the fifth style I am imagining when she tells me to snap out of it. “You are daydreaming?”

“A man is allowed to dream, right? Especially when someone decides to look all kinds of delicious out of the blue,” I tease.

“You can turn your dreams into reality after eating or better yet, I will be your dessert,” she winks and my guy down there twitches. “How was your day?”

“Crappy. Until I received your text. Come here,” I softly pull her to me. I make her sit on my lap and wrap my arms around her. “I’m sorry S'thandwa sami. What I said was uncalled for and you don't deserve such from me. I'm really sorry. It will never happen again and I will never again make you feel like you have to compete with my late wife.”

“It's okay, we were both angry and said hurtful things to each other. I'm also sorry.”

“I love you, Nomvula,” the words escape my lips before I can process them, but they still feel right.

“W.. what did you just say?” she's stunned.

“I love you,” I look into her tearing eyes. I cup her cheek with my left hand and bring her face towards mine...

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CHAPTER 19

SABELO

“Come on, baby, it's only a weekend trip. I will be back before you know it,” I comfort Nomvula who has been emotional ever since I told her about my business trip to Cape Town.

“I know. I wish I could come with you but I have to study,” she sulks.

“We will make time and go together. We won't be going for business but pleasure. Start looking at accommodation and check your calendar. All expenses on me,” I try to comfort her.

“Okay then. Go before I start crying again,” she hesitantly pulls out of the hug.

“Bye babe,” I kiss her on the forehead, grab my bag and make my way to the door.

“Wait, were you not supposed to be with the boy this weekend?”

“I was, but it's sorted. I asked her mother to reschedule. I have to go to work, babe, otherwise the boy won't eat and I won't have money to lobola you—”

“Hayibo! Speaking lobola already?”

“I am a man who loves commitment,” I wink at her and walk out. A pang of guilty hits me but I quickly dismiss it. I'm doing this for myself, for once in my life, I get to do something

that excites me and serves me. All my life I have been doing things to make others happy.

My Uber ride is here. I get in and off to the airport we go.

After two weeks of trying to call David, he finally called yesterday. I missed the first event and I wasn't okay the entire weekend. He told me to pack my bag and will have his PA send me my booking information. It wasn't even 15 minutes after the call when I received the flight confirmation email. Business Class. What a gentleman that he is. I only fly business class when the company is paying. I had to lie to Nomvula about it because I know she would have told me not to go. I don't know what she has against David, sometimes I wonder if he is not a blast from the past?

I also finally found courage to start the insurance claiming process. I went to Standard bank first and by the time I left their branch, the confirmation message was already in. I was only waiting for the bank to process the funds. I then went to Old Mutual where I almost fainted when I got to know about the total amount that I'm supposed to claim. I still don't understand why my wife had life insurances totaling to 12 million plus. I filled the forms and they also made me open an account with them so it would be easy to transfer the money. I did all that and now I'm waiting for the money to clock in.

Ndalo also forced me to go to Anele's workplace and also find out about her benefits and all that. The money isn't much since she only had four tears working with them. I listed my

in-laws as beneficiaries of all the funds coming from her work. I think they need the money.

The last time I went to Dubai on a business trip, I was met by a jovial gentleman in an ankle-length white kandura (a robe) and ghutra (head scarf), holding a board with my name scribbled in giant letters. Unfortunately, my name was spelled Sarbeelo Masalahkoo. Now here I am, at the Cape Town International Airport, this time coming face-to-face with a broad-shouldered gentleman in a black suit, holding a similar board. This time, my name is spelled Sabela, an error I have learned to forgive in Mzansi with its diverse tribes and languages. Heck, even Zulus get it wrong sometimes.

The man's eyes are sealed behind dark sunglasses, and his jaw visibly clenches with disgust at every person passing by without paying any attention to him. His skin is as dark as the haunted night, and his demeanour sends shivers down my spine. He seems to notice that I have stopped dead in my tracks and that I am staring at him. He suddenly takes five brisk, giant steps towards me.

“Sabela? Sabela Mseleku?” he asks and I nod timidly. “Mr. Jacobsson couldn't make it. He sent me to fetch you.” He rips my bag off my hand. “This way please.” And he marches towards a black Mercedes Benz idling right in front of the foyer façade. Any closer he would have parked right inside the airport.

My driver isn't a chatty fellow, so I take in the views as we drive past some of Cape Town's leafy suburbs. Clifton is one

of Cape Town's most expensive suburbs, with properties exceeding R100 million. One mansion I saw showcased on the show "Listing Cape Town" on DSTV cost over R120 million, a price tag reserved mostly for overseas buyers who earn and pay in dollars and pounds. For most of us born and bred in Mzansi, we can only dream about owning such a property.

Then again, with David's contacts, the dream might very well be a realistic and attainable one. In my career, I have come across countless men who were rich but carried themselves as if they were wealthy, whose dealings with anyone they met screamed "I've got money like dust", when in reality, they were one visit from SARS closer to declaring bankruptcy. David, on the other hand, seems to have the kind of wealth that doesn't shout, that doesn't make headlines, and certainly doesn't invite unnecessary attention.

It only occurs to me now that I don't really know what David does for a living. I bet if I were to ask him, he would simply say, "I make money, Sabelo. I make money." I make a mental note to ask him when I am finally delivered to him.

The car slows down and turns into a winding driveway lined by a lush green, perfectly manicured hedge. Soon, we come up to sleek black gates that swing open automatically, revealing a stunning double-storey beachfront mansion. Outside, I count about twenty cars, most of them German-made. It would seem the party is already in full swing.

And then I see them. The two blue Lambos parked inside the four-door garage built separately from the house, on the east wing. Parked in reverse, the cars' bold front hoods with the iconic bull logos add to the aesthetic of the setting, as if

the mansion was bought with them as part of the package. David had said the house belongs to a friend of his; he said nothing about living here too.

“Mr. Jacobsson instructed that you be booked at the Marriott,” says my driver after pulling up in front of the mansion. “I will go check you in and return with your key. Enjoy the party, Mr Mseleku.”

“Uhm... okay, but my bag... it is in the boot –”

“Your bag will be waiting for you in your hotel room, Mr. Mseleku,” he cuts me off. “Enjoy your evening.”

I get off the car and walk towards the house. I can hear the music already, as well as indistinct chatter and bursts of laughter. I am happy that I am wearing a suit, otherwise I would have felt underdressed.

The entrance boasts a grand foyer with a crystal chandelier, marble floors, and a curved glass staircase. The open-plan interior opens up to the outside on the other side where an infinity pool lies, beyond which lies a lush lawn stretching to the private beach. The warm sand is just steps away, with crystal-clear waters lapping at the shore. Palm trees sway gently in the ocean breeze, and the sound of waves fills the air. This is certainly the epitome of luxury living.

Inside, the mansion pulses with elegance. Guests in designer attire mingle, sipping champagne and canapés amidst marble columns and art pieces. I realise the jazz tune I heard while outside is from a live band, their music floating through the open-plan living area, where conversations flow as freely as the Dom Pérignon. As David had promised, this is certainly a networking haven for the elite.

“Wow! You made it!” says David, patting me on the shoulder from behind.

I turn around, relieved he is here and that I don’t have to introduce myself to a whole bunch of strangers. He has a big smile on his face; the kind of genuine smile you give to a friend you have known and haven’t seen in years. He is dressed in blue jeans and a loose black silk shirt, which he left half unbuttoned so it reveals his hairy chest. He didn’t bother to tuck the shirt in. I guess the dress code for this party doesn’t apply to him.

“How was your flight? Comfortable?” he doesn’t wait for me to respond. “Come, let’s get you a drink.”

He leads me through a tight squeeze of guests, to the home bar almost at the other end of the house near the exit, overlooking the beach. Some guests greet him as we walk past, while others acknowledge him with a friendly nod or an enthusiastic pat on the shoulder.

“I’m glad you made it,” he says, perching on a bar stool and signalling to the formally dressed barman. Two whiskey glasses are put in front of us almost immediately. “I’m guessing you are a whiskey man?”

“Spot-on,” I reply, absent-mindedly scanning the guests for familiar faces. “The driver told me you couldn’t make it to the airport. I thought I would get here and be in the midst of strangers.”

“Strangers? Nonsense!” he says, swinging around on the bar stool to face the guests milling about. “That over there is...”

“Member of Parliament, George Skosana, and that over there is the CEO of DigiDot Telecoms,” I cut him off. “Half

the people here I have seen on TV and read about them in newspapers, but that doesn't mean I know them."

"Well, you are about to," he says, playfully slapping me on the back so hard that I choke on my drink.

"I never got to ask; what do you do for a living, David?"

He grimaces, swallows the whiskey forcefully, and then swivels on the bar stool to face me. He is about to speak when a shadow falls over us, and I get a whiff of a cologne so musky, I must owe its owner about a grand for just being in its ambience.

"David, for a moment there I thought you had disappeared on me," says the man, and we swivel on the stools to face him.

I can't believe my eyes! Standing in front of me is Andrew Dlodlu, the nephew of Minister of Minerals and Energy, Dumisani Khumalo. The same man under investigation for the R5 billion Eskom tender, and the previous owner of the two blue Lamborghinis that David had purchased at the auction.

He is in summer Burberry attire from head to toe, puffing away on a cigar and sipping something bubbly that can only be champagne. In person, he is slimmer, cleanly shaven and can easily pass for a model than a tenderpreneur.

Wait. If this is Andrew's house, and the Lambos are in his garage...

"How could I? I haven't been paid for my services yet," David says bluntly. "You owe me 300K, Andrew."

Andrew chuckles and turns to Sabelo, resting his elbow on his shoulder. "The difficulty with my friend here, is that he

operates on cash-only basis, as if we all always have 300K lying around.”

“Sabelo, meet Andrew Dludu,” says David. “He is the nephew of Minister Dumisani Khumalo, but doesn’t like being introduced as such. Something about not wanting to live under his uncle’s shadow – the same uncle who made him a billionaire.”

“Come on now, David, you think it was easy growing up in this family?” says Andrew, taking a measured sip of his champagne. “The man sent me to boarding school, and then the four years of indoctrination and re-colonisation of the mind at the so-called elite London Business School. Four years of not speaking a single Zulu word. Can you imagine that? I almost became a gentlemen’s gentleman. Heck, I was even thinking and dreaming in English! And then, just when I thought I was finally free and returned to the country, this uncle of mine forced me to shadow the Motsepes, under the pretext of grooming me into the business world. So yeah, the old man owed me some reparations for the suffering he forced me to endure in my youth.”

“You went to the London Business School?” I ask, stunned. “I mean, it is ranked seventh in the world. It is renowned for its MBA and Master’s in Finance programs. What’s more, their graduates are highly sought after globally.”

Andrew studies me intently, the same look you would give someone who has just farted. “David, where did you get this guy? Doesn’t he understand sarcasm?”

“We met at the auction in Johannesburg,” David says with a smirk. “Talking about the auction, Sabelo here nearly snatched the Lambos right under my nose. It was a close call,

considering I wasn't going to continue bidding if the price had shot up over R4 million. If I didn't know better, I would have thought you had sent him in to push the price up."

"And then pay more for what is legally mine? Not a chance."

"Wait... did you say 'pay more'?" I ask, confused.

"Are you really that slow, Sabelo?" David asks, nudging me on the shoulder. "Andrew here gave me the money to buy his toys back for him."

"But that makes no sense," I say. "The cars were bought for far less than what you are alleged to owe. You are still liable for the shortfall. Why go through the trouble?"

"Not me personally; the company," says Andrew. "The company bought the vehicles. A company that is now insolvent."

"Yes, but if the bankruptcy was caused by the illegal actions of its director or owner, the director or owner may be personally held liable," I insist. "Again, I ask, why go through the trouble?"

"David, what did you say your friend does for a living?"

"He's actually a lawyer, Andrew," says David, his chuckle echoing into his glass as he takes a sip.

"Sabelo, you should be my lawyer, because unlike our friends at the National Prosecuting Authority, you think far ahead and on your feet. I can use someone like you. But here's the thing, though. Our friends at the NPA will first have to prove that I am actually guilty of a crime, correct? Not through trial by media, but in an actual trial, in front of a judge."

"Yes, that's true."

“Now how long do you think that would take, considering that I haven’t been charged with anything even now? How much of what is going on works in my favour?”

“I would assume they are still investigating.”

“You are a lawyer, Sabelo. You know assumption is the mother of all fuck-ups. Let’s talk facts.”

“Well, the longer they take, the weaker their case appears to be. And the fact that the case has been tried in the media already, opens them to up to litigation, because there is no way the media would know so much about the case if there hadn’t been a leak. This prejudices you as the defendant. Plenty of people out there are not aware that the attachment of property is not necessarily a guilty verdict. It merely requires a valid court judgement or order because it is an administrative law to secure or satisfy a debt. It does not mean the person the property is being seized from is guilty of any crime. Yet, you have been painted as such.”

“Defendant turned plaintiff,” says Andrew smugly. “They have fucked up already by branding me a criminal. See now why they wouldn’t dare pursue the bankruptcy matter?”

“Or any of the prima facie cases for that matter, unless they source concrete evidence,” I add, lips pursed. “Evidence they currently don’t have, especially since several of their credible witnesses have died mysteriously, including the whistleblower. Otherwise, they would already have come for you. But that’s still a gamble, because the onus and burden will be on you to rebut the evidence if they do pursue charges.”

“Sabelo, why do you think Msholozzi still hasn’t faced trial of any of the corruption, racketeering and fraud charges to this day?”

“So you are banking on that Stalingrad legal tactic of endless appeals and litigations?”

“If it comes to that, yes,” he says. “That’s a card I would gladly play. By that, I am not admitting any guilt. God knows I got that tender fair and square.”

Silence. Andrew and David glance at each other for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

“Enough about my legal troubles,” he says, struggling to stop laughing. “Tell me more about you two love birds. Was it love at first sight?”

This time, we all burst out laughing.

CHAPTER 20

SABELO

Weekends need an extra day, or maybe two extra days. That would be nice and it would give some of us time to recover from the hangover before we go back to work. This weekend was a blast, short as it is—fun was had. I last partied like that before I got married. You know the kind of partying where the only thing that matters are the drinks that keep coming and nothing else. The conversation was flowing, food was scrumptious, deals were discussed, negotiated and sealed and for once, life felt simple and beautiful. Being around David and his friends made me realise that being broke isn't always about money—sometimes it's how small you allow your thinking to be. It also showed me that we worry a lot about things that are going wrong in our lives instead of focusing on what we can do to change the situation.

Andrew's assets were attached and auctioned. You would expect a man to be down and weeping, but he's not. He is out there making a means to survive and making sure that his life continues to be comfortable even though he might get arrested in the future. With the kind of law and leadership we have in this country, he might not even get arrested. He might lose millions here and there but he's already making more. He's turning lemons into lemonade and life is good.

Watching all of them enjoy their lives after sharing their struggles I realised that I have been feeling guilty for no reason when it comes to the policies Anele left behind. I finally understood that for every bad thing that you face in life, there's a good reward too. In this case, the money my wife left is a reward and I'm done feeling guilty about it. I am going to spend it to improve my life and enjoy while at it.

Speaking of Anele, I haven't visited her grave in a while now. I should buy her chocolates and visit. I have been so busy that I didn't miss her. A pang of guilty washes over me when it hits me that I might have moved on from the pain of losing her. Is that a bad thing? It's been almost a year since she left me and for the first time, I'm not sure if it's because I've healed or because I have replaced her with comfort.

I park the car at my designated parking spot and sit in the car for a while. I'm nursing a terrible hangover headache but I'm still early at work. I didn't go to Nomvula's house when I landed yesterday, I went straight to my house and slept for hours. I still felt drunk and I didn't want Nomvula to see me like that when I had told her that I was going to work. I only slept for two hours in Cape Town. It was so much fun that sleeping was the last thing on my mind. I only went to my room for a quick shower and change of clothes. It was as if we all did not want to miss out on anything.

After a few minutes of just sitting in the car, I finally disembark from the car. I grab my laptop bag and lock the car.

I proceed to the lift and I'm grateful when the elevator doors open and there's no one inside. I'm not in the mood for people today. It stops on the 18th floor and the smell of freshly brewed coffee and muffins hits my nostrils just as I walk towards the reception area.

“Good morning, Bhuti Sabelo,” the receptionist greets.

“Hey. How are you?” I ask.

“I'm good. I have your messages here,” she dumps a number of notes written on colorful pieces of paper.

“Thank you. Please send coffee and muffins to my office. No milk.”

“Noted.”

I leave her and make my way to my office. My wish to not interact with anyone before drinking coffee doesn't come to pass. I get into my office and Astrid is sitting and waiting. By the look on her face, not all is well.

“Astrid—”

“Do I pay you hundreds of thousands to be incompetent?” she fires. She is breathing fire, literally.

“What?” I'm stunned. I have seen her this angry but she has never spoken to me like this.

“Sabelo, I'm already in a very bad mood and the last thing I want to deal with is you acting ignorant. Where the hell are you coming from?”

“How is that your business—”

“I pay you motherfucker! I pay you to do a damn good job and attend to the meetings that you set with clients!”

“I... Oh, shit!” Realisation hits me when my eyes land on the file on my table. I had a meeting scheduled for Saturday lunch.

“You fix that mess and see that process through.”

“I’m sorry, something came up.”

“Yeah, something like partying and getting wasted in Cape Town—”

“How do you know that?”

“Not everything can be kept a secret, Sabelo, not especially when there are slauqueens in attendance. They live for content and you can become content too—”

“Wait, there are pictures of me out there?”

“I care about my business and reputation, I had pictures deleted and it better be the first and the last time you do this. You have a brighter future in this space, don’t ruin it for flashy things that you cannot afford at the moment. Unless you want to follow the footsteps of all the corrupt fellas in the country.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong, I swear. I just accepted an invite.”

“I hope the invite won’t cost you your freedom or worse, your life,” she sighs. “Get your head back into the game and fix the mess you created. I don’t care what you do during your free time, just make sure that it doesn’t affect my business. I have a reputation to protect.”

“Noted and I apologise. It won’t happen again.”

She doesn’t respond, she struts away instead, leaving me feeling a bit guilty about forgetting the meeting.

I get on the chair, power on my laptop and call the client while I wait for my laptop to fully load everything. I have to apologise to the client and try to secure another meeting with him.

My phone vibrates on the table, I look at the clock and I'm surprised to see the time. It's after 3PM already and this means I skipped lunch. I save the document I have been working on and pick up my phone. I have thirty missed calls from Zipho, two messages from Nomvula and a message from David. I ignore Zipho's missed calls and read Nomvula's texts first.

On the first text she asks if I'm back from Cape Town and in the second one she asks if we are still dating. The question has my heart skipping a beat. I quickly dial her. The phone rings unanswered. I call again and she answers.

“Sabelo,” she sounds down.

“Babe, are you okay?”

“I don't know, are you?”

“I'm so sorry for not checking on you and not telling you that I'm back. I got so busy that time just flew past. I'm sorry, my love, I will make it up to you.”

“You were so busy that you couldn't spare a minute to call me?”

“Babe, ngiyaxolisa—”

“No. You don't get to profess your love for me, speak marriage and then make me question where I stand in your life. A relationship is more than just words, Sabelo, you have to back them up with your actions. If you can't spare a minute to respond to my texts or return a call, then I guess you are too busy for me and I don't like feeling like I'm someone's last option.”

“Babe, you are not an option. It's only you, I promise. I'm not cheating or anything of the sort.”

“Then why are you making me question my position in your life? I love you, but I don't mind loving you from a distance—”

“Please don't talk like that. Give me an hour to wrap up my work and come to you. I'm sorry.”

“Whatever, Sabelo,” she ends the call, I sigh deeply. I'm in deep kak. Nomvula and Astrid are angry and now I have to appease them. God give me strength and wisdom to deal with this.

I dial Zipho and she answers on the first ring.

“So many missed calls, who died?” I ask.

“Your son wanted to speak to you.”

“It's Monday, isn't he supposed to be at school?”

“They are done with their assesments, the teacher said they can stay home.”

“Okay. Can I speak to him now?”

“He is not around now, my sister went out with him.”

“Okay. Tell me when I can call then.”

“I can tell you what he wanted to ask though.”

“Sure, I'm listening.”

“He wants a PlayStation 5. He went to a sleepover at a friend's place and they were playing with it the whole weekend. Now he wants it.”

“I will talk to him about it and then we will go and buy it.”

“Will you ever be a present father to your child?”

“What? What nonsense are you talking about now?”

“All you do is throw money at him as if he's some charity case—”

“Ibambe kanjalo ke Sisi, you are the one who decided who is going to be the father of that child despite knowing the truth. I'm out here trying to figure things out and you don't dare tell me about being present in a child's life when you haven't even told him the truth about his identity. I'm patient and waiting for you to do the right thing and you are blaming me? What do you want me to do? Do you want me to tell him the truth—”

“No, you can't!”

“Then ungazongidakelwa,” I end the call and blocked her because I know that she will be typing paragraphs after paragraphs that all say and mean nothing.

“I hear you managed to talk to the client,” that's Astrid walking through the door.

“I did and he agreed to meet tomorrow for brunch.”

“That's good news. Here's the file you requested.”

“Thanks.”

“I'm out of here, see you tomorrow.”

“Sure.”

I watch her as she exits and wonder if she ever thinks of settling down, like getting a man and tying the knot? She's such a wonderful person, she's strict here and there but I think she can be a good wife and mother. I smile at myself and shake the thoughts away.

I start gathering my things and prepare to knock off. I have to go and pacify my woman before I find myself single.

I check the message David sent and he's asking if I'm up for an auction happening in two weeks in the Northern Cape. I

close the message without a response, I need to think about it. Just then my phone vibrates and the notification that comes through has my heart rate quickening. I look around to see if no one is watching and open the message. The message is still there, I'm not daydreaming. I am over nine million richer than I was this morning...

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CHAPTER 21

SABELO

I am over the moon as I drive to the florist shop that I know in town. I want to buy the most expensive roses for my girl. I was going to buy a small bunch and some chocolates but now that the millions are here, a proper apology will do. I thought of calling my sister but decided against it. I will see her tomorrow after ironing things out with my woman and also getting back into Astrid's good books. I can't afford to mess up my career.

I park in front of the shop and get down. The scent of fresh flowers reminds me of Anele. She had a thing for fresh flowers and I always loved watching her take in the scent—it was as if she could visualise life beyond what an eye could perceive by just smelling flowers. But she never bought them, she said they were expensive for no reason. My dear wife loved food so if she was going to spend money, she would spend it on something she can eat.

“Good afternoon, ma'am,” I greet the florist. She returns my greetings with the most warm smile I have seen today. “Can I have your expensive roses, please.”

“Just roses?” she asks.

“Let's add the Lindt dark chocolate if you have it. Throw in the Ferrero Rocher ones too.”

“Order coming up, Sir. Would you want something to drink while you wait?”

“Water is fine.”

I'm shown to the waiting room and sit comfortably on the couch. The waiting room is spacious, luxurious and smells nice. It can pass as a luxurious airport lounge. There's a television set on the wall and Al Jazeera, a news channel is playing. Everything is all about the Iran-United States and that Co war. A lot is going on that side of the world and soon we will all feel the heat of these wars. I shake the uninvited thoughts of how war can destroy us and focus on the positive sides of life. The one positive side being that I can now afford to sell my old house and get a new house where Nomvula will be able to visit.

I can already imagine myself coming back from work and meeting her by the entrance, her apron on and the house smelling like lamb stew while Junior is busy with his homework.

My thoughts are interrupted by the florist letting me know my order is ready. I stand up and follow her to the collection and payment area. Damn! I have only seen these 200 stems roses on Instagram, I didn't know that they are this huge in real life.

“Cash or card, sir?” a guy behind the computer asks.

“Card,” I present it. He inserts the card and I input the pin as required. The total cost of everything is almost R10K. I get my card and receipt. I'm relieved when the florist tells me that someone will accompany me to the car. These look heavy already.

“Thank you,” I say as I close the car boot. I get into the car and reverse. My next stop is Woolies, I have to get her some wine.

The evening chilly air bites my arms as I walk towards the entrance. The lights are on which means Nomvula is at home. I knock and wait for a response but it doesn't come. I knock again and the door slowly opens. I put on my best smile but Nomvula just looks at me, sighs and turns around.

“Babe, I'm sorry,” I am almost running behind her. She ignores me and sits down. The TV is playing and she is now glued to it. “Babe,” I do something that will anger my ancestors, I kneel before her and beg. “Ngiyaxolisa S'thandwa sami. I seem to lose track of time when I am working. Please forgive me, it will never happen again.”

“You were working on the plane, Sabelo?”

“Yes,” I lie. I was asleep all the way from Cape Town to OR International Airport. I saw her missed calls. I meant to return them but I guess I was just too tired to focus. “There is this case I'm working on and it's taking too much of my time—”

“How about you go and come back when you are done with the case?”

“No, please don't say that. I want to be with you, I need you.”

“You clearly don't need me enough. You left on Friday, Sabelo, and today is a fuckin' Monday! You didn't fit me in

your schedule in over 74 hours and you want me to believe that you need me? What do you take me for?"

"Ngiyaxolisa, babe. I will do better next time. In fact, I will call you every hour from now on."

"No. I don't want to do things to please me, I want you to do something because you want to. If you can't communicate with me without me forcing you then you are not the man for me, Sabelo. I never saw my mother begging a man and I won't do that either. The door is open, you can leave—"

"Please give me one more chance, just one and I will show you how much you mean in my life."

"If you mess up? What do I do when you mess up again?"

"Dump me."

"Sure. Give me those chocolates, let me eat," she grabs the Lindt chocolate and starts eating. "I can't believe I starved myself for a man—"

"Wait, what?" I stifle a laugh.

"It won't happen again, trust me. The next time you make me feel like a desperate woman, I'm dumping your ass."

"Noted, ma'am. Kiss-nyana?"

I finally stand up from the floor and sit next to her.

"Kiss yani when you were busy with hoes in Cape Town the whole weekend?"

My heart almost jumps out of my throat. I hope she didn't see the pictures, otherwise I'm screwed. I only breathe in relief when she pecks my lips and finally takes her flowers.

"I don't have a vase this big, where am I supposed to put them?"

"We can get a vase online, right?" I ask, she nods. "Then order one, my love."

“You are paying?”

“Of course, what do you take me for?”

“Okay. Are you hungry, I didn't cook.”

“I am hungry, but I'm more hungry for you,” I pull her to me. She smells like vanilla and roses.

“Bath first, sir, I don't trust you—”

“Come on, I didn't even hug a female. Not even Astrid, she's mad at me.”

“What did you do?”

“I missed a deadline.”

“Where is your head at? What's distracting you?”

“This,” I sneak my hand under her short dress and my breath catches when my hand lands on a clean shaven mound. “F#ck! Babe,” I still can't get used to how my body quickly reacts to her.

“You... you are not having this until you get your act together... oh, babe,” she moans and I know I'm forgiven. I lean in and kiss her while my fingers trace her mound. The kiss deepens and we both moan.

“I missed you,” I say in between kisses.

“You are here now, let's make the most out of it.”

NOMVULA

I wake up to an empty bed. I am about to call out to Sabelo when a note on the bed catches my eye. I pick it up and it reads:

‘Don't leave the bed, I'm coming’

I smile and put it down. Soft raindrops are falling outside and the weather sounds beautiful already. I reach for the remote on the bedside table and open the curtains. The weather is as good as I thought, rain weather is my favourite because I get to sleep in, eat, watch Netflix and do a bit of work while in bed.

My phone vibrates, I reach for it. It's a message from Nandi. I also have missed calls from her. The message reads:

‘I guess lover boy is back that's why you are ignoring my calls’

I type a response.

‘Girl, he's back and did he not do things to me? I forgave him already.

Another message from her comes through.

‘I know that type. They disappear and then one touch from them you feel like nothing else matters. It's fun, but very dangerous. They know about that power they have over you and they can use it against you.’

‘I am in this with my brain fully functioning, I will give him a boot if he misbehaves’

‘I'm glad to hear that. I was checking up on you, let me go to work. I love you’

‘I love you more, Cuz’

“Hey gorgeous,” Sabelo walks, a tray in his hands.

“Hey Babe. You made breakfast?”

“I figured you will need it after all the escapades we got to last night,” he winks. He leans in and pecks me on the cheek. He then puts the tray on the bed.

“Wow! You can make pancakes?” He made pancakes, bacon, cheesy vienna and there's a fruit bowl on the side.

“I can cook, babe.”

“Okay. This is a plus, come here.”

He leans closer again and I kiss him on the cheek.

“Thank you, S'thandwa sami.”

“You are welcome. Eat up and come shower with me.”

“Mmm,” I smile at him.

“And get ready for me around 3PM, I want to take you somewhere.”

“I hope we are not going anywhere that David friend of yours.”

“No, love. I'm taking you somewhere and I'm sure you will love it. You can wear anything casually, preferably something that gives me access to your... you know.”

“You are crazy,” we both laugh.

While at that Mental Health Facility, I had stopped dreaming about such peace and happiness. I never thought that I, Nomvula, would be one day sitting on my bed, listening to soft raindrops and enjoying breakfast that my man made. God indeed works in mysterious ways. Angazi ngombonga ngani (I don't know how I will thank Him).

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CHAPTER 22

NOMVULA

Sabelo has been the best boyfriend ever in the past three weeks. I didn't believe him at first when he said he would do anything to show me that he loves and needs me, but now I believe him. He calls me every now and then to check on me. He took me to his office and introduced me as his girlfriend. You should have seen my cheeks turn pink with blushing. I spent the whole of the afternoon at his office. I have always known that he is the best at his work, but what I didn't know is how he commands respect in the workspace. They hold him in high esteem and he does his job effortlessly. The way he talks to clients, the way his brain works with numbers and the way he switches from the legal jargon to speaking numbers or information technology is out of this world. I didn't know that the three could sync perfectly until I saw him working. In my eyes, he is a genius.

After the office, he tricked me into passing by his house. I wasn't comfortable at first but getting in and not seeing any picture of his his wife on the wall made me relax. What I wasn't prepared for were the people at his house. His mother and his sister were there and he swore to me that he didn't know they were coming. Apparently they wanted to surprise him and they got the surprise instead. His mother wasn't impressed with how he introduced me, I guess it was because I was wearing a short dress. His sister was welcoming though.

We didn't stay long because it was awkward, the tension was so thick in the atmosphere that it felt like I was going to choke on it. I felt out of place, as if I had stepped into the holy place despite my sins. I asked Sabelo to drop me at my house and he did not refuse. You should have seen him apologising for everything as if it was his fault. On that day, I told him to never again take me to his house. I don't like feeling like an intruder.

On the lighter news, I aced my first exams and I am over the moon. I was scared that I would fail and that would mean rewriting the module. Now I'm convinced that I still have it in me. I am definitely going to enroll myself at university next year. I need to pick up my dreams where I left them. My parents are no longer here to hold my hand but I know they will be proud of me when they see me excelling.

To celebrate my small win, Sabelo promised to take me out. He said we will pass by some friend place and then go to dinner. I hope the friend isn't anything like his mother. The way that woman looked at me left me feeling naked and unworthy. Sabelo keeps saying she is a good woman but I didn't feel that when she stared at me. It was if she was staring daggers at me.

I finish cleaning and sit on the couch to catch a breather. Why I bought a three-bedroom flat when I stay alone is something I'm yet to convince myself of. Cleaning is a nightmare and my trust issues won't allow me to have a maid. Maybe I should try a cleaning company. They will clean once

a week, I guess that will work. I will look around for a company that can help.

My phone rings just as I am about to drift to dreamland. I pick it up and a smile creeps to my lips.

“Babe,” I answer.

“S’thandwa sami, ukahle?”

Butterflies are fluttering around in my stomach already.

“I’m good, Mthombeni, and you?”

“Ngikahle, Mama. I’m going to court, we will talk after three hours. Uyakuthanda uMseleku.”

“Uthandwa yimi,” I can already imagine the smile on his face right now. “All the best in court.”

“Thank you, babe,” he ends the call.

I no longer feel sleep, so I decide to start with the ironing. I was going to do it tomorrow but let me do it now. I also have to do a personal audit of my finances before I plan my month end spending. I gave out all the blankets my mother left for me, I need to buy a few. My apartment is air-conditioned but sometimes I don’t like the AC, I prefer my blankets.

I also need a few decorating items in preparation of the new season. I usually change my decor every season and I just love transforming my space into something new and beautiful.

I was also thinking of taking out a funeral policy with my bank and maybe a life insurance too. I am not informed about these so I will need someone to take me through the process. I guess a call to my parents’ trusted lawyer who is now my lawyer will help. Without wasting any more time, I call him.

“Miss Nomvula,” she answers.

“Hey, Mrs Swanepoel, how are you?”

“I’m good and you?”

“I’m fine. Let me not waste your time. I have been thinking of taking out a funeral cover and a life cover, what do you think?”

“A funeral policy is a standard procedure and most people have one so that those left behind do not have to worry about expenses that come with death. As for a life cover, I don’t think you need it.”

“Why do you say so?”

“You are the only surviving child with access to millions and with the right management team as the one you have now, even your kids wouldn’t have to work for a dime. What do you need a life cover for? Who will benefit from it? People usually take those because they are the breadwinners and they want their dependents to have something to keep going on after their demise. You don’t even have a dependant right now so I would advise you not to take it. We can revisit this conversation once you have a child or get married.”

“Okay, thank you. Talking about marriage, I’m seeing a guy and I think things are getting serious. Do I have to protect myself?”

“Are we talking marriage already?”

“He hinted at it. So I’m kinda scared of what will happen to my parents’ money and all that.”

“The money is yours now. You decide what you want to do. If you want to keep your assets and him keep his, you can come to me for a contract.”

“He is a lawyer, so I'm sure he will draw his own contract before everything.”

“You are okay with that?”

“Yeah. I don't care about his money, I just love him.”

“Okay. I always tell my clients to follow their brain because a heart can be misleading. I'm just glad that you want to protect yourself.”

“Yeah. Thanks for listening.”

“I get paid for that,” she teases and we both laugh.

“No, thank you, really. Let me leave you to work. Bye,” I end the call.

Well, that is now out of the way, we can move forward now.

By the time I'm done ironing and packing, I'm regretting my decision to get started. My feet are aching and so is my back. This labouring is not my cup of tea, I really need some help around here.

I check the time and it's 14:30 already. I quickly get ready for our outing with Sabelo. I don't bother with makeup today because if I do, I won't be done until 4 PM. Besides, Sabelo said something casual will do so that hints at a free outing rather than a formal one.

I grab a small purse and throw in my bank card, a few cash notes and lipgloss. One thing about me, I will never go out with anyone without money to transport myself back. I don't care if the person is driving or not, I just don't want to be

stranded. Yes, I have trust and anger issues like that. I'm working on them, I promise, soon I will trust people more.

My phone vibrates just as I apply lipstick. I pick it up and answer.

“Hey babe.”

“Come outside.”

“Okay, give me two minutes.”

I tidy up and then leave. My mother was big on leaving the room neat and tidy, I'm still following in her teachings.

Sabelo is leaning against the car and looking at his phone. He senses me and looks up. The smile that spreads on his face when he sees me has me smiling too. He opens his arms and I run into them. He embraces me and kisses the top of my head.

“Hey babe,” this time he tilts my head and kisses me on the lips. “Are you good?”

“I'm fine, wena?”

“I'm good. There's progression in the case I'm working on and I think I will win it. I don't want to talk about that though, get in the car and let's go.”

We both walk around the car and he opens the passenger door for me. I love these small gentlemanly gestures of his.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he reverses out of the complex.

“You will see,” he smiles.

I watch buildings as he drives through the neighbourhood. He is not saying anything, he keeps driving until we are at

Hyde Park. He makes a turn to this one beautiful house that is sitting on a slightly higher ground.

“I hope there are none of your relatives in that house?”

“No, there isn't.”

“Who are we here for?”

“Patience, baby, patience.”

He presses the intercom and the gate is opened. This house is beautiful. The manicured lawn and flower beds are a dream.

He parks the car and gets down. He comes to the passenger and opens the door for me. I'm still trying to figure out why we are here when a white young lady approaches us, a smile radiant on her face.

“Mr Mseleku,” she greets, professionally so. “Oh, I think you are the madam he kept referring to, right?”

I'm confused so I keep silent.

“Oh, yes, she's the one,” he wraps his arm around me.

“A pleasure to finally meet her, hopefully she will love what we have on the table.”

“Let's wait and see,” he says.

“This way please,” she leads us towards the house.

“What are we doing here, babe?” I ask Sabelo.

“Sizothenga umuzi wethu, that's if you like it—”

“What?”

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CHAPTER 23

NOMVULA

The words hang in the air long after he says them.

‘Sizothenga umuzi wethu...’

Our home. I blink, certain I must have misheard him.

“Our... what?” My voice comes out softer than I expect, almost like I am afraid of the answer. Sabelo smiles like he has just said something normal. Like this is just another stop in the day. A stop at a florist shop or something similar.

“Our home,” he repeats, gently this time. “If you like it.”

If I like it. I look at the house again. It is beautiful—too beautiful. The kind of house I have only seen in magazines and driven past without ever imagining myself inside. My parents' house was magnificent but not like this one. This one drips of luxury before you can even step inside. How much is he going to spend on this house?

My chest tightens.

“Sabelo...” I laugh nervously, folding my arms over my chest. “You’re joking, right?”

“I’m not joking,” he says, his tone calm but firm. “Come inside first. Then we’ll talk.”

That we’ll talk does not sound like a discussion. It sounds like a decision waiting for my agreement. The white lady is still standing there, watching us with that professional smile. I suddenly feel like I am on display. This moment has already

been arranged. Like all that is needed is my nod and I don't even have enough time to think about it or question it.

I lean closer to Sabelo, lowering my voice.

"You didn't tell me we were coming to buy a house."

"I wanted to surprise you," he says, brushing his thumb lightly against my hand. "You deserve nice things."

Nice things. My stomach twists. It sounds as if I'm some of the many sly queens whose loyalty and love is bought by nice things, and I hate this feeling. I don't want nice things, I want security and to be loved right.

"I already have a place, Sabelo," I say. "A big one, actually. Too big for me."

"This is different," he replies quickly. "That is your place. This..." he gestures toward the house, "this can be ours."

Ours. That word again. It sounds warm. It sounds right. It also feels... heavy. I think about Mrs Swanepoel's voice. Follow your brain because a heart can be misleading. My heart is already running ahead, imagining:

- waking up here
- cooking in that kitchen
- waiting for him in a home that feels... shared

But my brain is slower. Careful. Suspicious. Why our house all of a sudden? Are we not supposed to get married first? It feels too... early.

"Sabelo," I say, forcing myself to hold his gaze, "don't you think this is too fast?"

For a second, something shifts in his eyes. It is quick. Almost invisible. But I see it. Then he smiles again.

"Too fast for what?" he asks softly. "For us to be happy?"

That answer disarms me. Because now it feels like I am the one complicating things.

“I just...” I hesitate. “We’ve only been... really okay for a few weeks.”

“And in those weeks, have I made you doubt how I feel about you?” he asks.

I shake my head slowly.

“No.”

“Have I disrespected you?”

“No.”

“Have I hidden you?”

Another shake of my head.

“No.”

He steps closer, his voice dropping just enough to pull me in.

“Then why are you afraid of something good?”

That question lands harder than I expect. Because it leaves no room for me to say no without sounding ungrateful. I don’t have an answer that doesn’t make me sound broken or unsure. I look away, my eyes drifting back to the house. It is perfect. Too perfect.

“I’m not afraid,” I say, even though I’m not sure if it’s true. He reaches for my hand and intertwines his fingers with mine.

“Then trust me.”

Trust. That word again. Can I fully trust him? I think about the money in my purse. The one rule I never break. Always have a way out.

I swallow. My throat tightens. His hand is still wrapped around mine, warm... firm. Waiting. I glance at the door.

Then at the window. Then back at him. Why does this feel like a decision I won't be able to undo?

“Okay,” I whisper. I don't know if I am agreeing to walk into the house... Or into something much bigger. I hope he is not about to fall on his knee and ask me to marry him right this very moment because then I will run for my dear life. I love him, but it's too early to be talking marriage. The sound of it is flattering, but there's so much we still have to do and talk about. “Okay, let's do this,” I repeat, as if to reassure myself of the decision I'm making.

Sabelo smiles, satisfied, and turns to the agent.

“We're ready.”

The interior is nothing short of amazing and luxury. The house boasts of the modern and elegant yet simple furniture. It was made for someone who is a minimalist. Nothing feels forced into the space, and the furniture isn't overwhelming. It's all perfect—perfect in a way that is scary. So perfect that even walking around feels like an intrusion. Everything looks so perfect, so perfect it feels like it could be frozen in a picture.

The main bedroom is so spacious you can fit an RDP house inside. The pool and garden view from the floor to ceiling window in the bedroom is picture perfect and calming, almost to the view from my bedroom at my house but this one feels closer and personal. My apartment is in a complex—I chose that for security reasons and this is a house in its own yard and everything feels close and personal. Just like how it was at my parents' home.

The house is beautiful. Too beautiful. The kind of beautiful that doesn't look lived in... just owned. I suddenly become aware of how quiet it is. No neighbours. No distant noise. Just us. And the sound of my own breathing.

“And? Do you like it?” Sabelo who has been filming me asks.

“I love it!” That's the truth. I love this house although I'm not sure about it becoming our house.

“Then let's take it—”

“Before that, we have to talk.”

“What now, babe? You love the house and if we don't secure it now, someone might come and take it and then I will have to go through the trouble of viewing houses until I find the one for you again.”

“I understand the urgency, but I also want clarity, Sabelo.”

“Okay. Ask away, what do you want to know.”

“Why are you buying a house all of a sudden?”

He sighs and looks at me.

“I noticed how you tense every time I talk about my house. I saw how uncomfortable when we went there and I thought getting a new house will assure you of your position in my life. Yes, I have a past and my old house is linked to every memory I crested with my late wife. I'm no longer sad that she's gone because I found you, but that house still has me thinking about her. Every time I open a cupboard or turn on a stove, a memory about her crosses my mind and I get lost in those memories. I don't want you to have a me who is stuck in the past while you are giving me your all. I want you to have a me who is fully there emotionally, physically and mentally. I

want this house to be a start of our journey and a home where we will create our memories, memories that we will cherish forever.”

Why does he have to make so much sense? I am uncomfortable with his old house, he didn't misread that. Everything he is saying makes sense but why is my stomach tightening and my palms sweating?

“Change is uncomfortable, babe. I know that you were raised to be independent, to not want anything from a man except his manhood,” he chuckles, “but I was also raised to cater for a woman I love. I won't ask you to help me pay off the house, that's my responsibility and I will continue to provide for us. I earn a decent salary and I have a few investments.”

“I hear you, Sabelo, but it's not about the money only. It's also about control. As much as I love this house, I feel cornered. I feel like you already made a decision for us and all I have to do is to put a stamp on it.”

“I will understand if you don't want to move in with me. I will still buy the house though so you can come to my house whenever you feel like it.”

“You wouldn't mind that?”

“No. I will still love you even when you prefer staying in a complex instead of having your own yard and pool—”

“Are you mocking my apartment?” I raise my eyebrow.

“Hell no, babe. That apartment has the best of our memories,” he smiles. “On the real though, just please help me turn this into a home.”

“I got you, babe,” I squeeze his hand.

There. I just gave him the stamp he wanted. I don't know if I'm ready for what this change is about to bring us. I will have to trust our love to guide and keep us together.

“Thank you,” he pulls me to him and hugs me tight. “I promise to be the best man ever.”

“You are already a good man, Sabelo.”

His phone rings. He picks it up, stares at it and then drop the call. It rings again, he answers.

“What do you want?” he asks the caller. I don't get to hear the other person. “I said I will come and pick him up so we can buy that thing, didn't I?” he's getting agitated. “Stop calling me for nonsense.”

He ends the call abruptly. The silence that follows feels different. Heavier. I study his face. The softness is gone... just for a second. Then it's back. Like it was never missing

I want to step away from him but he pulls me back.

“Apparently my son wants a PS5,” he says, irritation still clinging to his voice. “Zipho is nagging me about it. Now I'm supposed to leave work and go PS5 shopping?”

“I'm sure she didn't mean it like that, come on.”

“Babe, you don't know Zipho. But let me not spoil our day because of her. Come, let's talk to the estate agent and get out of here.”

“Are you buying this cash?”

“What do you think?”

“I don't know. I don't know your financial standing.”

“Do you want to know?”

I hesitate.

“I will send you my financial report,” he smiles. “The good thing is that I won't be paying any lawyer fees, the law firm

I'm working for will do the honours and I will save about half a million—”

“How much is this property?”

“R9 million seven hundred thousand including transfer costs. I'm going to negotiate though.”

“You have such money in cash?”

“Maybe,” he shrugs, but his eyes don't quite meet mine.

Something about the way he says it doesn't sit right with me. But maybe I'm just paranoid. Being betrayed by my own family makes it a bit hard for me to fully trust people's intentions.

“Let's go and we are going to dinner after this. I'm famished.”

“Lead the way, sir.”

He takes my hand and we walk out of the bedroom...

I take one last look at the house before we leave. It's strange... I have everything I've ever wanted standing right in front of me. All I ever dreamt of while at the facility was a home and someone to call family. I have everything right here, Sabelo is here promising me a future that once only existed in my mind. Why does it feel like I've just given something up though?

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CHAPTER 24

SABELO

“Come on, I'm being a gentleman.”

I tell Ndalo who just stares at me and then shakes her head.

“No, you are being territorial now. I don't know if you are consciously doing it or you are unconsciously trying to control everything around you. Not so long ago you wanted nothing to do with the child and now you want custody? Do you know that social workers will check your family structure and usually bachelors don't get custody unless the mother is really bad.”

“But picture this. Myself, Nomvula and Junior. One small happy family.”

“Does Nomvula want that? Did you talk to her about it?”

“Not yet but she loves me, Sisi. She won't say no to my child coming to stay with us. She already agreed to moving in with me, that shows she's committed to us too.”

“I understand the moving in part but bringing your child into a relationship that still needs to reinforce its foundation is not good. Give Nomvula time to adjust to these changes. That girl still has a lot to deal with, don't overwhelm her.”

“Nomvula has always wanted a family, Sisi. I'm giving her that and more.”

“Still, talk to her about this thing. Don't just bombard her with decisions that you take on your own but still affect her.”

“Okay, I hear you. I'm going to meet her after signing the deal with the estate agent.”

“Cool.”

“When are you going home?”

“What for? Is everything okay? I sent money to Mom yesterday—”

“It's been over a year since you last went home. Are you still angry at our parents for trying to get to marry Owethu?”

“No. I just... I need peace.”

“Are you saying they disturb your peace?”

“No, not really. I have just been trying to find myself after losing Anele. When I'm ready I will go home and visit.”

“I don't know what's going on with you but you are changing, Sabelo—”

“I'm changing because I'm focusing on myself and what makes me happy more? Come on, I'm sure you don't mean that. If anything, you are the one person who should be happy for me. You know how I grew up. You know how I used my first salary to pay school fees for our younger sister. After that demands came from all sides. Dad wanted more cows, umama wanted the home renovated. All that was on me and my entry level salary. I really never got to enjoy my money because I also got married and handed over every financial decision to my wife. I don't regret what I did, I'm just rewarding myself for all the work I did.”

“Okay, bafo. I hear you.”

“I'm glad you do. And thanks for passing by, I have to go and meet the real estate agent. I will see you around.”

“Sure. Invite us for house warming.”

“If the madam agrees to it. I love you. Bye.”

My phone vibrates just as I drive out of the gate. I check the caller ID and let it ring. I thought it was David calling. Speaking of him, I haven't heard from him in over a month. Maybe he got angry with me because I did not respond to his message. I have been busy getting back into Astrid's and Nomvula's good books. I did call him – 11 times to be exact – and the calls went straight to voicemail. A couple of days ago his assistant, the mysterious lady who still wouldn't tell me her name, called and told me that David had seen my missed calls and would get back to me.

“His phone is roaming because he is out of the country,” she had said. “He is in Washington DC on business.”

The reason for the calls was to thank him for the networking opportunity he granted me in Cape Town – at his expense no less. But I have been restless ever since the Cape Town trip. The strange kind of restlessness, the one accompanied by butterflies in your stomach, where each time your phone rings, you grab it hurriedly and be disappointed that the person calling isn't who you thought it was. The kind where you glance at your phone every minute, wondering if it is even on, where you start typing a text, delete it and make a call, and then hang up before it starts ringing on the other side. You don't want to seem desperate or pushy, but at the same time you are dying to hear the person's voice. The last time I felt like this was when my late wife, Anele, and I started dating years ago. If I didn't know better, I would start thinking I was developing homosexual tendencies.

My phone beeps and I quickly grab it as if the incoming text was timed and would vanish in seconds. Speak of the devil, it is David.

‘Just landed at O.R. For some reason I can’t reach anyone from my office. Mind fetching me?’ reads the text message.

I find myself typing a reply as I hurriedly head out the door.

I find him standing outside next to a flashy BMW X6, chatting candidly with a gentleman in a grey suit. A porter is loading several Louis Vuitton bags into the car boot. He waves as he sees me pulling over, then they shake hands and exchange business cards. A moment later he opens the backseat door, hesitates, and then loads his bag and saunters round to the passenger seat.

“Apologies, I am a creature of habit,” he says, grinning. “I nearly turned you into my personal chauffeur.”

“When last did you drive yourself?”

“The right question is, can I even still drive,” he says.

“How was your trip? Your assistant told me you were in Washington DC.”

“Oh, yeah,” he says, draws a deep breath and reclines the seat. “I had a series of meetings with that pompous, self-important asshole, Jared Kushner.”

I turn to face him, stunned. “Kushner? Donald Trump’s son-in-law?”

“I see he needs no introduction even on these shores,” he scoffs, as if talking about Kushner leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Come on now, the man was in Trump’s inner circle even during his first term,” I say. “One of those unelected officials who handle the United States’ foreign policy. He is the

founder of Affinity Partners and is said to handle billions on behalf of some Middle Eastern bigwigs, including money from Sheik Mohammed bin Rshid Al Maktoum himself.”

“Yep, that’s the right Kushner all right.”

“What business are you running with him?”

“If I tell you, I will have to kill you.”

“Oh, no problem,” I say, a tad disappointed. Clearly, he doesn’t value our friendship as much as I do. “Where do I drop you?”

“Seriously, I can’t tell you, at least not as yet,” he says, noting my disappointment. “But the world will know about it soon enough. Just... as soon as this war with Iran is over.”

“I understand. Where do I drop you? I was on my way to a meeting.”

“I thought we could grab a drink first and then...” he cuts himself off, sighs, and then... “Okay, here’s what I can tell you for now. Do you remember what the United States said before invading Venezuela?”

“That the country is using boats to flood the United States with drugs?” I say, and chuckle. “That’s America’s old and tired script whenever they want to invade a foreign country. They build a false narrative, repeat it long enough until it becomes fact because those it is directed against get tired of debunking it. Then they invade, use propaganda to win the citizens over, and then take over the country’s minerals. They have done it with Iraq when they claimed Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, they did it in Libya when they claimed Gaddafi was a dictator murdering his own people, then Venezuela for its oil, and now Iran for oil and for Israel’s expansion project. I don’t know what’s their plan with South

Africa, but the same script is being used with this Afrikaner genocide rubbish. What has all this got to do with Kushner?”

“Well, an almost similar script is being used in the United Arab Emirates.”

“Uhm... but the UAE is not in conflict with the United States. In fact, they are allies. The United States has military bases all over the UAE.”

“Exactly, which is why this project will work seamlessly,” he says, warming up to the subject. “We stand to make a ton of money. Billions, and none will be the wiser until we own half of Dubai.”

“But how?”

“You must have seen in the news that Iran has been raining tons of missiles and drones onto Dubai and Saudi Arabia, right?”

“Yes. Dubai and Saudi Arabia have been drawn into this war because they are hosting American military bases, and some of the attacks are launched from those military bases.”

“Well, here’s what very few people know; it is not Iran attacking UAE and Saudi Arabia or even Qatar. The military bases, yes, it is definitely Iran. But not the civilian areas and infrastructure. Those are being attacked by someone else, and are blaming it on Iran.”

“Well, we have seen that in almost every war,” I say. “It is called a false flag, when one of the warring countries would attack another neutral country, just to get it to enter the war and fight on its side.”

“Yep, these people have cloned a number of Iran drones and missiles, and are shooting them into the neutral UAE,

Qatar and Saudi Arabia, slightly damaging their infrastructure.”

“I still don’t get how Kushner stands to benefit from destabilising all of the Middle East.”

“Dubai, specifically, has this long-standing reputation as a secure, tax-free safe haven for global finance, tourism, and real estate, right?” he says. “But now, the missile and drone strikes are hitting critical infrastructure, and have initiated a reassessment of the emirate’s risk profile, with the long-term future depending on the duration of the war. Dubai’s illusion of safety has been broken, with the city’s essence as a secure oasis under threat. High-net-worth individuals and professionals are considering evacuation. That’s where Kushner’s Affinity Partners comes in.”

Suddenly, it dawns on me, and I am stunned beyond disbelief.

“They are purposely forcing property prices in the UAE to drop, so that Kushner can come in and buy it all for a song,” I say, my jaw on the floor.

“You got it!” says David, grinning from ear to ear. “Some, of course, need to be persuaded to sell, so a strike or two would be made not far from his or her property. Prime property is currently selling faster than hotcakes in Dubai, as almost everyone wants to sell before their properties are either struck by a missile, or the prices are degraded to lower than what they are now.”

“But what if the war drags on? I mean, the Afghanistan war raged on for 20 years. Kushner could be buying mere rubble and ash, if this war drags on that long.”

“No, my friend. This war will be over by next week,” he says, self-assured. “You see, we as investors are privy to classified information that won’t be revealed to ordinary mortal souls such as yourself. As soon as Kushner’s Affinity Partners has grabbed enough property in the UAE, he will alert his father-in-law, who would then announce a ceasefire. With enough investments, Kushner intends closing all bids, so to speak, by next Tuesday.”

“Wow! That’s no different from insider trading,” I am shocked. “I do recall he has been at the forefront of the proposed development in Gaza as well.”

“Yep, as soon as Gaza is cleared of every soul, luxury properties will be built there,” says David matter-of-factly. “I have personally seen the plans. They are pretty impressive.”

“But... it’s immoral, David.”

“It’s money, my friend. If I don’t get in on this, someone else will. Wealthy people out there don’t care. Their thirst for luxury living knows no bounds. They would sleep soundly in a five-star hotel room, fully aware that the hotel was built on top of a mass grave of women and children who couldn’t outrun a missile. I personally have never pulled the trigger on anyone, Sabelo. I have never even seen a missile with my own eyes. But there’s one thing that I see, and that’s dollar signs. If you get in on such investments, tell yourself that your hands are clean, because they are. Even Kushner doesn’t do the dirty work. Those who do, are paid handsomely for their services, and you get paid for your investment, for life. Simple as that.”

I chuckle. “Even if I wanted to, I don’t have the kind of money to get in on this.”

“How much do you think I invested, Sabelo?”

“I don’t know. A R100 million?”

He bursts out laughing. “I don’t have that kind of money, my friend. I have put in my hard-earned savings of R10 million, which is peanuts if you convert it to Dollars. But it is a foot in the door. The beauty of this investment is that the money doesn’t go to just one property, but is spread evenly on a number of them so as to diversify your income and returns. I might already have shares in the Burj Khalifa, you never know. Next week, when the ceasefire is announced and everything returns to normal, property prices will rise as all the high-net-worth buffoons would be heading back. Imagine it, the previous owner becoming my tenant. My R10 million would easily rise to a R100 million, and it would increase even tenfold after we have rebuilt and restored Dubai to what it originally was. The same with Qatar and Saudi Arabia. A ton of money stands to be made here.”

“So, if I were to say, I invest R10 million too—”

“Wait, do you have that kind of money, Sabelo?” he glares at me, one eyebrow raised.

I smile sheepishly. “I might. You never know.”

“You sneaky son-of-a-gun!” he exclaims, punching me playfully on the shoulder.

I make a turn into Southern Sun in Hyde Park and slow the car into a parking zone. He opens the car door to get off the car, then turns back to me, staring at me incredulously for a moment.

“To think you nearly wasted all that money on a couple of toys at that auction,” he says. “Listen, Sabelo. Your money has to work for you, not you working for your money. Sure, a Lamborghini looks good in your driveway, and it does get a

slay queen's bra to come off on its own, but the damn thing drains you in the pocket. It is a gas-guzzler and the service cost alone is enough to feed a small village for two months. Sure, you can reward yourself if you buy it from the dividends of your investments – you would have earned it. That's your money working for you."

"Give me a day to think it over," I say.

"Sure, but remember, these properties are selling fast, and Kushner has people investing in dollars and pounds," he says. "If you snooze, you lose."

He reaches to the backseat, unzips his bag and pulls out what looks like a leather-bound file. He puts it on my lap.

"That's the prospectus for the investment, go through it when you get the time," he says. "Oh, I almost forgot. I am heading to Greece next week. I am pursuing yet another blank cheque that I would sign for myself. All this is like playing lotto when you already know the winning numbers, my friend."

"Let me think that over too."

"You mean you will be talking it over with the madam first?" he says, smirking. "That's why I divorced my wife. I had to report to her even when I was going to the little boys' room."

"Wait, what? You were married?" I am shocked yet again. "What happened?"

"Let's just say my wife suffered from irritable bowel syndrome that extended to her entire personality," he says, getting off the car.

"Come on now, David," I say, locking the car and following him into the hotel foyer. "The breakdown of your

marriage couldn't have entirely been her fault. What happened?"

"Are we getting that drink or you want to play marriage counsellor now?"

DISCLAIMER: The narrative above is purely work of fiction and serves to provide awareness. It is meant to encourage people to do their due diligence when approached with investment opportunities.

For most scams to work, scammers use current events and names of real people. This is aimed at putting their would-be victims at ease so that they would easily part with their hard-earned money.

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CHAPTER 25

SABELO

Have you ever felt like your life is too good to be true? That's me right now. I feel like I'm living my wildest dream. Everything at work is a breeze, back at home, I feel like my first marriage was not always roses because I was being prepared for this kind of bliss. Nomvula is everything a man can dream of. A woman you can give a house and she would turn it into a home. Give her ingredients and she will make a hearty meal. Ask for financial advice and she will coach you better than your actual financial advisor that you pay for. Leave her with your kid and your kid won't even miss you or complain.

God really blessed me for the second time. I sometimes feel like my Anele came back to life through Nomvula. She's everything I never thought I would get for the second round. I should thank my ancestors and God for these blessings.

“You are blushing?” Austin brings me back into the office where I am.

“Hey man,” we fist bump. “What's up?”

“Nothing much. I just came to congratulate you, kid. I heard you bought a mansion.” The smile on his face makes me feel proud of myself.

“Not a mansion, but a young seven-bedroom and five bedroom—”

“Dude! Seven bedrooms? Are you planning on having three wives?”

“Not three wives brother, but a sevens' rugby team. I six players short.”

“And you think that girlfriend of yours will give you six kids? Man, that's so 18th century. Women nowadays want to preserve their figures.”

“I am a Zulu man, Austin, and my woman knows that she has to give me kids and more of them.”

“If not?”

“There are ways, Austin.”

“Dude!”

“Just kidding man, I do want a lot of children but that depends on the madam. I bought a big house because I have a big family, you know. I want them to have their own rooms when they visit.”

“That's good man, don't skip any payments, these banks will repossess it within a month of a missed payment.”

“I won't. Thank you.”

I want to tell him that I bought it cash but they will only make him question my earnings and my lifestyle. I prefer to keep my financial business close to my own chest and that of the woman in my life. Strangers don't have to know, it's none of their business.

“So, when is the housewarming party?”

“My woman still wants to furnish the house and have a few things changed and some added. When she's done, I will let you guys know.”

“You got a good woman. Keep her.”

“I know, I know.”

I'm about to shoo Austin out of my office so I can finish my work when there's commotion by the entrance.

“Get out of my way!” a voice I recognise so well shouts and I feel the atmosphere instantly tensing. “Let me go! Sabelo! Sabelo!”

God, what kind of temptation is this? I stand up and walk towards the commotion. Zipho is screaming and scratching the security guards who are trying to restrain her.

“Gents, it's okay, I will take it from here—”

“It? I'm an ‘it’ to you, Sabelo? Ungijwayela kabi wena—”

“Can we talk in private like old and mature people?”

“Mature yokunuka! Were you mature uxelela usana lwami lomnqundu obumxelela wona?”

Austin realises the tension and asks the security guards to leave. He pats me on the shoulder and follows them. I stare at Zipho, long and hard, she stares back and all of a sudden she has nothing to say. I turn and go back into my office, she follows.

“Why are you embarrassing me?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“You had no right to tell him that you are his father!”

“I told you to tell him or I would. How do you think it felt to support a child who sings praises of another man? My child glorifies that thug because of your lies! My child didn't believe

me when I said I didn't know that he existed because you chose to play God with our lives! And you think you have the right to be angry and come here to cause a scene? You think you are the only one who can be angry?”

“He is angry and heartbroken. He is not talking to me and all he keeps saying is that he wants to stay with his father. You made me look like a bad person to my son! How could you be so heartless?”

I laugh even though I didn't intend to.

“Heartless? Heartless is you taking my child to another man and using him as a bargaining chip. Heartless is you choosing to lie for so many years simply because there is money involved. Heartless is you denying your son his true family for your own selfish reasons! You are the evil one here and if you really want to know who is more evil, let's take this matter to court and hear what the magistrate will say—”

“No, never! You are not taking my son away from me! I carried him alone for nine months and I was alone in the labour room—”

“That was your choice. Had you told me the truth from the onset, we wouldn't be here.”

“Were you going to leave your wife for me? For us?”

“No. But maybe I was going to be there for the kid. Now, lalela lana ke ntombazane yomxhosa, kube okukuqala nokokugcina ubukisa ngami. Lastly, pull one more stunt like this or try to elope with my child, you will find yourself six feet under—”

“Are you threatening me?”

“No. Junior, my girlfriend and I have a picnic planned for Saturday. He better be ready and waiting by 10 in the morning.”

“Sabelo—”

“On your way out, vow and swear to never ever return to my office even if your life depends on it. Now get lost.”

“Sabelo—”

“You want to fly out through the window?”

“You wouldn't dare!”

“Awungazi, you don't know me and you definitely don't know what I can do to protect my peace. Get out, now!”

She stares me and then hesitantly drags herself out.

“Instead of coming here to embarrass yourself, you should have gone to the salon and changed that wig, it looks like a bird nest.”

She turns, looks at me, opens her mouth and closes it again. Her hand slowly goes to her head and then she shamefacedly walks out.

I clench my fists and countdown from 10 to 1. I feel like screaming, but this is a workplace and I have to be at my best behaviour. I know Astrid is not happy about this and she's coming to tell me where to get off.

NOMVULA

Whoever said education is the key should just have given us the key. We wouldn't be suffering like this in the name of opening doors. I thought a shirt course won't be too hard but it

is showing me flames. I don't know what I would have done if I was dating someone uneducated. My life would have been a mess.

I just finished typing my assignment, the grumbling of my stomach reminds me of the last time I had a meal. There are leftovers in the kitchen so I stand up and head to the kitchen.

My phone rings just as I open the fridge. I go back to the living room and get it. It's Nandi calling.

“Hey babes,” I answer.

“Hey. Where are you? I'm at your house and your neighbour is telling me that you have been gone for four days now.”

“Oh, shucks! I forgot to tell you, Sabelo bought a house.”

“Okay. What has that got to do with you not being home for days?”

“I kinda moved in with him—”

“You are joking, right?”

“No. I love him, Nandi—”

“Let me guess, you have to prove your love by being a dutiful wife when you are just a girlfriend?”

“No, it's not like that. He didn't force me into anything, I swear. He only told me that he's buying a house for us and would be happy if I move in with him. I did this out of my own freewill. I promise.”

“If you say so,” she sighs. “Where is this house?”

“Hyde Park. I will send you the location.”

“Okay. I'm going to work now, I will pass by tomorrow after work.”

“Thank you for checking up on me, I love you.”

“I love you more, please take care of yourself.”

“I will,” I end the call.

Nandi is dramatic. She makes it sound like I went to a warzone by just moving in with my boyfriend. I'm happy here, Sabelo is my happy place and all this feels right. I was skeptical at first but the past three days proved to me that I took a good decision. I don't know if I'm moving too fast, but I'm already imagining our children running around this open space between the kitchen and the living room.

“Babe, I'm home,” Sabelo's voice awakens butterflies in my stomach. “Hey babe,” he bends and kisses me on the forehead.

“Hey,” I blush. “How was your day?”

“Productive. Yours? I see you skipped lunch which explains why you are heating up food at this hour.”

“I was studying.”

“But that doesn't mean you should skip lunch, babe. Come on, you could have ordered something if you couldn't cook. You still have my card linked to your Apps, right?”

“Yes.”

“Spend that money, then. I'm going out for a couple of minutes, I have to meet a client for a quick meeting. Should I order dinner on my way back or you will?”

“I will cook—”

“No, love. You are tired. Have your food, soak yourself in the tub and relax. I will bring food.”

“You are the best man, do you know that?”

“Only the princess treatment for you,” he kisses me again and leaves for the bedroom. “Oh, the interior designer will be

coming tomorrow afternoon. Show him your dream house and make sure they get it right.”

“Definitely. I'm so excited!”

“I know, babe, I know.”

I look at him as he disappears through the corridor and silently thank God for his life. He's a blessing I count ten times every time I count my blessings.

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CHAPTER 26

SABELO

I am filled with excitement and hope for a better future as I drive through the Southern Sun, Hyde Park, gate. My excitement is the kind that awakens butterflies in my stomach and I'm sure Nomvula will be just as excited when I tell her about the investment I am about to make. I'm already imagine myself getting hundreds of millions in returns and then I will buy all the cars I ever dreamed of driving.

I didn't tell anyone about the investment, not even my financial advisor. He asked why I was withdrawing 95% of my savings after buying a house in cash and I had to come up with a lie—a believable lie of course. It wasn't easy to come up with a convincing lie but I managed to get out of it. I told him that I want to invest somewhere, which is not entirely a lie. We can just say I omitted the name of the company that I'm investing into. I want to make money first before I can share this opportunity with anyone else.

I hate the underground parking that most of these luxurious hotels have. I don't know if I'm claustrophobic or just scared that the building might collapse on top of me while parking, I don't feel comfortable being here. I park as quickly as I can and I'm almost running when I make my way to the lift. I

summon the lift and it doesn't take long. I get in and start counting floors on my way to the hotel's restaurant.

I get to the foyer and greet the security guard who is looking around, clearly securing the area. I make my way to the restaurant. I don't have to wander around before I can see David. He is seated at the far end of the restaurant and seems to be concentrating on his phone more than he is concentrating on the glass in front of him.

"My man," I greet as I sit on the chair opposite him. He raises his finger, signalling me to give him a moment. He furiously types on the phone. When he is done, he puts the phone down and looks at me, a smile plastered on his face.

"Mseleku, sir," he greets back. I love it when people who are not from my tribe pronounce my surname correctly. It shows that they respect you enough to can bite their tongues, if need be, to pronounce your name correctly.

"Wrong timing? I see you are busy there."

"I was. But now I'm all yours. I was talking to my guy in Greece, I told you about businesses that side too."

"I see. Life is really kind to you, you are getting deals from every corner of the universe."

"It's not about life being kind to anyone, Sabela," there we go, why is he butchering my name now? I'm Sabelo. Sabelo. But I will let it slide this one time. "It is about positioning yourself. Nothing comes to you while you sit idle and wait, even God needs to be met halfway. You cannot believe that God will provide and then sit back and do nothing. God wouldn't have given us brains if that was the case."

“I see. I didn't see you as someone who could reference the bible?” I raise my eyebrow. Every time I meet him I feel like I get introduced to a part of him that I didn't know existed before.

“I was raised by a grandmother who woke up at 5 in the morning, every Sunday, to prepare for church. And no one under her roof dared to say no to going to church. We all went and we learnt a lot about the creator and all that.”

“Do you believe God provides?”

“I believe the universe meets you halfway. You position yourself for opportunities and you will be good.”

“But nowadays everything is all about connections and who you know in the industry.”

“That is not a nowadays thing, it has always been that. From time immemorial, people were grouped by their social status. Connections worked back then, they still work even today. You just have to be clever about it, introduce yourself to the people that matter and you are sorted.”

“How did you get here? I mean knowing so many people and having contact with them?”

“Like I said, I introduced myself to people who matter. I was a waiter in one of the biggest restaurants in Dubai. While serving guests, I would listen and I would Google topics I overheard. I then became a bartender. The difference between the waiter and the bartender is that the waiter doesn't spend much time with guests, but at the bar, you spend all your work shift with people. You meet people from all backgrounds, some want to vent and some just want to have a drink while discussing a project. One day I overheard an old man saying he wished his children were interested in his business. He

needed someone to pass on the knowledge to. I don't know what prompted me but I blurted out that I would love to learn. The man and his company were stunned but somehow he trusted me enough to take me under his wing. The rest is history," he smiles as he raises his hand to signal a waiter.

The waiter rushes to our desk.

"A refill please and..." he looks at me.

"Whiskey on the rocks will do," I say.

"Food?"

"Nah. I promise the madam that I will bring dinner and we will eat together. Maybe I can get takeaways."

"Go on and do that. Bill it to my account," he tells the waiter.

"I can afford food, you know?" I tease.

"You are my guest, and where I come from we feed our guests."

"I hear you."

"So, you said you wanted to meet? What's up?" he glances at his wristwatch. "I have a zoom meeting in thirty minutes."

"I won't be long. I just wanted to let you know that I'm ready to invest."

"Great! You made a good decision, man. An investment is better than those cars you wanted to buy. You can buy more of those when you get your returns."

"Yeah, I see that. Invest first and enjoy the rewards later."

"That's the spirit. I will have my PA send you the account details. Should I welcome you onboard already or you are yet to discuss with the madam?"

"I'm in, man."

"Congratulations," he extends his hand for a shake.

“Thank you for the opportunity and let me not keep you waiting, the madam is waiting for me.”

“Of course, man, go and feed her. That's all those people are good for—”

“Not my Nomvula, but that's a discussion for another day. Go and make more of that paper.”

We say our goodbyes and just as the waiter brings my takeaway. I take the bag and head out.

I get home to find Nomvula asleep on the couch. My girl must be tired from all the cleaning and studying at the same time. I offered to hire a cleaning company but she said she wants to do it herself. I put the takeaway bag on the coffee table and wake her up.

“Babe, you are back,” she yawns.

“Yes, love. How long have you been asleep?”

“I took a bath, tried to watch the new Bridgerton season but I fell asleep. It smells nice, what did you bring?”

“Your favourite—”

“Creamy pasta?” I'm salivating already.

“Yep.”

“You are the best, come here.”

I bend and she kisses me on the lips.

“I didn't buy drinks though, do you want one?”

“No, babe. I want to savour the taste without any disturbances,” she responds, I laugh.

“Noted. Here you go.”

“So, how was your day? Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Studies are showing me flames, but there's peace here. This house somehow reminds me of the quietness that was at my parents' house. No awkwardness, just peace.”

“I'm glad you love it here. Did you have a look at those documents?”

“Oh, yes, I did. Quite impressive savings, hey,” she says and my heart skips a beat. I am about to use that money and she doesn't know. But what she doesn't know won't hurt her and she will be proud of me when the money comes back ten times more.

“I try, babe.”

“Are you going to sell your old house?”

“Yes, but not yet. I still have to ask my former in-laws to come and clear Anele's wardrobe. Then I will put it on the market.”

“I see. I was also wondering about our expenses now that we stay together. How are we going to divide them?”

“We won't. Just spend my money, babe and keep your apartment. You can put a tenant in there.”

“I love my space but I will think about it. Am I going to get girlfriend allowance?” she teases.

“Babe, you have access to the account where my salary goes, pay yourself girl, just make sure bills and utilities are paid for and there's food in the fridge. By food, I mean meat.”

We both laugh.

“I love you, Nomvula,” the words tumble out of my mouth and I feel my whole body getting warm by just looking at her blushing.

“I love you too, Sabelo.”

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CHAPTER 27

SABELO

I am always the first one in the office these days, much to Astrid's delight. She and the team know that I do my best work when I come early in the office. My table is set and cup of steaming hot coffee sits next to my laptop. I power on my laptop and notifications start pouring in. I scan through my emails and stop when I see one from David's PA. I click on it and there are several documents attached. It's most documents I have seen. David showed me the business plans, the projections and all that. I already went through them and I know what's inside. The only new document is the one with the banking details of an offshore account.

I already made my mind that I'm investing but for one last time, I go online and check David's companies again. His websites look legit and everything seems legit. There are even pictures of him standing or sitting with notable figures. In one of the pictures he is shaking hands with the Prince of Saudi Arabia, the richest prince in the world. You don't just get to meet these figures, you must be monied and well connected to share a table with them. I even check if the pictures are manipulated or not, and there's no sign of AI usage on any of

them, they are all original pictures with locations and time stamps.

I decide to get the investment thing off the way and then only focus on my work after. I log in to my Standard Bank account and transfer the money. I am a bit nervous but I believe in the saying that if your dreams don't scare you, they are not big enough. I'm only left with less than R500K between me and poverty. But I will be fine, soon I will be richer than I ever was and my salary can sustain us for a while.

“Hey man,” that's Austin greeting from the door.

“Dude, wassup?”

“Getting ready to go to court. I'm going golfing on weekend with the guys, wanna join?”

“Nah. My girl and my son want me for a picnic this weekend. I will join you guys some other time.”

“You are really committed, aren't you?”

“I have always been a guy who commits, casual relationships drain me. I want to know where I stand with the person and if that person chooses to be casual, then I'm out.”

“I hear you, man. Let me rush to court.”

“All the best.”

It's been exactly three days after I made a payment to an offshore account and I haven't heard anything from David. Not even an acknowledgement of receipt. It's just silence and this thing is starting to feel uncomfortable. I have tried calling

him numerous times but his number is not going through. It's possible that he is out of the country so I sent messages, but he hasn't responded to them either. I even emailed his PA and I only got an automated response.

I leave my desk and go to Astrid's office. I need someone to talk to before I lose my mind. Maybe I'm just worrying for no reason.

“Can I come in?”

“Oh, yes. Wassup?” Astrid is always straight to the point. I argue with myself for a moment before diving into it.

“What would you say to someone considering investing in the UAE, specifically in Dubai, especially with the current state of affairs in the Middle East?”

Astrid glares at me for a moment, and then chuckles sarcastically. “Sabelo, you can't be serious right now.”

“I am,” I say, putting on a straight face. “I'm asking for a friend.”

She sighs and folds her arms across her chest. “I would tell that person to withdraw every penny of the money he hopes to invest, douse it with petrol and then set it alight. Because that's what Iran is doing to every investment in the UAE as we speak.”

“So you wouldn't invest?”

“Sabelo, the UAE has a big target painted all over its back in this war,” she says, seemingly surprised I would even ask the question. “The country has seen more bombs dropped on it than Iran has attacked Israel. Iran cannot attack America the same way it is attacking Israel, so they have to hit the next best thing – and that's the UAE.”

“I don’t understand. The next best thing? The UAE isn’t even a part of this war.”

She sighs yet again. “My wealthy dad taught me one of the most important lessons in warfare and business. He said, ‘Never fight your enemy where they are strong. Attack where they are weak and exposed. America’s military is without a doubt unbeatable, and Iran knows this. But America’s economy? Its gas prices? Its stock market? Its technology partnerships? Those are exposed to missile strikes. And the UAE as America’s most committed economic partner in the Middle East, is where Iran has found the weakness.”

Then it hits me. I recall reading in the Sunday Times that the United States invested trillions in the UAE and signed a 10-year agreement that focuses on Artificial Intelligence, technology, energy and manufacturing. American companies, amongst them Nvidia, Microsoft, Amazon, Google and other major US tech companies, also committed trillions in investments. They also built data centres in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The same centres Iran has been bombing.

“Sabelo, the UAE is not just an oil state,” says Astrid. “It is the Artificial Intelligence capital of the Middle East. The financial hub between East and West. The model for what a modern Arab economy looks like. And that model was built entirely in partnership with America.”

“This means every attack on the UAE is an attack on America and on the global economy,” I say, the realisation sending a pang of fear knocking against my ribs.

“Iran understands something most people don’t,” says Astrid. “The most powerful weapon in the world is not a missile. It is an attack on the economy. Iran’s strategy is

simple and brutal – the UAE is where the money lives. It is where American tech companies built their Gulf headquarters. Where American AI infrastructure is being installed. Where the trillions in investments are flowing. If you destroy that, if you make it uninsurable. If you make it uninvestable. You make every CEO and wealthy idiot out there ask, ‘Should we really be investing in a war zone?’ All of them are pulling out. The UAE model is gradually failing. And the worst part? A message has been sent to every other Arab country contemplating a partnership with America: ‘Look what happened to Dubai.’ That is the target. Not American soldiers. The target is the economic architecture binding America and the Gulf together.”

“So... so you wouldn’t be investing?” it’s a stupid question, I know, but the dread I am suddenly feeling drives me to.

She laughs. “Sabelo, why would you invest where everyone else is pulling out? It just doesn’t make business sense investing into something that would be turned to rubble anyway.”

“But... what if... what if you have insider information that those who are pulling out would be coming back...”

“Of course they would be coming back,” she says matter-of-factly. “This doesn’t mean partnerships will fall through or that trust in the UAE will go away. But just not yet. You also have to remember, if there’s one thing the UAE has in abundance, it is money. The only type of investment they are open to is what they don’t have, and that’s technology. Not money. They will not struggle to rebuild what has been destroyed. So if your friend is some tech genius, and can offer what Google, Amazon and Microsoft can’t, then by all means.

He can go right ahead and approach them. But remember, most of these agreements the UAE has signed with the likes of Amazon, Google, Microsoft and other tech companies, are for a period of 10 years or more. Your friend will find that he doesn't just have to have the best technology in the world – better than Elon Musk's or Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates – but that there's a bunch of other hopefuls in the queue ahead of him who have been waiting to be given a chance for years."

"You mean, infrastructure-wise, and on property, I still can't... I mean, my friend still can't invest?"

"The only clever investment you can make during war-time is on companies that make bombs," she says with a cocky laugh. "That's what Donald Trump's kids have been investing in a few days before their father attacked Iran. Yes, Trump told them to. As far as property is concerned, the Arabs will rebuild all that with ease, on their own, and at record time. They don't need help with that. Remember when the Chinese built eight state-of-the-art hospitals within a week during Covid? The Arabs are just as capable. These are the people who built an oasis out of a dry, lifeless desert. In fact, they might not even use their own money. There certainly will be reparations and compensation for all the destruction after the war, and it will be paid for by America and Israel."

She studies me for a moment, pensive. A few teardrops surprise me when they land on my arm, long before I can feel the salt in them burn my eyes.

"Sabelo, what's wrong?" she asks, her tone now softening. "Which friend are you asking for? Are you the 'friend', Sabelo?"

My lips tremble, and I bite down on them hard, holding back a sob.

“Sabelo, how much did you invest, and with who?”

I can taste blood on my lips. I think I bit down too hard on them. I feel my stomach churn, I am about to let out a howl of a scream. I can't – not in front of Astrid. I stand up and bolt out of the office, leaving her stunned and wide-eyed.

Once in the car, I fumble frantically for my phone and dial David's number again. The call goes straight to voicemail. There's this ringing sound in my ears. It is too loud, so loud it clouds my thoughts, making me feel as if I'm losing my mind.

Is it possible? Did David scam me? How could I have been so stupid? No, David didn't scam me. He couldn't have. This is a legit business opportunity. I just need to find him, tell him that I have changed my mind and would no longer be investing, and ask for my money back. I'm guessing I can't reach him on the phone because he may again be out of the country. He is a businessman after all.

I will call his assistant. Yes, that lady who refused to give me her name. She has always been able to get through to him even when he is overseas. I didn't save her number, but it is on my Received Calls somewhere.

I scroll for what seems an eternity and eventually find the number. I dial it and... how is this subscriber unavailable? Is this how these people do business now? By being unreachable? Andrew Dluđu. I have to call Andrew; he is his friend. David helped him get back his Lamborghinis. He would know where David can be found.

I'm relieved when Andrew's phone rings, but it rings forever, eventually putting me through to voicemail. I decide

to send him a message: ‘Urgently need your help to find your friend David. It’s very important. Please call me back.’

I sit in my car, my mind racing. Is David even who he says he is? My phone beeps. It’s a message from Andrew. It simply reads: ‘What do you mean “my friend”?’ In a meeting, call me back at 5pm.’

I’m stunned. Why is he denying him so quickly? Is it possible he is aware of what is going on? Is he involved? My bank. I have to contact my bank. I dial frantically, cuss as the electronic voice lists my options, and cuss even louder as the music plays while I wait for a human.

Finally, there is a human on the other side. Impatiently, I go through the verification process and then get to explain my situation to the lady on the other side.

“Sir, I do see here you did make a transfer to an offshore account three days ago,” she says. “Normally, it takes between one to five business days before the money clears on the other side...”

“I am not inquiring about the clearing period. I want the funds reversed!” I roar into the phone.

“Oh, I see sir, please give me a moment.” And then she plays me the irritating music again. One minute, two minutes, three minutes. “Sorry for keeping you holding, Mr Mseleku. I was checking on the transaction and also verifying with my supervisor if it is at all possible...”

“Can you reverse the funds or not?”

“What is the reason for requiring the funds to be reversed, Mr Mseleku? Do you possibly suspect fraud, criminal activity...”

I sigh loudly. “I think I have been scammed into transferring the funds to that account. That is why I need the transaction reversed.”

“Have you laid criminal charges with the police, sir?”

“I will!” I retort furiously. “But for now, I just need you to reverse the transaction.”

“Well sir, I cannot. Not three days after the transaction. You have better chances of having the funds reversed at least minutes or several hours after the transaction, not days. The funds have already passed the cut-off time and have moved to the SWIFT network. You however can come into the branch and submit what we call a Recall Request, but even that will require the consent of the recipient to release the funds back to you. Can’t you call the recipient and ask them to return the--”

“Look, it hasn’t been five days yet, that means the funds still haven’t cleared to his account,” I say, almost pleading now. “You can still stop the money from getting into his account. I have been your client for years. Your bank can’t drop me now that I need you the most.”

“Sir, when we say within one to five days, we don’t mean it takes five days before the funds clear. We mean it can clear at any time between one and five days. If you suspect criminality, I would suggest you first report the matter to the police, and then come into the branch so we can submit the Recall Request to the offshore—”

I hang up before she can finish her sentence.

A thought creeps into my mind, and I immediately start the car. The last time I saw David, he had booked at the Southern Sun. If he is still in the country, if he is still in Johannesburg, he would most probably still be there.

I'm sweating as I walk into the hotel foyer. The ladies behind the desk, oblivious to the emotions brewing inside me, smile broadly at me as I approach. If I didn't know better, I would think they are mocking me. But I can't blame them. Smiling so welcomingly is part of their job description.

"Good day Sir, welcome to the Southern Sun. How can we help you today?"

"I'm looking for a friend of mine who is your guest... I don't know which room he is in, unfortunately. His name is David Jacobsson. With two Ss."

"A moment please," she says, and runs her fingers over her keyboard, squints her eyes and looks up at me. "Sorry sir, we don't have anyone by that name. When did he check in with us?"

I tell her and she runs her fingers briskly on the keyboard again, and then shakes her head. "No, we haven't had anyone with that name at all, sir."

"But... he has been your guest for almost a week."

"Possibly not as a stay-in guest," she says. "We do have clients who use our facilities for business meetings, dates, meeting clients and for networking. Maybe—"

"No, he was staying here," I say absent-mindedly, my eyes now scanning the foyer, lobby, and all the way to the almost empty bar area.

"Do you maybe have a picture of him?" the other lady asks.

I have a bunch of pictures that one of the catering staff snapped of us in Cape Town. I pull out my phone and scroll to the gallery. The first picture isn't good enough. It is me, Andrew Dlundlu and David standing against the bar – except David is looking aside as if he just had to inspect my ear for

flees. In this picture, he had untied the pony tail and the maze of long hair covered much of the side of his face. Only his cheekbone and the long nose can be seen. I scroll to the next picture that we took on the terrace. Jesus! On this picture, you would swear he is admiring his shoes. Again, the long hair is like a curtain over his face. The third picture, the fourth, the fifth, almost in every picture that I took with him, he is either looking elsewhere or scanning the floor. You would swear this man waited for the right moment to look down or away before the camera shutter opened and closed. Was it on purpose?

“Sir?”

“Oh, sorry,” I say, and hand over the phone.

The two ladies scroll through every picture, shake their heads and hand the phone back to me.

“No sir, I haven’t seen this man. Maybe if it was a full face picture, not one showing only the side of his face.”

So he is not David Jacobsson...

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CHAPTER 28

SABELO

After exiting the hotel, I felt my head spinning and my stomach tightened in fear. I forced myself to continue moving until I got into the car. With tears blurring my eyes, I drove off. I didn't know where to until I found myself at the graveyard. I did get down the car but I couldn't get myself to face Anele, not today. Not after losing everything she worked hard for. I went back into the car and drove aimlessly until I thought about going to the police station. The police will help me, they are trained to chase criminals and those include fraudsters. They will find David and I will recover my money. Yes, they will.

With renewed hope, I get down the car and make my way into that police station. I have been here way too many times to recount but today feels different. It feels like I'm walking in here for the first time. It feels like even the walls can hear my thoughts and are mocking me.

“Good afternoon,” I greet an officer behind the counter.

“Good afternoon, mister. How can I help you?” she loudly chews gum.

“I'm here to open a case.”

“What happened? Some slay queen you picked up at a club yesterday ran off with your gadgets?”

“No, I was scammed,” I begin to narrate the story from the day I met David.

“Wait, I know you wena mos,” says the gum-chewing policewoman across the counter. “Nguwe vele (is it really you)?”

She has stopped writing the statement and is looking up at the broken fan hanging from the ceiling, as if trying to recall a memory that refuses to be recalled, the pen stroking her glossy lips.

“Ngikwazelaphi vele (where do I know you from)?” she asks me now, glaring at me with a pout.

“Uhm... possibly from court? I am a lawyer.”

“Ja, man! You are a lawyer wena!” she says, as if I haven’t already told her. The way she says it, it sounds like an accusation, as if being a lawyer is some kind of sin. “You are a lawyer, ne? A famous one. You are very good, wena. Thina la we are busy arresting them, and wena you get them out. Usile wena.”

“Yes, well, it’s my job. Now about the case...” I say, urging her on to continue doing her work. “I really have to get the case number and take it to the bank because--”

“Manje tell me ke Mr Lawyer,” she says, cutting me off. “Why did you allow yourself to get scammed? You are a lawyer wena mos. Aren’t you supposed to be smart?” She swivels on her chair, turning to another policeman. “Sibiya, uyamazi lona (do you know this one)?” she says, motioning in my direction with a flick of her dreadlocked head.

“No, I don’t,” says Sibiya, approaching the counter interestedly. “Who is he?”

“He is a lawyer, and bam’nokhile shem, R10 million cabanga (and he has been scammed shame, R10 million, imagine),” she says, and I see some people in the charge office looking in my direction and gossiping in hushed tones.

“I can sue you for what you have just done!” I say through gritted teeth. “This can cost you your job.”

“Haibo bhuti!” she exclaims, recoiling on her chair as if the word ‘sue’ has the force of a heavyweight boxer’s punch. “How much will you sue me for? R10 million? I earn a government salary, bathong. Even my pension won’t cover the money you were scammed—”

“Constable Nkosi, you are out of order!” the commanding voice comes from behind me, and I turn to find the station commander, Brigadier Solomon Chauke, standing there. I have met him a number of times in the line of duty. We are more like acquaintances. I should have called him before coming here to be disrespected by a lowly constable. “How far are you with the docket, Constable?”

“Almost done, Brigadier,” she says coyly, her voice suddenly trembling. “I was about to register it and then take it to the detectives, Brigadier.”

“Give it to me, I will take it to the detective unit commander,” says Chauke, and then turns to me. “Mr Mseleku, come with me please.”

I follow Chauke down a flight of stairs and into a corridor lined by rows of offices, our steps echoing loudly in the stillness. Though I am as tall as Chauke, I am battling to keep up with his giant strides.

“I apologise for my constable’s behaviour. Sometimes they forget that the charge office is a community service centre –

their job is to service the community, with respect and empathy,” he says.

“I’m wondering what would have happened if I was there to report a sexual assault matter,” I say, rubbing it in. “The whole building would have known how I had been forced pull them down and to bend over.”

“Too graphic, Mr Mseleku, but I get your point. I will address the constable’s behaviour.”

He pauses in front of a door with the name ‘Brigadier T. Radebe’ on it. He knocks and pushes the door in, opening to an expansive office with a huge desk at the far end piled with mountains of files and docket. A man in formal attire is standing at a filing cabinet next to the window. He turns around, acknowledges us with a nod, and continues to pull out a file from the cabinet and returns with it behind the desk.

“Tom, hope you are not too tied up,” says Chauke, pulling a chair to sit. “I have a matter that needs your urgent attention.”

“I knew it was urgent when the door opened before I could even say come in,” he says, laughing. “How may I be of assistance?”

“This is Sabelo Mseleku, from—”

“Thee Sabelo Mseleku?” he asks incredulously, standing up and extending his arm for a handshake.

“Yes, and Mr Mseleku, this is Brigadier Tom Radebe, he heads the detective unit,” says Chauke, putting the docket on the desk in front of Radebe.

The man starts paging through the docket, and then his eyes widen as he reads. He looks up at me, then back at the

docket, and continues reading with interest. Then he picks up the phone and starts dialing.

“Hello, General Naude, Radebe here in Johannesburg... yes General, we spoke yesterday... I still haven’t received the Red Notice, sir... maybe the national office is still tied up in red tape sir... yes sir, but I wanted to ask, what is the name of that Interpol suspect... yes, the one Andrew Dluclu has cried foul about as well...” and he refers to the docket, reading silently... “Same name... no sir, I am just reading from a new docket that just came to my desk just now. It’s definitely the same person... this time it’s R10 million, sir... yes, he really has been busy, General... thank you sir, I will certainly keep you posted.”

He hangs up, sighs and sits back on his chair, drumming his fingers on the desk as he studies me intently.

“Spit it out, Tom. What’s going on here?” Chauke barks.

“Uhm... last week, during a Zoom meeting with specialised units, departmental and provincial heads, the national office talked about an urgent Interpol Red Notice on a man named David Jacobsson,” he says. “Not long after, an auction house reported having sold two performance cars to this man, but the funds he had transferred to the auction house never cleared on their side. They could see the money had come in, but it was strangely inaccessible. They thought that the bank might have put the funds on hold for some reason, but three days later it still wasn’t accessible. So they contacted the bank. Guess what they found? There was no money. The matter is still under investigation, but it seems the funds had indeed been paid in, and then mysteriously recalled by the person who had transferred it. The auction house, with the

help of a private security company, managed to trace the cars to the one and only Andrew Dlodlu, Minister Dumisani Khumalo's nephew, the very same person who had previously been legally dispossessed of the cars. Andrew Dlodlu has since also laid charges, claiming he had also lost money to the same individual. It seems Dlodlu paid this individual money to repurchase the vehicles on his behalf, as well as a fee for the job. He lost both."

"I... uhm... I met David for first time at that auction," I say, stunned. "I was with him in Cape Town as well, I think it was after he had delivered the cars to Andrew Dlodlu."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, Mr Mseleku, but you didn't meet him at the auction for the first time," says Radebe. "Maybe for you, it was the first time. But he most probably had known you or about you for some time. By the time you met him at the auction, his plan to rid you of your money was already at an advanced stage. There are no coincidences with this man. He meets you because he had planned to meet you. Was this money you always had, or was it some inheritance or investment dividends you have been waiting for for some time?"

"It was... it was policy payouts..." I say and look up at him. "Are you trying to tell me David may have been told about the payouts by someone who works for the insurance company?"

"Or by someone who works for your bank, or someone who works for the insurance company underwriter, or someone within SARS as they have to take their cut before the money comes to you," says Radebe. "The leak could have

been from anywhere. It could have been even from your own family.”

“Wait... who exactly is this David Jacobsson?” I ask.

“What we were told from the Interpol Red Notice is that this man’s real name is Kevin Saunders, and initially operated as a legitimate wealth manager, in the United States between 2007 and 2010,” says Radebe. “After some time, he began stealing his clients’ money to finance his lavish lifestyle. He initially operated what is called a ponzi scheme, and like all ponzi schemes, at some point the FBI gets wind of it. That was when he ran. He started creating various identities, moved between countries, using money from one victim to charm the next, before disappearing. There were rumours he was murdered in 2015, after he scammed a mafia boss from Colombia of millions of dollars. But Interpol continued operating under the assumption that he is still alive, believing he is hiding, possibly having undergone plastic surgery. He could afford it with ease.”

“Why hasn’t he been caught by now though?” I ask. “I mean, 2015 was so long ago.”

“This man has mastered the art of leveraging cryptocurrencies, international finance loopholes and digital personas to steal large sums and evade law enforcement,” says Radebe. “Until he showed up in South Africa, many within Interpol were convinced he may have been fed to the Colombian mafia boss’s crocodiles. This side, he surfaced as some kind of fixer as early as 2016, getting the rich and famous whatever they wanted, and even offering services of making any problem disappear.”

“Making any problem disappear?” I ask, glaring at Radebe. “You mean killing?”

“The man is a jack of all trades,” he says, pauses and draws a deep breath. “Look, don’t beat yourself up too much. Anyone could have easily fallen for this man’s charms. He even scammed a mafia boss; someone he ordinarily should have been terrified of. The fact that he has his own money and doesn’t mind spending it makes people lower their guard. He knows appealing to your greed, convincing you that you can be as wealthy as him, name-dropping here and there, you easily pry your wallets open. What have you got to lose? Answer: everything.”

“So, he is still in the country?”

“He could be or might have already left. What we know is that last month, he had holed up in Dubai, changing hotels every few nights. With the war going on, Dubai was getting too hot for him. He then got someone to travel on his passport to the Maldives to draw the eyes of authorities and investigators, while he slipped south to the Seychelles. We don’t know which identity he used to enter the country again, or which identities he is using to book into hotels. He doesn’t mind booking into three or four hotels a night. It’s cheaper this side for him.”

“Brigadier, I will just ask you one question,” I say, pause and draw a deep breath, summoning the strength I would need for this one question would surely break my heart more than it already has. “As far as you know, will I ever get my money back?”

He studies me momentarily, and I can see the pity in his eyes.

“Mr Mseleku, men like Saunders are like casinos. They lure you with the promise of big wins, only to take from you and disappear. When these men are eventually caught, it is usually not because of brilliant police work, but because they have run out of the money that makes it easy for them to evade law enforcement. All we can do is to make the world they operate in smaller by spreading awareness about them, such as the Red Notice. It will soon be released all over the world with his pictures and the different aliases he uses. The smaller his world, the less he operates his schemes, which means he would be spending more than what he gets back. Soon, the money runs out, and he can no longer afford the lavish lifestyle. That’s when we usually catch up with them; when they have spent all the money they have stolen.”

“So this is a waiting game?” I ask, feeling the stinging warmth of tears at the corners of my eyes. “You wait until he has spent everything? What’s the point of catching him when he no longer has my money?”

Silence. The two law enforcers simply exchange embarrassed glances, tight-lipped. I stand up and storm out of the office, slamming the door behind me. With every step I take, my chest is being ripped apart...

CHAPTER 29

NOMVULA

Today is just one of those days. The kind where even breathing feels like work. I woke up tired, not the kind of tired that sleep can fix, but the kind that sits deep in my bones. Dragging my feet from the bed to the bathroom, I felt like I could just collapse on the floor and scream until my chest gave in.

I only understand it when I look at the calendar.

Today marks eight years since I last heard my mother's voice. Eight years since I became an orphan. Eight years since the world, as I knew it, ended.

Some days I pretend I have healed. Today is not one of those days.

I put on my clothes and make my way to the kitchen. I need coffee, strong coffee to kickstart my body for the day. At least I don't have any lessons or assignments to take care of, I will just eat and go back to bed. I will wake up when Sabelo returns, that's if I feel like it.

My phone vibrates just as I sit down to eat my breakfast. I check the caller and it's Sabelo. For a second, I just stare at it, my heart suddenly beating faster for reasons I cannot explain. I hope history doesn't repeat itself, I cannot receive bad news, not today. I press the green button and put the phone on loudspeaker.

“Hey babe.”

“Hey. You good?”

He sounds down, or maybe it's tiredness.

“I'm okay. What's up?”

“You know you don't have to pretend with me, babe. Today is the day your parents died and you told me how hard this day is.”

“You remembered?” tears burn the corner of my eyes. I have spent this day on my own, alone with my thoughts and no one has ever remembered me.

“I did. How are you feeling?”

“Like the entire world's troubles are sitting on my shoulders. My body is heavy.”

“Allow yourself to feel everything, and don't be hard on yourself.”

“Ngiyabonga, babe.”

“Anything for you, S'thandwa sami. I sent you something to cheer you up... I hope it does cheer you up.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Let me get back to work, I will see you later.”

“Okay, thank you.”

I can't believe God blessed me with such a kind and caring man. I didn't think he will remember what today is. Heck, I wasn't even expecting him to remember. But he did and that means the world to me.

The delivery guy arrives. I sign for the parcel and get back inside. Sabelo sent me flowers, chocolates and wine. I'm not a wine fan or any alcoholic drink, but I think a glass is needed to go through this day. I text to thank him and ditch my coffee

for wine. Let's see if alcohol can help numb this feeling that I cannot explain.

I don't know when I fell asleep, I'm only waking up now as the front door opens. I sit up on the couch and yawn. My body is aching as if I was toiling in the fields.

“Hey babe,” Sabelo greets. I look at him and there's something different about him today.

“Sabelo?”

For a moment, he just looks at me. Not the way he usually does, but as if he is trying to read something on my face.

“Yes, sweetheart,” he throws himself on the couch and pulls me closer to him. He reeks of alcohol.

“You are drunk? Are you not supposed to be coming from work?”

“I went to work, babe. I worked more than they pay me for. You know I generate millions for that company but I get peanuts for a salary—”

“That's not true, you get paid more than what an average property lawyer—”

“I am not an average lawyer! I am Sabelo Mseleku, there is no job that I have done that did not generate millions for that company. I have done a lot for them!”

I don't know where all this is coming from and I don't like where it is going. He is really upset.

“What happened, babe? Trouble at work?”

“Something like that,” he sighs. “I'm tired, you know. I'm tired of working for other people. I'm tired of watching other

people get rich because of my hard work. I want what I deserve. I deserve better than this!”

He says it again, quieter this time, as if convincing himself more than me.

“Okay, what do you think you deserve?” I ask, he smiles—a smile that doesn't reach his bloodshot eyes.

“Half of that company—”

“What?”

“That's what I deserve. I have carried that company on my shoulders for years. They wouldn't be where they are today without me.”

“I think you are being unfair on Astrid. She has been good to you and you are the one who told me that she taught you most of the things you know now. They came to your rescue when my uncle held us hostage. They killed for you, for us—”

He laughs, a laugh that has chills running down spine.

“You don't know anything, wena. You think the corporate world is all suits and computers? You think anyone cares about someone? You are wrong. They came to my rescue because I have done the same before. They came to my rescue because not only did I stand to lose a life, but the company's reputation also was on the line and so was their money. Letting you die was not an option, not before the company received what was due to them—”

“You all fought because of money, not me?”

“They did, I didn't. I took your case because I felt like I had nothing to live for anymore. When Astrid told me, I know it was going to be dangerous but that's what I needed. Something to keep me going. I didn't even know that it was

you until I came to meet you. I helped you because I cared. I care and I love you.”

“I’m sorry you feel used. What do you think of doing? Resigning?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs. “Maybe start my own law firm. I have spoken to a few people who want me to look after their investments and properties. But at the same time I’m thinking of focusing more on information technology. I don’t know, babe. I’m just venting. And no, I’m not drunk drunk. I only had a few tots of whiskey.”

“What triggered all this?”

I search his face, trying to understand what I am missing.

“Nothing much. Just arguments at work, I’m sorry. I just wanted to vent.”

“It’s okay, babe. I’m here for you,” I move even closer and wrap my arm around him.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“I love you more.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes.

“Are you hungry?” I ask him.

“Not really. I just need a bath and I will go to sleep.”

“Okay.”

It took sleeping pills for Sabelo to finally fall asleep. He kept tossing and turning until I offered him pills. He took them and fell asleep. It really broke my heart to see him like that yesterday. He broke down in tears before we went to bed. He cried so much his body shook. I tried comforting him but I

wasn't getting it correctly. I ended up crying with him. It broke my heart to see someone who is so passionate about his work like him break down like that. His salary is way above the average pay of a property lawyer, I thought he was happy there but yesterday painted a different picture for me. We really don't understand what people are going through until they open up to us.

It's six in the morning and he's still fast asleep. I don't know if I should wake him up or just let him be.

I decide to wake up and prepare breakfast for him while he continues to rest. I don't know if he will wake up and decide to go to work or he will still insist on quitting his job. As much as I understand his feelings, I feel like quitting his job will leave him depressed. Sabelo loves practicing law. Law isn't his work, it's his passion. It is who he is. I don't see him surviving without doing what he loves most.

"Hey love," he is finally awake. His dress code says he is not going to work.

"Hey. You are awake."

"Yeah. Thanks for yesterday," he steps closer and kisses me on the cheek. "I have a headache from hell."

"Coffee will fix that, sit down. Coffee coming up."

"Thank you."

I serve him coffee and then continue preparing breakfast. Sabelo still looks lost. It's as if he's with me for a minute and wanders again. Or maybe not lost, just somewhere I cannot reach.

"Babe?" I call.

“H..huh?”

“Whatever happened is really stressing you. You are lost, my love.”

“I will be fine.”

“You don't have to force it, babe. Sometimes things happen so we can realise our full potential. Maybe you are right. It's time you start your own thing, build a legacy for your kids. Imagine ‘Mseleku Attorneys’, doesn't that sound nice?”

“It does, babe. But what if I fail to pull it off?”

“Fail? You fail at something? Never. I believe in you and I know you can do it.”

“Thanks,” he sighs. “You know solamba if I don't get clients, right?”

“It won't get to that. I know you can pull this off and if I'm impressed by your progress, I will fire my own team of lawyers and trust you with my investments.”

“Really?”

“Yes, baby. I believe in you—”

He jumps down from the stool and hugs me from behind.

“I will not fail you, I promise.”

I close my eyes and hold onto his words, letting them settle where the ache has lived all day. For the first time since morning, the weight on my chest begins to ease. Maybe I am not as alone as I thought. But somewhere, deep inside me, something shifts and I don't quite understand why.

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CHAPTER 30

SABELO

The money is gone. I keep staring at the screen as if it will somehow change. As if the numbers will correct themselves and reflect what I know should be there. They don't. I refresh the banking app again. And again. Nothing.

A hollow laugh escapes my throat, dry and humourless. I don't even recognise the sound. It doesn't sound like me. It sounds like someone who has just realised that they are not as smart as they thought they were.

I drop the phone on the table and lean back on the chair, staring at the ceiling.

How did I let this happen? No. That's the wrong question. I know exactly how it happened. I trusted him. He did look and sound like someone who could pull such deals off. His website erased all the doubts I had about him and the investment. The thought alone makes my jaw tighten. My fingers curl into fists as I sit up again and grab the phone. The case is open. Statements have been taken. Promises have been made.

"Chances of recovering the money are slim."

"Slim," I scoff. That's a polite way of saying the money is gone and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Not even me. Especially not me. That is what burns the most. Not even the money itself, but the fact that I—Sabelo Mseleku—

allowed myself to be played like some desperate amateur who doesn't understand how the world works. I'm not just a lawyer, I am an IT specialist yet I didn't dig deeper. He was already on a wanted list. I would have seen it if I had just taken my time.

I should have seen it. The signs were there. The urgency. The pressure. The way everything had to happen quickly. I saw it but I ignored it. Because I wanted more. Because I believed I deserved more and that is exactly how men like him win.

I run a hand down my face and let out a slow breath.

'Deserve.' The word sits heavy in my chest. I deserve better than this. I have always deserved better than this. Years of building other people's wealth. Years of making them richer while I get a salary that, no matter how good it looks on paper, will never match the value I bring. I have done the most for this company. Astrid does care about me, but is it really care or she's just interested in what I bring to the table? I taught every lawyer we have in here the ropes yet I still don't get what I deserve. At this point, I should be a shareholder not just an employee.

And now this. Now I am back at zero. Worse than zero. Because now I know what it feels like to have it and lose it faster than one can blink. That money was supposed to upgrade me, not to leave me broken.

A knock at the door pulls me out of my thoughts.

"Come in."

The door opens and Astrid steps in, composed as always. Sometimes I wonder how much effort it takes for her to always look perfect. You never find a strand of hair somewhere where it is not supposed to be or see her blazer wrinkled. She closes the door behind her and walks in without a word, her eyes settling on me. She already knows. Of course she does. Astrid is not the kind of person you hide things from. She demanded the truth out of me yesterday and I faltered. I only asked her to keep this between us, I don't think I can handle the embarrassment of my team knowing that their leader was scammed.

“You look terrible,” she says, her tone neutral. Not unkind. Not sympathetic either. Just observant.

“I've looked better,” I reply.

She studies me for a moment longer before taking a seat across from me.

“I spoke to the investigators,” she says.

Of course she did. I sigh.

“And?”

A brief pause.

“They're doing what they can.”

I let out a short laugh.

“Which means nothing.”

She doesn't argue. She doesn't try to soften it.

“That depends on how you choose to look at it,” she says instead.

I shake my head. “No, Astrid. It doesn't.”

Silence stretches between us. She leans back slightly, her gaze never leaving mine.

“You’re not the first person this has happened to,” she says. “Stop throwing a pity party for yourself.”

“But I should have been the last,” I snap before I can stop myself.

The words hang in the air, heavier than I intended. Astrid doesn’t flinch. My anger doesn’t move her and she has seen me angrier than this.

“That’s your ego talking,” she says calmly. I let out a breath and look away. Maybe it is. But that doesn’t make it hurt any less. “You’ll recover,” she continues. “You’re too smart not to.”

Smart. The word feels like an insult right now but I nod anyway.

“Yeah.”

She stands up, smoothing down her blazer.

“Take the day if you need it,” she says. “But don’t disappear for too long. You’re more useful to me when you’re focused.”

There it is. Not concern. Not comfort but value and use. I almost smile.

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

“I know,” she replies, already walking towards the door. “You don’t really have a choice.”

And just like that, she’s gone. The office falls silent again.

I sit there for a long time, staring at nothing. Astrid is right. I don’t have a choice but to be okay. I can’t sit here and feel sorry for myself. I can’t wait for miracles or investigations that lead nowhere. If the money is not coming back then I need to

find another way to get it. It's that simple. You lose something, you go after it with your all.

My eyes drift to my phone. For a moment, I don't move. I just stare at it, my mind going quiet in that dangerous way it does when a thought begins to form. There are always ways to recover what is lost. You just have to be willing to take them. I reach for the phone and unlock it.

Her name appears on the screen almost immediately.

Nomvula ❤️

My thumb hovers over it. I think about last night. The way she looked at me. The way she held me. The way she said she believes in me without hesitation, without doubt. A flicker of something uncomfortable stirs in my chest. I push it down. This is not about feelings. This is about survival. About fixing a mistake and getting back what I lost.

I exhale slowly.

"She won't even feel it," I murmur under my breath.

The words sound strange, but they make sense in my head.

She has more than enough. More than she needs and I just need a start. I stare at her name a second longer. Then I lock the phone and place it back on the table. Someone has to pay for what David did to me and right now, I don't care who it is.

I unlock my laptop and stare at the screen for a moment. My heart beats faster, threatening to jump out of the ribcage. Not from fear but the rush. I have to talk myself into calming down. I need to do this. Having a conscience doesn't pay, the universe pays people like David and the law is too weak to

can catch them. Theft and corruption are everywhere, you just have to choose your battle and fight it wisely.

I click on the browser and go incognito. I hide my location and make sure that no one can trace me. It doesn't take me long to log into the Standard Bank database. I check the number of employees they have and also check which one of their branch is the busiest. I find the branch but it looks like it is closely monitored. I pause and then click on another branch. I check the list of their employees and one of them catches my eye. Her name is Sindisiwe.

I pause for a second. She looks like a slay queen. From her wigs to the accessories she has on, she looks like someone loves soft life. But at what salary? I zoom in her profile picture and her necklace looks real. Where does she get the money for that? It doesn't matter. She will take the fall for this one. The bank she works for didn't want to help me, she will pay for them.

I check her on LinkedIn and all her social media. She has a husband and two kids. The husband is a teacher, so they will be fine even if she gets fired for stealing. People recover from worse. I quickly log into her bank account. She's such a loyal employee, she even banks with Standard Bank. Her balance is on R7.11. I create a savings account under her account and hide it from her. She won't see it, only I will and from now on, her bank account is ours until I get my money back. She just doesn't know it yet.

I'm about to log back into the Standard Bank system when Astrid knocks and walks in. I quickly exit the window and click on a document on my screen.

"I thought you were taking some time off?" she says.

"Nah. Let me work, it will take my mind off things."

"Okay, then. I'm out of here, Mom invited me for a family lunch."

"Sure, have fun."

"Sabelo, Nomvula is the good thing you have right now. Don't lose everything at once. Focus."

"I love her, you know it."

"Good."

I wish I can show her how focused I am but she doesn't have to know because when I'm done with Standard Bank I'm coming for her. It's time I put my skills into good use, into something that benefits me not others. I deserve some bit of a reward for the good things I do for others.

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DISCLAIMER: Events narrated in this chapter are for the fictional world. They are not in any way a guideline to hacking systems and stealing. Do not try this at home. Uzoboshwa.

CHAPTER 31

SABELO

The house is quiet. Nomvula went to some prayer meeting with her cousin or whatever it is believers do on a Good Friday. I'm not complaining though, I need this peace and quiet. Even the city outside seems to pause, giving me space. I lean back in my chair, hands hovering over the keyboard, and let my thoughts settle. Every detail has to be perfect. One slip, one trace and it's over. I need to be extra careful.

I take a slow breath, reminding myself that this is mine to control. No one deserves this money more than I do. The money David stole, the money I earned with my skills and mind, it's all slipping through my fingers and now I'm taking it back. On my terms. One cent at a time, until I have it all back to myself.

I log into the hidden account I created for Sindisiwe. Her balance blinks back at me, calm and unaware. R7.11. It's sad that no one sent her money for Easter eggs, not even the

husband. Isn't it women get money for every holiday? A laugh rises from my chest before I can stop it. That's funny. That's pathetic that's perfect. I check the savings account I created under her name and it's still there, untouched and unseen.

The transfer has to be smooth, invisible. I triple-check the details: routing numbers, branch codes, transaction limits. Everything is in place. One slip here, one alert there, and this falls apart. I pause again and stare at the money this branch has access to. There are so many trust funds and business accounts that trust this bank. They just don't know that this bank doesn't care about their investments, they only care about what they get in return. They can lose it all in a blink of an eye and this bank won't help them with anything. That's how I lost my money. Banks promise you safety of your money, but the truth is, nothing is safe in this world.

I already identified a trust fund that my girl, Sindisiwe, will steal from. Of course she doesn't know that she is stealing right now. She's probably at church singing and crying for Jesus's crucifixion. She will one day find out that she stole millions. She will be shocked, or maybe get a minor stroke, but she will be fine. If not, she can die. That's what people who are defeated do, they kill themselves or whatever.

The trust fund has over 100 million Rand. I create a transaction for 15 million Rand, it's not much and they won't see it any time soon. Trust Funds are usually not closely monitored, as they are usually waiting for some 12-year-old to turn twenty-one and then have access to the money. I click

“transfer” and lean back. My pulse accelerates, but not from fear. From control and power. The numbers change. Slowly. Steadily. The balance moves from R0 to 15 million Rand. And this is my start.

I watch for a moment, holding my breath, my mind tense. Nothing happens. No alerts, no errors, no traces. No alarms from the bank system. Everything is mine. A small smile curls on my lips. I exhale, letting the tension drain. The thrill is intoxicating. I feel alive. For the first time in days, I am untouchable. I have what I lost back, plus bonus. For my troubles, of course. It's not easy hacking an entire bank and come out unscarred.

I close the laptop but I don't move. I just sit back and let it sink in. This is mine. Completely. Secretly. Untouched by anyone else. I lean forward and pick up my phone. I take a picture of the new balance and save it in a hidden folder. A memento. Proof. My victory. I won't move the money anytime soon. I will let it sit there for a while.

I stand, stretching slowly and savoring the quiet rush. I walk to the kitchen and pour myself a drink—not wine, not coffee. Something strong, something simple. I lift the glass and whisper to no one:

“I did it.”

The words echo softly in the empty house and I let a laugh escape. Not a hollow laugh. This one is warm, real. I lean against the counter, closing my eyes. For a moment, nothing else exists. No loss, no shame, no David. Just me.

I stay like that for a long time. Alone with my success, alone with the power of knowing no one else can touch it. No one even suspects. No one will ever know. Yet a tiny voice in my mind whispers something I push away. Too easy. The process was too easy. But I ignore it. Right now, it doesn't matter. Right now, I'm untouchable.

I go back to the living room, grab my phone and transfer R10 000 to my girl. She should be like Sindisiwe, she must get an allowance for every holiday. Just because she exists and she is mine.

NOMVULA

I missed this. God knows I missed singing my heart out and dancing my stress away in church like this. I'm sweating and my voice is becoming hoarse already but I wouldn't have it any other way. This is where I belong right now. Nandi is also having fun and nothing beats the fun you have in the house of the Lord.

“Everybody scream ‘Hallelujah’,” the female leading choir singer says and the church erupts. The more we praise and worship the more I feel like holy spirit is with us. His presence comforting, yet overwhelming. Now and then I blink my tears away. I become an emotional wreck thinking of all the things I went through on my own. God was there, walking with me even though I didn't really acknowledge His presence.

“Hey,” Nandi taps me on the shoulder. “Your phone is ringing,” she mouths while showing me the screen of my phone. It's so noisy in here we can't even hear each other when we speak. Not only is it noisy, it is packed to the rafters. I can't negotiate my way out even if I wanted to.

I take the phone and silence the call. I log into my WhatsApp and text Sabelo, he is the one calling. I notice that I have messages from him.

Sabelo ❤️: Babe, should I cook? Will you be coming back anytime soon?

Sabelo ❤️: Would you mind if I bring Junior for the weekend? Just to spend time with us, I will take him back on Monday. That's if you are okay with it.

Sabelo ❤️: I'm craving lamb and there's none in the fridge, please order from Woolies and have it delivered.

I also notice a bank confirmation. This man just sent me R10K with a reference ‘Happy Worshipping’. My heart swells with love and joy. God, I love how this man loves me.

Me: Hey babe. Sorry, I couldn't answer the call, it's noisy here. I will order the meat and some snacks since they are finished. And it's okay, you can bring Junior.

I press send and he responds with a heart emoji. I log into the Woolies App and start shopping. By the time I checked out, balance to be paid is over R4K. I just did a grocery haul

and I know my man will pack everything correctly. His mother trained him well, bless her heart.

The pastor is now preaching and we are all focused on him. He is talking about restoration. About how God gave up His only son so that we can be saved. Not perish but have eternal life. The word seems to be talking to me directly, the son of God died for me to be saved, if not, I wouldn't be here. If God didn't love us this much, I would be dead by now.

The service is closed with a prayer and then a song. The master of the ceremony comes to the stage and starts reading announcements out loud. They are mostly about how the evening service and the other services to follow will be conducted. He also reminds us about the offering and tithe. I already paid my tithe and offering for today. He continues reminding congregants that church uniforms are available and so are the calendars.

When he is done, the choir starts singing again and people start milling out of the building. It was such a good service, you can see and feel it in the atmosphere. Nandi grabs my hand and we negotiate our way to the parking lot. This one behaves like my mother, she treats me like a child.

“Thank you for bringing me here, I really enjoyed myself,” I tell her just as we approach the car.

“No Biggie, I knew you would love it here.”

“I did. Can we pass by the mall?”

“Okay. What for?”

“Sabelo sent me money for Good Friday, we are going to spend it—”

“You lie!”

“I kid you not. 10 grand, cabanga!”

“Jesus! Does he have a brother? I mean I've never received money for my birthday, not to talk about an allowance for the death of imvana! Yimuphi ugogo omhambayo ntombi?”

We both laugh and get into the car. Nandi is driving, she never let me drive unless she is drunk. She feels like we are safe with her behind the steering wheel. I'm not a bad driver, I don't know why she doesn't trust me.

“So, what are you going to buy? I'm hungry and I'm sure it's packed at the mall.”

“There are Egyptian cotton sheets that I have been eyeing, I want those and some bedroom decor. I want to start putting together these things while we wait for our customised bed and couch.”

“You are really embracing this grown woman era of your life and I'm proud of you. I also love that you have your own money but Sabelo still treats you like a woman he wants to take care of. He is letting you shine in your feminine energy.”

“He really does. And I love him more for that.”

“I'm happy for you. I'm sure Aunt is looking down and smiling. You made it, I feel like you have arrived. Literally.”

“I have.”

I look out of the window and whisper a silent prayer of thanksgiving, God has been good to me and he continues to be.

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CHAPTER 32

SABELO

I spent the entire holiday with my small family. Zipho didn't mind to let Junior come to our house and we really had fun. From baking together as a family, swimming to taking walks to an ice cream stall. It was not just fun but fulfilling. It felt like I finally have the family that I always prayed for when Anele was still alive. Nomvula is free around my child and so is Junior around her. I don't know what the universe is planning for my life but I love it.

Waking up today was a struggle. Sleeping in for the past four days had my body getting used to that routine. I cursed under my breath when the alarm rang today. I almost snoozed it and went back to sleep but then I remembered the incomplete mission that I have to see through. That alone gave me enough energy and motivation to wake up and get ready for work.

The office smells the same as it always does—polished wood, expensive perfume, and something cold underneath it all. I can't really put a name onto it but it has always been there. It unsettled me at first but now I bask in it. Is it control? Yes, that's what this place is built on. Control and precision and that is Astrid's world. A world that was designed to suit her and we all had to fit in and learn to live in it.

“Good morning, Bhuti Sabelo,” Nontobeko greets as we meet on the wide corridor.

“Hey Nonto,” I smile at her. “How was your Easter?”

“Oh, it was awesome. I went to church and I finally got confirmed and got my robe—”

My brain switches off. This conversation now feels like what Nomvula subjected me to on Sunday. She told me all about confirmation, getting her robe and whatever the other things the pastor did.

“Oh, let me not keep you waiting with my church gossip,” she smiles shyly. I didn't get the gossip part but I'm glad we are done with this.

“Sure, let me get to work.”

“Sure, bhuti.”

I love how cleaners here always clean before we start working. My office smells like lemons and berries. Not the best of combinations, but I will take it over the lavender scent. I sit at my desk and power my desktop and laptop. I stare at both screens, but I'm not seeing any of it. Numbers move, emails come in, notifications blink—but my mind is somewhere else entirely. I am supposed to be checking out my emails but the mission I started is haunting me.

‘I shouldn't be doing this.’

The thought comes uninvited, sharp and unwelcome. It lingers longer than it ever has before. With the bank, it was different. Distant. Abstract. Just numbers in a system that didn't care about people.

This feels personal. It feels like betraying my own sister. I shift in my chair and glance toward her office. The glass walls

are half-frosted, but I can still see her silhouette moving inside. Calm, composed and unbothered. She trusts me and that's the problem. My jaw tightens as my mind races. Astrid doesn't miss things. She built her reputation on not missing things. Every cent accounted for. Every report double-checked. Every anomaly is investigated. If something moves where it shouldn't she will see it. Not eventually but immediately. She is quick to even tell a client when he or she is lying. Sometimes I think she has laser eyes that scan one's mind.

A flicker of unease settles in my chest. I look back at my screen and force myself to breathe normally. I need to be in control of everything around me in order to pull this one off.

'You've done this before,' my brain urges. But the thought doesn't land the same way this time. Because I haven't done something like this. Not to someone this close. Someone who trusts me with her all and someone I consider a sister.

My fingers hover over the keyboard, but they don't move. For the first time in days, I hesitate. It's not fear of the system. It's fear of her. A memory surfaces. Astrid standing behind me last week, pointing at a discrepancy in a statement I thought was flawless. She saw it at one glance, she will definitely notice the activity in the accounts.

"If you look closely, Sabelo," she said, her voice calm but cutting, "you'll notice that small mistakes are never really small. They just wait to become big problems. This was going to come back and bite you in court."

At the time, I nodded. Took the correction. Fixed it. Now, the words echo differently. Small mistakes lead to big problems. I swallow hard. This isn't a mistake. This is

deliberate. I have been planning this and I have to see it through.

I glance at the time. She has a meeting in five minutes. I know her schedule better than I know my own. When she steps out, she'll be gone for at least twenty. Twenty minutes is all I need. That's all it should take. My screen dims slightly and I tap the trackpad, bringing it back to life. Lines of data sharpen into focus. Access points. Accounts. Pathways. All leading to her, to her company. I figured that if I want to get away with this, I should go through the company accounts not her personal accounts. That way the blame will fall on the people in the accounting and finance departments. I already identified the weak links in that department and they will have to take the fall. Not willingly of course. But it is what it is.

My pulse begins to pick up—not the rush from before, not that intoxicating sense of power. This feels different. Tighter. Colder. Real. I glance at her office again just as the door opens.

Astrid steps out, heels clicking against the floor, posture straight, expression unreadable as ever. She doesn't look in my direction as she walks past, already scanning something on her tablet. Unaffected and unaware. For now. I don't know for how long, but I pray it lasts for a few months. I need to plan my exit after this.

After bypassing all the security systems, which wasn't hard because I used one of the workers' log in details, I initiate the transfer. A smaller amount this time. Not fifteen, but five million. I have to test the waters. I impatiently wait for the system to process the transaction. Fuck! It needs an OTP. An

OTP that was sent to someone's email. Shit! Shit! This wasn't supposed to happen.

'Calm down, Sabelo. You are smarter than this,' my brain consoles me.

I take a deep breath and hack into Mo's phone. I used his details, so the email must be with him and I hope he hasn't seen it. He is in the meeting with Astrid. It doesn't take long to get into his phone. He hasn't seen the email. I copy the OTP and delete the email on his side. I type the OTP and the system starts processing.

One second. Two. Three— and then a sound cuts through the office.

My blood runs cold. It's a sound of a notification but not from my computer. It's somewhere in the office. I look at the computer again, the transaction is still processing. It's taking forever and I'm getting anxious.

"Hey Astrid," the receptionist's voice cuts through my unease. "I wanted to confirm—"

Maybe I'm hearing things. Astrid is not supposed to be back yet. I freeze as her heels click against the floor. I glance at the screen again and it's still loading. Beads of sweat form under my collar as both Astrid and Mo head towards my office. Every muscle in my body locks as I stare at the screen, the transaction is still loading.

"Sabelo," says Astrid as they walk into my office.

"Boss lady," I force a smile.

"I need you to have a look at something—"

Just then the transaction completes and Mo's phone beeps. I quickly wipe the notification on his phone and log out of the bank App.

“Sabelo!” Astrid taps on the shoulder.

“Sorry, I have been trying to make sense of these numbers. You were saying?”

“No, it's fine. Let me leave you to finish that. Come to me when you are done.”

“Sure, give me fifteen.”

“Something strange just happened,” Mo announces, stopping Astrid in her tracks and I freeze.

“What happened?” I ask, hoping that my voice is controlled.

“My phone beeped, there was a notification from the bank but it's gone now,” he says.

“Have Lesedi look into it. You know she can access every gadget in this building,” says Astrid and I feel my body getting cold despite the office being warm. How did I miss that?

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CHAPTER 33

SABELO

I didn't sleep a wink. I lay on my back the entire night, staring at the ceiling, replaying every second from yesterday like I could undo it if I thought about it long enough. The notification. Mo's voice. Astrid stops mid-step. Lesedi. My heart is thudding against my chest. I'm feeling jumpy but trying to keep my cool. Everything and it is still weighing heavily on my chest.

I close my eyes and exhale slowly. My chest feels tight, like something is sitting on it, refusing to move. I've been here before. Not like this, but close enough to recognise the feeling. It's pressure. The kind that threatens to tear you apart while forcing you to hold it all together. The difference is, before, I thrived under it. Now, it feels like it's waiting for me to slip. And the feeling is scary.

I get out of bed before the alarm rings. Nomvula stirs beside me but doesn't wake up. For a moment, I just stand there, looking at her. She looks so peaceful and safe. I promised her a good life. I promised to take care of her. I promised to never let her feel alone...

A lump forms in my throat, I look away. I shouldn't get emotional, not now. Not today.

The office is quieter than usual when I walk in. Not the normal morning quiet. This one feels heavy. Like everyone is holding their breath.

“Morning, bhuti,” Nontobeko says softly.

“Morning.”

She doesn't try to start a conversation today and that's good. I'm not in the mood for any chit chat today.

I sit down and power up my machines. My fingers move before my mind can catch up. Logging in. Access points. Entry trails. I go through everything again, more carefully this time. I must have missed something yesterday. No system just beeps for nothing. That notification that I couldn't figure out meant something. It might have been a warning even.

I retrace my every step. Mo's login. The OTP. The deletion. It's all clean, too clean and that's the problem. There must be something that a tech genius can find. No job leaves a clean trail like this, there is always something. I pause and stare at the screen. Then it hits me. Background sync! A quiet process that is automatic and invisible unless you know where to look.

“Shit!” I cuss under my breath.

I move quickly now, digging into the back end. There it is. A shadow of the activity. Not the full transaction, but enough to raise questions. Enough for Lesedi to dig further. There's nothing one can do about background sync. It's something that is always there, waiting for someone to find it. My jaw tightens as I isolate it, reroute it, corrupt just enough data to make it look like a system glitch tied to multiple users. This

way nothing will point back to me. For now. I lean back in my chair, my heart pounding and my mind races. I need to find a way out of this.

“Everyone in the boardroom. Now.” Astrid’s voice cuts through the office like a blade. No greetings. No smiles. Just control. Her element, something she thrives in it.

We all gather quickly. I take my usual seat, two chairs away from her. Mo sits across from me. He looks uneasy and keeps checking his phone.

Astrid stands at the head of the table, tablet in hand. She doesn’t look angry or alarmed.

“There was an irregularity in one of our systems yesterday,” she says, her tone calm but firm. “A glitch that should not have happened considering how full proof out systems are.” Silence. No one breathes or even cough. “We are treating this as a serious breach,” she continues. “Lesedi is already looking into it. Please check your systems and see if any information is missing or corrupted.”

My eyes flicker toward Lesedi. She’s sitting quietly in the corner, her laptop open, fingers moving slowly. She doesn’t look up. She doesn’t look like someone who is with us in this room. That’s not a good sign, she is concentrating and might find something sooner than I thought.

“If you know anything,” Astrid adds, “now would be a good time to speak. There are sites that one of you might have logged in and corrupted our system.” No one says a word. Of course not. Astrid nods once, like she expected that. “Alright. Then we proceed formally.”

Her eyes move across the room. For a second, they rest on me. My heart pumps even harder.

“Sabelo, do you think you can lend us to expertise?”

“Me...me?”

“Of course. You are good at this, I trust you to help us. Help me.”

“Okay. I will work with Lesedi and see what's wrong. I will send you an invoice,” I joke. “This is beyond my pay grade.”

Everyone laughs.

“Just find out what happened,” she says with a thin, controlled smile.

“Sure.”

“I have to be in court, can I be excused?” asks.

“Oh, yes, sure. You are all dismissed,” says Astrid.

By the time I leave the office, my head is pounding, but at least I'm still free. That has to mean something. I love the IT industry. I love finding things, I enjoy working under such pressure but this time it's different. This time I am the culprit and instead of working to find the culprit, I'm working to make sure that the culprit doesn't get caught.

Nomvula is in the kitchen when I get home. The smell of food fills the space, warm and familiar. Normal. I stand by the door and watch her as she dances to soft music that is playing through a small speaker that she bought for Junior. She is so lost in the song that she even dances along. A memory of Anele walking barefoot in our kitchen and the smell of lamb

stew filling the room crosses my mind. I try to shake it off but it stays. She would drag me into the stage of our little kitchen and force me to dance with her. I'm a bad dancer, but she didn't mind me stepping on her toes. Her laugh would fill our small kitchen and my world would be complete.

"You're late," Nomvula says, not turning around and bringing me back to where I am.

"Work, babe. It was hectic," I step closer to her and kiss her on the cheek.

"Hmm," she still doesn't look at me. Something in her tone makes me pause. I drop my bag slowly and forget about my struggles for a minute. My woman doesn't look okay.

"You okay?" I ask. She turns then and my stomach drops. She's not angry. She's not even sad. She's shaken or defeated is the right word?

"What did you do, Sabelo?" she asks quietly. My heart stops.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't do that," she says, shaking her head. "Please don't lie to me."

I force a small laugh. "Nomvula—"

"I saw it," the words land like a slap on my face. My throat goes dry.

"Saw what?"

She steps closer, her eyes searching for mine.

"Your desktop," she says. "You left it open."

Silence stretches between us. I feel it now. There is a shift in her energy and it's making me scared. So scared my

stomach churns. Is this the moment when everything starts to fall apart.

“It’s not what you think,” I say so quickly I almost choke on my breath.

“Then explain it to me,” she says, her voice trembling. “Explain the accounts. The money. The transfers.”

I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out. Her face crumples slightly.

“Oh my God...” she whispers. “You did it.”

“It’s complicated—”

“You stole it,” she cuts in, her voice rising. “Sabelo, you stole that money.”

“Lower your voice,” I snap, stepping closer.

She takes a step back.

“From your boss?” she continues, panic creeping in. “Do you even understand what you’ve done? People go to jail for this. For years.”

“I have it under control.”

“Control?” she lets out a hollow laugh. “There’s an investigation at your office!”

My chest tightens.

“How do you know—”

“I’m not stupid,” she says. “Something has been off with you since yesterday. And then I see that on your desktop?” She shakes her head, backing away from me. “This is not you,” she says. “This is not the man I fell in love with—”

“It is me,” I say sharply. “Babe, it’s me. You know it’s me and you love me. I love you.”

The words hang in the air. We both hear them. We both feel them but no one dares to move or say anything. Her eyes fill with tears.

“Then I don’t know you,” she whispers, tears now flowing down her cheeks.

“Babe—”

“Don’t touch me!” she screams. Silence fills the room. Heavy and suffocating. “I can’t be part of this,” she says after a moment. “I won’t.”

My heart starts racing. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you need to fix this,” she says. “You need to go back there and tell the truth.”

My stomach drops.

“No.”

“Yes,” she insists. “Before it gets worse.”

“It’s already done.”

“Then you make it right!”

“You don’t understand—”

“No, you don’t understand!” she snaps. “This will destroy everything. You, me, Junior, everything!”

Her voice breaks on his name and something inside me snaps with it. Jail. I am going to jail. I’m going to lose everything.

“No! No one is going to the police,” I say, my voice low.

She stares at me for a moment, as if daring me. “I am,” she says. The words echo in my head over and over again.

I shake my head slowly. “Nomvula, please don’t do this.”

“I have to,” she says, tears streaming down her face. “This is bigger than us. You have to account for what you have done. You are lawyer, you help the law jail bad people—”

“I’m not a bad person! I helped you. I helped you, babe. I fought for you—”

“Did... did you kill your wife for money, Sabelo?”

“What?”

“Did you kill Anele?”

Something cold settles in my chest.

“You’re accusing me of killing my wife? The woman I still love to date?” I ask.

“I’m asking you a question!”

Wrong answer. Everything after that happens too fast. Or maybe too slow. I’m not sure which is which. I reach for her, she tries pull away.

“Let go of me, Sabelo—”

Her voice cut off and a sound of a thud follows just before silence settles in. The silence is too thick and unnatural. I follow the scent on blood and there Nomvula is, lying still on the floor and a pool of blood forming around her head.

“Nomvula,” my voice comes out as a whisper. She still lies on the floor. Still. I step back, my hands shaking. “No...” I whisper.

My chest heaves as I stare at her. I wait for something. A movement or maybe a cough, just something. Nothing comes. A ringing fills my ears. This wasn’t supposed to happen.

“Think, Sabelo, think!”

“Knock, knock,” Astrid’s voice fills the air. My entire world freezes. “The door was open,” she says and I blink rapidly trying to figure out if I’m dreaming or this is all real.

“Sabelo,” she whispers as her eyes land on Nomvula. “Tell me this is not what I think it is?”

*

EPILOGUE

Dear Astrid,

I don't know if I should thank you for what you did for me or just hide my face in shame until I die. I can never thank you enough for what you did for me five years ago. I managed to skip the country, I got all the money but I haven't known peace ever since.

I see her every second of my life, Astrid. I can't do anything without her popping out of nowhere. I'm scared and I'm afraid I now look like a madman. I thought maybe finding David and killing him would help me but I still feel the same, crappy. I have everything I need here but I don't feel at peace. I don't feel content and I am definitely not happy to wake up to the sea view every morning. The three beasts in that garage make me nauseous. All the excitement I had about cars is gone. I have girls wanting me, but I can't even get a hard on.

I have all the money I ever wanted, but... but I feel so empty. I didn't know that having nothing to lose feels like this. I used to have it all, Astrid, but I threw all that away because of my anger and greed. I hate myself every single day for it.

Thank you for ensuring that my Nomvula is laid to rest in a dignified manner. Thank you for visiting her on my behalf and thank you for the flowers you always take to her every time you visit. Thank you for taking care of my son and his mother. I owe you my life, Astrid. I don't know what I would have done without you.

I'm tempted to ask how my sister Ndalo is doing but I know that will only break my heart even further. I got your message that my mother's heart couldn't take what I did and she slept forever. Guilt is eating me up and I don't know for how long I can hold on. I'm tired, Astrid. I just want to rest, but I keep wondering if I will ever find my peace. Do you think there's peace after death?

Let me stop blabbering now. How is the team? How are you holding up at work? I hope I didn't ruin the way you see and trust people. I can assure that the team is good, man. I know I have told you this before but I didn't mean to hurt you. I was just fighting my demons and they won. I'm sorry, man.

I don't know if I can keep sending these letters, but I just want to let you know that I appreciate you and everything that you did and are still doing for me. My last wish for you is that you find a good man who will love and appreciate you the way you deserve.

But before I stop writing, I want to assure you one last time. I didn't kill Anele, I loved her too much to do that to her. With Nomvula, I didn't mean to. I panicked and it all happened too fast before I could control my emotions.

As for David, I enjoyed squeezing life out of that motherfucker. He will know not to mess with people in his next life. I wish I could say I regret it. But I don't know what that says about me.

*With love and lots of regrets,
Sabelo M.*

Astrid wipes a stray tear off her face. She stares at the message long and hard. Her lips quiver, tears burn her eyes. She looks up, trying to hide the tears. Trying to fight the emotions deep inside her. For five years now, she has questioned her decisions. Wondered if she did the right thing by letting Sabelo escape. Now and then Nomvula's picture haunts her. She visits her not because she cares, but because she is trying to ease her guilt. She wonders if the sacrifice was worth it.

She lost a valuable employee, someone who was like a brother to her. A brother who never measured her value by the money she gave him. A brother who saw her for her. A brother who didn't find it weird to buy street food, sit next to the road and enjoy the food. Sabelo made her life feel normal. Nothing with him felt like a routine just as things are with her family. In her family, everything has to be perfect. Calculated. It all feels like too much work and it's draining her.

But she can endure that. At least she knows that she did one good thing in her life. She saved the life of the one person who has always had her back. It came at a cost, but it's a cost that she's willing to bear. Hopefully, Sabelo changes his life for the better...

“Boss lady!” Michael storms into his office.

“What's going on?” says Astrid wiping her face and hiding her sadness behind seriousness.

“It's Sabelo, he handed himself to the police—”

With the letter still in her hand, Astrid freezes. Colour drains from her face and despite the lip gloss on her lips, her lips become dry.

“W..what?”

“He is in the news.”

‘God damn it, Sabelo! After everything I did for you?’
Astrid cusses under her breath.

“Wait, you knew where he was, didn't you?”

“No, I didn't. I told you that I found Nomvula on the floor and the door was open. I didn't see Sabelo that day and I haven't seen or heard from him.”

She lies. She knows exactly what Sabelo did and she herself helped Sabelo to move the money he stole to an offshore account.

“Are you not going to find a lawyer for him?”

“No, let him pay for his sins.”

Silence settles between them. They both have a lot to say but some things are better off left unspoken. Time will reveal the meaning and significance of everything that happened.

Astrid says nothing. She stands and walks towards the window. She looks outside, the city stretching endlessly beneath her, alive in a way she no longer feels. Somewhere out there, Sabelo is no longer running. Somewhere, he has finally stopped. She exhales slowly, her reflection staring back at her—composed, controlled, unchanged yet carrying everything. For a long moment, she simply stands there, suspended between guilt and relief, between loyalty and truth. And then, quietly, almost as if she's saying it to herself more

than anyone else, she whispers, “Some scores follow you wherever you go, you don’t walk away from.”

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THE END

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