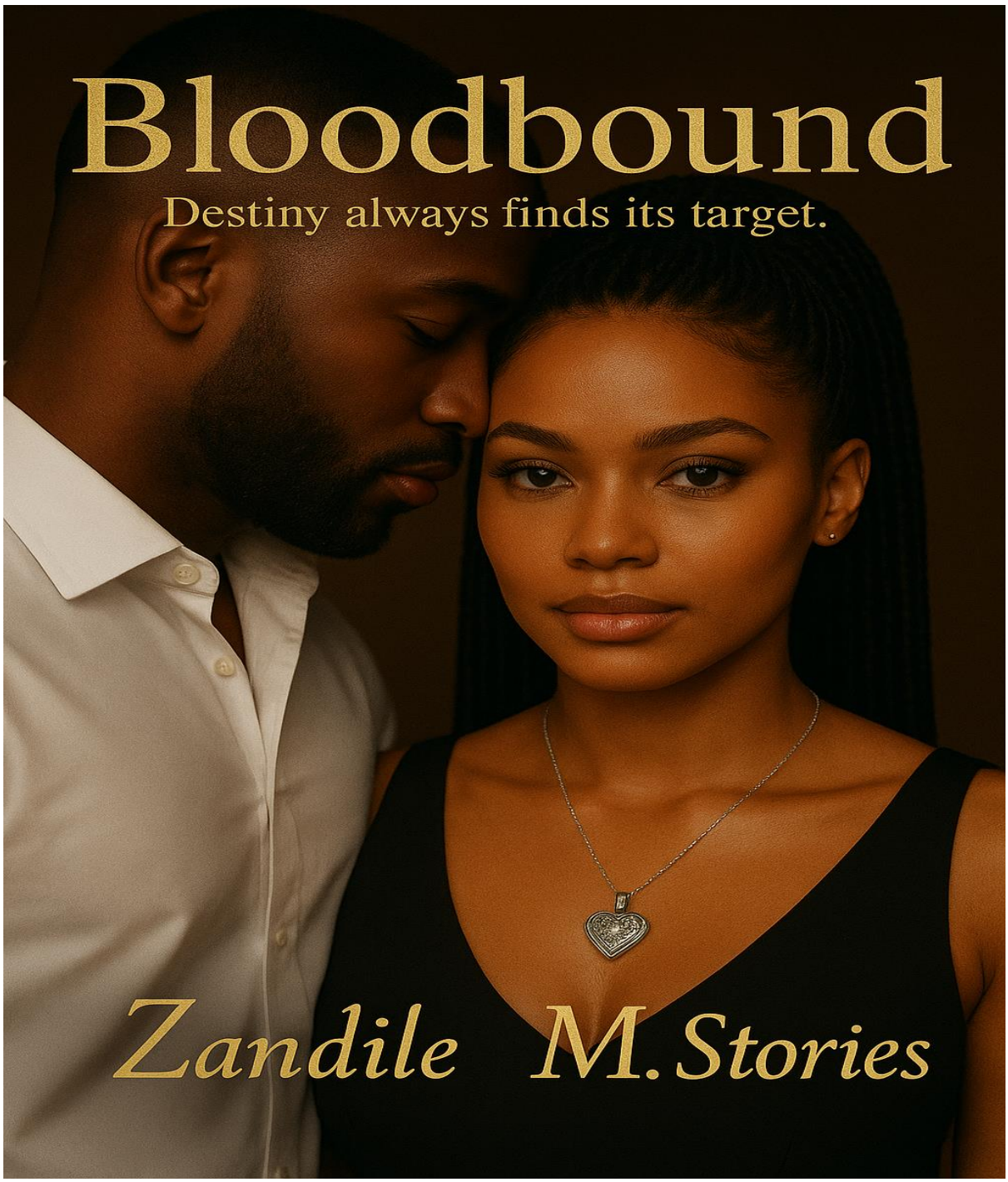
BLOODBOUND BY ZANDILE M STORIES



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Prologue

I've had this dream before.

Not the exact same one, but close enough that when I wake up, there's always this strange sense of déjà vu, like I've already lived it.

In the dream, I'm on stage. The lights are so bright I can't see the audience, but I can feel them. My heart is racing, but it's not fear. It's something else. Something electric.

The music begins, and I start counting in my head to start dancing on cue and not mess up. Right at that moment, I hear footsteps. I can feel him getting closer. My breathing changes. My hands are sweating.

He walks into the light.

I'm so eager to see his face, but I can never see it clearly. It's like trying to look at the sun and every time I focus, the details slip away. But I know him. God, I

know him. The way you know someone in dreams, with a certainty that defies logic.

He's tall, with broad shoulders and an expensive suit that fits like it was made for him and it probably was. There's power in the way he moves, like the world rearranges itself to accommodate him.

He stops in front of me, and even though I can't see his eyes, I feel them. Dark, intense, looking at me like I'm the only person who exists.

"Ntombi," he says. His voice sounds so good. I've never heard such a lovely voice in my life. The way he says my name, I don't think my name has ever sounded like that before.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

I nod. I can't seem to find my voice.

"You know I want to hear you say it," he says.

In the dream, I always say yes. Even though something whispers that I shouldn't. But somehow, I know he'll never harm me or let anything bad happen to me.

He reaches for my hand, and the moment our skin touches, the stage disappears. We're somewhere else, somewhere dark, with soft music playing in the background. His hand is on my waist, pulling me close.

"I've been waiting for you," he whispers against my ear.

And then I wake up.

Every single time, I wake up with my heart pounding and his voice still echoing in my head. I wake up reaching for someone who doesn't exist.

Bonolo says it's just stress. That my subconscious is creating some rich fantasy man because my real dating life is a disaster. She's probably right.

But here's the thing: each time I have the dream, I remember a little more. His hands, he has iziphandla (traditional wristband) on both wrists and a small ‘M’

tattoo on his ring finger. The scar just above his left eyebrow. The way he smells like expensive cologne, and his aura is so dark.

It's just a dream.

It has to be.

Because men like him, men who move through the world like they own it, who wear power like a second skin, who look at you like you're both the answer and the question, men like him don't exist in my world.

Something flutters in my chest. Hope, maybe? Or fate laughing at me.

I don't believe in signs. But if I did…

Chapter 1

Ntombi

“Auditions are going to start at 7 am and run until 6 pm, at The Playhouse Company in Durban. See you there!”

I blink at my phone, still half-asleep, I just woke up and I'm watching this video sent on our Performing Arts group chat. Lizzy just shared it with us. Oh my God, I love her so much right now for not gatekeeping! I still have a whole month to prepare, that part excites me. But reality: how was I even going to show up? I know my manager; she’s going to reject my leave before I even finish the sentence. Working at a call centre is draining, suffocating even, but what can I say? I need the job.

My name is Ntombi Khumalo, 24, Drama graduate. Two years out of university and still chasing the dream,

Theatre, TV, Film… anywhere I could perform and feel alive. I am more passionate about theatre performance; even though the money is… well, almost non-existent, I truly love it.

The group chat survived since first year We kept it to share audition opportunities.

Snap!

Look at the time.

I am LATE!

I can’t afford to be even two minutes late; I need that commission. I’m literally in survival mode.

Me: Mgani, he’s taking me on a date this Saturday. I can’t wait!!

Bonolo: O sure mara. Not that I'm saying don't go, just… he looks like a player to me.

Typical Bonolo. Always suspicious. Always right.

BEEP! BEEP!
The hooter outside yanked me back into reality.

Me: Babe, we'll talk at lunch, neh? I have to go. Sharp.

That's my lift club and I'm so late! I snatch my bag, didn't even think about packing lunch. Every night I promise myself I'll pack it. Every night I break the promise. Your girl is tired, okay? Tired on a spiritual level.

I can't believe I'll be buying from that expensive cafeteria. I don't understand why it's so expensive. I mean, we earn peanuts, but they charge us like the food was made with Jesus' blood. "Forgive me, Lord," I muttered while locking the door.

Anyway, that was Bonolo on the phone, my best friend. We met when I moved to Durban, and we've been tight ever since She never approved of the guys I dated.
Not one.
And the painful part? She was always right.

I’m such a lover girl though. I can’t help it. I believe there’s someone out there for me. Someone who won’t waste my time. Someone who will choose me.

I whisper a quick prayer, pull the door shut behind me, and sprint to the car waiting outside.

7:50 am

I arrive just ten minutes before my shift begins. I hurry to my locker, drop my phone and handbag inside, grab my water bottle, lock up, and rush to my cubicle and log into the system just as the clock hit 8:00 am.

I can’t focus. My mind keeps circling the same thing: **How am I going to ask my manager for leave?**

I think of doing it after my tea break, but my mind keeps spiraling. What if she says no? What if she asks too many questions? Maybe I should just not pitch for work that day and explain later. That can work, right?

No. The money. I need the money. If I don’t show up, I'll lose a day's pay, maybe worse. I really need to put on my best acting face right now and convince her to agree.

Ten more minutes to tea, Then I’ll face the monster.

It’s lunchtime, I made three sales. My head is pounding from the headset, and the rudeness of some customers didn’t help. You already know what happened. I still haven’t spoken to my manager.

I panicked. Again.

I open the audition video and watch it for maybe the tenth time. *The Playhouse.* My chest is tightening. I want this so badly. It feels like my chance. Maybe my only chance.

“Are you okay?”

I blink and realize I've been staring into space. Themba is standing in front of me.

Themba - the guy I’m supposed to go on a date with. Our tech guy. Cute, funny, and honestly? Patient. He’s been trying his luck for months, and I finally agreed to give him a chance.

Me: Oh…hi, Themba. I’ll see you…
I snatch my things in a rush.
I’m going to the manager. By fire, by force she’ll grant me that leave.

Themba: I bought us lunch, where are you rushing to? Ntombi!

“I’ll explain later!” I call back, already halfway across the floor.

He’ll have to forgive me.
This is a matter of life and death.

I am standing at the manager’s door and I am just realizing what I did.

Here goes nothing.

Chapter 2

Ntombi

Knock! Knock!

Mrs Naidoo: Come in.

She sounds happy today. I might be lucky. I open the door and close it slowly behind me, trying to control my breathing. She's having her lunch, a good sign. People are always nicer when they're eating.

Me: Good day, Mrs Naidoo.

Mrs Naidoo: Ntombi, right? How are you? And aren't you supposed to be on lunch?

Me: Yes, I am. I just wanted to talk to you before my lunch ends. I'd like to take leave. The second Monday of next month.

Mrs Naidoo: Oh, okay. No problem. But you know how it works, first come, first serve. Let me check how

many people have been approved for that day, then we'll see from there.

She's already clicking on the computer, pulling up the system. My heart hammers against my ribs. Please, please, please let no one else have requested that day.

Mrs Naidoo: Wow, look at that. You're the first to request that day. Lucky you. So you're only requesting one day?

Me: Yes. Only Monday.

Mrs Naidoo: Perfect. Not a problem. Just make sure you log it on your system, and I'll approve it. Is that all?

Me: Yes. Thank you.

I stand there, frozen. Wait... is she sure? What's happening? Did she confuse me with someone else? Oh my God, maybe she's dying and wants to do good deeds before her departure. No, no. Let me confirm before I leave.

Me: Mrs Naidoo... are you okay? Like, sick maybe? And do you see me? You can clearly see who you're talking to, right? My name is Ntombi Khumalo.

Mrs Naidoo: Why? What's wrong? Am I supposed to be sick? And of course I know you.

She's looking at me like I've lost my mind. Which, fair. But at least she's not dying, shame.

Me: I heard there's a new sickness going around, and people are getting infected. I saw it on TikTok. Anyway, bye!

I'm out the door before she can respond. I don't give her a chance to ask questions or change her mind.

Wait. What just happened?

I got my leave.

Yes! Yes! Yes!

I'm jumping in the hallway, fist-pumping the air like I've just won the lottery.

Themba: Ntombi...

I freeze. Themba.

He's standing by the water cooler, arms crossed, and he looks mad. But damn, he's super cute when he's mad, jaw tight, eyebrows drawn together. I quickly smooth down my shirt and try to look composed. How long has he been standing there?

Me: Themba, I, uh... okay, so I was rushing to Mrs Naidoo because I needed to ask for leave, and it really stressed me out. I'm sorry for leaving like that.

I see his face relax, the tension melting from his shoulders.

Themba: Mhmm. (He's smiling now) Here's your lunch. I don't know if you'll still be able to eat, though. Your lunch break is almost over.

Awww. My chest does a little flutter.

Me: Thank you so much, Themba. I'll just eat it after work. I know I'll be hungry.

I take the lunch from him, and our fingers brush. He doesn't pull away immediately.

Me: Lunch is on me tomorrow, neh?

Themba: There's no need for that, love. It's all good.

Love?

When did we get there?

Me: I'll cook. I don't mind, really.

I do mind. I'm just feeling bad for ditching him like that. But the word is already out there, hanging between us.

Themba: Sure. See you then.

We part ways, and I head back to my cubicle, clutching the lunch bag like it's treasure. I log into my system, put

in my leave request, and watch as Mrs Naidoo's approval pops up almost immediately.

It's official.

I'm going to that audition.

I'm going to The Playhouse.

And maybe, just maybe, my life is about to change.

NARRATED

Somewhere in Umhlanga

In the boardroom, twelve men are sitting around the table. They're all watching him. Waiting. No one dares to speak first.

He sits at the head of the table.

Man 1: We had an agreement

Him: And you broke it.

His voice is quiet. Controlled.

Man 1: I can explain.

Him: I don't want explanations. I want results.

The man shrinks in his seat. Everyone else at the table suddenly finds their phones very interesting.

Him: You have 48 hours. If I don't see what I'm owed, we'll have a very different conversation.

It's not a threat. It's a promise.

The meeting ends and everyone leaves the boardroom. Leaving him still inside.

Only one person remains. His brother.

Brother: You're getting soft.

He doesn't respond. Just stands and walks toward his office

He loosens his tie and pours himself a whiskey.

He opens the top drawer of his desk.

Inside, tucked beneath contracts and legal documents, is a small piece of paper. Worn at the edges. Folded and unfolded so many times it's starting to tear.

He unfolds it carefully.

A drawing. Rough, sketched in pencil during a sleepless 3 a.m. A woman's face. He can never see her clearly in the dreams, but when he wakes, he remembers just enough to put pen to paper. Her eyes. The curve of her smile. The way she looked at him like he was just a man, not a monster.

His hand trembles, just slightly. The only crack in his armour.

Brother: That dream again?

He doesn't turn around. Doesn't acknowledge the question.

Brother: You need to stop this. She's not real.

Still nothing. Just his thumb tracing the lines of her face on the paper.

Brother: You're obsessing over a ghost.

Him: Get out.

His voice is quite, lethal.

The brother hesitates, then leaves. The door clicks shut.

He's alone now. Just him and the drawing and the weight of a name he doesn't know but somehow can't forget.

He folds the paper carefully. Tucks it back into the drawer. Locks it.

But he knows he'll be back.

He always comes back.

Because somewhere out there, she's real. She has to be.

Chapter 3

Ntombi

It's the month of the audition, and tomorrow is the big day. The day that could change everything.

I've been rehearsing and practicing for weeks now. Every spare moment, before work, during lunch breaks, late at night when I should be sleeping. I run through my monologues in the shower, practice my movements in the tiny space between my bed and the wall. I feel ready. I have to be ready.

And Themba?

Well, Themba and I are... okay, I guess.

We did go on that date, and it was amazing. He took me to a nice restaurant on the beachfront, nothing too fancy, but nice enough that I felt special. We laughed. We talked. But we haven't given our thing a title yet.

He's been great, though. If you see us together, you'd think we're dating. I mean, we do everything people who are dating do, the calls, the lunch dates, the way he touches the small of my back when we walk. But no one has said "I love you." No "Can you please be my girlfriend?"

So I'm just going with the flow. We'll see where it goes, right?

It's Sunday. I was supposed to be with Themba today, but I can't get hold of him. He loves doing these disappearing acts of his, and it makes me not trust him. But because I don't know what we are, I can't be mad at him. I guess.

Every time I try to ask him about us, I get scared. I'm scared of what he might say. I'm very scared of being hurt.

Door opens!

"HELLOOO, LOVER DOLL!"

Me: Gosh, Bonolo! What's your problem with knocking, mara? And what's with all the noise?

She bursts in like she owns the place, which, let's be honest, she basically does. She comes straight to my single bed and flops down dramatically.

I stay in a one-room at a township near work. It's small but it's mine. The walls are painted a soft cream color, nothing fancy, but I've tried to make it cozy. My single bed sits against one wall with a white throw blanket Bonolo bought me for my birthday. There's a small wardrobe squeezed into the corner. My tiny kitchenette consists of a two-plate stove, a bar fridge, and a microwave balanced on a wooden counter that's seen better days. I have a small table with two mismatched chairs where I eat my meals and practice my scripts. On the wall above my bed, I've stuck up pictures, me, and Bonolo, my parents, my graduation photo, a poster from a play I did in university. The window overlooks the street, and I can hear everything, taxis hooting,

neighbors arguing, children playing. It's not much, but the rent is affordable on my call center salary, and it's only a fifteen-minute drive from work.

Bonolo: What? It's not like I'll find you with a man doing some silly things, you know...

She winks at me.

I laugh hard, throwing a pillow at her.

Me: Don't be too sure. Anyways, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be with Mr. D?

Mr. D is her boyfriend. We call him Mr. D because his name is Daniel. We love giving people nicknames, it's become our thing. It's actually funny when I think of all the people we've renamed over the years.

Bonolo: No, my love. I'm sleeping over. We're going together to the audition tomorrow. I want to make sure I'm there for support.

I jump on the bed and hug her, kissing her all over her face until she's laughing and pushing me away.

Me: Girl, don't make me cry. Thank you so much. This means a lot. Themba said he'll come as well. I guess we'll leave with him. He said he'll pick me up.

Bonolo's face changes.

Bonolo: Girl, please. That man won't show up. Trust me. Mr. D will take us. He already said he'll come support you. Don't stress about Themba.

Me: Haibo, Bonolo! Why are you so sure? He'll come.

Bonolo: Friend, I love you, and I never lie to you. You know that. I came here today without even asking if you're home or not. Do you know why?

Realisation hits me. Yeah. I'm a fool.

Me: Yeah... because you knew you'd find me here.

Bonolo: Exactly! You told me you'd be with Themba today, but I knew he'd disappear. That's what he's been doing. That man gives me weird vibes, Ntombi.

I sink down onto the bed next to her.

Me: I guess you were right. He is a player. Imagine, there's still no title, but he calls me "love" and "baby." I was hoping he was different.

Bonolo: Hey, don't think about that Chihuahua. Focus your energy on tomorrow, okay? We are nailing that audition.

She's right. Tomorrow is what matters. Not Themba and his disappearing acts. Not my confusing almost-relationship. Tomorrow, I step onto that stage at The Playhouse, and I show them what I'm made of.

Chapter 4

Narratted

The Mthethwa house sits on a hill in Umhlanga, overlooking the ocean. It's big, the kind of house that makes people stare when they drive past.

Tonight, the dining room is warm. The table is set and the food smells amazing. It's Sunday dinner, a tradition their mother insists on, no matter how busy everyone gets.

Baba Mthethwa sits at the head of the table. Next to him is Mama Mthethwa, elegant and sharp. She doesn't miss anything.

The Mthethwa children fill the rest of the table.

Zakhile sits at the other end, across from his father. The firstborn. The heir. Perfectly still, his plate barely touched. He's here, but his mind is somewhere else.

Next to him is Lizwi, the second son. He's scrolling through his phone while he eats, charming and reckless. Always getting into trouble but somehow always getting out of it too.

Njabulo sits across from Lizwi. The third son, quieter than his brothers but just as sharp. He's the one who keeps the peace in the family, the mediator.

Then there's Vuyiswa, the first daughter. She's elegant like their mother, works in the family business, and always has something clever to say.

And finally, Okuhle. The baby of the family at twenty-two, full of energy and dreams that don't fit into the family business. Right now, she's talking nonstop, her hands moving as she speaks.

Okuhle: And we've had over two hundred people register for the auditions! Can you believe it? Two hundred! The Playhouse is going to be packed tomorrow.

Mama Mthethwa: That's wonderful, my baby. You've worked so hard for this.

Okuhle: I know! And the choreography is insane, Mama. You're going to love it. I've been working with this amazing dancer from Joburg, and we created something really special.

Baba Mthethwa: We're very proud of you, Okuhle. It takes courage to pursue the arts.

He says it like he wishes she'd chosen something else, but he loves her too much to say it.

Okuhle: Thank you, Baba. (She looks around the table) You're all coming tomorrow, right?

Lizwi: Of course. Wouldn't miss it.

Njabulo: I'll be there. Wouldn't want to miss your big day, sis.

Vuyiswa: (Smiling) I've already cleared my schedule. Someone has to make sure these boys behave.

Okuhle: You better not be lying, Lizwi. Last time you said you'd come to my showcase, you showed up two hours late smelling like whiskey.

Lizwi: (Grinning) I was there, wasn't I?

Okuhle rolls her eyes and turns to the one person who hasn't said a word all evening.

Okuhle: Khehla...

Zakhile doesn't look up. He's cutting his food slowly, each movement controlled.

Okuhle: Zakhile.

Still nothing.

Okuhle: *Bhuti!*

Finally, he lifts his eyes. Dark and unreadable.

Zakhile: What.

It's not a question. It's a warning.

But Okuhle doesn't scare easily, especially not of her big brother.

Okuhle: You're coming tomorrow. To the auditions.

Zakhile: No.

Okuhle: Khehla, please

Zakhile: I said no, Okuhle. I have work.

Okuhle: You always have work! This is important to me.

Zakhile: And my work isn't?

Njabulo: Come on, Khehla. It's just a few hours.

Lizwi: (Muttering) Here we go...

Mama Mthethwa: Zakhile. Don't be difficult.

Zakhile's jaw tightens, but he says nothing. He knows better than to argue with his mother at her table.

Okuhle pushes her chair back and walks over to him. She stands beside his chair with her arms crossed,

looking down at him with those big eyes that have gotten her everything she's ever wanted since she was five.

Okuhle: This is my first real production, Khehla. My first time directing and choreographing something this big. The whole family is coming. Even Gogo said she's coming. Everyone except you.

Zakhile: Gogo is retired. I'm not.

Okuhle: You're also not a robot, even though you pretend to be one.

Lizwi snorts into his wine glass.

Okuhle: Please, Khehla. Just for a few hours. You don't even have to stay for the whole thing, just come see the auditions. Support me. That's all I'm asking.

She's using her baby sister voice now. The one that works every single time.

Zakhile stares at his plate. His hand tightens around his fork.

Baba Mthethwa: Son. Your sister has worked very hard. Surely you can spare a few hours.

Zakhile doesn't answer. The silence stretches on.

Finally, he exhales slowly.

Zakhile: What time.

Okuhle's face lights up.

Okuhle: Really?! You'll come?!

Zakhile: What. Time.

Okuhle: Seven a.m.! The auditions start at seven and go until six, but you can come whenever

Zakhile: I'll be there at seven.

Okuhle squeals and throws her arms around his neck from behind, kissing his cheek.

Okuhle: Thank you, thank you, thank you! You're the best big brother ever!

Zakhile: (Stiff) Don't push it.

But there's a hint of softness in his voice. So slight that only someone who knows him well would catch it.

Lizwi: Wow. She actually got you to agree. What's next, you're going to start smiling in public?

Zakhile: Careful, Lizwi.

Lizwi raises his hands in surrender, grinning.

Mama Mthethwa: That's settled then. We'll all be there to support Okuhle. It's going to be a beautiful day.

Okuhle bounces back to her seat, already talking about the auditions again. Her excitement fills the room.

But Zakhile has already retreated back into himself. His face is unreadable again.

He lifts his wine glass and takes a slow sip.

Tomorrow. The Playhouse. Seven a.m.

He doesn't know why, but something about tomorrow feels different. Like something is about to shift.

He shakes off the thought.

It's just another day. Just another obligation. Just a few hours to keep his sister happy.

That's all.

Later that night, alone in his office, Zakhile opens the drawer.

The drawing is still there. Folded and worn.

He stares at it for a long time, tracing the lines of her face with his eyes.

“I wonder if you are real, or I am losing my mind. Why did the dreams come back now why torture me again.”

He folds it carefully and puts it back.

Chapter 5

Ntombi

It's 6 a.m. and we're ready to go. Just waiting for Mr. D. We have to be there early because it's going to be packed. I feel so positive, like something good is about to happen to me.

Bonolo: He's one minute away. How are you feeling?

Me: I'm nervous but excited at the same time. Just hoping for the best.

Bonolo: You got this. Don't worry.

Her phone rings. That's Daniel for sure. I get up to grab my stuff.

Bonolo: He's here. Let's go.

We lock the door and Mr. D is waiting outside. We get into his car. He drives such a nice car. A black Mercedes-Benz C-Class. He's doing well for himself. My friend got herself a catch. How she managed to

secure a white guy, I'll never tell you. I don't know either. But they love each other and are very happy. He'll marry her, I'm telling you. And he's such a sweet guy.

Me: Hi, Mr. D. Unjani? (How are you)

He laughs.

Daniel: Ngiyaphila, Ntombi. Wena unjani? (I am good, Ntombi. How are you?)

He amazes me with how fluent he is in Zulu and Sesotho.

Me: I'm well. Thank you so much for coming to support me. I really appreciate it.

Daniel: Not a problem. Bonolo talks about how much you love this craft. It's not easy, but once the door opens, make sure to use every advantage and opportunity you see.

Me: Wow, I didn't know you're a motivator as well.

We laugh.

Daniel: I'm serious, njalo!

Me: Yes, sir! Thank you so much.

Fifteen minutes later, we're here. It's so packed. The queue goes all the way to the street, so long. I'm probably going to be number 100. He parks the car and we go stand in the queue.

Daniel: Okay, guys, let me go get us coffee. I'll be back. Need anything else?

Bonolo: Please get us muffins as well, love.

They share a kiss and off he goes to the petrol station nearby.

Me: You got a real one, friend. He's such a gentleman.

Bonolo: Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve him. He's so perfect. I feel so lucky.

Me: Manje, mengathi uya kushata? (And if he asks you to marry him?) Are you ready to be white?

We laugh.

Bonolo: Hayi, suka. I would be happy for real. I won't even hesitate. His family is lovely as well, so I wouldn't mind being "white."

We laugh again.

Narrated

The auditions started at exactly 7 a.m.

By the time the doors opened, there were over two hundred people in line. The queue snaked around the block, filled with hopeful performers clutching their audition papers and rehearsing lines under their breath.

Inside The Playhouse, the atmosphere was electric.

The stage lights were on. The judges sat in the front row, three of them, clipboards in hand, faces

professional and unreadable. Behind them, in the middle section of the theatre, sat the Mthethwa family.

Okuhle was on the edge of her seat, buzzing with excitement. This was her production. Her vision. Her dream coming to life.

Next to her sat Vuyiswa, elegant and composed. Njabulo was on his phone but paying attention. Lizwi was half-asleep, nursing a hangover. Mama and Baba Mthethwa sat further back, proud but reserved.

And then there was Zakhile.

He sat at the end of the row, arms crossed, face completely blank. He looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. He checked his watch twice in the first thirty minutes.

Okuhle kept glancing at him, hoping he'd show some interest. But he was a statue. Cold. Detached.

One by one, performers took the stage.

Some were good. Some were terrible. Some were so nervous they forgot their lines halfway through. Okuhle made notes, whispered to the judges, gave feedback. She was professional, kind, but firm.

Zakhile didn't care. He sat there, staring at nothing, counting down the minutes until he could leave.

Until number 97.

"Next, Ntombi Khumalo!"

A young woman walked onto the stage.

She was nervous, you could see it in the way she clutched her paper, the way she took a breath before stepping into the light. But the moment she opened her mouth, something shifted.

She was good. No, she was incredible.

Her voice filled the theatre. Her movements were natural, fluid, like she was born to be on that stage. She

wasn't just performing; she was living it. Every word, every emotion, every gesture felt real.

Okuhle sat up straighter. Her eyes went wide.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

Vuyiswa leaned over. "She's talented."

"She's perfect," Okuhle breathed.

Even Lizwi woke up, watching with interest now.

But it was Zakhile who couldn't look away.

His entire body went still. His eyes locked on her like she was the only person in the room.

He knew that face.

He'd seen it a thousand times. In his dreams. In the drawing folded in his desk drawer. In the moments between sleep and waking when he couldn't tell what was real anymore.

It was her.

His heart slammed against his ribs. His hands gripped the armrests of his chair.

She moved across the stage, and he followed her with his eyes, unable to blink, unable to breathe.

How?

How was she real?

Okuhle noticed. She glanced at her brother and saw something she'd never seen before. Zakhile completely and utterly transfixed.

"Khehla?" she whispered.

He didn't answer. Didn't even hear her.

Ntombi finished her monologue. The theatre was silent for a beat.

Then Okuhle started clapping. The judges followed. The rest of the family joined in.

Ntombi smiled, relief flooding her face. She bowed slightly and stepped off the stage.

Okuhle immediately turned to one of the judges and whispered urgently. The judge nodded.

"Miss Khumalo?" the judge called out. "Please wait in the makeup room. We'd like to speak with you."

Ntombi's eyes went wide. She nodded quickly and was led offstage by one of the assistants.

Okuhle was already on her feet.

"I'll be right back," she said, rushing toward the side door.

Zakhile watched her go. Then he stood up.

"Where are you going?" Lizwi asked.

Zakhile didn't answer. He just walked out.

Chapter 6

Makeup Room

Ntombi

I seat in the small room, hands shaking. My heart is racing. Did I mess up? Did they hate it? Why did they ask me to stay?

The door open.

A young woman walks in, glowing with excitement.

Okuhle: Hi! I'm Okuhle Mthethwa. I'm the director and choreographer of this production.

I stand up quickly.

Me: Oh! Hi. I'm Ntombi

Okuhle: I know who you are. And I have to tell you. You were incredible. Like, seriously incredible.

My breath catches.

Me: Really?

Okuhle: Really. I want you in this play. I'm offering you the lead role. Right now.

My legs almost give out.

Me: What?

Okuhle laughs.

Okuhle: I know it's fast, but I know talent when I see it. You're exactly what I've been looking for. Please say yes.

I can't speak. I just nod, tears filling my eyes.

Me: Yes. Yes, I'll do it.

Okuhle squeals and hugs me.

Okuhle: This is amazing! Okay, we need to exchange contact details. Rehearsals start next week. I'll send you the script and the schedule.

We exchange numbers, both of us talking excitedly.

I can't believe I'm here in the same room with the director and choreographer of the show. This is crazy. She's busy talking about how excited she is and how this is her first big show. She sounds so happy. Looking at her, I can tell she's Art. Her sense of style says it all, colorful, bold and creative.

Okuhle: This is going to be big, I tell you. You know what? I think we should go out for coffee sometime. I'd like us to go through a few things.

Wait, what now?

I smile.

Me: Sure, that would be great.

She gets up.

Okuhle: Well, Ntombi, it was lovely meeting you. I'll definitely be in touch.

I get up and we move toward the door.

Me: Nice meeting you too. Than…

She opens the door, and a man is standing there. Like he was about to open the door as well. I didn't even finish what I was saying. My world literally comes to a standstill. Time seems to have stopped.

I'm looking into his eyes. Dark and intense, just like the man in my dreams. His aura is the same, just how it is in the dream. I feel like I know him. He's not making things easy for me, he's looking at me like he's searching for something.

Okuhle: Khehla! What are you doing here? Is everything alright?

Oh, she knows him. "Khehla", that's his name? She sounds shocked to see him here. This Khehla guy says nothing. His eyes are still fixed on me. Okay, I'm getting uncomfortable now from his stare. I look down and clear my throat.

Okuhle: Bhuti? Uhm, Ntombi, this is my brother Zakhile. And bhuti, this is Ntombi. I'm sure you saw her

amazing performance. We were heading out right now. I have to go back; did you need anything?

She's still holding the door. And the brother? Well, seems like he won't speak. He moves, giving us space to pass.

"What's wrong with him?"

Okuhle bursts out laughing.

Okuhle: Oh my God, you said that out loud! Don't worry, I get that a lot. My brother is... well, he's complicated. We literally call him "The Robot" at home. He's always been like that, serious, quiet, intense.

I feel my face getting hot. I can't believe I said that out loud.

Me: I'm so sorry, I didn't mean…

Okuhle: No, no, it's fine! Trust me, we all think he needs to loosen up. He's been worse lately, actually. I don't know what's going on with him.

She glances back toward the hallway where Zakhile disappeared, a slight frown crossing her face.

Okuhle: But enough about my weird brother. I really have to get back to the auditions. There are still so many people to see. But I'll message you tonight with all the details, okay?

Me: Yes, please. And thank you so much again for this opportunity.

She gives me a quick hug.

Okuhle: You earned it, girl. Your talent speaks for itself. I'll see you at rehearsals!

She rushes back inside, and I stand there for a moment, trying to shake off this weird feeling. Those eyes. That intensity. Why do they feel so familiar?

I need to find Bonolo and Daniel. I start walking toward the parking lot, scanning the crowd.

"Ntombi."

That voice. I know that voice. I've heard it a hundred times in the dream. What is happening? My heart is pounding so hard I can barely breathe. I turn, and there he is, standing on the stairs.

He comes down slowly, each step deliberate. He stops right in front of me, so close I can smell his cologne, expensive, dark, exactly like in the dreams. He's tall, and I have to look up to meet his eyes. Those eyes. Dark and intense, looking at me like I'm the only person in the world.

My hands start trembling. This can't be real.

Zakhile: You're beautiful.

His voice is low, almost a whisper, but it goes straight through me. My breath catches in my throat.

Me: Thanks. Is there something I can help you with? Is Okuhle asking for me?

I'm trying to sound normal, but my voice comes out shaky. He takes another step closer. Too close. I can feel the heat from his body.

Zakhile: I've been looking for you.

What? What does that even mean? We just met. But the way he says it... it's like he means something else. Something deeper.

Me: I... I don't understand

"Baby, there you are. Kunini ngikufuna." (I’ve been looking for you)

Themba's voice cuts through the moment like a knife. I turn, and he's walking toward us fast. Relief and confusion hit me at the same time.

Me: Themba? When did you get here?

Themba doesn't answer right away. He reaches me and immediately puts his arm around my waist, pulling me

against him. Hard. Possessive. His eyes are fixed on Zakhile.

Themba: I've been looking for you everywhere. How did it go?

Me: It went amazing! I got the lead role!

Themba: That's my girl! I knew you'd kill it.

He kisses my cheek, but it feels forced. Like he's marking territory. I feel Zakhile's eyes burning into us. When I glance at him, his face is completely blank, but his jaw is tight. His hands are clenched into fists at his sides.

He looks at Zakhile, extends his hand for a hand shake.

Themba: Hey, man. I'm Themba. Her boyfriend.

Wait. Boyfriend? Since when?

Zakhile doesn't even look at Themba's hand. Doesn't acknowledge him at all. His eyes stay locked on mine. It's like Themba doesn't even exist to him.

The silence stretches. Awkward. Tense.

Themba drops his hand, his smile fading. He looks uncomfortable now, shifting his weight.

Themba: I said I'm Themba. And you are?

Still nothing. Zakhile's gaze doesn't waver from my face. He takes a step closer, completely ignoring Themba. I feel Themba's grip on my waist tighten.

Zakhile is still looking only at me.

Zakhile: Your performance was unforgettable.

His voice is soft but there's something underneath it. Something dark and possessive and dangerous. The way he says "unforgettable", it's not about the audition. It's about me.

My skin prickles and my heart won't stop racing.

Me: Thank you.

It comes out as barely a whisper.

He's staring at me like he's trying to figure something out. Like he's searching for an answer in my face. It's unsettling. But also... I can't look away.

Themba: Okay, bro, I don't know what your deal is, but we need to go.

He cuts in, is annoyed now.

Zakhile takes another step closer. So close now I can see a small scar above his left eyebrow. My breath catches. That scar...

No. It can't be.

Zakhile: I'll be seeing you again, Ntombi.

It's not a question. It's a promise. A warning.

Themba finally manages to pull me away. I stumble slightly, and he steadies me, walking me quickly toward the parking lot. But I can't help it, I look back.

Zakhile is still standing there. He hasn't moved. His eyes follow me, dark and unrelenting, until we turn the corner and I can't see him anymore.

But I can still feel him. Like he's branded onto my skin.

Themba is breathing hard, angry.

Themba: Who the hell was that guy?

Me: Okuhle's brother. The director's brother.

Themba: He was looking at you like…like he owns you or something. What was that about?

I don't answer. My mind is spinning. That scar. His eyes. His voice. The way he looked at me like he knew me.

It's just a coincidence. It has to be.

He stops and turns to face me.

Themba: Ntombi. Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost.

Me: I'm fine. I'm just... it's been a long day.

He softens slightly.

Themba: Okay. Let's find Bonolo and get you home, yeah?

I nod. But as we walk, my mind won't stop racing.

Zakhile Mthethwa.

Why does he feel so familiar?

And why do I feel like everything just changed?

Narrated

Zakhile watched her walk away with that boy's arm around her waist.

His chest tightened. His hands were still clenched into fists.

She was real. She was here. And she was with someone else.

Lizwi appeared beside him, grinning.

Lizwi: Well, well, well. The robot has feelings after all.

Zakhile: Shut up.

Lizwi: You looked like you wanted to kill that guy. Who is she?

Zakhile didn't answer. He just turned and walked back inside.

But his mind was racing.

Chapter 7

Ntombi

Everything that happened today is just weird. I hate feeling like this.

Themba wanted me to go with him after the audition, but I said no. Flat out. No explanation, just no. He can't just disappear whenever he feels like it and then come back calling me his "girlfriend" in front of strangers like we've had that conversation. No. It's not okay. I am not a playground, and he's not about to play me.

I decide to grab lunch with Bonolo and Daniel instead. They insist it's a celebration. But honestly? I can barely think straight.

We're at this nice restaurant on Florida Road. Bonolo is talking a mile a minute, barely stopping to chew her food. She's so excited she's practically vibrating.

Bonolo: Girl, you don't say! She just gave you the role right there and then?! No call back, no "we'll let you

know", just BOOM, you're the lead?! This is insane! I can't believe this!

Me: I know, right? I still can't believe it.

She suddenly stops, fork mid-air.

Bonolo: Babe, are you okay?

Me: What? Yeah, I'm fine.

Bonolo: Ntombi. You look like you've seen a ghost. You haven't even touched your food. This is literally what you've been dreaming about for years, and you're sitting there like someone died. What's going on?

I sigh so hard.

Me: I am happy. I swear I am. It's just... something else happened today. And it's freaking me the hell out.

Bonolo puts down her fork immediately. Her whole face changes, concern mixed with that detective look she gets when she knows there's tea to spill.

Bonolo: Okay. Okay. We're not doing this here. (She waves for the waiter) Let's get takeaways and go to your place. Baby I think we need to go now. We'll celebrate properly this weekend.

Daniel doesn't even question it. He just nods, signals for the bill, and pays. That's why I love him for her. He gets it.

The drive back to my place feels like forever. I'm staring out the window, watching Durban pass by in a blur, but all I can see are those eyes.

We get to my place and Mr. D drops us off. He gives Bonolo a kiss and tells me congratulations before driving away.

Inside, I kick off my shoes and throw myself on the bed. My phone buzzes. Again. Themba. He's been calling nonstop since we left The Playhouse. I don't even look at it.

Bonolo sits on the bed next to me, arms crossed, giving me The Look.

Bonolo: Alright. Spill. Now.

Me: Can I at least breathe first?

Bonolo: No. Talk.

I laugh despite myself. This girl.

Me: Okay, fine. Remember the dreams I've been having?

Bonolo: The rich man dreams? The one with the mysterious guy you can never see properly? Yeah, what about them?

Me: They're back. Or…no, wait. It's worse than that.

She leans forward.

Bonolo: Worse how?

I sit up, pulling my knees to my chest.

Me: So, Okuhle the director, calls me to the makeup room, right? To offer me the role. We're talking, everything's great, I'm literally on cloud nine. Then we're leaving the room, and there's this man standing right outside the door.

Bonolo: Okay...?

Me: Her brother. And Bonolo (I grab her arm) his eyes. His EYES. They looked exactly like the man in my dreams. Exactly. Same intensity, same... I don't even know how to explain it. I felt like I knew him. Like I've known him forever.

Bonolo's mouth drops open.

Bonolo: Wait. Wait, wait, wait. You're telling me…

Me: And he was just staring at me! Like, full-on staring. Not blinking. Not saying anything. Just... staring. It was creepy but also, God, I sound crazy, but also it felt... right? Like he was supposed to be looking at me like that?

Bonolo: Oh my God.

Me: Then when I go outside to look for you guys, he follows me. He calls my name "Ntombi" and Bonolo, his VOICE. (I close my eyes) His voice is exactly the same as in the dreams. Deep and smooth and…

She grabs my shoulders.

Bonolo: Ntombi! Are you telling me the man from your dreams is REAL?!

Me: I don't know! Maybe? And when he got closer, I saw it. The scar. Above his left eyebrow. The same one I've been seeing in my dreams for months!

Bonolo lets out a sound that's half scream, half gasp. She jumps off the bed.

Bonolo: SHUT UP! Shut up right now! You're lying!

Me: I'm not lying! I swear on everything!

She is pacing now.

Bonolo: Okay, okay. This is, this is insane. Like, actually insane. What did he say to you? What happened?

Me: He said, "I've been looking for you." Just like that. "I've been looking for you." What does that even mean?! We've never met before!

Bonolo stops pacing and stares at me.

Bonolo: Unless... you HAVE met before. In the dreams. Both of you.

We stare at each other. The weight of that possibility sits heavy in the room.

Me: That's impossible.

Bonolo: Is it though? Because you just described a man you've never met in real life down to the scar on his face!

I drop my head into my hands.

Me: I don't know what's happening. And it gets worse.

Bonolo: How could it possibly get worse?!

Me: Themba showed up.

Bonolo: Oh no.

Me: Oh yes. Right in the middle of... whatever that was. Zakhile is standing there, staring at me like I'm the only person in the world, and then Themba comes out of nowhere, puts his arm around me, and calls me his GIRLFRIEND. In front of him!

Bonolo: (Wincing) Yoh.

Me: And you know what Zakhile did? Nothing. He didn't even look at Themba. Didn't shake his hand. Didn't acknowledge him at all. He just kept staring at me. The whole time. It was (I fan myself) it was intense.

Bonolo sits back down, eyes wide.

Bonolo: So what you're telling me is... this man, this rich, mysterious, dangerous-looking man, completely ignored your not-boyfriend to focus entirely on you?

Me: Yes.

Bonolo: And you felt it. The connection.

Me: (Quietly) Yes.

Bonolo: And now you can't stop thinking about him.

I don't answer. I don't have to.

Bonolo: Holy shit, Ntombi. This is, this is like a movie. Like, an actual Nollywood romance movie.

I laugh, but it comes out shaky.

Me: I'm scared, Nolo. The way he looked at me... it felt like he already knew me. Like he's been waiting for me. And I don't know him! But also, I feel like I do. Deep down. How is that possible?

Bonolo reaches over and squeezes my hand.

Bonolo: I don't know, friend. But maybe and hear me out maybe there's a reason for all of this. The dreams. The audition. His sister choosing you. Maybe it's all connected.

Me: You sound like one of those spiritual aunties on TikTok.

Bonolo: (Laughing) I'm serious! Think about it. What did Mr. D say earlier? "Grab every advantage and opportunity." This is your big break. The role, the production, all of it. Maybe the universe is just... doing its thing. And if this ‘dream’ guy is part of that

Me: I need to focus on my career, not some mysterious man who may or may not be invading my dreams.

Bonolo: Okay, but what if he's both? What if…

My phone rings..

Me: It's probably Themba again.

Bonolo: Check.

I grab my phone. Unknown number.

Me: It's not Themba.

I answer annoyed, thinking its Themba calling with another number.

Me: Themba, what the hell, bro? Yini inkinga yakho kahle kahle? (what’s your problem?)

Silence.

Then

"Is it a bad time?"

That voice.

Oh my God. That VOICE.

My entire body goes still. I can't breathe. I can't move. I mouth to Bonolo: *It's him.*

Bonolo's eyes go so wide I think they might fall out. She scrambles closer, pressing her ear near the phone.

Me: Uhm... hi. Who is this?

I am trying to sound calm but failing.

My heart is pounding so loud I'm sure he can hear it through the phone.

"I just wanted to say good night."

His voice is low. Smooth. Intimate. Like we've had this conversation a thousand times before.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps.

Me: Tell me who you are first. And where did you get my number?

"I think you already know, Ntombi."

The way he says my name, slow, deliberate, like he's tasting it, makes my stomach flip.

"Good night."

Me: Wait

Tu! Tu! Tu!

He hangs up.

I stare at the phone, my mouth open.

Bonolo: WHAT DID HE SAY?! I couldn't hear!

Me: He…he said… he said good night. That's it. He called just to say good night!

Im still in shook.

Bonolo: WHAT?! That's so…that's, oh my God, that's so romantic!

Me: Romantic?! It's creepy! How did he get my number?!

Bonolo: Probably from Okuhle. They're siblings. She has your number. It's not that deep.

Me: Not that deep?! Bonolo, he called me just to say good night! We don't even know each other!

Bonolo: (Grinning) Girl, that man is INTERESTED. Like, capital I-N-T-E-R-E-S-T-E-D. He's thinking about you. He wanted to hear your voice before bed.

Me: Stop.

Bonolo: You stop! You're blushing!

Me: I am not!

But I can feel my face heating up. Damn it.

My phone beeps. A text.

I grab it so fast I nearly drop it.

But it's from Themba.

'What did I do, Ntombi? Why are you ignoring my calls?'

All the excitement drains out of me. Themba. The guy I'm supposed to be dealing with.

I type back: *'We'll talk tomorrow at lunch.'*

Bonolo: Let me guess. Themba?

Me: Yeah.

Bonolo: And you were hoping it was Zakhile.

Me: No.

Bonolo: Liar.

I throw a pillow at her. She catches it, laughing.

Bonolo: Okay but seriously, what are you going to do? About Themba?

Me: End it. Whatever "it" even is. I can't keep doing this half-in, half-out thing with him. It's not fair to either of us.

Bonolo: Good. He's been playing games anyway. You deserve better.

Me: Do I though?

Bonolo: Yes. You do. And I know you're scared about this Zakhile thing, but friend. I've never seen you like this. Ever. Not with any guy. You're shook. And that means something.

I don't know what to say to that.

We change into our pajamas and climb into my single bed. Somehow, we both fit, like always.

Bonolo lives in Musgrave in a nice one-bedroom apartment. She's doing well for herself, finance, corporate life, the whole thing. But whenever she crashes here, we share this tiny bed like we're back in university.

She's my person. My sister. The one who knows all my secrets and still chooses to love me.

I turn off the light, but I can't sleep.

All I can hear is his voice: *"I think you already know, Ntombi."*

All I can see are his eyes. All I can feel is this pull, this undeniable, terrifying pull toward a man I don't know.

Chapter 8

Zakhile

My name is Zakhile Mthethwa. I'm thirty-two years old.

To most people, I'm the eldest son of the Mthethwa empire. The heir to Mthethwa Oils. one of the largest oil companies in South Africa. Legitimate. Powerful. Respected.

But that's only half the truth.

The other half? The part the public doesn't see? That's where the real power lies. Import and export. Shipments that don't appear on any official manifests. Business deals made in the dark, sealed with blood instead of signatures. I control ports, routes, people. I've built an empire in the shadows, one that's just as powerful as the one that bears our name.

I don't apologize for it. This is the world I was born into. The world my father built and passed down to me.

I protect my family. I protect our interests. And I do whatever it takes to stay on top.

People fear me. They should.

I've never cared about much beyond business, power, and family. I've never needed to. Women come and go, transactions, arrangements, brief distractions. I've never felt anything real. Never wanted to.

Until her.

Until Ntombi.

I stare at her name on my phone after hanging up.

Ntombi Khumalo.

The feeling I have inside is something I've never felt before. I don't know how to describe it. It's like everything that's been empty is suddenly full. Like I've been searching for something my whole life and just found it.

I want to hear her voice again. Why did I even hang up?

I can't sleep. I know I won't be able to sleep. Not until I see her again.

I scroll through my contacts and call Nathi.

Two rings and he picks up.

Nathi: Sure, boss.

Me: Exe, Nathi. I need you to get an address for me. Now. Ntombi Khumalo. I'll send her picture now. And get me every information you can find.

Nathi: Sure, sure. Ngamla. Sharp.

Ten minutes later, he sends me an address. I know he'll send everything else once he finds it.

I'm going to her. Right now. I have to see her face again.

I open the drawer and take out the drawing. I stare at it one more time, her face, the one I've been sketching for months. I fold it carefully and put it in my pocket.

I don't know why I'm taking it with me. But it feels right.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm outside her gate.

It's late, almost midnight. The street is quiet. Her place is small, tucked in a township neighborhood. One room. Humble. So different from my world.

But it doesn't matter. None of that matters.

I take a breath and call her.

She answers after a few rings. Her voice is groggy, soft.

"Hello?"

Her voice sounds sexy when she's sleepy. I just woke her up.

"Hello?"

Me: Ntombi.

Silence. Only breathing. I can hear shuffling on the other end.

Ntombi: Zakhile...

Why does my name sound so good when she says it? The way it rolls off her tongue, like she's been saying it her whole life.

Me: Can I see you? Now.

Ntombi: Did you see the time, Zakhile? I'm sleeping

Me: I'm outside. Please come.

Ntombi: What do you mean outside?

I see the lights come on in one of the rooms. A curtain moves opens, closes quickly.

She hangs up.

I step out of the car and lean against the door, waiting. My heart is pounding, something that never happens. I'm always in control. Always calm.

But not with her.

Narrated

The door opens slowly.

Ntombi steps out, wrapped in an oversized hoodie and sweatpants, her hair tied up in a messy bun. She looks beautiful. No makeup. No pretense. Just her.

She stops when she sees him standing there, leaning against a sleek black Maserati Quattroporte, arms crossed, eyes locked on her.

The streetlight casts shadows across his face, but she can see him clearly.

He's wearing black jeans and a simple black T-shirt that fits perfectly across his chest and arms. The iziphandla on both wrists catch the light. He looks expensive. Powerful. And completely out of place in her neighborhood.

But he doesn't look uncomfortable. He looks like he belongs wherever he decides to be.

She whispers harshly as she approaches.

Ntombi: Are you insane? It's almost midnight!

Zakhile doesn't respond. He just watches her walk toward him, his eyes never leaving her face.

When she's close enough, he straightens up.

Zakhile: I needed to see you.

Ntombi: You saw me today. At the audition. Remember?

Zakhile: That wasn't enough.

His voice is low, quiet. But there's weight behind it. Certainty.

Ntombi crosses her arms, trying to look annoyed. But her heart is racing. She can feel it in her throat.

Ntombi: How did you even get my address?

Zakhile: Does it matter?

Ntombi: Yes! That's creepy, Zakhile. You can't just

Zakhile: Get in the car.

Ntombi: What?

Zakhile: Please. Just for a few minutes. I need to talk to you.

She should say no. She should go back inside. Lock the door.

But instead, she finds herself nodding.

Zakhile opens the passenger door for her. She slides in.

The interior is stunning. Black leather seats, soft and buttery. The dashboard glows with subtle blue lights. Everything smells new, leather, cologne. The kind of car she's only seen in movies.

Zakhile gets in on the driver's side and closes the door. The silence wraps around them, heavy and thick.

He doesn't start the car. Just sits there, hands on the steering wheel, staring straight ahead.

Ntombi: (Breaking the silence) Why are you here, Zakhile?

Zakhile: I told you. I needed to see you.

Ntombi: Why?

He finally turns to look at her. And his eyes make her breath catch.

Zakhile: Because I can't stop thinking about you.

Her heart skips.

Ntombi: We just met today.

Zakhile: No. We didn't.

Ntombi: What?

He leans closer

Zakhile: You know what I'm talking about, Ntombi. I see it in your eyes. You feel it too.

She does. God, she does. But she's not ready to admit it.

Ntombi: I don't know what you're talking about.

He smiles, a knowing smile.

Zakhile: Liar.

The word hangs between them.

Ntombi looks away, her hands fidgeting in her lap.

Ntombi: This is crazy. You're crazy.

Zakhile: Maybe. But you're here. You came out. You got in my car. So what does that make you?

She doesn't have an answer for that.

She changes the subject.

Ntombi: Do you... do you have a tattoo? An M? On your ring finger?

Zakhile's eyes sharpen. He stares at her for a long moment.

Zakhile: Why are you asking me that?

Ntombi: Just answer the question.

Slowly, Zakhile lifts his left hand. He holds it between them, palm down.

There, on his ring finger, is a tattoo. A simple, elegant letter M. Black ink. Bold and beautiful.

Ntombi's world tilts.

She's seen that tattoo before. In her dreams. So many times. On his hand. When he reached for her. When they danced.

Her hand moves on its own, reaching out. Her fingers hover over his hand, trembling. She touches his ring finger gently, tracing the M with her fingertip.

The moment their skin connects, electricity shoots through both of them.

Ntombi: (Whispering) How...

Zakhile: (Quietly) You've seen it before. Haven't you?

She looks up at him, tears pooling in her eyes.

Ntombi: I don't understand. How is this possible?

Zakhile: I don't know. But I've seen you too. Every night.

They stare at each other. The truth settling between them like a living thing.

Zakhile reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. He hands it to her.

Zakhile: Open it.

With shaking hands, Ntombi unfolds the paper.

It's a drawing. Pencil on worn paper. A woman's face.

Her face.

Not perfect. Not exact. But undeniably her. Her eyes. Her smile. The curve of her jaw.

Ntombi: When did you... when did you draw this?

Her voice breaking.

Zakhile: Three months ago. That’s when your face started becoming clearer. I've been drawing you ever since.

A tear slides down her cheek.

Ntombi: This doesn't make sense. None of this makes sense.

Zakhile: I know.

Ntombi: People don't just dream about each other before they meet. That's not, that's not real life.

Zakhile: And yet here we are.

She looks down at the drawing again. Her hands are shaking so badly she almost drops it.

Zakhile: Keep it.

He says gently.

Ntombi: What?

Zakhile: The drawing. Keep it.

Ntombi: Zakhile

Zakhile: Please. I want you to have it.

She stares at him. At this man who somehow knows her soul. Who's been dreaming about her. Who drove to her place at midnight just to see her face.

And for the first time in her life, Ntombi doesn't know what to do.

Ntombi: I don't know what this is. I don't know what we're doing.

Zakhile: (Voice firm) I'm not asking you to figure it all out tonight.

He turns fully toward her now, his eyes burning into hers.

Zakhile: From the moment I saw you today, everything changed. I don't know what this is either. But I'm not walking away from it. I'm not walking away from you.

Ntombi's breath hitches.

Zakhile: So take your time. Figure out your situation. But know that I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere.

The air between them crackles.

Ntombi clutches the drawing to her chest, her heart pounding so hard she thinks it might break through her ribs.

Ntombi: I should go.

Her face barely a whisperer.

Zakhile nods slowly. He gets out and walks around to open her door.

She steps out, the cool night air hitting her face.

They stand there, face to face, inches apart.

Zakhile: (Softly) Good night, Ntombi.

Ntombi: Good night, Zakhile.

She turns to walk back to her door. But halfway there, she stops and looks back.

He's still standing there. Watching her. Like he'll stand there all night if that's what it takes.

Ntombi: The drawing... it's beautiful. Thank you.

She calls out.

Zakhile: (smiling) So are you.

She smiles despite herself and hurries inside.

Zakhile watches until her light turns off. Then he gets back in his car.

He sits there for a moment, his hands gripping the steering wheel.

She has the drawing now. A piece of him. A piece of this impossible thing between them.

He starts the car and drives away.

But he knows with absolute certainty that this is only the beginning.

Ntombi leans against the closed door, the drawing pressed against her chest.

Bonolo is sitting up in bed, eyes wide.

Bonolo: Was that HIM?! Did he just…

She slides down to sit on the floor.

Ntombi: He drew me, Nolo. Before we even met. He's been dreaming about me too.

Bonolo's mouth falls open.

Bonolo: Oh my God.

Ntombi looks down at the drawing in her hands. At her own face, sketched by a man who didn't know her name but somehow knew her soul.

Ntombi: (Whispering) What's happening to me?

Bonolo gets out of bed and sits next to her on the floor, pulling her into a hug.

Bonolo: I don't know, friend. But whatever it is... it's magic.

Chapter 9

Ntombi

I'm on my way to work already. Bonolo left early as well.

I couldn't sleep last night. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw him. Those dark eyes. The M tattoo on his ring finger. The drawing he left with me, my face, sketched by his hand before we even met.

I can't stop thinking about Zakhile. He's occupying every corner of my mind. I don't know how I'm going to focus at work today.

I also need to call my mom and tell her the good news. I didn't even get a chance to call her yesterday with everything that happened.

My mom. Ahh, Ma Nxele, my father's wife, bakithi. What a superwoman.

I’m an only child. My father passed away when I was thirteen years old. That man was my everything. He made sure that even when he wasn’t around, we would be taken care of.

Before he left, he gave me a silver heart-opening pendant necklace. I wear it every day and never take it off. The pendant was never easy to open, the clasp resisted, as if it wasn’t meant to be disturbed. Over time, I learned to leave it as it was. It rests against my chest, like a promise I carry with me wherever I go.

Because of him, I was able to study what I love with the money he set aside for me. I finished my qualification and graduated. There’s still some money left, and I treat it carefully. I don’t want to misuse what he worked so hard to leave behind. Every month, I send some of it to my mom so she’s taken care of.

She renovated the house with her own money and even extended it. Now she works as a tailor from home, that’s how she makes a living. She refuses to rest. She

says tailoring keeps her busy, keeps her sane. And if she’s happy, then I’m happy too.

I arrive at work and head straight to the cafeteria to get some coffee. It's empty in the mornings. Very peaceful.

After buying my coffee, I find a quiet corner and call my mom.

"Nana."

Her voice is warm, full of love. It makes my chest tight.

Me: Sthandwa sami, unjani, Mamami?

Mom: Ngiyaphila. You sound happy.

Me: Mom, you have no idea. Guess what? I got the lead role!

She screams over the phone so loud I have to pull it away from my ear.

Mom: Hawu, Nkulunkulu wami! Siyabonga, Baba! My baby girl, this is what you've always prayed for. I am so happy for you!

Tears fill my eyes. My mom knows how much I love performing. She's the one person who's seen me grow up, who knew exactly what career I'd choose. She's never doubted me. Not once.

Me: Ngiyabonga, Mama. I'm so happy. This is a dream come true. To lead such a big theatre production, this is massive.

Mom: When are you coming home? We need to celebrate!

Me: I'll see if I can come this weekend. Maybe I'll bring Bonolo with me. Mama, let me get to work. We'll talk later, okay? I love you. Bye-bye.

We end the call, and I wipe the tears from my cheeks, smiling.

Then my phone beeps. A message pops up:

"Enjoy your day, MaMbulazi."

My heart skips. Zakhile.

I stare at the message, biting my lip to stop the smile that's threatening to take over my face. That means he's thinking of me, doesn't it?

I type back: *"Thanks. You too."*

Simple. Casual. Like my insides aren't doing backflips.

I take a sip of my coffee and head to my cubicle. Today is going to be a long day.

Zakhile

I smile reading her text.

Who knew? Just a simple text can make me, Zakhile Mthethwa, smile like an idiot.

I'm already at the office. It's early, but I couldn't stay home. Too many thoughts.

I call Lizwi and Njabulo in. I have some things to discuss with them.

Lizwi barges in without knocking. He knows how much I hate that. I'm sure he does it just to annoy me. But I'm in a good mood today, I don't have time for his nonsense.

Lizwi: Brother, I am a very busy man, okay? What do you want?

Me: Lizwi, stop with this nonsense. This is serious. Where's Njabulo?

Speaking of the devil, Njabulo walks in, closing the door behind him.

Njabulo: Good morning, bo Nyambose. What's this about, Khehla?

Straight to the point. That's Njabulo.

I lean back in my chair, my fingers steepled in front of me.

Me: I found her.

Lizwi freezes mid-sit. His eyes go wide.

Lizwi: No way!

He is shocked.

Njabulo: How? How sure are you?

How did they catch up so quickly? Ah, of course. Being in the kind of business we're in requires quick thinking. And these two? They're sharp. Fast. They're our brains.

I pull out my phone and show them two pictures. Side by side.

The drawing. And her. Ntombi.

They've seen the drawing before. I've shown it to them months ago when the dreams started getting worse. They thought I was losing it.

But now, seeing the real-life picture next to it? The resemblance is undeniable.

Lizwi leans closer.

Lizwi: Yoh. It's her. It's actually her.

Njabulo studies the pictures.

Njabulo: This is... Khehla, this is insane.

Me: I told you she was real. I could feel it. And now she's always on my mind. I can't think straight. I want her close to me.

Njabulo leans back in his chair, arms crossed, studying me.

Njabulo: Then go get her. Wait. Do you even know how to court a woman?

Lizwi snorts, trying not to laugh.

Lizwi: Khehla? Court a woman? Brother, you've never dated in your life.

I glare at him.

Me: I've had women before.

Njabulo: No. You've had transactions. Women who wanted something from you. Money, status, connections. That's not dating, Khehla. That's business.

He's not wrong. I've never been in a relationship before. Never wanted to be. Never saw the point.

But Ntombi...

Ntombi is different.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Oh man, this is going to be good. Zakhile Mthethwa. Mr. Robot himself, trying to woo a girl. I need popcorn for this.

Me: Shut up, Lizwi.

Njabulo: Khehla, listen. If you're serious about this girl, and clearly you are, you need to do this right. You can't just... bulldoze your way into her life like you do with business. Women don't work like that.

Me: I'm not bulldozing.

Lizwi: You showed up at her house at midnight. That's textbook bulldozing.

I clench my jaw. He has a point.

Njabulo: What does she do? What's her life like?

Me: She's an actress. Theatre. She just got the lead role in Okuhle's production.

Lizwi: Wait. THAT girl? The one from the auditions? The one you couldn't stop staring at?

Me: Yes.

Lizwi: (Whistling) No wonder. She's beautiful. And talented. Good taste, Khehla.

Njabulo: Does she know about... us? What we do?

Me: No.

Njabulo: (Nodding slowly) Good. Keep it that way. For now, if she's as innocent as she seems, you can't just drop that on her.

I know he's right. But the thought of keeping parts of myself hidden from her doesn't sit well with me.

Me: I'm not lying to her.

Njabulo: I'm not asking you to lie. I'm asking you to be careful. Protect her. Because if she gets involved with you, if people find out she matters to you, she becomes a target.

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

He's right. Of course he's right.

Anyone who gets close to me is in danger. That's the price of the life I've built.

But I can't walk away from her. Not now. Not ever.

Me: I'll protect her.

Lizwi: We'll protect her. That's what family does.

Njabulo nods in agreement.

Njabulo: So what's the plan?

Me: I don't know yet. I just know I need to see her again. Soon.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Well, lucky for you, she's going to be at rehearsals. With Okuhle. You have an excuse to be around.

He's not wrong.

Me: I'm not stalking her.

Lizwi: No, you're supporting your sister's production. Very different.

Njabulo: (Smirking) He's got a point.

I shake my head, but I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips.

Njabulo: Just... take it slow, Khehla. Get to know her. Let her get to know you. Don't scare her off.

Me: I won't.

Lizwi: (Laughing) Too late for that. You already showed up at her place at midnight like some kind of stalker Romeo.

I throw a pen at him. He dodges it, still laughing.

But inside, I'm already planning my next move.

There's something else. Something I need to ask them. I've never asked anyone for advice before. But this... this is different.

I clear my throat.

Me: There's something else.

Lizwi and Njabulo look at me, their smiles fading. They can hear it in my voice, this is serious.

Njabulo: What is it?

I pause. The words feel foreign on my tongue. Vulnerable.

Me: How do you know... if you're in love?

Silence.

Complete silence.

Lizwi's mouth falls open. Njabulo blinks slowly, like he's trying to process what I just said.

Lizwi: (Whispering) Did he just…

Njabulo: Shh. Let me handle this.

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, looking at me like he's trying to read my soul.

Njabulo: Khehla, are you asking me if you're in love with this girl?

Me: I'm asking how you know. What does it feel like?

Lizwi lets out a low whistle.

Lizwi: Man, you're really asking us this. Zakhile "I don't do feelings" Mthethwa is asking about love.

Me: If you're going to be useless, leave.

Lizwi raises his hands.

Lizwi: Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'm just... shocked. In a good way.

Njabulo sits back, thinking carefully before he speaks.

Njabulo: Love is different for everyone, Khehla. But I'll tell you what I know. When you're in love with someone, you think about them constantly. Not just when you're bored or lonely, all the time. They're the first person you think about when you wake up and the last person before you sleep.

I nod slowly. That's already happening.

Njabulo: You want to protect them. Not because they're weak, but because the thought of anything hurting them makes you feel like you're dying inside.

My chest tightens. Yes. That too.

Lizwi: And you smile like an idiot for no reason.

Njabulo: You start thinking about the future. Not just your future, *their* future. You want to be in it. You want

them to be in yours. You make plans around them without even realizing it.

Me: I want her close. All the time. The thought of her with someone else makes me (I clench my fists) it makes me want to destroy things.

Lizwi: (Nodding) Yeah, that's love. Or obsession. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

Njabulo: Khehla, there's a difference between loving someone and possessing them. Make sure you know which one it is.

Me: It's not possession. When I'm around her, I feel... different. Calm. Like everything makes sense for the first time in my life. When she looks at me, I feel like she sees *me*, not the Mthethwa name, not the money, not the reputation. Just me.

Njabulo and Lizwi exchange a look.

Njabulo: Then yes, Khehla. You're in love.

The words settle over me like a weight. And for the first time in my life, I don't hate the feeling of being vulnerable.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Welcome to the club, brother. It's terrifying and amazing at the same time.

Me: You're speaking from experience?

Lizwi: (Shrugging) Maybe. There's someone. But that's a conversation for another day.

Njabulo: Khehla, if you love this girl, you need to tell her. Eventually. But first, you need to earn her trust. Show her who you are, the good and the bad. Let her choose you knowing everything.

Me: And if she doesn't choose me?

The thought alone makes my chest hurt.

Njabulo: Then you let her go. Because that's what love is, wanting what's best for them, even if it's not you.

I don't like that answer. But I understand it.

Lizwi claps his hands.

Lizwi: Alright, enough of the deep stuff. Let's focus on the plan. How are you going to see her again without looking like a creep?

Me: Okuhle's rehearsals start next week.

Lizwi: Perfect. You show up, support your baby sister, and just happen to run into Ntombi. Very smooth. Very natural.

Njabulo: And in the meantime?

Me: I'll text her. Keep it light. Let her get used to me.

Lizwi: Look at you, being all strategic. I'm proud.

I stand up.

Me: Get out. Both of you. I have work to do.

They stand, but Njabulo pauses at the door.

Njabulo: Khehla?

Me: What?

Njabulo: (Smiling) I'm happy for you. You deserve this. You deserve her.

I don't know how to respond to that, so I just nod.

They leave, and I'm alone in my office again.

I pull out my phone and look at her text.

"Thanks. You too."

Simple. Short. But it's from her.

I save her number under a different name: *Ma Mbulazi*.

My queen.

Because that's what she is. Even if she doesn't know it yet.

I lean back in my chair, a small smile on my face.

Ntombi Khumalo.

I'm in love with you.

Chapter 10

Ntombi

I'm having lunch with Themba at work. I just want to be straightforward with him and end whatever this is.

We're sitting in the cafeteria. He's smiling at me like everything is fine. Like he didn't disappear for days.

Me: Listen, Themba. I get it, you want an explanation for why I ignored your calls. To be honest…

He reaches across the table and holds my hands, cutting me off.

Themba: Babe, I'm sorry for going AWOL. I went out with my boys on Saturday night, you know how it is. We were just supposed to have a few drinks, but then one thing led to another. The party kept going, we moved to another spot, then another. Before I knew it, it was Sunday morning and we were still going. My phone died somewhere along the way. I think I left my

charger at home. We didn't sleep at all. Just kept the vibe going, you know?

He's talking fast now, like if he explains enough, it'll make sense.

Themba: Then Monday morning, I finally crashed at my boy's place. When I woke up, it was already afternoon. I charged my phone, saw all your messages, and I panicked. I jumped in my car and drove straight to The Playhouse because I remembered, your audition. I was looking everywhere for you. But when I found you, you were with that strange man, and I just... I don't know. I got in my head about it.

He squeezes my hands, looking at me with those puppy dog eyes.

Themba: But I'm not angry, though. You're beautiful, Ntombi. Every man would want a piece of you. I understand that. I'm just sorry I wasn't there when you needed me.

What in the hell am I listening to?

He partied for an entire weekend. Lost track of time. Let his phone die. And now he's sitting here acting like it's no big deal? Like saying "my boys" and "the vibe" is an explanation?

How come I didn't see the red flags before? This person is crazy. He is not okay.

I laugh in disbelief, shaking my head.

Me: Right. You're unbelievable, you know that?

His face changes. The puppy dog eyes disappear, replaced by confusion.

Themba: What? Babe, I said I'm sorry

Me: Yeah right. Whatever it is that we might have had, it ends today. I'm ending this thing between us. I am not your girlfriend, and I never was. We're done, Themba.

I grab my bag and stand up, but he reaches out and grabs my wrist before I can leave.

Themba: No, wait. Wait, wait, wait. Is this about Lihle? Baby, I promise you, nothing is going on between us. It was a mistake. One night. She's in the past. I swear.

Lihle?

My blood runs cold.

This man had another woman this whole time. Look at him, lying through his teeth, thinking I'd believe him. Poor Lihle, she probably has no idea either.

I yank my hand back.

Me: Let go of me. And please, stay away from me. No hard feelings.

I pull my wrist free from his grip and walk away, my heels clicking loudly on the cafeteria floor. I can feel people staring, but I don't care.

I head straight back to my cubicle, my hands shaking with anger.

This is unbelievable. Bonolo was right about him from the start. Jesus. What a complete waste of a man.

I manage to get through the rest of the day somehow. It's 5 p.m. now, and I'm finally done with my shift. I log off my system, grab my bag, and practically run out of my cubicle. I can't wait to get home. My bed is calling my name; I can literally hear it.

I'm walking toward the exit, about to pass the reception area, when I hear it.

Commotion. Giggling. High-pitched squealing.

"Oh my God, I can't believe he's here!" one of the receptionists squeals, fanning herself dramatically.

"Which one is it? They all look the same. So hot," another girl replies, craning her neck to see out the window.

"The older one. The serious one. He is so yummy. Like, I would let him ruin my life."

They burst into giggles.

Who are they going crazy about?

I push open the glass doors and step outside into the late afternoon sun.

And I freeze.

I cannot believe my eyes.

Right there, in front of the building, parked in the visitor's section like he owns the place, is Zakhile. Leaning against his sleek black Maserati, arms crossed over his chest, looking like he just stepped out of a magazine.

Were they talking about him?

Gosh, he's so hot right now. The way the sunlight hits his face. The way his fitted black shirt stretches across his chest and arms.

What is he even doing here?

And then he sees me.

His eyes lock onto mine, and everything else fades away. He pushes off the car and starts walking toward me, slow and deliberate.

My heart starts racing. My palms are sweating. I grip my bag tighter.

He's coming straight for me.

Zakhile

"Could she be that busy to get back to me? Or answer my texts?"

I mutter to myself, staring at my phone screen like it personally offended me.

I call Ntombi again. For the third time. It rings once, twice, three times... straight to voicemail.

My jaw tightens.

I call Nathi immediately.

Me: Nathi, I thought you said it's her lunch break now.

Nathi: It is, boss. I checked her work schedule twice. I'm certain she should be free right now, unless something changed.

I hang up abruptly.

Me: Nx.

I toss my phone on the desk and lean back in my chair, running a hand over my face.

What is this woman doing to me? I'm going crazy. Absolutely insane.

I've closed million-rand deals without breaking a sweat. I've stared down dangerous men without flinching. But one missed call from her, and I'm losing my mind.

Fuck it.

Let me just pick her up from work. I know what Lizwi and Njabulo said "Take it slow, don't scare her, let her breathe." But I can't. I can't function here knowing she's out there and I'm not with her. Somehow, in less than two days, she's become the most important thing in my life.

I grab my car keys and stand up.

"Michelle, I'm heading out. Call me only if there's an emergency," I say to my PA as I walk past her desk.

Michelle looks up, startled.

Michelle: Sir, you have a meeting in fifteen minutes. The Ngubenis'. They're flying back to Johannesburg tonight, they insisted on meeting today before they leave.

Me: Cancel it.

Michelle: But sir, they're already waiting in the boardroom. They've been there for ten minutes

I stop and turn to face her.

Me: I said cancel it. That's an instruction, Michelle. Not a suggestion.

Her face pales.

Michelle: Ye…yes, sir. Right away.

I see her scrambling for her phone as I walk toward the elevator.

The Ngubenis' can wait. Or they can leave. I don't care.

Right now, there's only one person I need to see.

I get to the parking lot, slide into my car, and drive straight to her workplace.

17:00 PM

I've been sitting in this car for three hours now.

Three. Hours.

Watching people come and go. Ignoring calls. Declining meetings.

And finally, it's 5 p.m.

I step out of the car and lean against the door, positioning myself where I can see the exit clearly. I'm parked right across from the main entrance, impossible to miss.

People start streaming out. The workday is over.

Women notice me immediately. I can feel their eyes, hear the whispers and giggles. Some of them slow down as they walk past, trying to catch my attention

I don't react. I'm used to this. Women throw themselves at me all the time, for my money, my name, my face. It means nothing. It's all useless noise.

The men? They're staring at my car. The Maserati always draws attention. Let them look. It's just a car.

None of it matters.

Because then I see her.

Ntombi.

She steps out of the building, bag on her shoulder, looking tired but beautiful. So beautiful it physically hurts to look at her.

My heart starts pounding. My breathing changes. How is she doing this to me? How does this one woman have so much power over me?

She hasn't seen me yet. She's looking down, probably checking her phone.

I push off the car and start walking toward her.

And then she looks up.

Our eyes meet.

She stops walking. Her eyes go wide. Shocked.

Good. I want her to know I came for her. Only her.

We meet halfway, right in the middle of the parking lot. She's just standing there, clutching her bag, staring at me like she can't quite believe I'm real.

I can see the questions in her eyes. But she's waiting for me to speak first.

Me: Hi.

Ntombi: Hi. What brings you here?

Straight to the point. I like that about her.

Me: I came to pick you up. Let's go to the car.

Her eyes widen even more. She wasn't expecting that.

Ntombi: Uhm, why, though? My lift club is already here, so I can just

Me: Let's go to the car, Ntombi.

I cut her off, my voice firm but not harsh.

She stares at me for a moment. I can see the war happening behind her eyes, should she argue? Should she question me? Should she say no?

But then she nods.

She pulls out her phone and types something quickly, probably telling her lift club she doesn't need them anymore, and then she walks with me toward the car.

I open the passenger door for her. She slides in without a word.

I walk around to the driver's side, get in, and start the engine.

We're both quiet.

The only sound is the low hum of the engine.

She's holding her bag tightly in her lap, her hands gripping the straps. She looks nervous. Tense.

Did I scare her? Did I come on too strong? Maybe my brothers were right, maybe I should have called first, asked permission, given her a choice.

But seeing her here, this close to me, sitting in my car where she belongs... it feels right. Like this is exactly where she's supposed to be.

I glance at her from the corner of my eye. She's staring straight ahead, biting her bottom lip.

I need to break this silence before she thinks I'm some kind of psycho.

Me: Are you hungry?

She jumps slightly, like she forgot I was here.

Ntombi: Yeah. I'll eat when I get home. It's not far.

Me: What would you like to eat?

Ntombi: Uhm, it's fine, really. I'll just cook something quick when I get home.

I turn to look at her briefly.

Me: MaMbulazi, can we not argue about food?

She smiles.

And just like that, the tension breaks.

God, she's breathtaking. That smile. I finally see it in person, not just in my dreams. It's real.

Ntombi: Okay. Don't judge me, though. I want so many things. I want Burger King, KFC dunked wings, some chocolate muffins, oh my God, cranberry juice, anything sweet, maybe some-

She keeps going, listing things with her fingers, counting on her hands. Her voice is animated now, excited. She's talking so fast I can barely keep up.

I chuckle, shaking my head.

She's adorable. Completely adorable. I could listen to her talk about food for hours and never get bored.

I only catch "Burger King" and "KFC" before I tune out the rest, too busy watching the way her face lights up when she talks.

I make a turn, heading toward Gateway. We'll start at Burger King and work our way through her entire list.

She wants everything? She'll get everything.

Ntombi

He came to pick me up.

To say I'm shocked would be the understatement of the century. I don't even know what to say. But somewhere deep inside, deeper than I want to admit, a part of me is so happy to see him.

This man has some kind of control over me, and I can't even explain it. He told me to get in his car, and I just... nodded. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. It's the second time this has happened, and it's insane.

He makes me weak. But it doesn't feel wrong. It feels right. Him being here, real, in front of me.

I just texted Thabo from my lift club not to wait for me. And now I'm here. Sitting in Zakhile Mthethwa's car. Again.

Eish.

I realize I've been rambling about food for way too long. He's just quietly listening, driving, one hand on the steering wheel, completely unbothered. He must think I don't have food at my place or something.

But the truth is, I'm about to start my period. That's why I'm craving everything under the sun. God, how do I even explain this to him without dying of embarrassment?

Me: (Nervous laugh) You know, it's that time of the month. The cycle. I get like this. I crave too many things at the same time during this time.

He glances at me, then back at the road. His expression is unreadable.

Zakhile: What time? What cycle?

Wait. He doesn't get it?

Me: Japan?

Him: (Frowning) You're going to Japan? When?

Oh my God. Where does this man live? Under a rock?

I laugh despite myself.

Me: I mean; I'm going on my period. We call it Japan. You know... Aunt Flo? That time of the month?

His eyes widen slightly. Just slightly. Then he clears his throat and nods, his jaw tightening.

Zakhile: Oh. I see.

There's a beat of silence. I can see the tips of his ears turning slightly red. Is Zakhile Mthethwa... embarrassed?

He clears his throat again.

Zakhile: We'll buy everything you need. Don't worry about it.

I laugh, trying to ease the tension.

Me: I'm not buying all that stuff I listed. I'll just take a few things. The economy is bad right now. I can't be spending money like that.

Zakhile: (Voice firm) Don't worry about money. You'll take everything you need. Everything.

Okay, then. I won't argue. I won't say no if he's paying. Who am I to refuse free food and snacks?

Zakhile: Is your phone working?

Me: Yes. Why?

His voice drops.

Zakhile: Why didn't you answer my calls? I was worried about you.

Wait. He called?

I pull out my phone and check. Three missed calls. All from him. My heart sinks.

Me: Oh my God, I didn't even see them. I'm so sorry. I had such a long day. Themba drama, work stress... I wasn't checking my phone properly. Is that why you came all the way here?

Zakhile: I wanted to make sure you're okay.

Me: I'm sorry for making you worry. You really didn't have to come all this way.

He looks at me for a brief moment, before turning back to the road.

Zakhile: I don't mind.

The way he says it, so simple, so certain, makes my chest feel warm.

Silence settles between us again. But this time, it's not awkward. It's... comfortable.

We arrive at Burger King, and I can't help but smile.

Narrated

They walk into Burger King together, and heads turn immediately. Zakhile's presence commands attention, tall, intimidating, expensive. Ntombi walks beside him, trying not to notice the stares.

He orders everything she mentioned. Everything. When she tries to protest, he just looks at her, and she stops talking.

After Burger King, they go to KFC. Then to a dessert shop for muffins and treats. Then to a grocery store where he insists she pick up anything else she might need, juice, snacks, chocolate, sanitary products. She's embarrassed, but he's unbothered, tossing items into the cart like it's nothing.

By the time they're done, the back seat of his car is filled with bags.

Ntombi stares at it all, shaking her head in disbelief.

Ntombi: This is too much.

Zakhile: It's not enough.

They get back in the car, and he starts driving. She assumes he's taking her home, but then his phone rings.

He glances at the screen. His jaw tightens. He answeres.

Zakhile: What.

A voice on the other end, urgent, tense.

Zakhile listens, his face hardening.

Zakhile: Where? ... I'm on my way.

He hangs up.

Ntombi: Is everything okay?

Zakhile: (Glancing at her) I need to make a stop. It won't take long.

Ntombi: Oh. Okay.

But the energy in the car has shifted. The softness is gone. Now, he's all business, cold, focused, dangerous.

He makes a call.

Zakhile: Nathi. I'm bringing her with me. Have someone meet us there.

Ntombi's eyes widen slightly. Her? Is he talking about her?

Ntombi: Zakhile, where are we going?

Zakhile: Somewhere I need to be. You'll be safe. I promise.

She doesn't know what to say. Part of her wants to demand answers. But another part, the part that trusts him even though she shouldn't, just nods.

The car speeds up.

This is different. This Zakhile, cold, focused, dangerous is different from the man who just spent an hour buying her food and snacks. His jaw is tight. His eyes are hard.

His entire body radiates tension. This is the side she hasn't seen since they met.

Chapter 11

Narrated

Lizwi, Njabulo, and Nathi are at Lizwi's house, waiting for Zakhile.

The tension in the room is thick. Lizwi is pacing up and down, checking his watch every few seconds. His jaw is tight. His hands keep clenching and unclenching.

Lizwi: Eh, Nathi. How far are they?

Njabulo is sitting on a couch, arms crossed.

Njabulo: Bafo, relax. You're going to drive us all crazy with that pacing.

Nathi checks his phone

Nathi: They're almost here. Five minutes out.

Njabulo stands up and stretches.

Njabulo: I think we should go wait in your study, Lizwi. I don't think we want Ntombi's first impression of us to

be... awkward. You know how we get when we're angry. And right now? It's not a good time for introductions.

Lizwi and Nathi exchange glances, then nod in agreement.

They walk down the hallway toward Lizwi's study A large room with dark wood furniture, leather chairs, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The kind of room where serious business happens.

Once inside, Lizwi pulls out his phone and makes a quick call.

Moments later, there's a knock on the door.

"Sir, you called for me?"

A woman stands in the doorway. Tall, beautiful, professional. Her name is Nelisiwe, but everyone calls her Nelly. She works for Lizwi, managing his household staff.

Lizwi: My brother is almost here. Make sure you meet them at the door and keep his woman company until we're done here. Understand?

Nelly's face falters for just a second. His woman?

Nelly: Not a problem, sir.

She walks out, closing the door quietly behind her.

Nathi: (Shaking his head) Really, Lizwi? Couldn't you get anyone else? It had to be her?

Lizwi: (Shrugging) What? Everyone else is not available. We can't leave the poor woman alone in the house. Besides, what Nelly had with Zakhile was just sex. No feelings. It's not that deep.

Njabulo and Nathi exchange looks but say nothing. They both know this is a bad idea.

Zakhile and Ntombi arrive a few minutes later.

The house is massive, modern and sleek. Floor-to-ceiling windows. Marble floors. Art on the walls that probably costs more than most people's salaries.

Zakhile parks the car and steps out. He walks around to Ntombi's side and opens the door for her.

She steps out, clutching her bag, looking around nervously.

Ntombi: Whose house is this?

Zakhile: My brother's.

They walk toward the front door. Before Zakhile can reach for the handle, the door opens.

And there she is.

Nelly.

Zakhile stops in his tracks. His jaw tightens immediately.

Why Nelly? Out of all people, why her?

He says nothing, but his mind is racing. She better keep her mouth shut.

Nelly's eyes widen slightly when she sees him. Then they drop to the woman standing beside him. Her expression falters. Hurt, jealousy, shock, all flashing across her face in a second before she quickly masks it with professionalism.

She clears her throat.

Nelly: Good afternoon, sir. And...

She glances at Ntombi, forcing a smile.

Nelly: ma'am.

Zakhile doesn't even acknowledge her. His voice is cold, clipped.

Zakhile: Where are they?

Nelly:The study, sir.

Zakhile turns to Ntombi, his expression softening just slightly.

Zakhile: I'm going to sort something out quickly. Are you going to be fine?

Ntombi: Yeah.

She's unsure, but what else can she say? She doesn't even know where she is or why they're here.

Ntombi: How long are you going to take, though? I have to be home. And I'm very hungry too.

He just stares at her blankly for a moment. Then, without a word, he turns and walks back outside toward the car.

Ntombi watches him, confused. Where is he going?

Nelly clears her throat, breaking the awkward silence.

Nelly: Ma'am, this way, please.

Ntombi: (Smiling) Please, just call me Ntombi. What's your name?

Nelly smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. It's strained. Forced.

Nelly: Nelisiwe. But you can call me Nelly.

They walk through the house. Past expensive furniture, designer decorations, everything pristine and perfect, until they reach the living room.

Nelly: You can sit here. Would you like anything to drink?

Before Ntombi can answer, the front door opens again.

Zakhile walks back in, holding the bags of food. Burger King and KFC, exactly what she asked for earlier.

He walks straight to them and hands the bags to Nelly.

Zakhile: (Voice firm) Please warm it up for her.

Nelly's mouth falls open slightly. She stares at him, completely dumbstruck.

This is a side of Zakhile she's never seen before. Soft. Considerate. Caring.

She only knows the cold side. The man who used her and discarded her without a second thought. The man who never looked at her the way he's looking at this woman right now.

Her chest tightens, but she forces a nod.

Nelly: Of course, sir.

She takes the bags and walks toward the kitchen, her hands trembling slightly.

Ntombi watches Zakhile, her heart doing a little flip.

Ntombi: (Smiling) Thank you so much, Nyambose.

Zakhile freezes.

Nyambose.

The way she says it. Soft, affectionate, respectful, does something to him. Something he's never felt before.

His heart is doing backflips. His chest feels tight. He wants to hear her say it again. And again. And again.

He looks at her for a long moment, just admiring her. The way she smiles. The way her eyes light up. The way she makes everything feel... lighter.

Zakhile: Let me attend to this quickly. Anything you need, ask Nelly. She'll assist you. Okay?

His voice is softer now.

Ntombi nods.

Ntombi: Okay.

He holds her gaze for a second longer, then turns and walks down the hallway toward the study.

Ntombi

I watch him disappear down the hallway, and suddenly, I feel very alone.

This house is huge. Intimidating. And I have no idea what I'm doing here.

I sit down on the couch, expensive leather, probably worth more than my entire room, and try to calm my racing heart.

What kind of "business" does Zakhile need to handle? And why did he bring me here?

A few minutes later, Nelly comes back with my food, warmed up and arranged nicely on a tray with utensils and a napkin.

Nelly: Here you go... Ntombi.

The way she says my name is cold. Detached.

Me: Thank you, Nelly.

She just nods and stands there, hovering awkwardly.

I take a bite of my burger, trying to ignore the tension.

Nelly: So... how long have you and Zakhile been together?

I almost choke on my food.

Me: (Coughing) We're not...we're not together. We just... met recently.

Nelly's eyebrows raise slightly. She looks surprised. Maybe even relieved?

Nelly: Oh. I see.

There's an awkward silence.

Nelly: Well, he's never brought a woman here before. So you must be... special.

The way she says "special" doesn't sound like a compliment.

I continue to eat in silence.

Chapter 12

Zakhile

I walk into the study, and I can already feel the tension thick in the air. The energy is wrong. Dark.

This is not good. We're screwed.

I close the door behind me and look at my brothers. Lizwi is leaning against his desk, arms crossed, jaw tight. Njabulo is standing by the window, staring out at nothing. Nathi is seated at the computer, fingers flying across the keyboard, multiple screens open in front of him.

Me: How bad is it?

Njabulo turns to face me, and I see it in his eyes. We're in deep shit.

Njabulo: Very bad.

Lizwi: Someone intercepted the Cape Town shipment. Three containers. Gone. Vanished into thin air.

My blood runs cold.

Me: What do you mean, gone?

Lizwi: I mean exactly that. The shipment left Durban port on schedule. It was supposed to arrive in Cape Town two days ago. But when our people went to collect it, the containers weren't there. No paperwork. No record. Nothing.

My voice drops dangerously low.

Me: How the fuck does an entire shipment just disappear?

Njabulo: Someone on the inside. Has to be. The only people who knew the route, the timing, the container numbers, it was a closed circle. One of our own sold us out.

I feel the rage building in my chest. Hot. Blinding.

Me: Who?

Nathi: (Not looking up from his screen) I'm working on it. Give me five minutes.

Nathi is our IT guy. Our tech genius. The man can find anything with just a few clicks on a computer. Bank accounts. Phone records. CCTV footage. Security logs. If it exists digitally, Nathi can access it. He's pulled us out of more tight spots than I can count.

Lizwi: Do we know what was in those containers?

Njabulo: Electronics. High-end. About fifteen-million-rand worth of goods. But that's not even the worst part.

My jaw tightens.

Me: What's the worst part?

Njabulo: The buyers. They're not happy. They've already paid half upfront. They're threatening to pull out of all future deals if we don't deliver by Friday.

Me: Friday? That's three days.

Lizwi: Exactly. And if we lose them, we lose the entire East Coast route. That's half our operation, Khehla.

I run a hand over my face, trying to think. Trying to stay calm. But all I want to do is find whoever did this and make them disappear.

Nathi suddenly sits up straight.

Nathi: Got it.

We all turn to him.

Nathi: The shipment was rerouted. Someone changed the delivery codes in the system two hours before it left the port. Look.

He pulls up a screen showing lines of data, timestamps, IP addresses, access logs.

Nathi: This login. Right here. It's one of our port managers. Bongani Cele.

Lizwi: (Pushing off the desk) Bongani? That bastard has been with us for five years.

Nathi: Not anymore. Look at this. Three days ago, fifty thousand rand was deposited into his account. Offshore. Untraceable sender. Then yesterday, another hundred thousand. He sold us out.

The room goes silent.

I feel the rage settle into something colder. More dangerous.

Me: Where is he now?

Nathi: His phone last pinged in Pinetown. I'm pulling up his location now.

He is typing on his computer.

Lizwi: We need to move fast. If he knows we're onto him, he'll run.

Njabulo: What about the shipment? Can we track it?

Nathi: (Nodding) I'm tracing the rerouted containers now. They were sent to a warehouse in Parow, Cape

Town. Private owner. I'll have the address in two minutes.

Me: Good. Lizwi, take a team to Pinetown. Find Bongani. Bring him to the warehouse in Umlazi. I want him alive. We need answers.

Lizwi: (Grinning darkly) With pleasure.

Me: Njabulo, you and I will handle Cape Town. We leave tonight. I want those containers back before Friday.

Njabulo: What about the buyers?

Me: Stall them. Tell them there was a logistics delay. We'll have their shipment ready by Thursday.

Njabulo nods. Nathi pulls up a final screen.

Nathi: Address confirmed. The containers are at a warehouse owned by a shell company. But I traced it back. It's registered to the Shabangu family.

My jaw tightens.

The Shabangu family. Our rivals. They've been trying to move in on our territory for months.

Me: So it's a declaration of war.

Lizwi: Looks like it.

Njabulo: If we go in guns blazing, this could turn into a bloodbath.

Me: Then we go in smart. Quiet. We get our shipment back, and we send a message. No one touches what's ours.

Nathi: I'll monitor all communication. If they make a move, I'll know.

I nod. The plan is set.

But then Lizwi leans back in his chair, crossing his arms, and I see the smirk creeping onto his face.

Lizwi: So... are we going to talk about the fact that you brought a woman here?

I freeze.

Njabulo: (Grinning) Oh, here we go.

Lizwi: I’m just saying, Zakhile Mthethwa slides in here with a beautiful woman waiting in the living room? That’s… interesting.

Me: (Voice flat) Focus, Lizwi.

Lizwi: I am focused. I'm focused on the fact that my big brother, who has never, and I mean *never*, brought a woman anywhere, suddenly has one sitting in my living room.

Njabulo: (Laughing) He's got a point, Khehla. I thought we agreed on ‘taking things slow’.

He makes air quotes with his fingers.

Lizwi: Exactly. You were supposed to not scare her off bafo. Yet you are doing the opposite.

Me: Are we done?

Lizwi: No. We're not. Because I also heard you canceled the Ngubeni meeting today. You know, the one I had to step in for? The million-rand deal that took me two hours to close because you decided to go pick up your girlfriend from work?

I glare at him.

Me: It was handled. Wasn’t it?

Lizwi: You should be thanking me, by the way. I saved your ass. That was a million-rand deal, Khehla. The Ngubenis were ready to walk.

Me: (Coldly) Whatever. They needed that deal more than us. They were going to come back anyway.

Lizwi: That's not the point

I cut him off, voice sharp.

Me: The point is, we have a shipment to recover and a traitor to deal with. So unless you want to keep running your mouth, I suggest we get moving.

The room goes quiet.

Lizwi raises his hands in surrender, but the smirk doesn't leave his face.

Lizwi: Fine. But we're talking about this later.

Me: No. We're not.

Njabulo: (Standing up) Alright. Let's move. Lizwi, you handle Bongani. Khehla and I will fly to Cape Town tonight.

Lizwi: What about her? Ntombi?

I pause. I hadn't thought about that.

Me: I'll take her home first.

Lizwi: You sure? Because if this goes south, you're going to be gone for days. She's going to have questions.

Me: I'll handle it.

Njabulo looks at me seriously.

Njabulo: Khehla, be careful. If she's as important to you as she seems, you need to keep her far away from this world. The Shabangus don't play games.

I know he's right. But the thought of being away from her, even for a few days makes my chest tighten.

Me: I know. I'll figure it out.

Nathi: I'll keep monitoring everything from here. If anything changes, I'll call.

We all nod.

The plan is set. The pieces are in motion.

I turn and walk toward the door, my mind already racing.

Three days. We have three days to fix this before everything falls apart.

But first, I need to get Ntombi home. And I need to figure out how to explain why I'm about to disappear without telling her the truth.

Because if she knew what I really do, what this family really is, she'd run.

And I can't let that happen.

Chapter 13

Ntombi

I'm done eating my food, but I didn't even enjoy my meal. Nelly was giving me evil stares the entire time, which made it hard for me to eat in peace. God. She's sitting across from me, watching my every move.

She's very beautiful, I must say. But it's clear she doesn't like me. I wonder why, because she doesn't even know me.

My phone rings. It's an unsaved number.

I clear my throat and stand up.

Me: Uhm, let me take this call. I'll just step outside by the pool. Is that okay?

She looks at me up and down slowly, like she's judging everything about me.

Nelly: (Coldly) Sure. Suit yourself.

The tone in her voice says she doesn't care what I do.

The sliding door is in the living room, and through it, you can see a stunning pool outside, crystal blue water, surrounded by lounge chairs and perfectly manicured landscaping. I step out onto the deck and answer the call.

Me: Hello?

"Ntombi! Hi! It's Okuhle! Oh my God, I'm so, so sorry for not texting you yesterday! It was absolutely hectic after the auditions. How are you? Are you okay? Tell me everything!"

I laugh out loud because she's talking a mile a minute, barely taking a breath between words. Her energy is infectious.

Me: (Still laughing) I'm good, Okuhle. Wena unjani? And don't stress about yesterday. I totally understood. You had hundreds of people to deal with. I'm just so

happy you actually called me. I was starting to think maybe you forgot.

Okuhle: Forget?! Girl, no! I could never forget you! You were incredible. I *need* you in this play. Listen, can we meet up for coffee tomorrow morning? I want to go over some details with you, the script, the rehearsal schedule, all of that.

Me: (Wincing) Uhm, eish, I have work tomorrow. I'm there from eight to five. Maybe after work?

Okuhle: (Sighing) Ahh, I have a meeting with the costume designer after five. Okay, don't worry! What about Saturday morning? Are you free then?

Me: Yes! Yes, Saturday works perfectly.

Okuhle: Perfect! I'll text you the details. And uhm… since rehearsals start next week, what are you planning to do about work? Like, how are you going to juggle both?

The question hits me like a punch to the stomach. I don't respond right away. I'm thinking. Stressing. I really don't know the answer.

Me: I… I was thinking maybe I could…

She cuts me off gently.

Okuhle: You know what? Don't stress about it right now. We'll sit down on Saturday and figure it out together, okay? I promise we'll come up with a plan. There's always a solution.

Me:Okay. That would be amazing. Thank you so much, Okuhle. Really.

Okuhle: No, thank *you*, gorgeous! You have no idea how excited I am to work with you. Okay, I have to run, my mom is calling. But I'll see you Saturday! Byeeee!

She hangs up before I can respond.

I stare at my phone, shaking my head in disbelief. This girl has more energy than ten people combined. I can't help but smile.

Then I turn around.

And I almost drop my phone.

Zakhile is standing near the sliding door, hands in his pockets, just watching me. How long has he been standing there?

Me: Zakhile! You scared me! Are we leaving now?

He doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he walks toward me slowly, until he's standing right in front of me. Close. Too close.

Zakhile: You sound excited.

There’s a hint of amusement in his voice.

Me: Uhm, ye…yes! Your sister just called. I honestly thought she forgot about me, but she didn't.

My words tumbling out faster now.

Me: I still can't believe this is actually happening. Like, I'm going to be on that stage. Performing. Leading a production at The Playhouse. This is literally a dream come true.

He chuckles softly, and the sound sends a flutter through my chest.

Zakhile: She wouldn't forget you. You were perfect up there.

I look down, suddenly feeling shy under his gaze. But then reality creeps back in, the work situation, the stress, the impossible choice I'll have to make soon.

His voice drops, concerned.

Zakhile: What's the matter?

I look up at him. His eyes are so intense, so dark, searching my face like he's trying to read every thought

I'm having. The way he looks at me, it's like he actually cares. Like he sees me.

I force a smile.

Me: It's nothing I can't handle.

He doesn't look convinced. He just stares at me, his expression unreadable.

After a long pause.

Zakhile: Let's go. I'm taking you home.

Me: Finally!

He frowns slightly, and I catch something in his eyes, disappointment? Hurt?

Zakhile: Were you bored?

Me: (Laughing) You have no idea, Nyambose. Let's go before I fall asleep standing up.

We walk back through the house. I don't see anyone; his brothers must still be in the study. Whatever they were discussing must have been really important, yoh.

He opens the car door for me, and I slide in. He then gets in and starts the engine.

We're on the road, heading back to my place.

He breaks the silence, his voice soft.

Zakhile: I'm sorry for leaving you alone like that. I had some urgent business to handle with my brothers. It couldn't wait.

The way he says it, so genuine, almost guilty, catches me off guard.

Me: It's okay, really. I understand. Family business is important.

He smiles. Just a small one, but it transforms his entire face.

God, he should smile more often. He's already handsome, but when he smiles? It's devastating. He's always so serious, so guarded. But that smile…

Zakhile: (Glancing at me) You said you were bored. Where was Nelly the whole time?

Ah. I knew he'd ask eventually. And honestly? I wanted to talk about her.

Me: (Groaning) Yoh, yoh, yoh, Nyambose! It was so awkward. I couldn't even enjoy my food properly. The stares that woman was giving me. I swear, if looks could kill, I'd be six feet under right now. It felt like she wanted to poison my food and watch me suffer. What's her problem vele?

He doesn't respond immediately. Just keeps driving, but I notice his jaw tightening slightly.

Me: (Laughing) And get this, she actually thought you and I are together! Like, dating. Can you imagine? I told her we literally just met a day ago, and you

should've seen her face. She looked so relieved. Like she could finally breathe again.

He clears his throat but says nothing.

And then it clicks.

I sit up straight, eyes widening.

Me: Wait. Wait a minute. Is she your ex-girlfriend? Oh my God! That's why she was giving me those death stares! Zakhile, why didn't you warn me?!

Zakhile: She's not an ex. She's no one.

His voice is cold, flat, final.

The way he says it, so dismissive, so final, makes me shut up immediately.

But I'm not stupid. There's definitely history there. Maybe not a relationship, but *something* happened between them. And clearly, it didn't end well for her.

Silence settles between us for a moment. Not uncomfortable, just… heavy with unspoken things.

Me: (Quietly) Can I ask you something?

He glances at me.

Zakhile: Anything.

Me: Do you think… do you think I'll be able to manage it? Work and rehearsals at the same time? Because I'm honestly terrified that I'm going to mess everything up.

He looks at me longer this time, his eyes searching my face before turning back to the road.

Zakhile: Why are you worried about that?

Me: Because I don't know how I'm going to do both, Zakhile. Rehearsals are going to be intense. And I work full-time. Eight to five, Monday to Friday. I can't afford to lose my job. I need the money for rent, for food, to send to my mom. But I also can't give up this opportunity. This play, it's everything I've ever wanted.

It's my dream. And I'm terrified I'm going to have to choose between surviving and living.

My voice cracks at the end. I didn't mean for it to, but the weight of it all is crushing me.

He's quiet for a long moment. So quiet that I think maybe I said too much. Maybe he thinks I'm being overdramatic.

But then he speaks, his voice calm, steady, certain.

Zakhile: You'll manage. And if you can't do both, you choose the play.

I shake my head.

Me: But the money, Zakhile. I can't just…

He cuts me, his tone firm but not harsh.

Zakhile: You choose the play, Ntombi. You'll figure out the rest. Trust me.

I stare at him, my mouth slightly open, not sure what to say.

The way he says it, with such absolute certainty, like it's the simplest thing in the world, makes me want to believe him.

Me: It's not that simple.

Zakhile: It is. You just have to decide what matters most. What's going to matter in five years? Ten years? A call center job? Or the fact that you took a chance on your dream?

I look out the window, watching the city lights blur past, my mind racing.

What if he's right? What if I just need to take the leap and trust that I'll land somewhere safe?

We arrive at my place a few minutes later. He parks the car outside my gate, gets out, and before I can even

protest, he's grabbing all the shopping bags from the back seat.

I unlock the door, and he follows me inside, carrying everything effortlessly like the bags weigh nothing.

He sets them down carefully on my small table, and for the first time tonight, I watch him really look around my room. It's a tiny, one room. Nothing like the houses he's been in today. Nothing like his world.

I suddenly feel self-conscious. Embarrassed, even.

Me: (Nervous laugh) Uhm… do you want something to drink? I have water, juice, tea… I think I might have coffee somewhere…

He shakes his head gently.

Zakhile: I can't stay. I have something I need to take care of tonight. It's urgent.

Me: Oh. Okay.

There's disappointment in my voice, and I hate that he can probably hear it.

He turns to face me fully, and suddenly, the space between us feels even smaller. Charged. Electric.

Zakhile: (Voice soft) Take care of yourself, Ntombi. And don't stress too much about work, okay?

Me: (Smiling softly) I'll try.

We're standing so close now. Too close.

He's looking at me the way he did by the pool. Like he's memorizing every detail of my face. Like he's trying to hold onto this moment before he has to leave.

And then he leans in.

Just slightly. Slowly.

My breath catches in my throat. My heart is pounding so hard I'm sure he can hear it. I can feel the heat radiating from his body.

His eyes drop to my lips. Linger there. Then back to my eyes, silently asking permission.

He's going to kiss me.

And God help me, I want him to.

But then.

Panic. Shyness. Fear.

I take a small step back, breaking the spell. My cheeks are burning. I can't look at him.

I look down, laughing nervously.

Me: I… uhm… you should probably…

He stops. Doesn't move forward. Doesn't push.

His jaw tightens, but when I finally dare to look up at him, he doesn't look angry. Just… patient. Understanding. Maybe even a little amused.

Zakhile: (His voice low, almost a whisper) I'll see you soon, Ma Mbulazi.

The way he says it, like a promise, makes my stomach flip.

He turns and walks to the door. His hand is on the handle when he pauses and looks back at me one more time.

Zakhile: Lock the door behind me.

Me: (Nodding) I will.

He steps out, and I hear his footsteps fade. The car door opens. Closes. The engine starts.

I stand there frozen, staring at the closed door, my heart still racing, my lips tingling even though he didn't kiss me.

What just happened?

And why do I feel like pulling away was the biggest mistake of my life?

Chapter 14

Zakhile

I know I messed up trying to kiss Ntombi like that. I hope I didn't scare her off.

It was a moment, a pull so strong I couldn't resist. But when she stepped back, when I saw the nervousness in her eyes, reality hit me. I'm still a stranger to her. Even though it doesn't feel like it. Even though every fiber of my being knows her, recognizes her, *wants* her.

It hurts that she moved away. But I understand.

I want her. All of her. And I will have her, she will be mine. I feel it with absolute certainty. There's this undeniable force pulling us together, like gravity, like fate. She has to feel it too. I can't be the only one.

I'm driving to my place now to prepare for tonight. I'll meet Njabulo at the airport. He's arranging everything with the pilot. Fueling the jet, filing the flight plan. We leave in three hours.

All of this is making me angry. Furious. And when I'm like this, blood will spill.

I arrive at my estate. Security opens the gate immediately, recognizing my car. I drive up the long driveway and park in front of the house.

Inside, I go straight to my room and take a quick shower. Hot water, harsh and scalding. I need to wash off the day.

I dress in all black. Black jeans. Black sneakers. Black T-shirt. I look at myself in the mirror. Cold, hard. This is who I am when I'm working. No warmth. No mercy.

I head to my weapon cache, a hidden room behind a false wall in my study. Inside, rows of guns, ammunition, knives. I select what I need: two Glocks, extra magazines, a blade. I place everything in a black duffel bag and carry it to the car, tossing it in the boot.

When I come back inside, Tshepo, one of my security guys approaches me.

Tshepo: Boss, there's a woman here to see you.

I frown. I'm not expecting anyone.

Me: Who is she?

Tshepo: She said her name is Nelly.

What the hell is she doing here?

I should send her away. I should tell Tshepo to get rid of her. But something stops me. Anger. Frustration. Tonight’s mission. I need to release some steam.

Me: Let her in.

Tshepo nods and walks away.

A moment later, the front door opens. Nelly steps inside, wearing a long coat that covers her entire body. She closes the door behind her, her eyes locked on mine.

Then she drops the coat.

Underneath, she's wearing black lace lingerie, barely anything at all. Her body is on full display, every curve, every inch of skin designed to provoke.

She walks toward me slowly, hips swaying , confident. She knows exactly what she's doing.

Nelly: (Her voice low, seductive) I know you cut off our... arrangement. But I saw you today with her. And I needed to see you. I needed to have you again. Just once. I promise I won't be trouble.

My jaw tightens.

I should tell her to leave. I should throw her out and never look back.

But my body betrays me. I'm already hard, tension coiling low in my stomach. I need a release. I need to let go of this anger, this frustration, this *want* that I can't satisfy with the woman I actually want.

Fuck it.

Me: (Voice cold, flat) This doesn't mean anything.

Nelly: (Smiling) I know.

I don't kiss her. I don't hold her gently. There's no softness here.

I grab her by the waist and spin her around roughly, pressing her hard against the wall. She gasps, her palms flat against the cold surface, and I can hear the anticipation in her breath. She knows how I am. She knows what she's in for.

My hand reaches into my pocket, pulling out my wallet. I grab a condom. I'm reckless about a lot of things, but never this. I tear it open with my teeth, rolling it on quickly, efficiently.

I don't speak. Don't ask if she's okay. This isn't about her. It's not about connection or feelings. It's purely physical, raw, rough, a way to burn off the rage simmering under my skin.

My hands grip her hips hard, hard enough to leave marks. I don't care. She arches her back, pushing against me, her breathing already ragged.

I enter her without warning, without gentleness. She cries out, her nails scraping against the wall, her body trembling. I set a brutal pace. Fast, deep, unrelenting. There's no rhythm, no care. Just need. Just release.

My fingers dig into her skin. One hand moves to her hair, gripping tight, pulling her head back. She moans, but I'm not listening. I'm not present. My mind is somewhere else, on anger, on frustration, on everything I can't have.

Her body responds despite the roughness, or maybe because of it. She's used to this version of me. The version that takes without asking. The version that doesn't care about anything but the moment.

I thrust harder, faster, my breathing heavy, my jaw clenched. The tension coils tighter and tighter until finally, release.

I pull out immediately, disposing of the condom and adjusting my clothes. No lingering. No afterglow. No words.

She's still against the wall, breathing hard, her legs shaking. Her body is flushed, trembling from the intensity.

I'm already pulling my shirt back on, my face unreadable, my walls firmly back in place.

She is trying to catch her breath and attempts to smile.

Nelly: That was…

I cut her off, my voice cold and flat.

Me: Get dressed. Leave.

Her smile falters. The reality sinks in. This meant nothing to me.

Nelly: Zakhile

Me: Now, Nelly.

My tone final, leaving no room for argument.

She stares at me for a moment, hurt and rejection flashing across her face. But she doesn't argue. She knows better. She's been here before.

She picks up her coat with shaking hands, wraps it around herself, and walks to the door without another word. The click of the door closing echoes in the silence.

I stand there alone, my chest tight, my breathing slowly returning to normal.

And then it hits me.

Guilt.

Sharp and immediate, like a knife twisting in my gut.

It feels like I cheated on something real before it even had a chance to begin.

I run a hand over my face, exhaling slowly, the weight of what I just did settling on my shoulders.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I grab my keys, my phone. I need to leave. I need to focus on the job. On Cape Town. On getting those containers back.

Narrated

Durban North

A private office occupies the top floor of a luxury building overlooking the coastline. Floor-to-ceiling windows catch the sunlight off the ocean, throwing gold across the room.

A man bursts through the double doors without knocking, his face slick with sweat, his breathing heavy. He's been running. Panicking.

In his trembling hands, he clutches a manila file.

The Boss sits behind an enormous mahogany desk, a glass of whiskey in one hand, a cigar in the other. He's older, mid-fifties. His eyes are cold, calculating.

He looks up slowly, annoyed by the interruption.

Boss: (Voice low, deadly calm) You'd better have a very good reason for barging into my office like this, Mfundo.

Mfundo is breathing hard, his voice shaking.

Mfundo: Boss... we have a problem. A big problem.

The Boss sets down his whiskey glass with a soft *clink*. His jaw tightens.

Boss: What kind of problem?

Mfundo steps forward and throws the file onto the desk. It lands with a heavy *thud*. Photographs spill out across the polished wood, scattered, damning evidence.

The Boss leans forward, his eyes scanning the images.

His entire body goes rigid.

The photographs show a young woman. Ntombi Khumalo. And next to her, holding her, looking at her, carrying shopping bags for her is a man.

Not just any man.

Zakhile Mthethwa.

There are multiple shots. Different locations. Different angles. Timestamps from earlier today.

Her getting into his car.

Him opening doors for her.

Them at Burger King, KFC, shopping.

Him carrying bags into her place.

The Boss picks up one of the photos, his hand trembling slightly.

Boss: Zakhile Mthethwa.

Mfundo: Yes, Boss. I've been following her all day like always. She left work with him. He picked her up personally. They spent hours together. He went *inside* her place.

Boss: (His jaw clenching) How is this possible?

Mfundo: I don't know, Boss. I've been watching her for years, *years* and she's never been anywhere near the Mthethwas. She doesn't move in those circles. She works at a call center, lives in a township, keeps to herself. But today? Today she was with *him*.

The Boss stands abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. He paces to the window, staring out at the city, his mind racing.

Boss: The Mthethwa sons... (He shakes his head) They're not like their father. Mthethwa is reasonable. Predictable. But his sons? (He turns back to Mfundo) They're dangerous. Ruthless. They've built an empire that makes their father's look like child's play. No one crosses them. No one.

Mfundo: What do we do, Boss?

Boss: Call Themba. Now.

Mfundo: Boss, I don't think

Boss: (His voice sharp) I said call him! NOW!

Mfundo fumbles for his phone, his hands shaking. He dials quickly and puts the call on speaker.

It rings once. Twice. Three times.

Finally, Themba answers, his voice casual, unbothered.

Themba: Yeah?

Boss: (His voice tight) Get to my office. Now.

Themba: Now? It's almost midnight, Dad…

Boss: I don't care what time it is. Get here. Now.

There's a pause.

Themba: (Sighing) Fine. I'm on my way.

The line goes dead.

Forty-Five Minutes Later

Themba walks into the office, still in casual clothes. Jeans, a hoodie, sneakers. He looks relaxed, almost bored. Like this is just another inconvenience.

He drops into the chair across from his father's desk, leaning back like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Themba: (Yawning) What's so urgent that it couldn't wait until morning?

The Boss doesn't respond immediately. He just stares at his son with a look that could kill.

Mfundo stands off to the side, silent, watching.

Boss: (His voice dangerously calm) Ntombi Khumalo.

Themba waves his hand dismissively.

Themba: What about her? She's just mad at me right now. She'll come around. She's a naive girl, easy to manipulate. Just give me a few days, and I'll have her right back where I want her. Trust me.

The Boss's jaw tightens. His hands curl into fists on the desk.

Boss: You are stupid. Very, very stupid.

His voice low, shaking with barely controlled rage.

Themba stands up, frowning.

Themba: What?

Boss: Do you have any idea what you've done?

Themba: I didn't do anything! I went out with my boys for the weekend. So what? She'll get over it.

Boss slams his hand on the desk.

Boss: SHUT UP!

The sound echoes through the office. Themba goes silent, his eyes widening.

The Boss grabs the photographs and throws them across the desk. They scatter in front of Themba.

Boss: Look at them. LOOK!

Themba leans forward, picking up the photos one by one. His face is confused at first, then his expression changes.

His eyes widen. His voice barely a whisper.

Themba: Wait... is this...?

Boss: Yes. That's her. With Zakhile Mthethwa.

Themba stares at the photos, his mouth falling open. He picks up one of them. Zakhile opening the car door for Ntombi, looking at her like she's precious.

He looks up. His face pale.

Themba: This is Zakhile Mthethwa? *Thee* Zakhile Mthethwa?

Boss: (His voice dripping with sarcasm) Oh, so you do recognize him.

Themba: (His voice shaking slightly) I... I saw him at the auditions. He was there. I thought he was just some random guy staring at her, but... (He looks back at the photos) This is bad. This is really bad.

Boss leans forward, his voice cold.

Boss: No, Themba. This is worse than bad. This is a disaster. Because while you were out partying and ignoring her, *he* stepped in. And now? Now she's with the most dangerous man in this city.

Themba: (Stammering) I didn't know. I didn't think…

Boss: (Cutting him off) That's the problem. You didn't think. You had ONE job. Get close to her. Keep her distracted. Make sure she stays away from anything or anyone connected to her father's past. And while doing

that, you were supposed to find out what she knows. Where her father hid the drive. And what did you do? You screwed it up!

Themba: How was I supposed to know Zakhile Mthethwa would get involved?!

Boss: You weren't supposed to give him the opportunity! But you disappeared, you ignored her, and now look! (He gestures at the photos) He's all over her!

Mfundo: Boss, what do we do now?

The Boss sits back in his chair, running a hand over his face. He's thinking. Calculating.

Boss: We need to separate them. Before he starts asking questions. Before he gets too involved.

Themba: How are we supposed to do that? You just said he's the most dangerous man in the city!

Boss: (His eyes sharp) We can't touch him. But we can make things... difficult. Plant doubt. Create problems. Make her think he's not who she thinks he is.

Themba: And if that doesn't work?

The Boss's expression darkens.

Boss: Then we have bigger problems. Because if Zakhile Mthethwa finds out what we've been doing, if he finds out why we've been watching her all these years, he won't just come for me. He'll come for all of us.

Silence fills the room.

Themba stares at the photos again, his stomach sinking.

He remembers that day at the auditions. The way Zakhile looked at Ntombi. The cold, dangerous energy that radiated off him. The way he completely ignored Themba like he didn't even exist.

And now that man is protecting her.

Themba: We're in trouble, aren't we?

Boss: Let’s hope not.

Chapter 15

Narrated

Cape Town - 2:30 a.m.

The warehouse sits on the outskirts of Parow, industrial and isolated. Rusted metal siding. Broken windows. No cameras. No witnesses.

Perfect for storing stolen goods.

Zakhile, Njabulo, and four of their men approach on foot, moving silently through the shadows. They're dressed in all black, faces hidden, weapons drawn.

Zakhile signals with his hand, two men go left, two go right. Njabulo stays with him.

They reach the side entrance. Zakhile picks the lock in seconds. The door swings open quietly.

Inside, the warehouse is massive. Stacks of crates. Shipping containers lined up in rows. Dim lights overhead casting long shadows.

And there they are.

Three containers. The ones stolen from them. The Mthethwa logo still visible on the side panels.

Njabulo: (Whispering) There. That's them.

Zakhile nods. But something feels off.

It's too quiet. Too easy.

Zakhile: (Low voice) Stay sharp. This doesn't feel right.

They move forward carefully, checking corners, scanning for movement.

And then

A sound. Footsteps. Voices.

Zakhile raises his hand, everyone freezes.

From the far end of the warehouse, men emerge. Six of them. Armed. The Shabangus.

They were waiting.

The leader, a tall man with a scar across his face grins when he sees them.

Shabangu Leader: Zakhile Mthethwa. I was wondering when you'd show up.

Zakhile: (His voice cold, deadly) You made a mistake stealing from us.

Shabangu Leader: No. You made a mistake thinking you're untouchable.

Silence. Tension crackling in the air.

Then…

Chaos.

Gunfire erupts. Bullets fly. Metal pings. Men shout.

Zakhile moves fast. Shooting, dodging, taking cover behind a crate. His men return fire. Bodies drop.

Njabulo is to his left, moving with precision, taking out two men with clean shots.

But there are more. They keep coming.

Zakhile reloads, his jaw tight. His mind is sharp, focused. This is what he does. This is who he is.

He moves forward, taking down another man. Then another.

And then…

Pain.

Sharp, burning, tearing through his side.

He's been shot. He grunts, clutching his side.

Zakhile: Fuck!

Njabulo turns, his eyes wide.

Njabulo: KHEHLA!

Zakhile stumbles but stays on his feet. Blood seeps through his shirt, hot and wet.

But he doesn't stop. He raises his gun and takes out the man who shot him. Clean headshot.

Njabulo rushes to his side.

Njabulo: We need to get you out of here!

Zakhile: (Through gritted teeth) Not without the containers.

Njabulo: Forget the containers! You're bleeding!

Zakhile: (His voice hard) I said we're not leaving without them!

Their men finish off the last of the Shabangus. The warehouse goes quiet except for the sound of heavy breathing and dripping blood.

Njabulo: (Into his radio) Bring the trucks in. Now!

Within minutes, two trucks pull up outside. Zakhile's men load the three containers onto the trucks while Njabulo keeps pressure on Zakhile's wound.

He is pale, but still standing.

Zakhile: Bongani. Did Lizwi find him?

Njabulo pulls out his phone, dialing Lizwi.

Meanwhile - Pinetown, Durban

Lizwi kicks down the door of a small house. Inside, Bongani is sitting on the couch, frozen in fear.

Lizwi: (Grinning darkly) There you are.

Bongani tries to run. He doesn't make it two steps.

Lizwi's men grab him, slamming him to the floor.

Lizwi crouches down, his voice cold.

Lizwi: You thought you could betray us and get away with it?

Bongani: (Crying) Please. I didn't have a choice! They threatened my family.

Lizwi stands, unimpressed.

Lizwi: And now you'll wish you'd chosen differently.

He signals to his men. They drag Bongani out of the house, throwing him into the back of a van.

Lizwi's phone rings. It's Njabulo.

Lizwi: (Answering) Talk to me.

Njabulo: We got the containers. But Khehla's hit. We're flying back now.

Lizwi's face goes hard.

Lizwi: How bad?

Njabulo: Bad enough. Meet us at the hangar. And get the doctor to the Umlazi warehouse. Now.

Lizwi: Already on it.

He hangs up and looks at Bongani, bleeding and terrified in the back of the van.

Lizwi: (To his men) Take him to Umlazi. I'm going to the airport.

Cape Town Airport - Private Hangar - 4:30 a.m.

Zakhile is barely conscious, slumped in the back of the SUV. Njabulo keeps pressure on the wound, his shirt soaked with Zakhile's blood.

Njabulo: (To the driver) Faster!

They screech into the private hangar where the jet is waiting, engines already running.

Two of their men help carry Zakhile up the stairs into the plane. They lay him down on the leather seats, Njabulo still applying pressure.

Pilot: (Over the intercom) We're cleared for takeoff. Buckle up.

The jet takes off immediately, climbing fast into the early morning sky.

The flight from Cape Town to Durban is just over an hour, but it feels like an eternity. Zakhile drifts in and

out of consciousness, his face pale, his breathing shallow.

Njabulo: (Holding his phone, his voice tight) Stay with me, Khehla. We're almost there.

Zakhile: (Weakly) The containers...

Njabulo: They're on the trucks. Already on their way back. We got them. Now stop talking and save your strength.

Durban - King Shaka Airport - Private Hangar - 6:00 a.m.

Lizwi is waiting when the jet lands. The moment the door opens, he's there, his face grim.

Lizwi sees Zakhile.

Lizwi: Yoh, Khehla. You look like shit.

Zakhile: (Weak smile) You should see the other guys.

They carry him down the stairs and into a waiting SUV. Lizwi gets in beside him, pressing a clean cloth to the wound.

Lizwi: The Doctor is already at the warehouse. We'll have you patched up in twenty minutes.

Zakhile nods, his eyes closing.

The drive to Umlazi feels endless, but finally, they pull up to the warehouse, an old industrial building on the outskirts, far from prying eyes.

Umlazi Warehouse - 6:25 a.m.

The Mthethwa family doctor is already there when they arrive. An older man, Dr. Govender, calm under pressure, used to patching up bullet wounds in the middle of the night.

They carry Zakhile into the back room and lay him out on a steel table.

Dr. Govender cuts away the blood-soaked shirt.

Doctor Govender: The bullet went clean through. That's good. But he's lost a lot of blood.

Njabulo: Fix him.

Doctor Govender: I'm working on it.

He works quickly, cleaning the wound, stitching the entry and exit points, wrapping Zakhile's torso in tight bandages.

Zakhile grits his teeth through the pain, refusing to make a sound.

Twenty minutes later, it's done.

Doctor Govender: (Wiping his hands) You need rest. No moving for at least 48 hours. And I mean it, no moving. You tear these stitches, you'll bleed out.

Zakhile tries to sit up.

Zakhile: I don't have 48 hours…

Njabulo pushes him back down, firmly.

Njabulo: You're staying here. That's an order.

Zakhile glares at him but doesn't argue. He's too weak.

Lizwi loks at Njabulo.

Lizwi: What happened out there?

Njabulo: Ambush. They knew we were coming.

Lizwi's jaw tightens.

Lizwi: Then we have a bigger problem than we thought.

Zakhile closes his eyes, exhausted, his mind drifting despite the pain.

Chapter 16

Narrated

Umlazi Warehouse - 10:00 a.m.

Nathi drives through the gates of the warehouse compound, his laptop bag on the passenger seat, a thick manila file on top. His hands grip the steering wheel tighter than usual.

He's been up all night. Digging. Searching. Connecting dots that shouldn't connect.

And what he found... it changes everything.

He parks and gets out, walking quickly toward the main building. Inside, he can hear voices. Lizwi and Njabulo talking in low tones.

He pushes through the door.

Nathi: Exe, majita. Zithini?

Lizwi and Njabulo look up from their coffee. They're tired, eyes bloodshot, faces drawn. It's been a long night for all of them.

Lizwi: Sure, sure, mfo.

Njabulo: (Nodding) You look stressed. What's going on?

Nathi sits down heavily, placing his laptop bag on the floor and pulling out the file. He always carries his laptop with him, with the life he's chosen, anything can require his assistance at a moment's notice.

Nathi: Where's Zakhile?

Njabulo: Getting dressed, probably. He'll be here shortly. The doctor just checked on him said the stitches are holding, but he needs to take it easy.

Nathi: (Shaking his head) That man doesn't know how to take it easy.

Two minutes later, the door to the back room opens. Zakhile appears, moving slowly, his face pale. He's dressed in a black T-shirt and sweatpants, his torso wrapped in thick bandages visible beneath the thin fabric. Every movement is careful, calculated. But his eyes, his eyes are sharp, alert.

Nathi: Eish, you don't look good, Khehla. How are you feeling?

Zakhile lowers himself onto the couch slowly, jaw tight, refusing to show weakness.

Zakhile: I've been through worse wounds. I'll live.

Nathi nods, but he can see the pain Zakhile's hiding. His brothers exchange worried glances, but they know better than to push. Zakhile is... Zakhile. He fears nothing. Not even death.

Zakhile: What is it, that couldn't wait for us to be at our own places? We're supposed to be leaving today.

His voice firm despite the pain.

Nathi: I know, man. But I couldn't sit still. I had to show you this. Immediately.

He opens the file and spreads documents across the table, printed emails, bank statements, old photographs, surveillance images.

The room goes silent as they lean forward, scanning the information.

Shock registers on their faces.

Zakhile's breathing changes. Shallow. Controlled. His hands curl into fists.

Zakhile: Nathi, what the hell is this?

Nathi: Exactly my reaction when I found it.

Lizwi picks up an old photograph, two men, arms around each other's shoulders, smiling.

Lizwi: You're telling me our father and Ntombi's father knew each other?

Nathi: Not just knew each other. They worked together. Close friends. Best friends, even. They were both involved with the cartel, deep in it. But here's the thing...

He pulls out another document, a police report marked "CLOSED - ACCIDENTAL DEATH."

Nathi: Ntombi's father was murdered. It wasn't an accident like the report says. My sources confirmed it. He discovered something, something that could destroy the cartel's leader. But he was killed before he could expose it.

Zakhile: (His voice tight) Zondi. That piece of shit.

Njabulo: (Leaning forward) What could it be? What did he find?

Nathi: I don't know yet. But whatever it is, it's big enough that Zondi has been searching for it for over a decade.

Njabulo: My guess? This is something that could destroy him and everyone involved. Evidence. Proof. Something that would end him completely.

Nathi: And by the look of things, he still hasn't found it.

He opens his laptop and pulls up surveillance photos, recent ones, timestamped over the last few weeks.

Nathi: This is one of Zondi's right-hand men. His name is Mfundo. And look what he's been doing.

The photos show a man following Ntombi. Outside her work. At the mall. Near her home. Watching. Waiting.

Nathi: He's been following Ntombi. I don't know for how long, but I'd bet it's been years. This can only mean one thing.

Njabulo: They're fishing. They think Ntombi might have what they're looking for.

Lizwi: Do you think she knows? That she has it?

Zakhile shakes his head slowly.

Zakhile: I doubt it. She would've done something. No... she has no idea.

His mind is racing now. She's been in danger this whole time. And she doesn't even know.

Nathi: That's not even the worst part.

Zakhile's head snaps up.

Zakhile: There's more?

Nathi pulls up another photo, a professional headshot. A young man. Handsome. Familiar.

Nathi: Themba Zondi. The one and only son of Mzwakhe Zondi. And guess where he works?

He pulls up employment records.

Nathi: The same call center as Ntombi. Started working there three months ago. Right around the time Ntombi transferred to that branch.

The room goes deathly silent.

Lizwi: (His voice tight) That's not a coincidence.

Nathi: No. It's not.

Zakhile stands abruptly, ignoring the sharp pain that shoots through his side.

Zakhile: She's in danger. I need to get out of here. I need to get to her…

Lizwi stands, blocking his path.

Lizwi: Wait, wait, wait. Don't be quick to make decisions when you're angry.

Zakhile: (Voice rising) Listen! THAT BOY CALLED HER HIS GIRLFRIEND, OKAY?! HIS FUCKING GIRLFRIEND! He's been playing her this whole time!

Njabulo Stands now too, his voice calm but firm.

Njabulo: Khehla, calm down. We know. It's clear Zondi is using his son to get close to Ntombi. He's desperate. And Ntombi's life is in serious danger. If Zondi finds out we know about this, if he realizes we're onto him

he'll hurt her. He'll torture her to find what he's looking for. And then he'll kill her.

Zakhile is breathing hard, pain and rage warring on his face.

Zakhile: Then we move. Now.

Lizwi: Khehla, listen to me. Let's lay low for now. You're hurt. You can barely walk without wincing. You need time to heal. Try to get back in shape, *then* we can strike. Ntombi can't see you like this, she'll ask questions. Questions we're not ready to answer yet. We don't want to scare her or tip off Zondi.

Njabulo: We'll protect her. Quietly. She won't even know. We'll put men on her 24/7 surveillance. No one gets close to her without us knowing.

Lizwi: And we need to talk to Dad first. He knows something. He has to. He and Ntombi's father were close, there's no way he doesn't know about this. We need the full story before we move.

Zakhile has his fists clenched, his voice shaking with barely restrained fury.

Zakhile: And while we're "laying low," she's out there. Alone. Vulnerable. With Zondi's people watching her every move.

Njabulo: Which is why we put protection on her. Starting today. Right now.

Nathi: I'll set it up. Discreet. She won't notice.

Zakhile stares at them, his chest heaving, every muscle in his body coiled tight.

He wants to argue. He wants to leave right now, grab Ntombi, and lock her away somewhere safe where no one can touch her.

But they're right.

He's in no condition to protect her. Not like this. And if Zondi realizes they're onto him, it could get her killed.

Finally, through gritted teeth.

Zakhile: Fine. But I want eyes on her at all times. Every second. And the moment, the *second* something feels off, we move. I don't care if I'm bleeding out. We move.

Lizwi: Agreed.

Njabulo: Agreed.

Nathi: I'll have someone in place within the hour.

Zakhile sits back down slowly, his hand pressing against his side where the stitches pull.

Zakhile: She has no idea what's coming for her.

Lizwi sits next to him.

Lizwi: But she has us now. And we're not letting anything happen to her.

Zakhile nods, but inside, guilt and fear are eating him alive.

He should've figured this out sooner. He should've known.

And now, because of his father's past, because of choices made decades ago. Ntombi is in danger.

And all he can do is sit here, wounded and useless, while the woman he's falling for walks around with a target on her back.

Njabulo breaks the silence.

Njabulo: We need to talk to Dad.

Zakhile: (Voice cold) Set it up. I want answers. All of them.

Lizwi: (Standing) I'll make the call. But first... (He looks toward the back room) We still have Bongani.

Zakhile's eyes go dark.

Zakhile: Bring him.

The Back Room - 15 Minutes Later

Bongani is tied to a metal chair in the center of the room. His face is already bruised from the beatings he

took when they brought him in. Blood drips from his nose. His hands are bound behind his back, zip ties cutting into his wrists.

The three brothers walk in. The door closes behind them with a heavy *thud*.

Bongani: (Voice shaking) Please... please, I can explain.

Lizwi: Oh, you'll explain. Every. Single. Detail.

Njabulo pulls up a chair and sits in front of Bongani, his face calm, almost friendly. But his eyes are deadly.

Njabulo: Let's start simple. Who paid you?

Bongani: (Crying) I didn't want to! They threatened my family, my wife, my kids…

Lizwi grabs his hair and yanks his head back.

Lizwi: I asked you a question. WHO. PAID. YOU?

Bongani: (Gasping) The Shabangus! It was the Shabangus!

They already know all that. They just want to know what else he told them.

Zakhile steps forward, his face unreadable despite the pain in his side.

Zakhile: How much?

Bongani: Fifty thousand. Then another hundred after I changed the delivery codes.

Njabulo: And what else did you tell them? What other information did you give?

Bongani: Nothing! I swear! Just the shipment details, the route, the container numbers, the timing. That's all!

Lizwi: (Leaning in close) You've been working for us for five years, Bongani. Five years. We trusted you. We paid you well. And you sold us out for a hundred and fifty thousand rand?

Bongani: (Sobbing) They said they'd kill my family if I didn't cooperate! What was I supposed to do?!

Zakhile: (Voice ice-cold) You were supposed to come to us. We protect our own. We would have handled it.

Bongani: I was scared

Zakhile: And now you should be terrified.

Njabulo: Who's your contact? Who did you report to?

Bongani: A man named Thulani. Thulani Shabangu. He's the one who approached me. He's the one who paid me.

Zakhile nods to Lizwi. Lizwi walks to the corner of the room and picks up a pair of pliers.

Bongani's eyes go wide with terror.

Bongani: No, no, no, please! I told you everything! I swear!

Njabulo: Did you tell them anything else about our operations? Any other shipments? Any other routes?

Bongani: No! I swear on my children's lives, that was the only one!

Lizwi holds the pliers in front of Bongani’s face.

Lizwi: See, the problem is, we don't believe you.

What follows is brutal. Methodical. They break him piece by piece. Fingers, ribs, confessions pulled out through screams and blood.

And finally, when they're certain he's told them everything, when there's nothing left to extract.

Zakhile pulls out his gun.

Bongani is barely conscious, begging.

Bongani: Please... my family... they need me...

Zakhile: You should have thought of that before you betrayed us.

One shot. Clean. Execution-style.

Bongani slumps forward, lifeless.

Silence fills the room.

Zakhile holsters his gun and walks out of the room without another word, his face expressionless.

Traitors don't get mercy.

Not in their world.

Chapter 17

Ntombi

It's Saturday morning, and I wake up with bad period pains. The kind that make you curl into a ball and question why women are cursed like this every month.

I drag myself out of bed and take medication. I know I'm in for a rough four days. I don't know why we're punished so badly with period pains. What did we do to deserve this?

It's been three days, and I haven't heard from Zakhile.

Three days of silence. Nothing.

He went AWOL. I guess that's what I attract, hey? They make me interested, pull me in, and then start acting up. Disappearing without a word.

I should just forget about him. The dreams meant nothing. It was all in my head.

But I'm hurt. I won't lie. I'm hurt.

I called once. It didn't even ring. Straight to voicemail. I thought he'd call back when he saw that I'd tried to reach him. But till this day? Nothing.

Maybe I'm just not that important to him.

I push the thought away and focus on today. I'm meeting up with Okuhle at Mugg & Bean at Suncoast. After that, I'm going home with Bonolo. Mom said we'll have a mini celebration for the role. She's so proud.

I take a long, hot shower, trying to ease the cramps. Then I get dressed, blue denim shorts, a white asymmetrical neck fitted T-shirt, and beige round-toe flat sandals. I look at myself in the mirror and smile. Simple and beautiful. That's all I need.

I leave my braids loose, grab my bag, lock the door, and request an Uber to Suncoast.

I arrive at Suncoast and walk into Mugg & Bean, scanning the restaurant for Okuhle.

I see her waving at me from a corner booth, and I walk over, smiling.

She stands up, and we hug.

Me: Hi! How are you?

Okuhle: I'm doing great! Look at you. So damn hot!

I laugh, feeling my cheeks warm.

Me: Ah, please. Thank you. But look at *you*, girl. You're beautiful!

Okuhle: (Laughing) Thanks, babe! Let's order something. I'm starving.

We wave for the waiter and place our orders. I go for a hot chocolate and a chocolate muffin. I don't really have much of an appetite, period hormones are killing me. Okuhle orders smashed avo and egg on toast with orange juice.

We settle into light conversation, and I'm starting to relax.

Okuhle: I'm sure you've been wondering why your director and choreographer is being so forward. Like, not very professional, right? (She laughs) Girl, I'll be honest with you. I want to keep you close. I think we can do big things together. You're talented, really talented. I'd love to work with you on more projects going forward. Maybe even as a choreographer. You never know.

Me: (My eyes widening) Okuhle, are you serious?

Okuhle: Yes! There's something about you, I don't know. This industry is very hard, and it takes time to be noticed. I'm still growing too. This is my first big play. This is my chance to showcase my work to big stars and producers. I'm positive that doors will open for both of us.

Our orders arrive, and I take a sip of my hot chocolate, letting the warmth soothe me.

Me: Of course. Wow, this is amazing. This is the biggest show I've ever been in. I've done small plays before, but I loved those too. One day, I want to open an academy, you know? That's my dream. For kids who love art, dance, acting, music. A space for everyone who wants to perform.

Okuhle: (Her face lighting up) Oh my God, Ntombi, that's amazing! Well, this is a step closer to our dreams. Cheers to that!

We raise our drinks and clink them together, laughing.

Okuhle: So, about rehearsals. They'll run for eight weeks, four times a week. You'll get the full schedule on Monday. And I have the script ready, hard copy, right here. I can give it to you now so you can start familiarizing yourself with it.

Me: Yes, please! I'd really appreciate that.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a thick script with my name printed on the cover.

I take it from her, and my eyes widen when I read the title.

Me: Sarafina! Okuhle... oh my God. I'm Sarafina?

My voice is bearly a whisper.

Tears fill my eyes. I can't help it.

I've always dreamed of being in Sarafina. *Always*. It's one of the most iconic productions. Music, dance, acting, everything. It requires so much energy, so much heart. And I'm going to be the lead.

Okuhle: Yes, girl! And I already know you're going to kill it. This is our chance.

I know what she means. She's trusting me with this, with her vision, her first big production. And I can't let her down.

Me: I won't disappoint you. I promise.

Okuhle: I know you won't.

We continue talking, laughing, planning. But eventually, I glance at the time and realize I need to leave.

Me: Okuhle, this was so nice, but I have to get going. I'm going home today, and I don't want to get there too late.

Okuhle: Oh, okay. Where's home? I can drop you off.

Me: (Laughing) Thanks, but I'll have to decline. It's so far, eMtubatuba. Far in the bundus. I have to stop at my place first to grab my bag.

She laughs.

Okuhle: Oh my! Okay, I can at least drop you off at your place then.

This girl.

I shake my head, smiling.

Me: Okuhle, mara. Okay, fine. Let's go.

We ask for the bill, and while we're waiting, I see someone approaching our table.

Themba.

Oh, for the love of-

He stands next to my chair, all smiles.

Themba: Ladies, how are you doing? Can I steal this lady for just a minute?

Okuhle glances at me, then back at him.

Okuhle: Hi there. Mhm... okay. I'll pay at the counter. Don't worry about the bill.

She gives me a naughty look, winks, and walks toward the till.

I turn to Themba, my arms crossed.

Me: We were leaving. What do you want?

He touches his chest dramatically, like I've wounded him.

Themba: Ouch. Come on, Ntombi. I know I fucked up. But can I just get one last chance? To prove I can be the best boyfriend?

Me: Ah, please. Just stay away from me.

Themba: Why? Is there someone else?

Me: No.

Themba: Then let me try again. I can do better. I promise.

I just stay quiet, staring at him. He's waiting for me to answer, but I'm not giving him anything.

Okuhle returns, sensing the tension.

Me: (Standing up) Well, nice seeing you. We have to go.

I take Okuhle's hand, and we leave, with Themba standing there looking confused and rejected.

We get to her car, and she starts driving toward my neighborhood.

Okuhle: Girl, what did he do to you? Your mood completely switched.

Me: He's an asshole. I'm glad I cut ties with him.

Okuhle: (Grinning) He's cute, though.

I shoot her a look, and she bursts out laughing.

We pull up to my place, and I thank her before getting out.

Inside, Bonolo is already waiting for me, sitting on my bed with her bag packed and ready.

Zakhile

I'm at my house, lying in bed. I'm getting better, it's not as bad anymore. I just need to take it easy for a few more days.

We're meeting with Dad tomorrow night. I won't go to the family dinner. Mom will ask too many questions about my condition. Dad and my brothers will have to come here instead.

My phone rings. It's Vusi, one of my guys. He's been keeping tabs on Ntombi. I know she's with Okuhle right now. What could have happened?

Me: Talk.

Vusi: Sir, the Zondi boy just walked into the restaurant. It looks like he's having some kind of conversation with Miss Ntombi. She doesn't look happy.

My blood boils.

Me: Okay. Keep a close eye on her. Make sure nothing happens to her.

I hate this. Not being able to protect her myself.

Vusi: She just left with Miss Mthethwa.

Me: Follow them.

Vusi: Sure.

I hang up and immediately call her. Straight to voicemail.

I try again after ten minutes. This time, it rings.

She answers.

Ntombi: Hello?

Me: Unjani, Nkosazana?

She's quiet. More like trying to control her breathing. Why is she mad?

Ntombi: (Her voice tight) It's good to know that you're alive.

Me: Hawu, mama. Kukhona iphutha engilenzile? (What did I do wrong) You sound angry. Tell me what I did so I can fix it.

She clears her throat.

Ntombi: Well... you went AWOL and didn't even answer my call. Didn't care to get back to me.

Her voice is softer now. Vulnerable. It's good to hear that she cares.

Me: Ngiyaxolisa, mama. I had business to take care of. It's taking longer than I planned.

Ntombi: Well, don't disappear like that. Not cool.

She's sulking. I love this side of her.

Me: I won't. Ngiyakuthembisa (I promise), maMbulazi. You'll be the first person I come see when I get back.

Of course, I'm lying. She can't know I'm lying in bed like a potato with a bullet wound.

Ntombi: Oh, you're not around? Okay then. Zakhile, I'll have to end the call. I'm going home today, so I have to get going before it gets late.

Me: You're going alone?

Ntombi: No. Bonolo's coming with me.

Me: You're using public transport?

Ntombi: Yeah.

Me: Okay then. Uhambe kahle.

Ntombi: Ngiyabonga.

The call disconnects.

I immediately call Vusi back.

Vusi: Boss?

Me: Drive them to wherever they want to go. They're about to leave. Tell them I sent you. You'll be her new driver from today. Siyezwana?

Vusi: Uhm... sure, sure, boss.

Narrated

Ntombi is happy that Zakhile called. She wasn't expecting it, but hearing his voice made her feel lighter, like maybe he does care after all.

She and Bonolo are about to leave. They double-check the room, making sure they haven't forgotten anything. Bonolo grabs both their bags while Ntombi locks the door.

They say a quick prayer together before heading out.

Outside the gate, there's a black BMW X7 parked on the street. As they approach, the driver steps out. A tall man in a suit.

Vusi: Hi, ladies. My name is Vusi. I was sent by my boss to be your driver today.

They both freeze, staring at him.

Bonolo: Who's your boss? You could be a kidnapper for all we know.

Vusi: Mr. Zakhile Mthethwa. You can call him to confirm.

Ntombi's eyes widen.

Ntombi: What? Why would he send us a driver? Let me call him.

She pulls out her phone and dials Zakhile's number. He answers immediately.

Zakhile: MaMbulazi.

Ntombi: Did you send us a driver by the name of Vusi?

She's not happy about this, you can hear it in her voice.

Zakhile: Yes, I did. He'll drive you home.

Ntombi: Why? I didn't ask for a driver. What's this, Zakhile?

Zakhile can tell she's angry, but he won't back down. She will get in that car. Her safety comes first. And this makes her life easier.

Zakhile: Mama, you said you don't want to be late. You know how public transport can be. Please get in the car. Vusi will make sure you get home safe. Ngiyacela, maMbulazi.

She exhales, clearly frustrated.

Ntombi: Fine. But please don't make decisions like this without asking me first.

Zakhile: Thank you.

Ntombi: Bye.

She hangs up and turns to Vusi.

Ntombi: Okay, he just confirmed. We'll go with you.

Bonolo: (Grinning) Girl, your *man* just saved us! We were already running late!

Bonolo is thrilled, no public transport means no stress, no delays.

Vusi opens the doors for them, and they climb into the luxurious SUV.

Ntombi: He's not my man, okay? And he could've told me, though.

Bonolo: (Laughing) I agree, but hey, at least he's thoughtful.

Ntombi crosses her arms, trying to stay annoyed. But deep down, she can't help but smile.

Maybe Zakhile Mthethwa does care after all.

Chapter 18

Ntombi

We're still on the road. Two more hours to go, and then I'll be home. We'll definitely arrive around 5 p.m.

Bonolo and I are sitting in the back seat. Vusi is quiet, just focused on the road. He's so stiff, like a robot. I guess he was trained to be professional. *Too* professional.

Let me break this tension before we all die of awkwardness.

Me: So, Vusi, do you live around my neighborhood?

He glances back at me briefly through the rearview mirror, then focuses on the road again.

Vusi: Where, Miss Khumalo? In Mtubatuba?

Me: Please don't call me Miss Khumalo. Gosh, you make me sound old.

Bonolo and I laugh.

Vusi: I'm sorry, Miss. What would you prefer I call you?

Bathong!

Me: Ntombi would do just fine.

Bonolo: And Bonolo for me. Or Nolo.

Vusi: Would Miss Ntombi and Miss Nolo work?

Bonolo and I look at each other. We're not winning this battle.

Me: (Sighing) That's fine. I meant KwaMashu, where you picked us up.

Vusi clears his throat.

Vusi: No, Miss Ntombi. I don't stay around there.

Bonolo: Well, how did you get there so quickly then? Were you already in the township?

Vusi: I... yes, I was passing by when my boss called. Would you ladies like to make a stop at the petrol station?

He changes the topic. I see what he did there. I will let it pass.

Me: Yes, please. I need a few snacks. And can we also drive past Mtuba Mall when we get there? I want to buy my mom some groceries.

Vusi: No problem, Miss.

We stop at the petrol station and grab some snacks and drinks. Vusi insists on paying for everything. He says his boss instructed him to cover all expenses.

Zakhile kodwa.

We're almost home now, heading to the mall to grab groceries for Mom.

We arrive at the mall and walk into Checkers. I grab the essentials. Rice, cooking oil, chicken, vegetables. The basics.

Bonolo: Girl, why don't you take a lot more things? Your man is *rich*. He's insisting on paying. Girl, that man is in loooove.

Me: In love? No. I doubt it. It's too early for that. And for the hundredth time, he's not my man.

Bonolo: Well, why would he do all these things then, huh? He wants you. And I know you want him too.

I shake my head and glance back at Vusi, who's walking behind us like a bodyguard, his face expressionless.

Me: Bonolo, stop saying things like that. What if he's married with kids? Or has a girlfriend? And they hear you saying such things? I don't even know Zakhile that well.

Bonolo: (Grinning) One way to find out.

Wait. What?

Me: What do you mean?

She stops walking and turns around to face Vusi.

Me: Bonolo... Bonolo, don't you dare... BONOLO!

She ignores me completely.

Bonolo: Vusi, does your boss have a wife and kids?

Vusi looks at me, then back at Bonolo, clearly uncomfortable.

I whisper urgently.

Me: Please don't answer her.

Bonolo: No, please *do* answer. So, does he?

He clears his throat.

Vusi: No. Mr. Mthethwa doesn't have a wife or kids.

Bonolo: A girlfriend?

Me: Bonolo!

Vusi: I... I do not know, Miss.

Bonolo: (Smirking) Awww, is it?

Vusi: Yes.

I grab Bonolo's hand and yank her away, pushing the trolley toward the till. My face is burning with embarrassment.

Vusi pays for the groceries without a word, and we load everything into the car.

Minutes later, we're pulling up to my childhood home.

We don't have a choice but to let Vusi park inside the yard and help us carry the bags. I'll have to think of a very good lie about who Vusi is.

He parks, and we step out, carrying the grocery bags toward the front door.

I knock once and push the door open.

"SURPRISE!"

I scream, dropping the bags. And before I can even process what's happening, Vusi is in front of me in seconds, his body blocking mine, his hand moving toward his waist, where I'm sure there's a gun.

I'm shocked by the surprise, yes. But Vusi? What is this behaviour?

I shoot him a look. *And then?*

He steps back slowly, his face unreadable.

I look around the kitchen. It's been quietly prepared. A small table has been pushed closer to the wall to make space. There are balloons tied to the chair legs and one big bunch near the fridge. A banner that reads *Congratulations!* is taped above the cupboards, slightly uneven, like it was put up in a hurry. On the table there’s a cake, simple but neat with candles already placed on top.

The smell of food fills the room.

I can't believe my mom. She went all out. I thought it would be a small thing, but no. Not maNxele.

My uncle, Mom's brother is here. My aunt from Dad's side, which is my father's sister, is also here with her husband. And lastly, my dad's mother. My grandmother.

Poor woman is so old. She should be at home, resting. But she never misses anything that involves me. I love her so much. She stays in Richards Bay with her two daughters and their kids, my aunts. They're old and not married. Bitter as hell. That's why we hardly visit. Only Aunt Kethiwe is nice. She's the one who's here.

My mom runs to me, ignoring Vusi completely, and pulls me into a tight hug, kissing me all over my face. She hugs Bonolo too. The whole family comes over, congratulating me, telling me they're proud.

This is so beautiful. My heart is full.

Mom: (Turning to Vusi) And who are you, young man?

Vusi: My name is Vusi. I…

Bonolo: My colleague! He stays nearby, so he gave us a lift.

I shoot her a look. She just saved us. How did she think of that so quickly?

Mom: Oh, ngiyabonga, mfana wami, for giving them a lift. You can come in. Sit down.

Me: Oh no, he has to leave. It's late, Mama.

Vusi: Yes, I have to go.

Mom waves her hand dismissively.

Mom: Hayi, suka. Ten minutes won't hurt. Sit down. Let me dish up for you. You must be starving.

That's my mom. No one leaves her house without eating.

We take our weekend bags to my bedroom and join the others in the kitchen.

My grandmother calls me over, and I go to her, sitting beside her on the couch.

Me: Gogo wami.

She smiles, touching my face.

Gogo: Look how grown you've become. I'm so proud of you, ngani yami.

Me: Ngiyabonga, Gogo. I try.

Gogo: Your father would've been so proud. (She lowers her voice slightly) He said he sent someone to protect you. He said he will take care of you and protect you from the danger that's coming.

I freeze.

Me: Gogo, Baba is no more. When did he say that?

She holds my hand and laughs softly.

Gogo: I know, silly. He appeared to me in a dream. He said I should tell you.

Okay. Here's the thing. Gogo believes in dreams. She even knows how to interpret them. She says every dream has a meaning. You could dream of a dog singing, and she'd have all sorts of explanations for it. And sometimes? She's actually right. So I pay attention when she talks about dreams.

Me: Really? Did he tell you the name of this person? My life is in danger, Gogo?

Mom and Bonolo turn sharply.

Mom: (Her voice rising) What's wrong? Your life is in danger?

Gogo: (Smiling calmly) He'll protect you. You are safe. (She looks at me closely) Are you still having those dreams?

Gogo and Mom know about the dreams. The dreams about a man I didn't know. Which I now know.

Anyway, Mom thought they were just dreams, but Gogo told me I'd find out soon what they meant.

Me: They stopped.

Gogo: (Frowning) Why?

Bonolo jumps in without thinking.

Bonolo: He's real!

Mom: WHAT?!

Me: Real in my head, right, Bonolo?

Bonolo: Uhm... I mean, real in... in her head, yes! Maybe they stopped because she finally made peace with the dream.

Gogo just smiles at me and gives me a look I don't understand. Then she stands and walks off with my mom to the kitchen.

Me: (Whispering) Bonolo, that was close!

Bonolo: You don't want them to know?

Me: Not yet. I still want to figure out what's happening between us first. What the dreams meant. And what Gogo just said is confusing me even more.

Bonolo: What did she say exactly?

I tell her about the protection, the danger, my father sending someone.

Bonolo: Yoh, so she's psychic or what?

I laugh.

Me: I don't know. She just believes in dreams. Strongly.

Bonolo: Maybe your dad sent Zakhile. But why would you be in danger?

I just shrug. My hand moves unconsciously to my necklace; the silver heart-shaped pendant my father gave me before he died. I touch it, running my fingers over the clasp that never opens.

Somehow, a part of me knows I'm safe. All the time.

The celebration goes on until 10 p.m. Vusi left long ago, after Mom forced him to eat two full plates of food. Gogo and Aunt Kethiwe are sleeping over they'll leave in the morning. My uncle and uncle-in-law left early.

Me and Bonolo are finally in my room, lying in my childhood bed, exhausted but happy.

Bonolo: (Yawning) Your family is amazing.

Me: I know. I'm lucky.

We're about to drift off when my phone rings.

I grab it from the nightstand. Zakhile’s name pops up.

Me: Hello.

Zakhile: Nkosazana. Ufike kahle?

His voice is low, warm.

I smile despite myself.

Me: Yes. We arrived safely. Thank you for Vusi. And for paying for everything.

Zakhile: You don't need to thank me. I wanted to make sure you got home safe.

Me: Still. You didn't have to.

Zakhile: I wanted to. (Pause) How was your day?

Me: It was good. My family surprised me with a celebration. My mom, my grandmother, everyone. It was beautiful.

Zakhile: That sounds nice. I'm glad they celebrated you. You deserve it.

Me: (Smiling) Thank you. How are you? How's your... business?

Zakhile: It's handling itself. I'll be back soon.

Me: When?

Zakhile: Miss me already?

Me: (Laughing softly) Maybe.

I can hear the smile in his voice when he responds.

Zakhile: Good. Because I miss you too.

My heart does a little flip.

Me: Zakhile?

Zakhile: Hmm?

Me: When are you coming back for real?

Zakhile: In a few days. Why? You planning something?

Me: (Laughing) No. Just wondering.

Zakhile: Mhm…Vusi will pick you up when you're ready to go back to durban. Just let him know when.

Me: Oh. Okay. Actually... can he maybe meet us at the mall instead? I don't want my mom to be suspicious. She'll ask too many questions.

Zakhile: (Chuckling) I'll tell him.

Me: Thank you.

There's a comfortable silence for a moment. Just the sound of our breathing.

Zakhile: Ntombi?

Me: Yeah?

Zakhile: I'm glad you're safe. That you're with your family.

Me: Me too.

Bonolo shifts beside me, mumbling something in her sleep.

Me: (Whispering) I should let you go. It's late.

Zakhile: ulale kahle mama.

Me: You too, Nyambose.

The call ends.

I lie there in the dark, staring at the ceiling.

And for the first time in days, I fall asleep smiling.

Chapter 19

Ntombi

It's a beautiful morning today. I've just had a lovely breakfast with my family. Eggs, toast, fresh fruit, and lots of tea and laughter.

Gogo and Aunt Kethiwe are about to leave. We're standing outside in the warm morning sun, bidding them farewell. They're heading back to Richards Bay.

We'll be leaving soon too. I've already communicated with Vusi to meet us at the mall. We'll just take a taxi there, no Ubers out here in the bundus.

Once Gogo and Aunt Kethiwe drive off, we say goodbye to Mom. She hugs us both tightly, making me promise to call when I get home safely.

We grab a taxi to the mall. When we arrive, we wait for Vusi inside near the food court. He finds us a few minutes later, and we head to the car.

Four hours, and I'll be at my place.

We settle into the back seat, and I can already feel the exhaustion setting in. Tomorrow, there's work. Well... not anymore, actually.

I've decided to resign with immediate effect.

I know I'm supposed to serve a one-month notice before leaving, but everything is happening so fast, and I won't be able to juggle both work and rehearsals. I'll have to state it clearly in my resignation letter. I won't receive my full salary at the end of the month, which is fine. I'll survive.

I can't even show up tomorrow. Rehearsals start at 10 a.m., and I have to be there. There's contract signing, paperwork, a read-through, introductions, and scheduling. I *have* to be present.

Bonolo: Girl, what are you daydreaming about?

Me: Agh, it's the work thing. I have to write a resignation letter when I get home. I'm resigning with immediate effect. I won't even pitch tomorrow.

Bonolo: That's messed up, but hey, this is your big break. A girl's got to do what a girl's got to do.

Me: I guess.

We talk for a bit, then both drift off to lala land. We're exhausted.

I open my eyes and realize we're entering Durban. It's 2 p.m. God, we've been sleeping since Mtubatuba.

I shake Bonolo awake gently.

Me: Are you going to your place?

Bonolo: (Yawning) Yes, love.

Me: Vusi, can we drive through McDonald's, then drop off Bonolo at Musgrave?

Vusi: No problem, Miss.

We stop at McDonald's drive-through, and I grab lunch. I'll probably have it for dinner too. I'm not cooking today, shame.

We drop Bonolo off at her apartment, and by 3 p.m., I'm finally at my place.

I sit down at my small table, open my laptop, and write the resignation letter. Short. Professional. To the point. I attach it to an email and press send to my manager.

Done.

I lean back in my chair and exhale. It's real now. I'm really doing this.

I spend the rest of the afternoon going through the script. I still can't believe I'm Sarafina. Every time I read my lines, I get chills.

By evening, I'm exhausted. Let me go to sleep early. I need all the energy I can get for tomorrow.

Zakhile

It's Sunday evening. I didn't go to the family dinner at home today. Mom would've asked too many questions about why I'm moving stiffly, why I look pale.

Instead, Dad, Lizwi, Nathi, and Njabulo are here at my place. There's a lot to discuss.

We're all in the living room. The air is tense. Dad sits across from me, his face unreadable but cautious. He knows this isn't a casual visit.

Dad: (Looking at me) You look better. Now, why was I summoned here this late? I have a wife at home waiting for me. Nithi kwenzenjani?

Lizwi: (Leaning forward) Well, we need answers. Khumalo. Your old friend.

Dad shifts uncomfortably in his seat. His jaw tightens.

Dad: What do you know about Khumalo?

Me: Let's cut straight to the chase. How are you connected to the cartel? And to Zondi?

Dad: (Frowning) What is this about, Zakhile?

Me: The woman I've been dreaming about. Turns out she's real. But what we found out is that she's in danger. And I can't allow anything to happen to her. I want her in my life, in fact, I *need* her. She's in danger because of Khumalo. Her father. (I lean forward, my eyes locked on his) What did Khumalo find the night he died?

My dad knows about the dreams. I told him two years ago when I thought I was going crazy.

His voice quiet, almost shocked

Dad: You found her?

Me: Yes. Her name is Ntombi Khumalo. And she's being hunted by Zondi and his people. Now tell me, what the hell is going on, Dad?

Dad runs a hand over his face and exhales slowly. He looks older suddenly. Tired.

Dad: Khumalo... (He pauses, collecting himself) He died before he could show me what he discovered. I don't know what it was. All I know is that he called me that night, panicking, saying he'd found something. Something that could destroy Zondi. But before he could get to me, they got to him first.

Lizwi: And you never found out what it was?

Dad: (Shaking his head) No. I searched. For months. But whatever it was, he hid it well. Or maybe Zondi's people found it first. I don't know.

Njabulo: But you knew Zondi was involved.

Dad: I suspected. But I couldn't prove it. And by then, I had my own family to protect. I couldn't go to war with Zondi without knowing what I was fighting for.

Me: (My voice hard) So you just... let it go?

Dad: (His voice rising) I didn't *let it go*, Zakhile! I made a promise to Khumalo. A blood oath. To protect his family. To take care of them. And I did. I've been keeping tabs on his wife and daughter for years. I made sure they were safe. I made sure they had money. I kept them hidden.

Nathi: A blood oath?

Dad: (Nodding) When Khumalo and I joined the cartel, we made a pact. We went to a powerful witch doctor in the mountains. We did the blood oath so we'd always be loyal to each other, so we'd take care of each other's families no matter what.

I feel my chest tighten. This is bigger than I thought.

Dad: When you started having those dreams, Zakhile, I knew. I went back to the witch doctor. I showed him the drawing you made.

Lizwi: (His eyes widening) Wait. Hold on. You knew? You knew it was Ntombi?

Dad: I recognized her. I've been watching over Khumalo's family for years. When I saw your drawing, I knew it was his daughter. So I consulted the witch doctor. I needed to understand why you were dreaming of her.

Me: And what did he say?

Dad takes a deep breath, like what he's about to say weighs heavily on him.

Dad: He said that because of the blood oath, Khumalo was able to connect with our ancestors. Even in death. He pleaded with them, begged them to bring you and his daughter together. He wanted you to protect her because you're powerful enough to keep her safe.

Njabulo: (Leaning forward) Wait, wait, wait. You're saying Khumalo, *dead* Khumalo is the reason Khehla has been dreaming about this girl?

Dad: Yes. He played his part in Ntombi's dreams. Our ancestors played their part in yours. Through the blood

oath, the two bloodlines are connected. Khumalo saw it fit to choose who his daughter would be with. And you, Zakhile... you were the perfect fit.

Silence. Heavy, suffocating silence.

Lizwi breaks the silence, his voice incredulous.

Lizwi: So what you're saying is... the ancestors *arranged* this? Like some kind of spiritual matchmaking?

Dad: That's exactly what I'm saying.

Nathi: (Shaking his head) This is... this is insane. Blood oaths are real? Like, *actually* real?

Dad: You think I would make this up? You think I'd go to a witch doctor in the middle of nowhere if I didn't believe it worked? The oath bound our families together. Forever. That's why I've been protecting them. That's why Zakhile dreamed of her before he even knew she existed.

I stand up abruptly, ignoring the sharp pain in my side. My mind is racing. My chest feels tight.

Me: So you're telling me that everything I've felt…the pull, the dreams, the obsession. It's all because of some blood oath you made decades ago?

Dad: Zakhile…

Me: (Voice rising) No! You don't understand. I've been losing my mind over her! I can't think straight. I can't sleep. I can't function without knowing she's safe. And now you're telling me it's not even real? That I'm just some puppet being controlled by ancestors and magic?

He stands, his voice calm but firm.

Dad: That's not what I said.

Me: Then what *are* you saying?!

Dad: I'm saying the ancestors brought you together. But what you feel for her…that's yours. That's real.

I Shake my head, running my hands on my head.

Me: How do I know that? How do I know I'm not just... programmed to feel this way?

Lizwi: (Quietly) Khehla has a point. If the ancestors are manipulating his dreams, how does he know his feelings are genuine?

Njabulo: And what about her? Does she feel the same pull? Or is she just an innocent bystander in all this?

Dad: She's been dreaming of him too. Since she was a child. The connection goes both ways.

My voice breaks slightly.

Me: But does she *want* this? Or is she being forced into it like I am?

Dad: No one is forcing anything, Zakhile. The ancestors opened the door. But you both have to choose to walk through it.

Me: (Laughing bitterly) Choose? How can I choose when I don't even know if what I'm feeling is real?

Nathi: How does this blood oath even work? Like, explain it to us. Because this sounds like something out of a movie.

Dad sits back down, gesturing for everyone to sit

Dad: The blood oath is ancient. Powerful. When Khumalo and I made it, we went to a witch doctor deep in the mountains, a woman known for dark magic, ancestral work. We cut our palms, mixed our blood, and made vows. To protect each other's families. To be loyal. To never betray one another.

Lizwi: And that's it? You just... cut your hands and boom, magic?

Dad: It's more than that. The witch called on the ancestors, both mine and his. She bound our bloodlines together. What affects one family affects the other. If one bloodline is in danger, the other must protect them. It's not a choice. It's a command from the ancestors.

Njabulo: So Khumalo's death triggered the oath. That's why you've been protecting his family.

Dad: Exactly. And when he died, his spirit didn't rest. He went to the ancestors and begged them to protect his daughter. The only way to do that was to bind her to someone powerful enough to keep her safe. So they chose you, Zakhile.

Me: I didn't ask for this.

Dad: Neither did she.

I Look up at him, my eyes searching his face.

Me: Do you believe it works? Really? Or is this just... superstition?

Dad: I've seen too much to not believe. The dreams. The timing. The way you found her right when she needed protection. That's not coincidence, Zakhile. That's the ancestors at work.

Me: But how do I know what I feel is real? What if I only think I care about her because I'm supposed to?

Lizwi: (Leaning forward) That's the real question, isn't it? Are you in love with her, or are you just following orders from dead people?

I don't answer. Because I don't know. I genuinely don't know.

Njabulo: Khehla, let me ask you something. When you're with her, when you talk to her, when you see her, what do you feel?

Me: (My jaw tightening) I feel... alive. Like everything makes sense for the first time in my life.

Njabulo: And when you're not with her?

Me: (Quietly) I feel empty. Like something's missing.

Njabulo: That sounds real to me.

Nathi: But how do we know it's not just the oath? The ancestors messing with his head?

Dad: Because the oath doesn't control emotions. It creates circumstances. It brought them together. But what happens next is up to them.

Me: So you're saying the ancestors put her in my path, but they didn't make me fall for her?

Dad: Exactly. They opened the door. You walked through it.

I lean back, exhaling slowly. My mind is a mess. My chest feels tight.

Me: I need to know if she feels the same. If this is real for her too. Or if she's just scared and confused because some stranger keeps showing up in her life.

Lizwi: (Smirking slightly) Pretty sure she feels it, Khehla. You don't let just anyone send you a driver and pay for your groceries.

Me: (Shaking my head) Or maybe she's just being polite. Maybe she doesn't feel what I feel.

Dad: Then you ask her. When the time is right. But right now, what matters is keeping her safe. Whether this is fate or free will, whether it's the ancestors or your own heart she's in danger. And you're the only one who can protect her.

I look up at him, and for the first time tonight, something clicks into place.

He's right.

It doesn't matter how I got here. It doesn't matter if the ancestors pushed us together or if it's just coincidence.

What matters is that she's in danger. And I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.

I stand, my voice steady now.

Me: Fine. We protect her. We find out what Khumalo discovered. And we end Zondi before he gets to her.

Lizwi: And what about the whole feelings thing? You just gonna ignore that?

Me: (My jaw tight) No. But I'm not going to let it distract me. Right now, keeping her alive is more important than figuring out if I'm in love with her because I want to be or because I'm supposed to be.

Njabulo: Fair enough.

Nathi: So what's the plan?

Me: We keep surveillance on her. 24/7. She doesn't go anywhere without someone watching. We dig deeper into Khumalo's last days, where he went, who he talked to, what he might have hidden. And we prepare for war. Because when Zondi realizes we're protecting her, he's going to come for us.

Dad: He'll come hard. He's been patient for over a decade. He won't stop now.

Me: Let him come. I'm done hiding. I'm done waiting. (I look at my brothers, then at my father) She's mine. The ancestors chose her for me. And I'll burn this city to the ground before I let anyone hurt her.

Dad nods slowly, something like pride flickering in his eyes.

Dad: Then be smart. Be strategic. And don't let your feelings, whatever they are cloud your judgment.

I nod.

But deep down, I know it's already too late for that.

Because whether it's fate or free will, whether it's the ancestors or my own heart

I'm already in too deep.

Chapter 20

Zakhile

This is just messing with my head. Ancestors manipulated our fate. Brought us together through dreams and blood oaths made before we were even born.

I hear what my father is saying, that how I feel is all me, that no one interfered with my emotions. But does Ntombi feel the same way? Does she want to be with me? Does she even know about the oath?

The guys are still at my place. Dad left about twenty minutes ago. We're all sitting in the living room, lost in our own thoughts. No one is saying anything. It's too much to process.

The silence stretches on.

Lizwi: Yeah, neh, our dad is a witch. I really can't believe this.

We all shoot him a stare. That's Lizwi for you. I can't with this one.

He Raises his hands defensively.

Lizwi: What? He said it himself! Blood oaths, ancestors, manipulating dreams. Don't look at me like that.

Me: Lizwi, you better not say that in front of him. Keep your thoughts and opinions to yourself.

Njabulo: Nathi, try to find anything and everything you can about Ntombi's dad before he died. Where he went. Who he talked to. Maybe we can find where he kept the evidence.

Nathi: I'm on it. I'll update you all once I find anything.

Lizwi: (Leaning back, grinning) You know what? Ntombi's father could just appear in both your dreams and tell you where the evidence is, yazi. Angithi bayenza ama-oath bona?

We all pause. Then burst out laughing. Lizwi is unbelievable. But he's right. Why not just show us? We've seen it's possible.

Me: (Chuckling) If only it worked like that.

Njabulo: Maybe it does. Maybe we're just not listening properly.

I grab my phone and stare at Ntombi's name in my contacts. My thumb hovers over it.

I dial. It rings. Once. Twice. Three times. No answer.

My chest tightens. Is she okay?

Thirty seconds later, she calls me back.

I answer immediately.

Me: MaMbulazi, unjani, mama?

The guys all turn to look at me, smirking. I ignore them.

Ntombi: I'm good. You called?

She sounds like she was sleeping. Her voice is low, slightly hoarse. It does something to me.

Me: Did I wake you?

Ntombi: Yes. But it's okay. I don't mind. How are you?

Oh, if she only knew what hearing her say that does to me.

I smile. I can't help it.

The guys clear their throats. Loud. Deliberately.

Lizwi: (Whispering) What happened to our brother?

They all laugh.

I stand up, shooting them a glare, and walk to my bedroom, closing the door behind me.

Me: I'm sorry about that. My brothers are just annoying.

Ntombi: What did they say?

Me: Don't mind them.

I sit on the edge of my bed, my voice dropping lower.

Me: Are you still having the dreams? About me?

There's a pause. I can hear her shifting, like she's sitting up in bed.

Ntombi: They stopped. And you?

Me: Me too.

Ntombi: Maybe it's because we found each other.

My chest tightens. She has no idea how right she is.

Me: And how does that make you feel? That you found me?

Ntombi: (She exhales softly) I feel... a lot of things. Confusion being at the top. I don't know. Scared, maybe. I ask myself if the dreams meant anything. Why dream of someone I don't even know? It's a lot.

I close my eyes. She doesn't know. She has no idea about the blood oath. About the ancestors. About any of it.

Me: I know. I feel the same way.

And I do. Because even though I know the truth, I still don't know if what I feel is real or just destiny playing tricks on me.

Silence falls between us. Not awkward. Just... us. Thinking. Breathing.

Me: Ntombi?

Ntombi: Yeah?

Me: I want to see you. When I get back.

Ntombi: (Softly) I'd like that.

We talk a bit more. She tells me about her day, about her family. Then she mentions that she resigned from her job.

Me: You resigned?

Ntombi: Yes. With immediate effect. I won’t be able to juggle work and rehearsals. This is my chance, Zakhile. I have to take it.

I smile. Good. That means she's far away from that douchebag Themba. And it means she's focusing on her dream.

Me: I'm proud of you. You're doing the right thing.

Ntombi: Thank you. That means a lot.

We talk for a few more minutes, light, easy conversation. Her laugh is soft and genuine, and every time I hear it, something in my chest loosens.

Eventually, she yawns.

Me: I should let you sleep, mama.

Ntombi: (Sleepily) Okay. Good night, Nyambose.

Me: Lala kahle, Nkosazana.

The call ends.

I sit there on my bed, staring at my phone, replaying her voice in my head.

Whether it's fate or free will, whether it's the ancestors or my own heart

I'm falling for her. Hard.

And I don't think I can stop it. Even if I wanted to.

Narrated

Durban North - Zondi's Office - 11:00 p.m.

Mzwakhe Zondi sits behind his massive desk, a glass of whiskey in one hand, his jaw tight with frustration. Across from him sits Themba, slouched in his chair, looking defensive.

The tension in the room is thick.

Zondi: (His voice cold, controlled) So let me understand this. You failed to keep her close. You failed to gain her trust. And now she's cut you off completely. Is that correct?

Themba: I told you, I didn't think.

Zondi slams his glass down on the desk.

Zondi: You didn't *think*. That's the problem, Themba. You never think!

Themba flinches but says nothing.

Zondi stands and paces to the window, staring out at the city lights below.

Zondi: And now we have a bigger problem. (He turns to face Themba) Zakhile Mthethwa sent a driver to pick her up. A *driver*. He's putting resources on her. Why?

Themba: I don't know. Maybe he's just... interested in her?

Zondi: Interested? Or does he know something we don't?

Themba: What do you mean?

He leans against his desk, his arms crossed.

Zondi: There are two possibilities. Either Zakhile Mthethwa is genuinely interested in the girl, romantically, which would make her his weakness. Or... he's also looking for what Khumalo hid. And if that's the case, we're in serious trouble.

Themba: (Frowning) You think he knows about the information?

Zondi: I don't know. But his father and Khumalo were close. Very close. If Khumalo told anyone what he found, it would've been Mthethwa. And if he knows, the sons might know too.

Themba shifts uncomfortably.

Zondi: (His eyes narrowing) We need to figure out which one it is. Is Zakhile protecting her because he cares? Or is he using her to find what we're looking for?

Themba: How do we find out?

A slow, dangerous smile spreading across his face

Zondi: We set a trap.

Themba: What kind of trap?

Zondi: We make a move on the girl. Nothing too aggressive, just enough to see how he reacts. If he's genuinely involved with her, he'll come running. And if he does, that means she's his weakness. Which gives us leverage.

Themba: And if he doesn't react?

Zondi: Then we know he's just using her to get to the information. Which means we need to move faster before he finds it first.

Themba: What do you want me to do?

Zondi sits back down, steepling his fingers

Zondi: I want you to try again. Get close to her. Apologize. Grovel if you have to. Make her believe you've changed. Gain her trust back.

Themba: She's not going to fall for that. She's done with me.

Zondi: (His voice hard) Then make her *undone* with you. You're my son, Themba. Use your head. Be charming. Be persistent. Women like her, naive, innocent. they want to believe people can change. Give her a reason to believe you have.

Themba: And if she still doesn't bite?

Zondi: Then we escalate. We create a situation where she *needs* help. And you'll be there to provide it. Either way, we get close to her again. And this time, you don't screw it up.

Themba nods slowly.

Zondi: But here's the thing, Themba. If Zakhile Mthethwa is protecting her, we need to be very careful. The Mthethwa sons are not like their father. They're ruthless. Dangerous. If we push too hard, they'll come for us. And we're not ready for that fight. Not yet.

Themba: So what's the plan?

Zondi: We test the waters. We make small moves. We watch how he reacts. And once we know for sure whether she's his weakness or just a pawn, we'll decide our next step.

Themba: And what if she really does have what we're looking for? What if Khumalo gave it to her?

Zondi: (His eyes cold, calculating) Then we take it. By any means necessary. Even if it means going through Zakhile Mthethwa himself.

Themba: (His voice quiet) That's a war, Dad.

Zondi: (Standing) Then it's a war. But I've been patient for over a decade, Themba. I'm not waiting anymore.

That information is mine. And I'll burn this entire city down to get it.

He walks to the door, opening it, a clear dismissal.

Zondi: Go home. Rest. Tomorrow, you start working on getting back into her life. And this time, don't disappoint me.

Themba stands, nodding, and leaves without another word.

The door closes.

Zondi returns to his desk, pours himself another whiskey, and stares at the photograph of Ntombi on his desk, one of the surveillance shots.

Zondi: Let's see how much you mean to him, little girl. Let's see if Zakhile Mthethwa is willing to go to war over you.

He takes a sip of his whiskey, his mind already working through strategies, traps, and contingencies.

The game is about to get very dangerous.

And Ntombi Khumalo is right in the center of it.

Chapter 21

Ntombi

It's Monday morning. I wake up excited and nervous at the same time. Today's my first rehearsal. 10 a.m. at The Playhouse. I don't want to be late.

I get ready, taking extra care with my appearance, not too dressed up, but I want to look put-together and professional. I make myself a quick bowl of cereal. No lunch box. I didn't cook. I'll buy something later. Today's rehearsal won't be long anyway. 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. First days are usually just introductions, getting to know each other, discussing roles, and signing contracts.

I'm about to walk out the door when my phone rings.

Zakhile.

I smile before I even answer.

Me: I'm starting to enjoy these phone calls.

Zakhile: I'm glad you are. I thought maybe I was becoming a nuisance. Good morning, maMbulazi.

Me: Good morning. I was actually on my way out.

Zakhile: Vusi will take you. And please don't argue.

Me: (Sighing) Zakhile, why are you doing this?

There's a pause. Then… His voice lower, more serious

Zakhile: You mean a lot to me, Ntombi.

My heart starts beating fast. My face gets hot. I'm blushing like a schoolgirl.

Me: I do? But…

Zakhile: But nothing, Nkosazana. Enjoy your day.

He hangs up before I can respond.

I stand there staring at my phone, my heart still racing.

You mean a lot to me, Ntombi.

What is happening between us? I don't even know how to describe it.

I lock the door and find Vusi already waiting outside, standing by the car like always professional, stoic.

Me: Good morning, Vusi.

Vusi: Good morning, Miss Ntombi.

He opens the door for me, and I slide in.

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at The Playhouse. I thank Vusi and head inside, my script tucked under my arm.

I walk into the rehearsal room. There are already a few people here, some sitting, some standing in small groups, chatting. I'm fifteen minutes early.

I greet everyone politely and find a seat near the back. I pull out my phone and pretend to be busy. The truth is,

I'm just awkward. I don't know these people yet, and I'm terrible at making the first move.

More people arrive. Some are already connecting, laughing, exchanging numbers. I sit quietly, observing.

Then a girl walks over to me. She's beautiful, dark skin, short natural hair, bright smile.

"Hi! I'm Lindiwe. I saw you sitting alone, and I thought, no way am I letting you sit by yourself. I hope you don't mind."

Me: (Smiling) No, not at all. I'm Ntombi. I suck at making conversation, that's why I'm sitting alone.

She laughs and sits down next to me.

Lindiwe: I totally understand. You take time to get used to people, right? Well, I'll be the first person you get used to. Fair warning, though. I talk for *days*.

I laugh.

Me: Well, please, be my guest. I don't mind at all.

We start talking, and honestly? She *does* talk for days. But she's funny. Like, genuinely funny. I find myself laughing more than I have in weeks.

At exactly 10 a.m., Okuhle walks in with two other people, her assistant director and stage manager.

She claps her hands, beaming.

Okuhle: Good morning, everyone! I'm so excited to see you all here. This is my AD, Thokozani, and my stage manager, Slindo. Can you all please sign the register? That's what we'll be doing every morning at rehearsal.

Slindo passes around a clipboard, and we all sign.

We spend the next hour going over the contract, payment schedules, performance dates, expectations, rules. Then we discuss our roles, introduce ourselves properly, and go over the rehearsal schedule.

Okuhle also mentions that lunch will be provided at every rehearsal. Thoughtful.

The day goes by really quickly. Everyone is excited and happy. The energy in the room is electric.

At noon, we break for lunch, sandwiches, wraps, juice. We sit together, talking, laughing. Lindiwe is already best friends with half the cast.

After lunch, we do a read-through of the first act. Hearing everyone's voices together, hearing the story come to life gives me chills.

By 1 p.m., we're wrapping up.

Okuhle: Great first day, everyone! See you all tomorrow. Same time!

I pack up my things, still buzzing with excitement.

Lindiwe and I walk out together. She's still talking, this time about her role, how excited she is, how she's already planning her costume ideas.

Me: (Laughing) Girl, you're going to be amazing.

Lindiwe: We both are!

We step outside into the warm afternoon sun.

And then I see him.

Themba.

He's leaning against his car, holding a bouquet of flowers.

What is he doing here? How did he even know he'd find me here?

He straightens up when he sees me and walks toward us.

Themba: Afternoon, ladies.

He's looking directly at me.

Lindiwe: (Grinning) Hello there! Girl, I'll see you tomorrow, neh? And bye, handsome.

She winks at me and walks off, leaving me standing there.

Themba doesn't even acknowledge her. She doesn't seem to care.

Me: (Crossing my arms) Hi. What are you doing here?

Themba: I came to see you. On your first rehearsal day. How was it?

Me: How did you know you'd find me here?

Themba: You weren't at work. I figured you were here. It was a guess.

Me: I resigned.

He looks genuinely shocked.

Themba: Oh. Uhm... I guess you really love this, then. (He holds out the flowers and a box of chocolates) I bought these for you.

I hesitate, then take them. They *are* beautiful. And it's a sweet gesture. But still...

Me: Thank you. This is sweet of you.

Themba: (Smiling) Can I take you home?

Me: Uhm, no. I have a ride.

Themba: Come on. I'm sure you can cancel.

Before I can respond, my phone rings.

Zakhile. I answer.

Me: Hello?

Silence. I can hear breathing. Then, finally, he speaks.

Zakhile: (His voice cold) Vusi is waiting for you.

The warmth from this morning is completely gone. He sounds... angry?

Me: Uhm, okay.

Zakhile: Ntombi.

Me: Yeah?

More silence. He's not saying anything, but I can feel the tension through the phone.

I wait. Nothing.

Me: Uhm, is there anything else?

Themba is standing right in front of me, watching, waiting.

Still silence.

Me: Okay, bye then.

I hang up, confused and a little frustrated.

Themba: So... can I take you home?

Me: Themba, thanks for the flowers, but I'll have to decline your offer. I'm sorry. Bye.

I turn and start walking toward where Vusi is parked.

Themba: (Calling after me) See you around?

Me: Sure.

I don't look back.

I get into the car, still holding the flowers and chocolates. Vusi glances at them in the rearview mirror but says nothing.

Narrated

Zakhile is sitting in his study, laptop open, reviewing shipment logs with Nathi on a video call. His wound is healing well. He can move without wincing now.

His phone buzzes. A message from Vusi.

Vusi: *Miss Ntombi is leaving the building now. There's a man waiting for her outside. Themba Zondi. He's holding flowers*.

Zakhile's jaw tightens. His hand curls into a fist.

Nathi on the screen notices.

Nathi: Khehla, what's wrong?

Zakhile doesn't answer. He dials Ntombi's number.

She answers.

"Hello?"

He hears her voice, bright, a little distracted.

Zakhile: Vusi is waiting for you.

"Uhm, okay."

There's noise. Movement.

Zakhile: Ntombi.

"Yeah?"

He wants to say so many things.

But he says nothing. Because he has no right. She's not his. Not yet.

The silence stretches.

"Uhm, is there anything else?"

Zakhile clenches his jaw.

"Okay, bye then."

She hangs up.

Zakhile sits there, staring at his phone, fury and jealousy warring inside him.

Nathi: Khehla... what just happened?

Zakhile: Themba Zondi is with her. Right now.

Nathi: (His eyes widening) Shit.

Zakhile: (Standing abruptly, pacing) That bastard is using her. He doesn't care about her. He's playing games.

Nathi: Then tell her that.

Zakhile: (Spinning around) And say what, Nathi? That Themba is using her? That his father is dangerous? She'll ask me how I know. And then what? Do I tell her

his father murdered hers? She'll think I'm insane. She'll think this is some vendetta, some jealous lie.

Nathi: So what are you going to do? Just watch him move in on her?

Zakhile: (His voice harsh) What can I do? I can't tell her the truth without sounding crazy. I can't warn her without proof. And I can't just... (He stops, runs a hand over his face) I can't tell her how I feel when she doesn't even know me. When she's standing there with flowers from another man.

Nathi: Khehla…

He cuts him off, anger rising.

Zakhile: No. You don't understand. She's there with him right now. Smiling. Accepting his flowers. And I'm here, what? Watching from the shadows like some obsessed stalker? She doesn't know what he is. What his family is. And I can't tell her because she'll never believe me. How do I tell her his father killed hers?

Nathi: So you're just going to do nothing?

Zakhile: (His jaw tight) I'm going to keep her safe. That's what I can do.

Nathi: Keeping her safe isn't enough, Khehla. Not anymore. You know that.

Zakhile: It has to be. Because the alternative is walking up to her and saying, "Don't trust Themba Zondi. His father killed yours." And then watching her walk away thinking I'm a jealous lunatic.

Silence.

Nathi: You're in love with her.

Zakhile stops pacing. He doesn't answer.

Nathi leans forward on the screen.

Nathi: Khehla. You're in love with her. And it's eating you alive watching him with her.

Zakhile: It doesn't matter.

Nathi: It matters. But you're too angry right now. Too angry to think straight. Too angry to see her.

Zakhile: Of course I'm angry. He's using her. And she has no idea.

Nathi: Then you need to calm down. Because if you go to her like this, angry, jealous, you'll say something you regret. You'll scare her. Or worse, you'll tell her everything and she'll run.

Zakhile sits back down heavily, his head in his hands.

Nathi: Khehla, you need to think clearly. You can't make your move when you're like this. Not when you're this angry.

Zakhile: (Looking up) So what do I do? Just let him…

Nathi: No. You keep doing what you're doing. You keep her safe. You let Vusi watch her. And when you're calm, when you can think straight, then you figure out your next move.

Zakhile: And in the meantime, he gets to be with her.

Nathi: In the meantime, you don't do anything stupid. Because if you go to her now, angry like this, you'll lose her before you ever had her.

Zakhile stares at his phone, his jaw working.

Nathi: Relax. Clear your head. And then we'll figure this out.

The call ends.

Zakhile sits there alone in his study, staring at nothing.

His phone is in his hand. He starts typing a message. Then deletes it. Types again. Deletes.

He wants to tell her everything. Warn her. Claim her.

But Nathi is right. He's too angry. Too raw. And if he goes to her now, he'll say things he can't take back.

So he sits there, fury and helplessness burning in his chest.

Chapter 22

Ntombi

It's Thursday morning. I'm getting ready for rehearsals. Today marks the end of week one.

I feel like shit. I haven't heard from Zakhile since Monday. After that phone call when he told me Vusi was waiting for me, nothing.

Was it because of Themba and those flowers? Did Vusi tell him? Is that why he sounded so cold on the phone? But why would he even care? We're not together. Of course, I tried calling. Straight to voicemail every time. He's doing it again, disappearing without explanation. And it's driving me crazy because I don't even know why I care this much. We're not in a relationship.

Vusi has been taking me to rehearsals and picking me up every day, so clearly Zakhile is fine. The whole thing confuses me. I thought he was interested. I thought there was something between us. But maybe I

was wrong. Maybe a man like him doesn't actually go for girls like me.

Meanwhile, Themba has been showing up at rehearsal every single day. Asking about my day, about how rehearsals went. And honestly? I wish it was Zakhile doing that. Coming to see me. Asking those questions. Not Themba.

I've told Themba to stop coming. Multiple times. But he refuses to listen. I don't understand what his deal is. You can't just suddenly be so interested in someone. Something about the whole thing feels off.

I grab my bag, say my morning prayer, and lock the door.

Vusi is already waiting outside. I walk to the car. He's on the phone.

Vusi: Sure, boss.

He hangs up.

Me: Morning, Vusi. Was that Zakhile?

Vusi: (Opening the car door) Good morning, Miss Ntombi. Yes, that was Mr. Mthethwa.

So his phone works. Good to know.

Me: Can you call him for me, please?

Vusi hesitates, shifting his weight.

Vusi: I'm sorry, Miss. I can't do that. You'll have to call him on your phone.

Right. Of course. Zakhile doesn't want to talk to me.

Me: (My voice firm) Okay. Tell your boss I don't need a driver anymore. I can take myself to and from work.

Vusi: Miss…

Me: No, it's fine. You're already here, so I'll go with you today. But don't pick me up tomorrow. Tell him I appreciate everything, but I'm good.

Vusi nods and opens the door wider. I get in. The drive to the Playhouse is silent. When we arrive, I turn to him.

Me: Thank you for everything, Vusi. But today has to be the last day you pick me up.

I get out and close the door before he can respond. My chest feels tight, but I'll survive.

Inside the rehearsal room, Okuhle is already there with some of the other cast members. I greet everyone and head to change into rehearsal clothes. As I'm about to leave the changing room, Okuhle walks in.

Okuhle: Hey, babe. Thought I'd check on you.

She sounds concerned.

Me: Hi, Diro. Is something wrong?

Okuhle: (Shaking her head) No, everything's great. You're doing amazing. It's just... (She pauses, studying my face) are you okay? Like, really okay?

Me: (Forcing a smile) Yeah, I'm fine.

Okuhle: (Crossing her arms) Ntombi, I might not know you that well yet, but I can tell something's up. You've been off the past few days.

Damn. She noticed. Thanks a lot, Zakhile.

Me: (Exhaling deeply) I'll be fine. Just going through something. But I'll be okay.

Okuhle: (Her voice softening) Look, I need you okay. You're carrying this whole show. So here's what we're doing, we're going out tomorrow. Something fun. Do you drink?

Me: Okuhle, you don't have to…

Okuhle: (Waving her hand) I'm not taking no for an answer.

I smile a little

Me: I do drink, yes.

Okuhle: (Grinning) Perfect. There's this place I know. Super chill, but you'll have a great time. I'm picking you up tomorrow. I'll have some friends there.

Me: Can I bring my friend? I get awkward around new people.

Okuhle: (Nodding enthusiastically) Absolutely. Bring whoever. The more the merrier.

I laugh. She's so sweet. If only she knew her brother is the reason I'm going through it in the first place.

Okuhle: Let's get back.

Rehearsal goes well. The room feels different now, more confident, more focused. Everyone knows what's expected. We've blocked scenes, established relationships, worked through the logistics. Today we run sections that have already been blocked. Mistakes happen that's normal at this stage. We're all still using scripts. Okuhle gives notes, sets expectations for next week.

Before I know it, the day is over. Week one done.

I change clothes and grab my bag. Hopefully Themba isn't lurking around outside.

I step out of the building. I look around carefully. No Themba in sight. Thank God.

“MaMbulazi”

I freeze. Only one person calls me that. I turn around slowly, see him standing there in a black shirt and jeans, hands in his pockets. My heart jumps. Then I turn back and keep walking.

I'm happy to see him. And angry. And I can't deal with this right now.

His footsteps follow me. I stop abruptly and spin around.

Me: (My voice sharp) What do you want, Zakhile?

He takes a step closer.

Zakhile: Can I take you home?

Me: (Shaking my head) No.

Zakhile: (His voice low) Mama…

Me: (Raising my hand) No. You don't get to do that. You don't get to disappear for days and then show up like nothing happened. I don't need this confusion in my life. The mixed signals. If you don't know what you want, just stay away. Please.

I turn and walk away, blinking back tears. Then suddenly my feet leave the ground.

I scream. Zakhile has thrown me over his shoulder like a bag of rice.

Me: (Pounding on his back) Zakhile! What are you doing? Put me down!

He doesn't answer. Just keeps walking with long, determined strides.

Me: Put me down right now!

People are staring. Some are laughing. I'm mortified. But he doesn't stop. He carries me all the way to his car, opens the passenger door, and sets me down inside. Before I can move, he closes the door, walks around to his side, gets in, and starts driving.

I cross my arms and turn to look out the window. I'm furious. I don't say a word.

Zakhile

When Vusi told me what Ntombi said, I knew I'd messed up badly.

The Themba situation had me so angry I couldn't think straight. I didn't want to talk to her while I was like that. But staying away was the wrong move. I should have been there. I'm healed enough now. I decided to pick her up myself.

I glance at her in the passenger seat. She's livid, arms crossed, jaw tight, staring out the window. I don't know what possessed me to just pick her up like that. I didn't think. I just couldn't let her walk away.

I'm taking her to my place. We need to talk.

Then I hear it. A soft sniffle. Then another.

Shit. She's crying.

I pull over immediately, yanking the handbrake. I get out, rush to her side, and open the door. I unbuckle her seatbelt and crouch down in front of her.

Me: (My voice soft) MaMbulazi, ngiyaxolisa, mama. I'm sorry. Ngicela ungakhali, mama.

She wipes her tears roughly with the back of her hand, but they keep coming. Seeing her cry is killing me.

I reach for her hand.

Me: Please look at me.

She does. Her eyes are red and puffy. My chest tightens.

Me: I'm sorry. For everything. For how I handled things. For disappearing.

Ntombi: (Her voice breaking) This is too much, Zakhile. I keep attracting the same kind of men. Disappearing whenever they feel like it. And I'm just supposed to understand, right? (She wipes her face again) I told you how I felt. You said nothing. You just dismissed me.

Me: (Shaking my head) I didn't dismiss you. I wanted us to talk somewhere quiet, not on the street with people everywhere.

Her voice rises slightly.

Ntombi: You could have just said that.

I run my hand over my face.

Me: I know. I should have. (Pause, looking down) I've never done this before. Never had someone I care about like this. Never been in a relationship. Everything I'm feeling right now is new. You said if I don't know what I want, I should stay away. But I do know what I want.

Ntombi: (Quietly) What do you want?

I look directly into her eyes.

Me: You.

Ntombi: (Blinking) What?

Me: I want you, Ntombi. I've wanted you from the beginning.

She stares at me, her lips parted slightly.

Me: I know I've been confusing. I know I disappeared. But it wasn't because I didn't care. It's because I cared too much. (My jaw tightens) I thought you were into Themba and I got jealous. Really jealous. And I didn't want to come to you angry like that.

Ntombi: You were jealous?

Me: (Nodding) Yes.

Something shifts in her expression. The anger softens, but the hurt is still there.

She shakes her head slowly.

Ntombi: You can't just disappear on me, Zakhile. You can't go silent and expect me to wait around.

Me: (Squeezing her hand) I know. I'm sorry. I'll do better. Just... come with me. Let me explain everything properly. No distractions. Just us.

She's quiet for a long moment. Then she nods, just slightly.

Ntombi: Okay.

I exhale in relief, close her door gently, and get back in. I pull back onto the road.

The silence isn't angry anymore. It's softer, tentative.

Me: Are you still mad at me?

Ntombi: Yes.

She still looking out the window. A small smile tugs at my lips

Me: Fair enough.

She almost smiles. Almost.

We drive through the city until we reach the estate. I stop at the security gate. The guard recognizes my car and waves us through. As we drive in, the houses get bigger, the streets pristine and quiet. Manicured lawns, high walls, expensive cars in driveways. She shifts in her seat and looks around.

Ntombi: Where do you live?

Me: You'll see.

I pull up to my gate and it opens automatically. I drive through and park in front of the house.

She stares at it, her eyes widening.

Ntombi: This is your house?

Me: Yes.

Ntombi: (Still staring) It's huge.

Me: Come.

I open her door. She gets out slowly, still looking at the house. I unlock the front door and we go inside.

Ntombi: You live here alone?

Me: Yes.

She nods slowly.

Me: Let's sit.

I lead her to the living room. She sits on the edge of the couch, hands in her lap. I sit across from her on the opposite couch.

Me: Do you want water? Tea?

Ntombi: Water is fine.

I get up and go to the kitchen. I pour two glasses and bring them back. She takes one.

Ntombi: (Softly) Thank you.

I sit down again, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees.

Me: Ntombi, I need you to know something. When I said I want you, I meant it. This isn't a game. You're not a game to me. I know I've confused you. I know I hurt you. But my feelings are real.

She looks down at her glass.

Ntombi: Why didn't you just tell me?

Me: (Meeting her eyes) I thought you wouldn't feel the same. That I'd lose you before I even had you. I've never done this before.

She's quiet for a moment. Then:

Ntombi: You hurt me, Zakhile. When you disappeared, when you didn't call... it hurt.

Me: I know. I'm sorry.

Ntombi: I thought you didn't care. I thought maybe I imagined everything.

I shake my head firmly.

Me: You didn't imagine it. What's between us is real.

She searches my face, her eyes moving over my features like she's trying to read me.

Me: You have to stay away from Themba.

Ntombi: Themba means nothing to me.

I look up sharply, my heart jumping.

Me: What?

Ntombi: Themba. He means nothing. I've told him to stop coming around. He won't listen.

Relief floods through me so hard I have to take a breath.

Me: You don't want him?

She shakes her head.

Ntombi: No.

I lean forward.

Me: Who do you want, Ntombi?

She looks at me. Holds my gaze. Her chest rises and falls.

Ntombi: I think you know.

My heart pounds so hard I can hear it in my ears.

Me: I need to hear you say it.

Her vice barely a whisper.

Ntombi: You. I want you.

I stand up and cross to her in three strides. I kneel in front of her, my hands on her knees.

Me: Say it again.

Ntombi: (Her breath catching) I want you, Zakhile.

I cup her face in my hands, my thumbs brushing away the dried tears on her cheeks.

Me: I'm sorry I made you doubt that. I'm sorry I hurt you. But I'm not going anywhere. I'm here. And I'm not letting you go.

Tears shine in her eyes again, but this time they're different. She nods.

My voice drops to a whisper.

Me: Can I kiss you?

She doesn't answer. She just leans forward and presses her lips to mine.

The kiss is soft at first. Tentative. Then her hands come up to my face and I pull her closer, deepening the kiss. Everything else disappears, the hurt, the confusion, the anger. It's just us.

When we finally pull apart, we're both breathing hard. I rest my forehead against hers.

Me: (Smiling) You're mine now, MaMbulazi.

She smiles back, her voice teasing.

Ntombi: Is that so?

Me: Yes. That's so.

She laughs, and the sound fills the whole house.

Chapter 23

Ntombi

Oh my God, Zakhile's house is to die for. Everything about it screams wealth and taste. Him and his siblings have really done well for themselves. Even Lizwi's house is beautiful, but this? This is on another level.

I still can't believe we've made it official. Me, Ntombi Khumalo, in a relationship with Zakhile Mthethwa. To say I'm happy would be an understatement. My heart feels like it's going to burst. I've fallen for someone I barely know, but somehow it feels right. Like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. And I can't help it. I don't even want to help it.

He's outside right now dealing with something security-related. I need to ask him what he does for a living. All this security, the cars, this house in an estate, you'd swear he's running the country.

The front door opens and he walks back in, adjusting his watch. I'm still on the couch, my hands folded in my lap. I'm nervous. Still trying to process that this is real.

He walks over, sitting next to me.

Zakhile: I hope I didn't take long.

Me: (Shaking my head) Not at all. But I actually need to get going. I need a hot shower to wash off all this sweat from rehearsals.

His hand finds mine, thumb brushing over my knuckles.

Zakhile: But mama, you don't have to go now. You can shower here. I have plenty of bathrooms.

I laugh. He's completely serious.

Me: (Smiling) What am I going to shower with, Mr. Mthethwa? And wear what afterwards? My sweaty clothes?

He pulls me a little closer.

Zakhile: You can use my stuff. I have new toiletries. Unopened. Well, except you're going to smell like me afterwards. And I'm sure you'll find something in my closet. A shirt. Something.

I stay quiet, thinking. I'm still so shy around him. This is all so new. He leans in, watching my face.

Zakhile: Or I can send someone to go buy whatever you need. Clothes, toiletries, everything.

He's completely serious. He really doesn't want me to leave.

Me: (Softly) You don't want me to go, do you?

Zakhile: Am I wrong for wanting to have you around a bit longer? Just the two of us. Getting to know each other properly.

My heart does a little flip. I smile.

Me: (Shaking my head) What am I going to do with you? Fine. I'll use your stuff.

His face lights up with the biggest grin.

Zakhile: Perfect.

He stands up, pulling me to my feet.

Zakhile: I'm sure you're starving too. There's no food in the house though. I don't cook. But I can order something. Anything you want.

Me: (Tilting my head) Who cooks for you then?

He scatches the back of his head.

Zakhile: I have a chef. She doesn't live here or anything. I call her when I need her. Most of the time I just order takeout.

I laugh, stepping closer.

Me: Oh my God. Do you even know your way around your own kitchen?

He rubs his head, grimacing slightly.

Zakhile: Uhm...yeah... not really. I go there for quick things. Coffee. Cereal. Water. That's about it.

I burst out laughing. He's adorable.

I stand right in front of him now.

Me: Oh my goodness. Tell you what, how about for the first time ever, you actually cook in your kitchen? With your beautiful girlfriend?

He stands up fully and pulls me in by my waist. Suddenly we're inches apart. He's so tall I have to tilt my head all the way back to look at him. Our eyes lock. My knees go weak. There's this fluttering in my stomach that won't stop.

He has the most beautiful eyes. Dark. Intense. And that scar above his eyebrow, the one I've dreamed about. My gaze drops to his lips. Full. Perfectly shaped. He hasn't even done anything, but just standing this close, feeling his hands on my waist, the way he's looking at me. I

feel heat pooling low in my belly. Am I actually wet right now? He didn't even touch me.

I look down, breaking eye contact. I can't handle the way he's staring at me. It's too much. I shouldn't have stood up.

He lifts my chin with one finger, forcing me to look at him again.

Zakhile: (His voice low, almost a growl) Mhm. I'm not so sure about that.

I clear my throat, trying to sound normal.

Me: It will be fun. You... you'll enjoy it. Trust me.

His eyes darken, roaming over my face.

Zakhile: Mhmm. I'll do anything for you.

I smile then I try to step back, create some space. He pulls me even closer. His eyes drop to my lips, lingering there. Then I feel it. His bulge. Hard. Pressing against

me. Oh my God. He's hard. From just standing close to me?

Zakhile: You're so beautiful.

My voice is gone. My brain has completely shut down. I can't form words.

Me: Th... thank you.

He chuckles, a low, deep sound that vibrates through his chest. Then he smirks, and I nearly collapse.

I clear my throat, stepping back quickly.

Me: Uhm... I should go take that shower now. We'll start with dinner afterwards.

He reaches out, his hand wrapping around the back of my neck gently. He pulls me in, rests his forehead against mine. For a moment we just breathe together. Then he kisses my forehead. Soft. Sweet. His breath warm against my skin.

Zakhile: You are driving me crazy, Ntombi… and you don’t even realise it.

He Pauses. Our eyes lock again. He clears his throat.

Zakhile: Let me show you the room.

He adjusts himself, not even subtly and I can still see the bulge straining against his pants. I swallow hard. Jesus. The man is gifted. Ntombi, compose yourself. Get it together.

I follow him up the stairs, my legs feeling like jelly.

We reach the master bedroom and I stop in the doorway, taking it all in. It's stunning. Spacious, calm, masculine. A large bed dominates the center of the room, made up perfectly with neutral bedding, grey, cream, beige. The headboard is dark wood, solid, matching the rest of the furniture. Everything is clean. Minimal. No clutter. Just clean lines and carefully chosen pieces.

Floor-to-ceiling glass doors lead out to a private balcony. I can see the estate grounds stretching out below, perfectly manicured lawns and trees. The light pouring in makes everything feel warm despite the cool color palette. Heavy curtains frame the windows for privacy.

One entire wall is built-in wardrobes. Sleek. Seamless.

He stands behind me, his hands in his pockets.

Zakhile: This is my bedroom. Ours, from now on. You can use the shower in here.

I walk further in, running my hand along the bed.

Me: This is beautiful. Very masculine though.

I peek into the en-suite bathroom. Modern. Polished. A huge glass walk-in shower. Double sinks. Everything gleaming.

He comes up behind me.

Zakhile: You can change it however you like. This whole house needs a woman's touch. Your touch.

I turn to face him, blushing.

Me: (Smiling) I still need a full tour of this place. I saw the garden when we arrived. It's gorgeous. Actually, everything here is amazing.

He kisses my cheek, his lips lingering for a second longer than necessary.

Zakhile: (Softly) I'll take you on a proper tour tomorrow morning. It's even more beautiful in the daylight. There's a pool out back. A tennis court. The gardens go on forever.

I nod, trying not to think about waking up here tomorrow morning. With him.

He goes to a cupboard and pulls out a fresh, fluffy white towel and a brand new toothbrush still in its packaging. He hands them to me.

Zakhile: I'll be downstairs. Shout if you need anything. Anything at all.

Me: Thank you.

He looks at me for a long moment, like he's memorizing my face. Then he leaves, closing the door softly behind him.

I exhale. Finally, I can breathe again.

I brush my teeth, then strip out of my clothes. The shower is incredible. Multiple shower heads, perfect water pressure, the kind of heat that melts into your muscles. I stand under the spray for what feels like forever, letting the day wash off me.

When I finally get out, I wrap myself in the bathrobe hanging on the back of the door. It's massive on me, soft as a cloud. I find lotion in the cupboard, expensive, barely used and lotion my whole body.

Then I open his closet. It's huge. An entire walk-in wardrobe. Rows and rows of perfectly pressed shirts, suits, shoes lined up like soldiers. Everything organized by color. Very Zakhile.

I find a simple white t-shirt and pull it on. It falls to mid-thigh on me, but it's comfortable. Modest enough. I find a pair of his socks, thick, grey and pull those on too.

I catch my reflection in the mirror. Face bare, drowning in his clothes. I look young. Happy. I smile at myself.

Then I head back downstairs.

He's in the living room, sitting on the couch with his phone in his hand. When he hears me, he looks up. And the smile that spreads across his face? It does things to me.

He stands immediately, walking over to me. His eyes traveling slowly from my head to my toes.

Zakhile: Mama. Mhm. That shirt looks good on you.

I do a little spin.

Me: It's what I could find. Now come. Let's go cook. Where's the kitchen?

He stares at me for a beat too long, raises his eyebrow.

Zakhile: We're really cooking? You're serious?

I take his hand, pulling him.

Me: Yes. It's called bonding. We get to know each other while we cook. Ask questions. Talk. You know, normal couple things.

He laughs, shaking his head.

Zakhile: Okay, okay. This way, chef.

He leads me through the house. The kitchen is just as impressive as everything else. Massive. Modern. Marble countertops. Top-of-the-line appliances that look like they've never been used.

I look around, hands on my hips.

Me: Okay. So what do you have in here?

He opens the fridge, peering inside.

Zakhile: Uhm, honestly I have no idea. But it is fully stocked.

I laugh. I walk over and peer inside. The fridge is fully stocked. Fresh vegetables, chicken, cream, cheese, herbs. The pantry has pasta, spices, everything we need.

I turn to him, with a smile.

Me: Perfect. We're making creamy chicken pasta. Quick, easy, and delicious.

He leans against the counter, arms crossed, watching me.

Zakhile: Sounds good. What do you need me to do?

Me: (Pulling out ingredients) First, you're going to help me prep. Get me a cutting board and a knife.

He moves around the kitchen surprisingly well for someone who claims not to cook. He finds everything I ask for, setting it all on the counter. I hand him an onion and garlic.

Me: Okay, chef. You're going to chop these. Small pieces.

He takes them, looking sceptical.

Zakhile: I can do that.

I pull out the chicken breasts, rinse them, and start cutting them into bite-sized pieces.

He watches me for a moment, then starts working on the onion. His cuts are uneven, but he's trying.

Me: (Glancing over, smiling) Not bad for a first-timer.

Zakhile: (Concentrating hard) I'm trying not to cut my fingers off.

I laugh. There's something intimate about this. Cooking together in his massive kitchen. Just the two of us. Talking. Learning each other.

Narrated

Across town, Themba sits in his apartment. The lights are off except for the lamp in the corner. He's pacing,

phone pressed hard against his ear. His voice tight with frustration.

Themba: Dad, I tried everything, okay? She's not budging. And I can't push too hard. She'll get suspicious.

Zondi: She's different. Not what I expected. Mfundo says Zakhile picked her up today. Personally. He still isn't sure what's happening between them, but something is.

Themba stops pacing, runs his hand through his hair.

Themba: (His jaw clenching) We'll have to do this the hard way then. We don't have a choice anymore. Time is running out, and we can't let Zakhile find that evidence first.

Zondi: That son of a bitch will use it to destroy me. I know he will. He's been waiting for this.

Themba: (Sitting down heavily) So what's next? What do you want me to do?

There's a pause. Silence on the line. Zondi is thinking. Calculating.

Zondi: Let me think. I'll let you know what the plan is. Soon.

The line goes dead. Themba pulls the phone away from his ear and stares at it. Then he throws it onto the couch and leans back, closing his eyes. His jaw is tight. His hands are fists.

The Mthethwa House, Umhlanga

In the Mthethwa family home, Okuhle is curled up on the couch with her sister Vuyiswa. They each have a glass of wine. The house is quiet, warm. Comfortable.

Vuyiswa: (Swirling her wine, smiling) I'm glad everything is coming together with the play. You were so stressed about casting.

Okuhle: (Nodding, taking a sip) Everyone is amazing. I casted well. The chemistry is there. We just need to tighten up a few scenes. Then we go deep into choreography next week.

She trails off, staring into her glass. Vuyiswa notices.

Vuyiswa: (Leaning forward) What's wrong?

Okuhle: It's Ntombi. My lead. She's been off the past few days. Quiet. Sad. And I'm really worried about her. Which is weird because I barely know her. But I care. A lot.

Vuyiswa: That is weird. What do you mean?

Okuhle: (Shrugging) There's just something about her. It's like... like she's family. You know that feeling you get sometimes? Like someone belongs to you? Like you're supposed to protect them?

Vuyiswa: (Laughing softly) That's crazy, Okuhle.

Okuhle: Maybe she's Dad's long-lost daughter. A secret love child he forgot to mention.

Vuyiswa laughs harder, shaking her head.

Vuyiswa: Please. No. Your brothers would have sniffed that out years ago. They're like bloodhounds when it comes to family secrets. Zakhile would've had Nathi dig up everything. Dad wouldn't have been able to hide a whole child.

Okuhle: (Grinning) True. They definetly would have found out.

Vuyiswa: But I want to meet her now. You've got me curious. Bring her for dinner with the family. Maybe we'll all feel it. Or maybe Dad will look at her and go, "Oh yes, that's definitely my daughter."

They both laugh.

Okuhle: (Nodding) We're going out tomorrow night. I'll ask her then. Hopefully she doesn't think I'm completely insane.

Vuyiswa: (Raising her glass) To family dinners and potential long-lost sisters.

Okuhle clicks her glass against her sisters’

Okuhle: To not being weird.

They laugh together, the sound filling the cozy room.

Chapter 24

Zakhile

My view is perfect. I could watch this every day for the rest of my life. I didn't know falling in love could be this beautiful. I'm watching the woman I love move around my kitchen in nothing but my shirt, and it looks so good on her. I'm whipped. Completely gone.

I'm trying so hard to control myself and these dirty thoughts, but she's making it impossible. Her laugh does things to me. Every time she touches me, even just a brush of her hand, I feel it everywhere. She's driving me insane. The power she has over me is terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

She's talking about something, the pasta, I think but I can't focus. I'm too busy staring at her. The way the shirt hits her thighs. The way she bites her lip when she's concentrating.

She stops mid-sentence and stands in front of me, waving her hand in my face.

Ntombi: (Laughing) Mr. Mthethwa, I'm talking to you. Where did you disappear to?

She looks so cute right now, hands on her hips, trying to look stern but failing.

I smile, pulling her closer.

Me: I'm sorry. I was just thinking about this beautiful woman in front of me.

She tilts her head, a small smile on her lips.

Ntombi: Mhm. And what exactly are you thinking?

Me: How beautiful you are. And how sexy this shirt makes you look. How much I want to…

I don't finish. I pull her in by her waist and crash my lips onto hers. The kiss is intense, hungry. I can already feel myself getting hard. I want her. Right now. Right here on this kitchen counter.

She pulls back, both of us breathing hard.

Ntombi: The pots... let me check the pots.

Her voice shaky, glancing at the stove. I know my eyes are dark right now, hooded with want.

Me: We can just let them burn.

She laughs breathlessly, pushing against my chest.

Ntombi: Oh no, I'm too hungry for that, Nyambose.

She walks over to check the pots and I look down at myself. Fuck. Look what she did to me. I'm rock hard and she's acting like she didn't just set me on fire.

She Turns around with a bright smile

Ntombi: It's all done now. Let's set the table and have our dinner.

I chuckle and shake my head, adjusting myself as subtly as I can. I walk over to stand next to her.

Me: Yes, ma'am.

I lean in close, my lips near her ear.

Me: (Whispering) You make me so weak, Ntombi. I'm failing to control myself around you.

Her breathing changes. I hear it catch in her throat. She steps closer, looking up at me through her lashes. Then she bites her bottom lip.

Ntombi: (Her voice soft) I'm failing too, Nyambose. I…

I don't let her finish. I smash my lips onto hers and we kiss like we're starving for each other. I pick her up effortlessly and she wraps her legs around my waist. I set her on top of the counter and she moans into my mouth. That sound drives me crazy.

My hands move up her thighs, under my shirt she's wearing. I caress her breasts, feeling her nipples harden under my palms. She arches into me.

Right then, my phone rings.

We both freeze. I let it ring. It rings again. Persistent. She is breathing hard, her forehead against mine.

Ntombi: I think you should get that.

I growl in frustration.

Me: Fuck. Let me answer it.

She giggles, actually giggles and slides off the counter, walking out of the kitchen. I watch her go, her hips swaying, and I want to throw my phone across the room.

I pull it out of my pocket. Lizwi. Of course.

Me: Lizwi, this better be important.

Lizwi: What? Did I catch you at a bad time?

Me: Very bad. What do you want?

Lizwi: Ouch. What were you doing? Anyway, Nathi sent a message. He wants us to meet at his place. He found something. Are you coming?

I run my hand over my face.

Me: No. I have Ntombi over. I'll meet you all tomorrow.

Lizwi: Oh, so you've made it official then?

Me: Yes. Today.

Lizwi: (Laughing) It was about time. You're whipped already. You're not showing up to the meeting because of her. I guess your heart isn't as cold as we all thought.

I smile, thinking about just how whipped I am. When it comes to her, I'd do literally anything.

Me: (Chuckling) Can you believe she made me cook with her? I chopped vegetables. With a knife. Me.

He laughs loud enough that I have to pull the phone away from my ear.

Lizwi: I love her already. Listen, bring her to dinner at my place. Let us meet her officially.

Me: I'll ask her about it.

She comes back into the kitchen and starts setting plates on the table. I watch her, completely gone.

Me: Lizwi, fill me in tomorrow. Sharp.

Lizwi: Sharp.

I end the call.

Ntombi

I almost gave it up right there on the counter. My God, Zakhile. He makes me wet just by looking at me. Makes my knees weak with just a whisper. His phone interrupts us and I practically run to the bathroom upstairs to wipe myself. It was already dripping down there. I clean myself up, splash some water on my face, and try to calm down.

Get it together, Ntombi.

I go back downstairs and continue setting the table. We sit down and I dish out the pasta we made. The sexual tension in the room is thick. You could cut it with a knife. But we need to eat. Food first. Sex later. Maybe.

He keeps looking at me. Not just looking, staring. Like he wants to devour me. It makes me incredibly shy. I can feel my cheeks burning.

We start eating.

Zakhile: That was my brother on the phone. Lizwi. He wants us to come have dinner at his place tomorrow. Meet my brothers officially.

I almost choke on my pasta.

Me: (Coughing slightly) With me? Uhm... maybe some other time? I'm going out with Okuhle tomorrow.

Zakhile: (Raising an eyebrow) You're really close with her.

Me: (Nodding, smiling) Yeah, she's a sweet soul. Very kind. I really like her.

He chuckles, shaking his head.

Zakhile: She always gets on my nerves. All my siblings do. But I love them regardless.

I laugh.

Me: Well, I don't relate. I'm an only child. My mom didn't move on after my dad died. True love, I guess.

His expression changes. Becomes serious, concerned. He leans forward slightly.

Zakhile: How was he? Your father?

Me: (My smile turning soft, nostalgic) He was the best. I saw him love my mother so loudly and beautifully. They were so happy together. He gave me everything. He was my best friend. (My voice catches) His death was a shock. We weren't expecting it at all. That night, the night he died, he gave me this necklace.

I touch the necklace around my neck, holding it between my fingers.

Me: It's a part of him he left me with. I know he's still with me somehow, you know?

I smile, but I feel tears rolling down my cheeks. I didn't even realize I was crying.

Suddenly he's next to me, kneeling beside my chair. He wipes my tears with his thumb, his touch gentle.

Zakhile: Don't cry, MaMbulazi. It hurts me to see you cry.

I sniff, wiping my face.

Me: Sorry. I didn't even realize.

Zakhile: Can I touch it? The necklace?

Me: (Nodding) Sure.

He reaches out and touches it carefully, examining it. Then he tries to open it, his fingers working the clasp.

Zakhile: (Frowning slightly) It doesn't open?

Me: I don't know. I've tried opening it but I couldn't. So I just let it be. I didn't want to force it.

Zakhile: You're not curious what's inside?

Me: (Shrugging) Not really. I just don't want to force it open and end up breaking it. It's all I have left of him.

He nods, studying the necklace for another moment, then goes back to his seat.

We continue eating, the conversation lighter now. We talk about small things, his favorite movies, my worst audition story, places we want to travel. When we finish, we do the dishes together. I wash, he dries. I hate messy kitchens and he helps without complaining, which I find adorable.

When we're done, we head upstairs.

I stop at the bedroom door, suddenly nervous.

Me: Am I sleeping here? With you?

I won't survive the night with him in the same bed. Not after everything that's happened today.

He smiles, turning to face me.

Zakhile: Yeah. You're not comfortable?

Me: (Quickly) No, not that. I just thought... maybe since it's the first night together, we should... I could sleep in the guest bedroom?

Zakhile: (Shaking his head) Not happening. I don't mind sharing the bed. It's big enough for both of us.

Me: (Swallowing) Okay then. I guess we're sharing the bed.

Zakhile: Let me take a quick shower. I'll be joining you in a few minutes.

I nod. He starts undressing right there and I quickly turn around, my heart racing.

He comes up behind me, still shirtless, and kisses my neck from behind. His lips are warm, soft.

He chuckles against my skin, then walks to the bathroom. I hear the door close.

I finally breathe.

I get under the covers quickly, still wearing his t-shirt. I'll be sleeping in this. I try to close my eyes, try to sleep, but sleep doesn't come. My mind is racing. My body is still buzzing from earlier.

I hear the shower turn off. Then the bathroom door opens.

He walks out with just a towel wrapped around his waist, water still dripping from his head, running down his chest. My mouth goes dry.

He catches me staring and smirks. Walks to the closet.

Zakhile: Like what you see?

I turn away quickly, pulling the covers up.

Me: Shut up.

He laughs, that deep rumbling laugh that does things to my insides.

He drops the towel. I can hear it hit the floor and pulls on something. Sweatpants, I assume. Please let it be sweatpants.

He climbs into bed beside me, and the mattress dips under his weight. He reaches over and turns off the bedside lamp. The room goes dark except for the moonlight streaming through the windows.

He pulls me close, my back to his chest.

Zakhile: Come here.

Me: I thought we were just sleeping.

He wraps his arm around my waist.

Zakhile: We are. I just want to hold you.

I relax into him, feeling his warmth, his strength. His breath is on my neck. His hand is splayed across my stomach.

This is nice. Safe. Perfect.

But then I feel it. His hardness pressing against my backside.

Me: (My breath catching) Zakhile...

Zakhile: Ignore it. Just... ignore it. I'll be fine.

I turning slightly to look at him over my shoulder.

Me: Are you sure?

His eyes meet mine in the darkness. Dark. Intense. Filled with want.

Zakhile: (His jaw tight) No. I'm not sure. But I don't want to rush you. We don't have to do anything you're not ready for.

My heart is pounding.

Me: And if I am ready?

His hand on my stomach tightens. His breathing changes.

Zakhile: Are you?

His voice barely above a whisper. I turn fully to face him, our noses almost touching. I look into his eyes.

Me: Yes.

That's all he needs.

He kisses me hard, his hand sliding up to cup my face. I kiss him back just as desperately, my hands finding his chest, feeling the hard muscles under my palms.

He rolls on top of me, his weight pressing me into the mattress. His hand slides under my shirt, his shirt and I arch into his touch. He breaks the kiss, breathing hard, his voice rough.

Zakhile: Are you sure about this?

I pull him back down to me.

Me: I've never been more sure of anything.

He smiles against my lips, then captures them again in a deep, consuming kiss. He whispers against my mouth.

Zakhile: Tell me if you want me to stop. At any point. Okay?

I nod, my hands touching his head.

Me: Okay.

He pulls my shirt over my head slowly, his eyes taking in every inch of my exposed skin. I'm completely bare beneath him now. His eyes darken with hunger.

Zakhile: Fucking beautiful.

Then his mouth is on me, kissing, sucking, tasting. My neck. My collarbone. Down to my breasts. He takes his time with each one, his tongue circling my nipples until I'm squirming beneath him, desperate for more.

Me: (Gasping) Zakhile... please.

His hand slides down my body, over my ribs, my stomach to my hip. When his fingers finally reach between my legs, we both groan.

Zakhile: Fuck, Ntombi. You're soaking wet. All for me?

I whimper, my hips moving against his hand.

Me: Yes. Only for you.

His fingers work me expertly, finding that perfect spot that makes my toes curl. He slides one finger inside me, then two, stretching me, preparing me. I'm panting, gripping his shoulders, completely lost in the sensation.

Zakhile: (Watching my face intently) That's it, baby. Let me feel you.

The pressure builds and builds until I'm right on the edge. Then he curls his fingers just right and I shatter, crying out his name, my body arching off the bed.

He works me through it, his fingers gentling as I come down, trembling. I am breathing hard, looking up at him.

Me: That was...

Zakhile: (Kissing me softly) We're just getting started.

He pulls off his sweatpants and my eyes widen. He's huge. Thick and long, already hard and ready.

He positions himself between my legs, the head of him pressing against my entrance. He looks into my eyes, his hand cupping my face.

Zakhile: (His voice soft) I've got you. Breathe for me, okay?

Me: (Nodding) Okay.

He pushes in slowly, inch by inch. The stretch is intense. More than I expected. I gasp, my nails digging into his back. He freezes immediately.

Zakhile: Too much?

Me: (Shaking my head) No. Keep going. Please.

He inches in deeper, giving me time to adjust to his size. When he's finally fully seated inside me, we both groan. He's so deep I can feel him everywhere, his forehead pressed against mine, his voice strained.

Zakhile: Fuck. You feel incredible. So tight. So perfect.

He starts to move slowly, pulling out almost all the way before sliding back in. Each thrust deliberate, controlled, hitting spots inside me I didn't even know existed.

Me: (Moaning) Yes. Just like that.

He picks up the pace, his hips moving faster, harder. The sound of skin slapping against skin fills the room along with our moans and heavy breathing.

Zakhile: You're taking me so well, baby. So fucking well.

His hand slides between us, his thumb finding my clit. He rubs circles while he thrusts, and the dual sensation is overwhelming.

Me: Oh God. Zakhile. I'm…

His thrusts become more urgent.

Zakhile: I know. I can feel you. Come for me, Ntombi. Let go.

A few more thrusts and I'm gone. The orgasm crashes over me like a wave, my body convulsing around him, his name a scream on my lips.

Zakhile: (Groaning) Fuck. I'm close. So close.

His rhythm falters, becomes erratic. I can feel him pulsing inside me.

I pull him closer, whispering in his ear.

Me: Let go, baby. I want to feel you.

That's all it takes. With a deep groan, he buries himself as deep as he can go and I feel him release inside me. Hot. Pulsing. Filling me completely.

Zakhile: (His body shuddering) Ntombi. Fuck. Ntombi.

He stays inside me for a long moment, both of us breathing hard, hearts racing. Then he carefully pulls out and I feel his release start to drip out of me.

He looks down between my legs, his eyes darkening again.

Zakhile: You're mine.

Me: (Smiling, breathless) Yours.

He gets up and disappears into the bathroom. He comes back with a warm washcloth and gently cleans me up, his touch tender and caring. When he's done, he tosses the cloth aside and climbs back into bed, pulling me into his arms.

After, we lie tangled together, both of us breathing hard, skin slick with sweat. He's still holding me close, his hand running up and down my back soothingly. He kisses my forehead.

Zakhile: You okay?

I snuggle into his chest.

Me: More than okay.

He tightens his arms around me.

Zakhile: You're mine now, MaMbulazi. You know that, right?

I smile, my eyes already closing.

Me: I'm yours.

Zakhile: (His voice soft, sleepy) I love you.

My eyes fly open. Did he just...?

Me: What?

He looks at me directly.

Zakhile: I love you, Ntombi. I know it's fast. I know we just made this official. But I do. I love you.

My heart feels like it's going to explode.

Me: (My voice thick with emotion) I love you too.

He smiles, that beautiful smile that makes my whole world brighter. Then he kisses me softly, tenderly.

Zakhile: Go to sleep, sthandwa sami.

Me: (Yawning) Goodnight, Nyambose.

Within minutes, we're both asleep, wrapped in each other's arms, completely at peace.

Chapter 25

Ntombi

I feel kisses all over my face. I slowly open my eyes and it's Zakhile, kissing me awake. I cover my face with my hands, smiling.

Me: (Yawning) Oh my God, Zakhile. What time is it?

Zakhile: (Grinning) It's 10:00 AM. I missed you. Thought I should wake you up.

I smile, stretching.

Me: I slept that long? Gosh, I guess I was really tired. You made me tired.

Well, he really did a number on me. He woke me in the middle of the night for two more rounds. I'm exhausted but I had a very good night, I must say. How is he not tired after all that work?

He laughs, that deep rumble that makes my toes curl.

Zakhile: (Leaning over me) Come on, sthandwa sami. You can't blame the guy. Look at you, so beautiful and sexy. How was I supposed to cope?

I blush. My cheeks are burning red.

Zakhile: Breakfast is ready. I also got you the morning-after pill. And toiletries and some clothes.

I sit up, shocked. Then it hits me. We didn't use protection. How can I be so reckless?

Me: (My hand flying to my mouth) Oh my God, we didn't use protection. That's... that's really thoughtful of you. Thank you. I really can't afford to be pregnant right now. My career is just about to bloom and pregnancy would definitely set me back. I need to book a doctor's appointment.

He sits next to me, his hand on my thigh.

Zakhile: Baby, calm down. A doctor's appointment for what?

Me: I need to be on birth control. ASAP.

Zakhile: (Laughing softly) That can be arranged, mama. I can speak to a doctor I know and see if she can squeeze us in today. Would that be okay?

Me: (Relief flooding through me) Really? Yes, please.

Zakhile: (Pulling me close) You can relax now, okay? Breathe. Are you that scared of carrying my seed?

Me: It's not that. It's just not now, okay? I'm not ready.

He smiles, understanding in his eyes.

Zakhile: (Nodding) I understand. Although I wouldn't mind at all.

He kisses my stomach and I giggle, pushing him away playfully.

Me: More reasons I need to be on birth control. Anyways, when did you get the time to get everything? And you... you made breakfast?

He laughs.

Zakhile: No, I called my chef to come make us breakfast. And I sent someone to go buy your stuff.

Me: (My eyes widening) You did what? Zakhile... you didn't have to. I would've made us breakfast and gone to my place to get my things.

Zakhile: (Cupping my face) Mama, you're tired. I just wanted you to relax on your day off. Allow me to take care of you. Besides, I still want to spend the day with you.

Me: (Smiling) Mr. Mthethwa, you can't keep me here forever, you know that, right?

Zakhile: (His eyes darkening) I don't know what you did to me. I can't help it.

I laugh.

Me: Let me go take a shower.

I get out of bed, still naked. I'm shy at first, but what's the use? He's seen everything. Every part of me. He's staring at me like he wants to devour me. His look makes me feel confident, sexy. I love how he looks at me.

The shopping bags are on the floor near the closet.

Me: (Looking at them) Zakhile, so many bags. How many things did you buy?

Zakhile: (Shrugging, looking pleased with himself) I wanted you to have options so you can choose what you love.

I take the toiletry shopping bag first. So many things, body wash, shower gel, bar soap, bath sponge, loofah, exfoliating scrub, shaving cream, feminine wash. Different brands and they all smell amazing.

I look at the clothes next. Beautiful dresses, casual wear, underwear. I check one of the price tags and nearly choke.

Me: (My voice rising) So expensive! How did you even know my size?

He smirks from the bed.

Zakhile: I have my ways, Miss Khumalo.

Right. Of course he does.

I go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, wash my face, then step into the shower. I use one of the expensive body washes and I smell heavenly. Not like a man anymore. When I walk out wrapped in a bathrobe, the bed is already made. Zakhile is lying on it, facing up, his hands behind his head.

Me: (Surprised) You made the bed?

Zakhile: Yeah.

I nod, walking to the lotion. I drop the bathrobe and start lotioning my body, taking my time. He gets off the bed and I can already see the bulge growing in his pants. He's wearing black slim-fit pants with a brown

fitted polo shirt. Clean and simple. He has white slip-on shoes which make the outfit look relaxed but still neat. He looks so hot right now. I bite my bottom lip without thinking.

He adjusts himself, touching his crotch as he walks toward me. He stands behind me, mind you, I'm still completely naked and he wraps his arms around me from behind. His lips find my ear.

Zakhile: (His voice low, strained) How am I going to behave around you when you make me this weak?

I swallow hard. He turns me to face him and our lips crash together. The kiss is hungry, desperate. His hands roam my body and I melt into him.

Before I know it, he's lifting me up. I wrap my legs around his waist and he carries me back to the bed, laying me down gently.

Zakhile: (His eyes dark with desire) I need you.

Me: (Breathless) I am all yours

He pulls off his shirt in one smooth motion, then his pants. He's hard already, ready for me. He positions himself between my legs, his hands gripping my thighs.

Zakhile: (Looking into my eyes) Tell me you want this.

Me: (Pulling him down to me) I want this. I want you.

He pushes in slowly and we both groan. Even after last night, the stretch still makes me gasp. He fills me completely.

He doesn't waste time. His thrusts are deep, purposeful, hitting that spot that makes me see stars. My nails dig into his back as I hold on.

Me: (Moaning) Yes. Right there.

Zakhile: You feel so good, baby. So fucking good.

It doesn't take long. We're both still sensitive from last night. Within minutes, I'm falling apart beneath him, crying out his name. He follows right after, burying himself deep as he releases inside me again.

We lie there for a moment, catching our breath.

Zakhile: (Kissing my shoulder) Now I definitely need a shower.

Me: (Laughing) We both do.

He stands up, pulling me with him.

Zakhile: Let's go take a shower together.

Me: (Raising an eyebrow) An innocent one, please. Before we become addicts.

He laughs, picking me up and I wrap my legs around his waist.

Zakhile: (Walking toward the bathroom) I'm already addicted.

I blush, placing my head on his shoulder.

We get to the shower and, surprisingly, it is innocent. We wash each other, share soft kisses, but nothing

more. When we're done, we dry off and lotion each other's bodies.

I check the shopping bags for what to wear and choose a baby blue summer dress. It's relaxed and pretty. I pair it with white one-strap slide sandals and put a white headband on my braids, letting them hang loose.

Zakhile: (Looking at me with admiration) You look beautiful, sthandwa sami. Let's go.

We walk downstairs and my morning-after pill is on top of the kitchen counter with a glass of water next to it. I take it immediately, gulping down the water.

Breakfast is served outside. It's beautiful. The setup is on a wooden table under the trees, overlooking the garden with its colorful flowers. Pancakes are stacked neatly on white plates, topped with fresh berries. Bowls of fruit sit nearby, along with cups of coffee and tea.

The table is simple but well arranged, clean dishes, folded napkins, and a few flowers placed casually

between the plates. Sunlight filters through the leaves above, warming everything.

Zakhile is on a call, standing next to the table. He's changed into white sneakers. This man is gorgeous. And all those muscles... mhmm.

I walk toward him. He sees me, ends his call, puts his phone in his pocket, and smiles.

He pulls out a chair for me, kisses my cheek, and I sit down.

Zakhile: I'll be right back.

I nod.

He goes inside the house and comes back with a bouquet of roses. Beautiful, fresh, red roses.

Zakhile: I got you these. Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady.

I smile, my heart melting. This is so sweet. Who knew he could be this romantic?

Me: Ngiyabonga, Nyambose. This is beautiful. The breakfast setup, the flowers. I love them.

Zakhile: (Sitting down across from me) I'm glad you love them.

There's a note attached to the flowers. I open it and read:

Ngiyabonga, MaMbulazi, for trusting me with your heart. I promise to take care of it. I love you. Oh, and thank you for last night.

I laugh at the last part, folding the note and wiping the tears that threaten to fall. I'm such a crybaby.

When I look up, he's taking pictures of me with his phone.

Me: (Laughing) Are you taking pictures of me?

Zakhile: (Still snapping) Yes. You look beautiful. I thought I should capture the moment.

Me: (Blushing) I'm going to die from blushing. You're being so sweet. I didn't know you were into photography. Ngiyabonga.

Zakhile: I'm not. But for you, I can be.

Me: (Teasing) Cheesy.

He laughs.

Zakhile: I'm being serious.

We start eating. The breakfast is delicious; the chef really knows her stuff.

Zakhile: I spoke to the doctor. She said she can see us at one. Will that be okay?

Me: Yeah, that's perfect.

Zakhile: We'll go right after this.

I nod.

My phone rings. It's Okuhle. I answer.

Me: Okuhle, hi.

Okuhle: (Her voice bright) Hi, love. I'm just confirming, we're still on, right?

Me: Yes, of course.

Okuhle: Okay, be ready at 20:00. I'll pick you up.

Me: Alright then. See you then.

We end the call.

Me: (Looking at Zakhile) That was Okuhle. She's picking me up at 20:00. I don't even know where she's taking me.

Zakhile: (His jaw tightening slightly) I'm pretty sure it's a club. I know Okuhle. I'll drive you.

Me: Uhm, she said she will pick me up. I've already agreed, baby. Plus, I'm taking Bonolo with me.

He doesn't like this one bit. I can see it on his face. His jaw clenches.

Zakhile: (Flatly) Okay.

I reach across the table for his hand.

Me: How do you think she'll take the news of us dating?

Zakhile: Knowing Okuhle? She'll talk about it nonstop for weeks.

I laugh. We finish breakfast and I call Bonolo. She's beyond excited to go out tonight.

I wonder where Okuhle is taking us. Hopefully, it'll be safe. But Zakhile would've said something if it wasn't.

We take a tour of the house and walk around the yard. His home is really beautiful. It’s big big enough for a large family. My favourite part is the garden. It’s quiet and peaceful.

Narrated

They drive to the doctor's office. In the car, Zakhile can't keep his hands to himself. He's holding Ntombi's

hand, kissing the back of her palm repeatedly, his thumb stroking her skin.

It's a beautiful sight to see. He has fallen deep. And there's no saving him now.

He glances over at her. Her eyes are closed, her breathing slow and steady. She's fallen asleep. She must be really tired. She needs the rest after last night.

Then he notices it. A car following them. Black Audi. Tinted windows. Keeping a steady distance but definitely tailing them.

He takes out his phone and dials Njabulo, keeping his voice low so he doesn't wake Ntombi.

Njabulo: (Answering) Khehla, what's up?

Zakhile: (His voice low) I’m being followed. It’s a black Audi with tinted windows.

Njabulo: Shit. You got the number plate?

Zakhile: Yeah, AB 34 CD GP. Find out who he is.

Njabulo: Where are you?

Zakhile: I'm driving Ntombi to the doctor.

Njabulo: (Cursing) Shit, she's with you. Okay, let me get to the bottom of this. Stay calm. I'm getting Nathi and Lizwi on the line now.

Zakhile hangs up. He glances at Ntombi again. Still asleep. Her head is resting against the window, peaceful.

His phone buzzes. A conference call. He answers, keeping the volume very low.

Nathi: (His voice sharp, focused) Khehla, I'm in. I'm looking at the street cameras now. I see you. I see the Audi.

Lizwi: (In the background) Who is it?

Nathi: Give me a second... okay, I'm running the plates. Rental car. Registered under... (He pauses) Fuck. It's registered to one of Zondi's shell companies.

Zakhile's jaw clenches. His grip on the steering wheel tightens. He checks Ntombi again still asleep.

Njabulo: (His voice hard) Zondi. That bastard.

Nathi: Wait, I'm pulling up the rental records. The name on the rental agreement is... Mfundo Dlamini. One of Zondi's men. Works security for him.

Lizwi: Khehla, what do you want to do?

Zakhile: Where am I?

Nathi: (Checking the cameras) You're about three blocks from the doctor's office. He's still behind you.

Zakhile: Good. When I get to the doctor, I'm dropping Ntombi off. Then I'm dealing with this.

Njabulo: We're on our way. Don't do anything stupid.

Zakhile: (His voice steady) Meet me there. And bring the car around back just in case.

Lizwi: We'll be there in ten.

Zakhile: Good.

He hangs up.

They pull into the doctor's office parking lot. The black Audi parks across the street, trying to be inconspicuous.

Zakhile parks and turns to Ntombi. He touches her face gently.

Zakhile: (Softly) Baby, we're here.

She stirs, blinking her eyes open.

Ntombi: (Yawning) Oh, I fell asleep?

Zakhile: (Smiling) Yeah. You were tired. Come, let's go inside.

He gets out, opens her door, and helps her out. He kisses her forehead.

Zakhile: (His voice gentle) Go inside and let the receptionist know you're here. I'll be right behind you. I just need to make a quick call.

Ntombi: (Looking up at him, still sleepy) Okay. Don't take too long.

Zakhile: I won't. I promise.

She walks inside. He watches her go, making sure she's safely in the building.

Then he turns. His expression changes. Cold. Dangerous.

He walks across the street toward the black Audi. The driver sees him coming and tries to start the car. But Zakhile is faster.

He yanks the door open before the man can lock it and grabs Mfundo by the collar, dragging him out of the car. Mfundo stumbles, trying to regain his balance, but Zakhile doesn't give him a chance.

He slams him against the side of the car.

Mfundo: (His hands up, panicking) Hey, hey! I don't know what

Zakhile: (His voice deadly calm) Don't. Don't insult my intelligence.

He throws a punch. Hard. Right to Mfundo's jaw. The man's head snaps to the side and he groans.

Zakhile: (Grabbing him again) Who sent you?

Mfundo: (Spitting blood) I don't know what you're talking about

Another punch. This one to the ribs. Mfundo doubles over, gasping for air.

Zakhile: (Leaning in close) Let me make this simple for you. You go back to Zondi. You tell him I know he's watching me. You tell him if he ever, and I mean ever, comes near Ntombi again, I will end him. And everyone he holds dear. You understand?

Mfundo: (Breathing hard, nodding quickly) Yes. Yes, I understand.

Zakhile: (His voice dropping even lower, more menacing) Tell him to stay the fuck away from her if he knows what's best for him. Tell him I'm coming for him. Soon.

He shoves Mfundo back toward the car. The man stumbles, nearly falling.

Zakhile: (Straightening his shirt) Now get the fuck out of here before I change my mind about letting you live.

Mfundo scrambles into the car, starts it with shaking hands, and speeds off.

Zakhile watches him go, his chest heaving, adrenaline pumping through his veins. He pulls out his phone and calls Njabulo.

Njabulo: Khehla, we just pulled up. We saw him speed off. What happened?

Zakhile: I sent Zondi a message. He'll get it.

Lizwi: (In the background) Is Ntombi okay?

Zakhile: She's inside with the doctor. She doesn't know anything.

Nathi: Good. Keep it that way for now.

He exhales, running his hand over his face.

Zakhile: Wait for me outside. When she's done, I'll bring her out. We need to talk.

Njabulo: We'll be here.

Zakhile hangs up, takes a deep breath, and walks back toward the doctor's office. By the time he reaches the reception area, his expression is calm again. Controlled.

The receptionist smiles at him.

Receptionist: Mr. Mthethwa, Miss Khumalo is with the doctor now. It shouldn't be too long.

Zakhile: (Nodding) Thank you.

He sits down in the waiting area, but his mind is racing. Zondi is making moves. He's testing him. And now Ntombi is in the middle of it.

He needs to end this. Soon.

Twenty minutes later, Ntombi walks out from the doctor's office, looking relieved. She's holding a small paper bag, her prescription, probably.

Ntombi: (Smiling) All done. The doctor was really nice. She gave me a three-month supply to start.

Zakhile: (Standing, pulling her close) Good. I'm glad.

He kisses her forehead, holding her for a moment longer than necessary. She's safe. She's okay.

Zakhile: Come. Let's go.

They walk outside and Ntombi immediately stops when she sees three men standing by two cars parked near

Zakhile's. She recognizes the energy; these are his people.

The men turn when they see them. Njabulo, tall and broad with a serious face. Lizwi, slightly shorter but just as intimidating, wearing designer everything. Nathi, lean and sharp-eyed, hands in his pockets.

Ntombi suddenly feels very shy. She steps a little closer to Zakhile.

Zakhile: (His hand on her lower back) Baby, these are my brothers. Njabulo, Lizwi. And this is Nathi, he's family too.

Njabulo steps forward first, a warm smile breaking his serious expression.

Njabulo: (Extending his hand) Ntombi, right? It's nice to finally meet you. Khehla hasn't stopped talking about you.

Ntombi: It's nice to meet you too.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Wow. Khehla wasn't lying. You're beautiful. I'm Lizwi, the good-looking brother.

Ntombi: (Laughing) Thank you. Nice to meet you, Lizwi.

Nathi: (Nodding, shaking her hand) Nathi. Welcome to the family. You're brave, dealing with this one.

He gestures to Zakhile, who rolls his eyes.

Zakhile: (Shaking his head) Don't listen to them.

They all laugh. The tension eases. Lizwi looks at Zakhile, then back at Ntombi.

Lizwi: Did he tell you about my dinner invitation?

She smiles and looks at Zakhile.

Ntombi: (Smiling) Yes, he did. That sounds really nice. I’d love to, but not today. I’m going out with Okuhle. We can set another day, maybe?

He claps his hands together.

Lizwi: Perfect. Wednesday.

Ntombi: (Laughing, shaking her head) I guess Wednesday it is.

Zakhile: (Nodding) That works.

Njabulo: We'll be there.

They say their goodbyes. Ntombi waves shyly as Zakhile helps her into the car.

As they drive off, the brothers follow behind in their own cars.

Ntombi

In the car, I lean back in my seat, exhausted.

Me: (Yawning) Your brothers are nice. A bit intimidating, but nice.

Zakhile: (Glancing at me, smiling) They liked you. I could tell.

Me: (Closing my eyes) That's good. I was so nervous.

Zakhile: (His hand finding mine) You did great, baby.

I smile, but I'm so tired. Between last night and this morning, I'm completely drained. My eyes are already closing again.

Zakhile: (Softly) Sleep, sthandwa sami. I'll wake you when we get home.

I don't argue. Within minutes, I'm asleep.

Zakhile

I glance at her as I drive. She's out cold, her head resting against the window, her breathing soft and even.

My phone buzzes. Njabulo.

I answer, keeping my voice low.

Me: Yeah?

Njabulo: We're right behind you. Everything okay?

Me: Yeah. She's asleep.

Lizwi: Good. We need to talk when we get to your place. About Zondi.

Me: I know.

Nathi: Khehla, I'm digging deeper into his operations. I'll have more for you by tonight.

Me: Good. See you at the house.

I hang up.

I look at Ntombi again. Peaceful. Unaware of the danger circling around her.

I'll keep her safe. No matter what it takes.

We pull into my driveway. The brothers park behind me. I turn off the engine and gently shake Ntombi awake.

Me: (Softly) Baby, we're home.

She stirs, blinking.

Ntombi: (Sleepily) Already?

Me: Yeah. Come on. Let's get you inside.

I help her out of the car. She's barely awake, leaning against me as we walk to the door. The brothers are getting out of their cars, but I wave them off.

Me: (Quietly) Give me a few minutes. Let me get her settled.

Njabulo: (Nodding) Take your time.

I take Ntombi upstairs to the bedroom. She's already half asleep again.

Me: (Helping her onto the bed) Rest, baby. I have some business to handle downstairs, but I'll check on you soon.

Ntombi: (Already under the covers) Okay. Wake me... if you need me.

Me: (Kissing her forehead) I will.

Within seconds, she's asleep.

I close the door quietly and head back downstairs to face my brothers.

It's time to deal with Zondi.

Chapter 26

Zakhile

We're in my study. Nathi is pacing back and forth, laptop in hand, explaining what he found. Njabulo and Lizwi are already filled in, sitting across from me with grave expressions.

Nathi: (Stopping, looking at his screen) So he went to this shady store that sells old things. Antiques, vintage jewelry. Ancient stuff. He purchased a silver heart-opening pendant necklace two days before he died.

I sit forward. I knew there was something about that necklace.

Njabulo: (Leaning back in his chair) We need to find that necklace. Because why would you purchase a heart-opening pendant days before you die unless…

Me: Unless you want to use it to hide something.

Lizwi: Exactly. And that something has to be very small. Like a chip. A memory chip.

Me: (Nodding slowly) He's smart. So he bought the necklace, converted all the information into a chip so it could fit inside.

Njabulo: But now we have another mission. Finding the pendant.

Silence fills the room. Then I speak.

Me: I think I might know where to find it.

They all look at me, waiting.

Me: (Exhaling) Ntombi. She wears a silver heart pendant necklace. She never takes it off. Ever.

Lizwi: (Sitting up straight) Do you think she knows what's on it?

Me: (Shaking my head) No. She doesn't know anything. She said her father gave it to her the night he passed away. She tried opening it once but couldn't figure out

the clasp. She didn't want to force it open and break it, so she just left it.

Njabulo: (His voice softening) It makes her feel close to her father.

Nathi: Yeah. It's special to her. Sentimental.

Me: (Running my hand over my face) How am I going to convince her to open it? That means I have to tell her everything. About her father. About what he was involved in. About Zondi. About... (I pause) about what I do.

The room goes quiet.

Me: (My voice dropping) She'll think I'm a monster. She'll probably leave me. And I... (I shake my head) I can't lose her. I wouldn't survive it.

I wipe my face with both hands, feeling the weight of it all. What was I thinking? A perfect woman like Ntombi would never settle for a criminal like me. But when I'm with her, everything's different. She's not scared of me.

She treats me like I'm just a man. Not a Mthethwa. Not a killer. Just Zakhile. I smile when I'm with her. I laugh. I feel alive. And when she finds out the truth... all of that will change.

Lizwi: (His voice firm) Calm down, man. Look, I think it's best she hears it from you. Not from Zondi. Not from someone else. From you.

Nathi: (Nodding) True. But do it when you're ready. Don't rush it. Because the only way she'll agree to take off that necklace and open it is if she understands why. If she trusts you enough to know you're telling her the truth.

Me: (Looking up at them) And what if she doesn't? What if she runs?

Njabulo: (Leaning forward) I don't think she will. That girl loves you, Khehla. I saw it in the way she looked at you today.

I want to believe him. I really do.

Narrated

Mfundo bursts into Zondi's office like he's being chased by the devil. He doesn't even knock. Zondi is inside with Themba and one of his clients. Mfundo is bruised, face swollen, lip split, blood still dried on his collar.

Themba: (His eyes widening) Woah, what the hell happened to you?

Zondi looks at Mfundo, then at his client.

Zondi: (Standing, his voice smooth) I apologize for this interruption. Can we continue this another time?

The client nods, gathering his things quickly, and leaves.

The door closes. Zondi's expression darkens.

Zondi: (His voice cold) What the fuck, Mfundo. What happened to you?

Mfundo: (Breathing hard, touching his jaw) That fucking Mthethwa son happened.

Themba: (Stepping closer) Zakhile? Zakhile did this?

Mfundo: (Nodding) Yeah. He saw I was following them. Dragged me out of the car and beat the shit out of me. He said he's coming for you. And you should stay away from Ntombi.

Zondi smirks. Then he laughs. A low, dark laugh that fills the room.

Themba: (Confused) Dad?

Zondi: (Still laughing, walking to his desk) Oh, this is perfect. So he cares for her. He actually cares.

Themba: How is that funny?

Mfundo watches Zondi carefully. Then it clicks. He realizes what Zondi is thinking. Zakhile isn't just protective. He's in love with her.

Mfundo: (A slow smile spreading across his battered face) She's his weakness. We can use her against him.

Zondi: (Pouring himself a drink) If his enemies know about this, the mighty Mthethwas will fall. He'll do anything to save her. Well, I hope. Because that bastard is one heartless motherfucker. But if he loves her... (He takes a sip) then we have leverage.

Themba: (Sitting down, processing) So what's the plan?

Zondi: (Setting his glass down) Let me think. Let me calculate my next move. But this... this changes everything.

Ntombi

I feel so much better now. I really needed that sleep. I'm starving though. I need to eat, then head to my place to get ready for tonight. I don't even know what to wear yet.

I walk downstairs and hear voices coming from Zakhile's study. Him and his brothers, probably still talking. I don't want to interrupt, so I head to the kitchen instead.

I open the fridge and spot a chocolate cake on the top shelf. Perfect. I pull it out, slice a generous piece, pour myself some juice, and sit on one of the high chairs at the kitchen island.

As I'm halfway through my slice, Zakhile walks in. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching me with a smile.

Zakhile: Oh, so you're hiding in here. When did you wake up?

Me: (Smiling, mouth full) Not long ago. I felt hungry and decided to find something to eat.

Zakhile: (Walking over to me) Let's go out to eat. Nothing fancy. Just something chill.

Me: (Swallowing) Okay, but I need to go to my place after to get ready for tonight.

Zakhile: (Pulling me closer by my waist) You can leave from here. You have clothes here.!

He raises his hands in surrender, grinning.

Me: (Laughing, pushing him playfully) Zakhile

Zakhile: Okay, okay. We'll go to your place.

Me: (Standing, finishing my juice) Let me freshen up first. Then we can leave.

Zakhile: (Kissing my forehead) Okay, baby.

I head upstairs, wash my face, brush my teeth, and fix my hair. Just want to feel fresh after that nap. When I come back down, Zakhile is waiting by the door.

We walk to the garage and I stop in my tracks. There are so many cars. Beautiful, expensive cars lined up like

an exhibit. Mercedes, BMW, Range Rover, Audi. What does this guy do for a living?

He leads me to a sleek black Mercedes-Benz S63. He opens the door for me, as always, then gets in on the driver's side.

As we drive out of the estate, I can't help myself.

Me: I've been meaning to ask. What do you do? For work?

He shifts slightly in his seat. His face becomes unreadable.

Zakhile: (His voice steady) I run the family company. Mthethwa Oils. I also have my own businesses. Property investments. A few clubs.

I nod, processing.

Zakhile: (Glancing at me) Why do you ask?

Me: (Gesturing vaguely) The cars. The security. The estate. I was just curious... like, how rich are you?

He laughs. A real laugh.

Zakhile: Oh, is that what you're worried about?

Me: (Laughing too) Yeah. Got to know these things nowadays. What if you're into something illegal? Or uthwele? I need to be sure.

He laughs harder.

Zakhile: (Smirking) Mhm. You've got to be sure. What if I am all those things?

Me: (Shaking my head firmly) Weee, ngeke. Cut me out. I'll leave. Imagine you have a snake that gives you money. I won't stay for that. Maybe illegal stuff I might consider staying for, but I don't support witchcraft. At all.

He just nods, a small smile on his lips.

Me: (Narrowing my eyes at him) Wait. What about the illegal part? Are you into anything illegal?

He glances at me, then back at the road.

Zakhile: (His voice calm) No, baby. I'm not into anything like that.

Me: (Relaxing) Good.

He shakes his head, smiling.

We arrive at this chill restaurant. Modern but cozy. We order our meals and the conversation flows easily. The atmosphere is warm, comfortable. I'm laughing so much my cheeks hurt. He's actually really funny. I never would have guessed.

Zakhile: (Grinning, telling a story) I'm telling you, we've done some crazy things. My brothers and I. Njabulo once…

Me: (Laughing, wiping tears from my eyes) Stop! You can't tell by looking at you all. You're so serious. So reserved.

Zakhile: (His expression softening, watching me) I'm happy to see you laughing like this.

Me: (Smiling at him) All because of you.

He reaches across the table, takes my hand, and kisses the back of it. My heart melts.

The whole afternoon is perfect. We finish eating and by the time we leave, it's already 6 PM. He's driving me to my place now.

Zakhile: (Glancing at me) Can I pick you up tonight?

Me: (Shaking my head) Baby, Okuhle will already be there. She'll drive us.

Zakhile: (His jaw tightening slightly) As long as she's not drinking.

Me: (Squeezing his hand) Of course not. She's the designated driver.

Zakhile: (Nodding, but not looking happy about it) Okay.

We pull up to my place. He parks and walks me to my door, his hand in mine.

At my door, he pulls me close.

Zakhile: (His voice low) I'm going to miss you.

Me: (Smiling up at him) Me too.

Zakhile: (Cupping my face) Uziphathe kahle and enjoy yourself. But not too much.

I laugh.

Me: I will.

We share a long, slow kiss. When we pull apart, I'm breathless.

Zakhile: (His forehead against mine) Call me when you get there. And when you're coming home.

Me: (Nodding) I will. I promise.

He kisses me one more time, then reluctantly lets me go. I watch him walk back to his car, and he watches me until I'm safely inside.

I close the door and lean against it, smiling like an idiot.

I need to call Bonolo immediately. I'm someone's girlfriend now. Ladies and gentlemen, Ntombi Khumalo is officially taken.

I pull out my phone and dial her number. She answers on the first ring.

Bonolo: (Screaming) FINALLY! Tell me everything!

I laugh, walking to my bedroom.

Me: Girl, sit down. This is going to take a while.

Chapter 27

Ntombi

It's almost 8 PM and Okuhle is already here, waiting for me outside. She texted me earlier saying I should look like a million dollars and be ready to dance. Zakhile was right, we're definitely going to a club.

I decided on a black backless mini dress with silver open-toe high heel sandals. Simple but sexy. I grab my clutch, check myself in the mirror one last time, and head out.

When I get to the car, I notice Okuhle's not alone. There's someone in the driver's seat. She's in the passenger seat, looking gorgeous in a gold dress.

I open the back door and slide in.

Me: Hi, guys.

Okuhle: (Turning around, grinning) Hi, babe! You look stunning. This is my driver, Thembani. Thembani, this is Ntombi, the star of my show.

Thembani: (Nodding in the rearview mirror) Nice to meet you, Miss Ntombi.

Me: (Smiling) Nice to meet you too.

Okay, so she's not driving. That means we're getting drunk tonight. And I am absolutely here for it.

Okuhle: (Reading my mind) I don't drink and drive, love. And I know I'm going to be wasted tonight.

I laugh.

Me: Cheers to that.

We drive to Musgrave to pick up Bonolo. When she comes out of her building, she looks incredible, tight red dress, heels, hair and makeup done to perfection. She's ready to party.

She gets in the car next to me.

Bonolo: (Excited) Hi, everyone!

We all greet her warmly.

Me: Bonolo, this is Okuhle, my director. And that's Thembani, her driver. Guys, this is Bonolo, my best friend and partner in crime.

Okuhle: (Turning around to shake her hand) Nice to meet you, Nolo. Are we ready to party?

Bonolo: (Grinning) Say less.

We all laugh as Thembani drives us to Greyville. The music is already playing in the car, and we're singing along, hyping each other up.

When we arrive at the club, the bass is already thumping from outside. We head straight to the VIP section, and there are already people there. Okuhle's friends, I assume.

Two guys and three girls. They look up when we walk in, smiling and waving.

We greet them and sit down while waiting for our drinks. Okuhle does the introductions. Ntokozo, Thabiso, Mpume, Sne, and Mbali. All of them are her varsity friends.

I notice Okuhle is really close with this Thabiso guy. Way too close. You'd swear they're dating. She's practically sitting on his lap. He's hot though. Tall, well-dressed, confident.

The drinks arrive and we start loosening up. The conversation flows, everyone's laughing, and the vibe is perfect.

After a while, I need to make a call.

Me: (Standing) I'm going to the bathroom. I need to make a quick call.

Okuhle: (Starting to get up) Let me come with you.

Me: (Waving her off) No, no, babe. I'll be fine.

Okuhle: Are you sure?

Me: Yeah. I'll be quick.

I head to the bathroom. Of course, there's a queue. Women's bathrooms. There's always a queue.

Finally, after waiting, I step aside and dial Zakhile.

Zakhile: (Answering immediately) Sthandwa sami.

I smile, my heart melting at the sound of his voice.

Me: Nyambose, how are you?

Zakhile: (His voice low, sulking) I'm not okay. I'm driving to Lizwi's house, but I should be with you.

He's being such a big baby.

Me: (Giggling) Come on, baby, stop it. Anyway, I've arrived safely. You were right, we're at a club.

Zakhile: (Sighing) I know my baby sister. Okay, mama, be safe. Don't drink too much.

Me: I will. I love you.

Zakhile: (His voice softening) I love you more.

I can feel him smiling through the phone. We end the call and I turn to leave the bathroom area.

I bump into someone. Ntokozo.

Ntokozo: (Smiling) Hey, I was looking for you. You took long.

Me: (Smiling politely) Oh, must be the queue. It was long.

Ntokozo: (His eyes lingering on me) You're very beautiful, you know that?

Me: (Uncomfortable but polite) Thanks. That's sweet of you.

He smiles wider.

Ntokozo: Let's go back to the others.

He puts his hand on my waist, guiding me back to the VIP section. I find it weird and uncomfortable. I subtly try to shift away, but he doesn't seem to notice, or care.

I just let it go. Maybe it's innocent. Maybe I'm overthinking.

We get back to the table.

Bonolo: (Looking at me) Girl, you took forever.

Me: (Sitting down) The queue was insane.

We start drinking again. Shots, cocktails, more shots. We're having the time of our lives. I notice Okuhle's driver, Thembani, is now inside the club, standing close to our table like a bodyguard. Smart. We leave our bags with him and head to the dance floor.

We dance like there's no tomorrow. The music is incredible, the energy is high, and we're all completely wasted.

Zakhile

I'm chilling with my brothers at Lizwi's house. We're having drinks on the balcony, the city lights stretched

out below us. I'm sitting here hoping Ntombi will call me to come pick her up.

I could just go get her. Show up at the club. But I'm respecting her space. She said no, and I'll respect that. But damn, I miss her. I don't know what she did to me, but I can't function without her. I don't want to imagine a life where she's not part of it. Because it doesn't make sense.

I think I should propose to Ntombi.

The thought just comes to me. Clear and certain.

Njabulo and Lizwi both look at me like I just announced I'm joining the circus.

Lizwi: (Shaking his head) Nc, nc, nc. It hasn't even been 24 hours since you made things official and you already want to show her you're not okay upstairs?

They laugh. I just shake my head, smiling.

Njabulo: (Leaning forward) You're sitting here thinking about her. That's why you keep checking your phone every two seconds?

Me: (Running my hand over my face) I don't know what's happening to me. Everything I'm feeling is foreign. I've never felt this way about anyone. She completes me. I keep checking my phone hoping she'll call and ask me to come pick her up.

Njabulo: (His voice gentle) Let her have fun, man. She's with Okuhle. She's safe. They have security 24/7. One of our best guys is there watching them.

Lizwi: (Laughing) You see what happens when you fall in love for the first time when you're 30 years old? Uyabona?

Me: (Frowning) How does falling in love have anything to do with age?

Lizwi: (Gesturing at me) Look at you. Twenty-four hours. Only twenty-four hours and you're thinking of

proposing. And wena, I know you'd do it. Please, if you want to keep her, don't do that yet. You'll scare the poor girl. Talk to her about it first. Hear what her thoughts are about marriage. Before you pop the question.

Me: (Leaning back) I don't mean right now. But I will. Eventually. I want to marry her. She'll be my wife.

Lizwi: (His voice serious now) Still have that conversation with her. What if she doesn't want to get married? Uzothini?

Me: (Pausing) Could she not want to?

Lizwi: It happens. Ay, Njabulo, we're going to have an issue here.

They both laugh.

Me: (Glaring at them) Nx. What issue?

Lizwi: (Grinning) In your next life, don't fall in love when you're old. Try when you're in your early twenties. Hayi, Khehla. Next thing you know, a man

will look at Ntombi, ask her out, and boom, you're on a killing spree.

Me: (My jaw tightening) I'm not old. And why would he ask my woman out? I'd kill him vele.

They laugh harder.

Njabulo: (Still laughing) Ngeke, bafo. I have to agree with Lizwi here.

I shake my head and leave them there, still laughing at my expense. I walk inside the house. It's 1 AM now and I haven't heard anything from her. I hope she's okay.

I stand in the kitchen and try to call. Straight to voicemail. My chest tightens.

I call Thembani instead.

Thembani: (Answering) Sure, boss.

Me: Sure. Still at the club? Are they safe?

Thembani: They're about to head home now. They're all very drunk, but safe.

Me: (Exhaling in relief) Okay. Good.

I hang up. She's safe. That's all that matters.

I turn around and see Nelly walking toward me. She shouldn't be here at this time. Working hours are over.

Nelly: (Smiling) Hi.

Me: (Flatly) Yah.

I try to walk past her, but she grabs my arm. I look down at her hand, and she quickly removes it, clearing her throat.

Nelly: (Her voice soft, seductive) Hey, I thought maybe we could... you know. A quickie?

She's pissing me off now. She's been blowing up my phone ever since that time she came to my house. I regret it every day. I should've known she'd be a problem.

Me: (My voice cold, dangerous) Don't. Ever. In your fucking life. Touch me like that. Siyezwana? I am not your mate, Nelisiwe. Stay the fuck away from me if you know what's good for you.

I walk away, then stop, breathing heavily. I turn back to her.

Me: (My voice low, deadly) Don't piss me off. You don't want to see that side of me. You were a no-strings-attached situation, and you failed to keep it that way. Now don't come at me with your games thinking I don't notice. Don't.

I walk back to the guys, fuming.

Njabulo: (Noticing my expression) And then? Someone dump you?

Me: (Sitting down heavily) That bitch Nelly. She doesn't understand what "no strings attached" means. I regret fucking her that day. I knew she'd give me problems. It was a moment of weakness. I needed to

release, and she happened to be there. Now we're back to square one. She can't stay away.

Lizwi: (Sighing) I'll have a talk with her. Before she messes things up with umakoti.

I laugh despite myself.

Me: Makoti, huh?

Lizwi: (Grinning) Yeah. You're proposing, angithi?

We all laugh, and I pretend to punch him. He ducks, still laughing.

Narrated

Nelly is left in the kitchen, hurt and confused. She doesn't understand why Zakhile doesn't feel anything for her. She's angry too. She overheard them talking about Zakhile's new woman.

She's crying as she walks to her car and drives home.

Nelly: (Talking to herself, wiping her tears) He loves her. What does she have that I don't? I know I agreed to no strings attached, but I thought he'd catch feelings eventually. But it seems like I'm the one who fell. (She grips the steering wheel) But no. Let me make him see that he wants me. I know he does. It's just this new girl. He'll get over it. And I'll make sure of that.

Chapter 28

Ntombi

If you want to party, please make sure you have Okuhle's number on speed dial. That girl knows how to turn it up. I had the best night last night. We were so wasted, and now I have a banging headache that feels like someone's using my skull as a drum.

I reach for my phone to check the time. 10:00 AM. And I have so many missed calls from Zakhile. Shit. I was so wasted last night, all I remember is Okuhle's driver taking us home and making sure we got inside safely. See why I say call Okuhle to party? She came prepared. She knew we'd get wasted.

I dial Zakhile's number. He picks up almost immediately. He doesn't say anything, but I can hear his breathing on the other end.

Me: Nyambose?

Nothing.

Me: (My voice soft) Baby, I'm sorry for not calling last night. But I'm safe, I promise. I was just too wasted to even hear my phone ring. But Okuhle's driver made sure we all got home safe.

Zakhile: (His voice flat) How's the headache?

Why is he so cold? I clear my throat nervously.

Me: Very bad. The hangover is killing me right now.

Zakhile: (His tone softening slightly) Get ready. I'm coming over. I'll bring you something for the hangover.

Me: Really? Thank you so much, baby.

Zakhile: (Quietly) I love you.

He hangs up before I can respond.

What's wrong with him? Maybe I'm dating a lunatic. He's such a strange man. But funny enough, I love him regardless. Even when he's acting all moody and possessive.

I drag myself to the shower, letting the hot water wake me up. I throw on shorts and a vest, nothing fancy then try to clean up a bit around the room. Which is very hard when the hangover has you by the throat and every movement makes your head pound harder.

About thirty minutes later, there's a knock on the door. That must be Zakhile.

I open the door and there he is, holding a paper bag from KFC in one hand and a pharmacy bag in the other. He's wearing a simple black T-shirt and jeans, but somehow he still looks like he stepped out of a magazine.

Zakhile: (His voice soft) Hi.

Me: (Smiling) Hi.

Zakhile: Come here.

I walk to him and he pulls me into a tight hug, burying his face in my neck. He kisses my forehead, lingering there.

Zakhile: (Breathing me in) I missed you.

I laugh softly against his chest.

Me: But baby, it's only been a few hours.

He pulls back to look at me.

Zakhile: I know. But somehow, not having you close doesn't feel right.

I stand on my toes and kiss him. He deepens it immediately, his hands sliding down to grab my ass. I can feel his growing erection pressing against me. We pull apart, both breathless. I smile, my lips still brushing his.

Me: (Whispering) I missed you too. I thought you were mad at me or something. You sounded so cold on the phone.

He cups my face.

Zakhile: I can never be mad at you. I was just frustrated because I wanted you close. I wanted to wake up next to you.

Me: You've become so attached in such a short period of time.

Zakhile: It's my first time falling in love. Do you blame me?

Me: (My eyes widening) You've never been in love? Ever?

Zakhile: No.

Me: Not even a girlfriend? Anyone?

Zakhile: (Shaking his head) None. You're my first. My only.

Me: (Studying his face) I don't know if I should be happy or worried about that.

He laughs, a real laugh that makes his eyes crinkle.

Zakhile: (His voice becoming serious) I would never hurt you. You're my heart. My main purpose is to make you happy. And I will do just that for as long as I live.

I look at him. He sounds so genuine. So sincere. He kisses my forehead and looks down at me.

Zakhile: Move in with me.

I step back, shocked.

Me: What? Are you serious?

Zakhile: Yes.

Me: (Shaking my head) Not happening, baby.

Zakhile: (Frowning) Why? You don't want to?

Me: It's not that I don't want to. But baby, understand this. Our relationship is still new. We can't just move in together so early. We still have to get to know each other properly before making such big decisions. And we're not married. My mom would actually skin me

alive if she found out I'm cohabitating with a man I just started dating.

He holds both my hands, looking at me intently.

Zakhile: Marry me then.

This guy. Is he out of his mind?

Me: (My voice rising) Zakhile!

He chuckles and puts his hands up in surrender.

Zakhile: (Grinning) Okay, okay. Can you at least sleep over at my place tonight?

I laugh, hitting his chest playfully.

Me: (Smiling) Of course. I'd love to.

He smiles so wide, his whole face lighting up. Such a beautiful man.

Zakhile

I'm watching her eat her chicken wings. She looks so cute right now, sauce on her fingers, completely focused on her food. My love for her grows every day.

I asked her to marry me. She thinks I was joking, but I was dead serious. My brothers did say it's still early. But I don't see anything wrong with it. I love her. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I know I sound crazy right now, but it is what it is.

Me: You had fun last night?

Ntombi: (Her eyes lighting up) Mhmm. So much fun. Okuhle came with her friends. It was really nice. We danced until our feet hurt.

Me: (Smiling) I'm glad you enjoyed yourself.

But there's something eating at me. I don't know how I'm going to ask her about the necklace. That thing is eating me up inside. I really want to finish this Zondi shit and get it over with. I need to protect her. With everything in me.

Ntombi: What's wrong? You keep staring at me.

Me: (Snapping out of it) Nothing. Just admiring you.

She blushes, looking down at her food.

Ntombi: (Softly) You're such a sweet talker.

I reach across to wipe sauce from her chin.

Me: Only for you, MaMbulazi.

Ntombi

After we finish eating, I pack a small bag for tonight. Just the essentials. Zakhile helps me, even though I keep telling him I can do it myself. He insists on carrying my bag to the car.

We drive to his place, and the whole ride, his hand is on my thigh. Not in a sexual way just... there. Like he needs to be touching me. It's sweet and possessive. I kind of love it.

When we pull into his estate, my phone rings. Unknown number.

Me: (Frowning) Hello?

Ntokozo: (Cheerful) Hey, Ntombi! It's Ntokozo. From last night.

I freeze. How did he get my number?

Me: Oh. Hi. How are you?

Ntokozo: I'm good, I'm good. Just wanted to check on you. Make sure you got home safe. You guys were pretty wasted.

Me: (Uncomfortable) Yeah, we did. Thanks for checking.

Ntokozo: Cool, cool. I was thinking maybe we could grab coffee sometime? Get to know each other better?

I glance at Zakhile. His jaw is tight. His eyes are on the road, but I can tell he's listening to every word.

Me: Oh, uhm... I don't think that's a good idea. But thanks for the offer.

Ntokozo: Oh. Okay. No worries. Well, if you change your mind, you have my number now.

Me: Yeah. Thanks. I have to go. Bye.

I hang up before he can say anything else.

Zakhile: Who was that?

Me: Ntokozo. One of Okuhle's friends from last night. I don't even know how he got my number.

His grip tightens on the steering wheel

Zakhile: What did he want?

Me: (Shrugging) To check if I got home safe. And he asked me out for coffee.

Zakhile: (His voice dropping) And what did you say?

Me: (Looking at him) I said no, obviously. Baby, I'm with you.

He relaxes slightly, but I can still see the tension in his shoulders.

He parks the car.

Zakhile: He got your number from Okuhle?

I nod.

Me: I guess so. I'm going to ask her about it later. It's kind of weird that she just gave it out without asking me first.

Zakhile: (Getting out of the car) Yeah. It is.

He comes around to open my door, but his face is unreadable. I can tell he's not happy about this. At all.

I take his hand.

Me: Baby, you don't have to worry. I'm not interested in him.

Zakhile: (Looking down at me) I know. But he's interested in you. And that's a problem.

I smile trying to lighten the mood.

Me: A problem you're going to handle with your fists?

Zakhile: If necessary.

I laugh, but he's completely serious. Oh God. I've definitely gotten myself involved with a possessive man.

We walk into the house and he sets my bag down in the foyer.

Zakhile: (His voice softer now) I'm sorry. I don't mean to be like this. I just... I don't like other men thinking they have a chance with you.

I walk to him wrapping my arms around his waist

Me: They don't. I'm yours. You know that.

He pulls me closer

Zakhile: Say it again.

Me: (Looking up at him) I'm yours, Zakhile.

He kisses me then. Deep, possessive and claiming.

When we pull apart, he rests his forehead against mine.

Zakhile: (Whispering) Mine.

Me: (Smiling) Yours.

Narrated

Meanwhile, across town, Ntokozo sets his phone down, disappointed but not defeated. He leans back on his couch, thinking.

He liked Ntombi. She was beautiful, funny, down-to-earth. Different from the other girls he usually met. And he could tell she was shy, maybe even a little uncomfortable around him last night. But that just made her more intriguing.

Coffee was a no-go. But maybe he'd see her again. Through Okuhle. He'd make sure of it.

He picks up his phone again and texts Okuhle.

Ntokozo: Yo, I called Ntombi. She seemed off. Is she seeing someone?

He waits. Three dots appear.

Okuhle: Why are you asking? 👀

Ntokozo: Just curious. She's cool. Wanted to get to know her better.

Okuhle: She might be seeing someone. I'm not sure. Why don't you ask her yourself next time?

Ntokozo: I did. She turned me down for coffee. 😂

Okuhle: Then there's your answer, bro. Leave it alone.

Ntokozo stares at the message. Leave it alone. But he doesn't want to.

Not yet.

Chapter 29

Ntombi

It's the second week of rehearsal now. Everything is going smoothly and the cast is on track. Lindiwe has literally become my work friend. She's nailing her character. The show is going to be amazing, I can feel it.

My relationship with Zakhile has been great. I'm at my place, surprisingly. He didn't argue when I told him Monday that after work I'm going home. He wanted to argue, but I shut it down. So far, we've been good. I want to be with him and wake up in his arms every morning, but if I'm not careful, I'll end up living there without even realizing it. So I have to control myself a bit.

It's Wednesday already and I'm having dinner with his brothers tonight. I'm nervous. Very nervous. They're quite intimidating. As for Okuhle, she still doesn't know

I'm dating her brother. It's not my place to tell her, that's his job.

I did ask her about giving Ntokozo my number. She apologized and mentioned that he said he was interested, begged for it, and she gave it to him while drunk on Saturday. It's water under the bridge now. Ntokozo hasn't contacted me since, so I'm good.

It's the end of the day and I need to head home. I see Okuhle walking toward me.

Okuhle: Hi, girl. You're doing great. Your dedication is unmatched.

Me: Thanks, Diro. It means a lot.

Her expression becomes serious.

Okuhle: Are we okay? I'm really sorry. I really didn't mean to cause problems. I wasn't thinking when I gave Ntokozo your number. It was stupid of me.

I touch her arm gently.

Me: Hey, that's water under the bridge. It's okay.

She brightens up immediately.

Okuhle: Can I invite you to dinner?

Haibo, what's wrong with the Mthethwa siblings and dinner? My goodness.

Me: Uhhh...

Okuhle: Not today, of course. But okay, so this is what happened. I was telling my sister about you and how I have this weird feeling, like maybe I should protect you, like you're one of us. She suggested I invite you to dinner so we can see our dad's reaction. Maybe you're our long-lost sister or something. And she really wants to meet you because I always talk about you.

I laugh because this is madness.

Me: Oh my God, Okuhle, that's crazy. I know for a fact we're not related.

She laughs too.

Okuhle: You never know!

Me: (Giggling) Okay, I'll come to dinner. Let's see what happens then.

She jumps excitedly.

Okuhle: Oh my God, thank you! Thank you! Sunday?

Me: Not a problem. Let's see what "Dad" has to say.

We both laugh out loud and say our goodbyes.

Vusi is back as my driver when Zakhile is busy with work. He drives me to my place. I get there and start getting ready for dinner with the Mthethwa brothers.

I choose an apricot-colored knitted textured bodycon long-sleeve backless dress and pair it with khaki leather high-heel sandals. I check myself in the mirror. Perfect. Now I wait for my man to pick me up.

He arrives ten minutes later. It's 7:45 PM now. Dinner is at 8:00 PM. We're already late.

I open the door and there he is. Tall, dark, and handsome. He looks like he came straight from work, still in his black suit. He looks so hot. My clit is literally twitching just looking at him. Help me, God.

He does a little whistle and spins me around.

Zakhile: Mama, you look breathtaking.

I blush.

Me: Ngiyabonga, sthandwa sami.

He checks me out from head to toe, and I see him adjust himself, grabbing his crotch. Did he just get a boner? This man.

Zakhile: Don't look at me like that.

I laugh.

Me: I didn't even say anything. Let's go before we're even more late.

I lock the door and he opens the car door for me. He gets in and we drive.

He keeps squeezing my thigh and looking at me. He keeps trying to adjust the bulge under his belt. He's suffering. Let me satisfy him a bit.

I touch his crotch and start massaging him through his pants. He shifts in his seat, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

Zakhile: You want us to cause an accident, Miss Khumalo?

Me: (Smirking) Keep driving.

He looks at me with dark, seductive eyes, then focuses back on the road. I unbuckle his belt, unzip his trousers, and pull out his shaft. Huge, thick, with veins running along it. I lean over and take him in my mouth.

Zakhile: Ahhh, ba... baby. SHIT.

He pulls over to the side of the road, adjusts his seat back, and lays back. His eyes are hooded, voice hoarse.

Zakhile: Come here.

I giggle and pull up my dress because it's long, and climb on top of him. Lucky for us, I'm not wearing any panties. I position myself over him and sink down, riding him slowly at first, then faster.

The car fills with our moans. He grips my hips and starts thrusting from below, giving it to me hard. I can feel myself getting close.

Me: (Gasping) I'm coming, ba... baby.

Zakhile: (Groaning) Come for me, baby.

I come hard, releasing my juices all over him. He thrusts faster and then comes too, releasing deep inside me. I collapse on top of him, both of us catching our breath.

He chuckles and kisses my forehead.

Zakhile: You're one crazy woman, you know that?

Me: (Smiling) I love you.

Zakhile: I love you, MaMbulazi.

I climb off him and grab my bag, pulling out wipes. I clean myself and him, and we fix ourselves before continuing the drive.

We arrive at Lizwi's house super late now. Lizwi opens the door for us.

Lizwi: (Smirking) Ah, welcome. You're late.

Me: I'm sorry. We got held up.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Mhmm, is that so? Come in.

Zakhile: Ayi kahle wena. We got held up.

He raises his hands innocently.

Lizwi: What did I say? I didn't say anything.

We enter the house and I ask to use the bathroom to fix myself.

I head to the bathroom and Zakhile follows me inside.

Me: What are you doing here?

He grabs my waist and starts kissing me. I pull back. He moves to my neck.

Me: (Laughing) Baby, Lizwi is waiting downstairs. Stop it.

Zakhile: You started it.

I laugh.

Me: Come on.

He pulls back reluctantly.

Zakhile: Fine. But tonight you're sleeping at my place.

Me: (Smiling) Yes, sir.

He smiles, and I wash my hands and check myself in the mirror. I look good. We walk out and find the table already set.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Is my bathroom still intact?

Zakhile: (Rolling his eyes) Fuck off.

He laughs.

Zakhile

What Ntombi did to me in the car is insane. I'm failing to focus. I want to have her right now. She's been at her place for the past two days. Of course, I'm not okay with it, but I didn't want to sound controlling, so I let her be. If it was up to me, she'd be waking up next to me in my bed every morning. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Njabulo and Nathi arrive shortly after. The night is beautiful, we're laughing, having good conversation, enjoying each other's company.

Lizwi grins at Ntombi.

Lizwi: So, Ntombi, you're really settling for Khehla?

This fool. Ntombi nods, smiling.

Me: (Raising an eyebrow) She shouldn't?

Lizwi: Nah, I'm just wondering how she deals with you. You're not normal, my guy.

We all laugh.

Nathi leans forward.

Nathi: Yeah, Ntombi, tell us, how do you deal with this man?

Her face softens.

Ntombi: He's such a sweetheart. Very caring and romantic. He's funny too. He makes it easy for me to love him.

I'm just looking at her, admiring her. She's perfect.

Nathi: (Shocked) Really? Khehla? Funny?

Njabulo: I'm shocked at "romantic."

Lizwi shakes his head.

Lizwi: Makoti, what you see is completely different from what we know. This man doesn't even laugh with people. If you see him laugh, consider yourself lucky.

Me: Stop it. You're making me sound like a robot.

Njabulo: (Smirking) Aren't you?

They all laugh. Mxm.

We move outside to the balcony, having drinks under the stars. It's getting late now.

Me: (Standing) We should get going now, guys. It's late.

Then my phone rings. Unknown number. I frown.

Me: Baby, let me answer this, then we'll leave. Okay?

She nods.

Ntombi: Okay.

I kiss her cheek and walk inside to answer.

Me: (Coldly) Yeah?

Zondi: The mighty Zakhile. I got your message.

Me: What the fuck do you want, Zondi?

Zondi: (Chuckling) Mhm, nothing much. How is Ntombi doing?

Me: Say her name one more time and see what I'll do to you, you piece of shit. Don't fucking start with me, Zondi. I will paint this town red just to get your head.

Zondi: (Amused) Relax, will you? I wonder what Leonid will say once he knows about your precious Ntombi.

Fuck. Fuck. Leonid is our worst enemy in Russia. A ruthless arms dealer who's been looking for any weakness in the Mthethwa empire.

Me: Stay the fuck away, Zondi, if you know what's good for you.

I hang up. My mind is racing. I'm angry. Livid. My hands are shaking.

"Hi, Zakhile."

I didn't even see Nelly walk in. She's standing in the doorway, wearing something tight and revealing.

Me: (Coldly) That's Mr. Mthethwa to you.

She walks toward me seductively and stands too close. She reaches out and grabs my shaft through my pants. I get a boner. It has a mind of its own. Fuck.

I grab her wrist hard.

Me: Remove your pathetic hands off me.

Nelly: (Smirking) That's not how you should talk to the mother of your child.

Me: What the fuck are you talking about?

Nelly: I'm pregnant, Zakhile. And it's yours.

I hear a glass shatter. I turn and see Ntombi standing in the doorway, eyes wide, hand covering her mouth. The wine glass she was holding is in pieces on the floor.

My whole world comes crashing down.

Ntombi: (Whispering) What?

Me: (Stepping toward her) NTOMBI. Baby, I can explain

She turns and walks out of the house.

Me: NTOMBI!

My brothers rush inside to see what's happening. I chase after her. She's already out the gate.

Ntombi

I can't breathe. I can't think. My chest feels like it's being crushed. I hear him behind me, calling my name, but I can't stop. I can't face him. Not right now.

He catches up to me, grabbing my arm gently.

Zakhile: (Breathing hard) Ntombi! Baby, please! Let me explain!

I pull my arm away, tears streaming down my face.

Me: (Sobbing) I want to go home. Please, just... I want to go home.

Zakhile: Baby, please, just listen to me. It's not what you think

Me: (Shaking my head) I don't want to hear it. I can't... I can't do this right now.

My voice breaks completely and I can barely get the words out through my tears.

Me: Please, Zakhile. Just... just let me go.

Zakhile: (Desperate) Ntombi, please. Don't do this. Let me explain what happened

Me: (Crying harder) No. No. I don't want to hear anything right now. Please. I just want to go home.

I'm sobbing so hard I can barely stand. My whole body is shaking.

Njabulo steps out of the house, approaching carefully.

Njabulo: (Gently) Ntombi, let me drive you home. Come.

I nod, unable to speak anymore. I can't even look at Zakhile.

Zakhile tries to reach for me again.

Zakhile: Ntombi, please. Don't leave like this. We need to talk.

Me: (Wiping my tears, my voice breaking) I... I can't. Not right now. Please.

I walk toward Njabulo's car, my vision blurred with tears. Zakhile tries to follow but Njabulo steps between us.

Njabulo: (Quietly to Zakhile) Let her go. Give her space. You'll only make it worse right now.

I get into the car and immediately break down completely, my face in my hands. Njabulo drives me home in silence, occasionally glancing at me with concern. I cry the entire way.

Zakhile

I watch her leave. My heart is being ripped out of my chest. I stand there, frozen, as Njabulo's car disappears down the street.

Then the rage sets in.

I turn and storm back into the house. Nelly is still standing there, looking satisfied with herself.

Me: You.

She steps back, suddenly afraid.

Nelly: Zakhile

I grab her by the throat and slam her against the wall. Not hard enough to hurt her, but hard enough to scare her.

Me: You listen to me very carefully. I don't know what game you think you're playing, but it ends now.

Nelly: (Gasping) I'm... I'm pregnant Zakhile

Me: Bullshit. You're lying. And even if you're not, that baby isn't mine.

Nelly: (Her eyes watering) But..

Me: I used protection, Nelly. I ALWAYS use protection. So either you're lying, or that baby belongs to someone else.

I lean in closer, my voice deadly calm.

Me: You will take a paternity test. And when it comes back negative, you are dead you hear me

She nods frantically.

Nelly: (Crying) Yes. Yes, I understand.

Me: And if you ever, EVER come near Ntombi, or try to contact her, or even breathe in her direction, I will destroy you. I will ruin your life so thoroughly that you'll wish you never met me. Siyezwana?

She nods frantically, sobbing.

Nelly: Yes. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I release her and step back.

Me: Get the fuck out of my sight.

She stumbles away, grabbing her purse. Lizwi steps forward, blocking her path.

Lizwi: (His voice cold) Nelly, you're fired. Effective immediately. Pack your things and leave. Don't ever come back to any of my properties. Security will escort you out.

Nelly: (Pleading) Mr. Mthethwa, please

Lizwi: (Cutting her off) I said leave. Now.

She runs out the door, still crying.

Lizwi and Nathi turn to look at me.

Lizwi: (Quietly) Khehla

I run my hands through my hair, pacing back and forth.

Me: She's lying. She has to be lying. I used protection. That one time we slept together, it was two weeks ago. Right after I met Ntombi. Before we made things official. I was confused about my feelings and stressed about the mission and She happened to be there.

Nathi steps forward.

Nathi: Even if she's telling the truth, you can get a paternity test. Prove it's not yours.

Me: (My voice breaking) It doesn't matter. Ntombi won't forgive me. She won't even listen. Did you see her face? I broke her.

Lizwi's voice is firm.

Lizwi: Then you fight for her. You don't give up. You fix this.

I sit down heavily, head in my hands.

Me: How? How do I fix this?

Nathi sits next to me.

Nathi: You tell her the truth. Everything. And you pray she loves you enough to listen.

I close my eyes. The image of Ntombi's tear-streaked face is burned into my mind.

I've lost her. And I don't know if I'll ever get her back.

Chapter 30

Ntombi

My heart is so painful I don't even know how I'm going to survive rehearsal today. Zakhile has been calling all night and I finally just switched off my phone. I'm hurt. Very hurt. Because I thought he was different.

When I saw him get hard when Nelly touched him, my heart shattered. And when she said she's pregnant, I lost it completely. Her stomach isn't visible, meaning it's still early. I have so many thoughts running through my mind. Did he sleep with her while he was with me? Or days before we got together? Am I hurt by him getting hard and letting her touch him? Or am I hurt that she's pregnant with his child? I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.

I get ready for rehearsal. Last day of the second week. I'm so down today, but I'll try to mask it. Okuhle notices

small things. I don't want her to see that something's off with me.

I'm done getting ready. I walk out, lock my door, and head toward the gate. Then I see him. Zakhile, standing outside his car. What is he doing here? I don't need this right now.

He walks toward me. He looks like he didn't sleep at all. Dark circles under his eyes, shirt wrinkled.

Zakhile: Mama, can we talk?

Me: I have to get to work.

Truth is, I'm scared to hear the explanation. What if he cheated? What if it's worse than I think?

Zakhile: Get in the car. I'll take you.

Me: No.

His jaw tightens.

Zakhile: Get in the car, Ntombi. Don't make me drag you.

I swallow hard and walk to the car. He opens the door for me. I get in. He gets in on his side and locks the doors.

He turns to face me, his expression intense.

Zakhile: You don't want to hear my explanation. You've already made assumptions. What do you want me to do, Ntombi? I can't lose you over this. And I won't. You are not leaving me.

I exhale slowly and just look out the window. I can't look at him right now.

He takes a deep breath.

Zakhile: I had a no-strings-attached situation with Nelly a long time ago. She started acting crazy. She caught feelings. I didn't do relationships back then, and I didn't want one. I had no feelings for her whatsoever, so I cut ties.

He pauses, shifting in his seat to face me fully. My arms are folded, and I'm still looking out the window.

Zakhile: The second day after the auditions, when I picked you up from work and we went to Lizwi's place, he asked her to keep you company. I don't know why. He said no one else was available.

Another pause. I can hear him breathing.

Zakhile: I was stressed about work. And about you. I was still trying to figure out my feelings for you. After I dropped you off to deal with work, she came by my place. We... we hooked up. I told her no strings attached. She agreed. I just needed to release tension. She happened to be there.

He touches my thigh gently. I don't pull away, but I don't look at him either.

Zakhile: Say something. Please.

Me: (My voice flat) There's nothing I can say, Zakhile. Please just take me to work.

Zakhile: I didn't cheat on you, Ntombi. We weren't together yet.

Me: I know we weren't official. But what I don't understand is why you got hard when she touched you. You still want her? Besides, she's pregnant with your child. Maybe it's best you fix things with her and stick to her.

His voice rises.

Zakhile: I DON'T FUCKING WANT HER. I want you, Ntombi. She means nothing. Yes, I got hard. I admit that. But trust me…he has his own mind.

He gestures to his crotch with frustration.

Zakhile: And I used protection. Every time. That baby is not mine.

Me: (Quietly) Condoms break.

Zakhile: I fucking know that, okay? But I checked. Every time. That bitch is lying. But I'll do a paternity test. Then I'll know for sure.

Me: And if she's telling the truth?

He goes quiet. His jaw tightens. He starts the engine without answering.

I take a shaky breath.

Me: I think I should give you space to figure everything out. I also need time to myself.

Zakhile: (His voice strained) Don't do this, Ntombi. I love you. What you're doing is... you're pushing me away.

Me: (My voice breaking) I love you, Zakhile. God knows how much I love you. But am I ready for baby mama drama? Am I ready to see the man I love father a child with another woman? I don't know. I just... I don't know.

He runs his hand over his face roughly, clearly frustrated.

Zakhile: I will fix this. I promise.

I just exhale. What else can I say?

We arrive at the Playhouse. He parks and comes around to open my door for me. I step out. He stands close, too close, and brushes my cheek softly with his thumb.

Zakhile: Ngiyakuthanda, MaMbulazi. I don't want to lose you over this. I'm sorry for allowing her to get that close and touch me. I wasn't thinking.

I just nod. I'm so down. So much is happening in my head right now.

Zakhile: Are we okay?

Me: I just need time to process this. And to decide what I'll do if it turns out she's really pregnant. Can I have that?

Zakhile: How long?

Me: I don't know.

He shakes his head, clearly frustrated.

Zakhile: Ntombi, come on.

I walk past him, but he grabs my hand gently.

Zakhile: I'll fix this.

I nod and pull my hand away, walking toward the building without looking back.

Zakhile

I don't even know how we got here. We were doing just fine. That bitch Nelly. I regret every moment with her. Now I might lose the love of my life because of one stupid mistake. I pray to God she's not pregnant with my baby. I don't know how I'll deal with all this if she is.

I didn't sleep a wink last night. I kept trying to call Ntombi. My mind was racing with so many thoughts, so many scenarios.

I drive to my place and find my brothers already there, waiting in the living room.

Me: Sure.

They all nod.

Lizwi: How is she?

I shake my head and sit down heavily.

Me: I told her the truth. She asked for time.

Njabulo: At least she didn't break up with you.

Me: That's the same as breaking up. She's pushing me away.

Lizwi: She just wants to process all this. Give her time, Khehla.

Me: And while she processes this, I'm opening a door for Zondi. Can you believe he threatened me yesterday?

Njabulo leans forward.

Njabulo: What did he say?

Me: He said he wonders what Leonid will say once he knows about my "precious Ntombi."

Lizwi curses under his breath.

Lizwi: This is fucked up. We need that chip. Ntombi is in danger.

Me: I know. Shit!

Njabulo: And Nelly? How are you dealing with that situation?

Me: I don't know. I have to take her to the doctor for a checkup. To see how far along she is. If she even is.

Lizwi shakes his head.

Lizwi: I don't wish to be you right now, Khehla.

Narrated

Nelly is pacing up and down in her small apartment, staring at the text she just received from Zakhile. She's panicking. Full-blown panic.

The text says he'll pick her up tomorrow to go to the doctor for a pregnancy checkup.

The truth is, she's not pregnant. She lied. And now Zakhile is going to find out. And when he does, he's going to kill her. Maybe not literally, but close enough. She knows the Mthethwas are dangerous. Everyone knows that.

She didn't think this through. Trapping him with a baby seemed like the perfect plan in her head. She thought he'd soften up, maybe even give her a chance. She thought she'd have time to actually get pregnant before he found out. But everything took a sharp turn when that girl showed up and heard everything.

She runs her hands through her hair roughly, breathing hard.

She grabs her phone and calls one of her friends.

Nelly: Xolani, hey. I need a favor.

Xolani: Yeah, sure. What's up?

Nelly: Can I crash at your place for a few days? I... I fucked up.

Xolani: Yeah, but what did you do, Nelly?

Nelly: (Her voice shaking) I... fuck. I tried to trap someone with a baby. But I'm not pregnant. And he's

going to find out. And he's probably going to fuck me up.

Xolani: (Her voice rising) NELLY!

Nelly: (Crying now) I love him, okay? I didn't think. I just wanted him to love me back. That's it. That simple.

Xolani sighs heavily on the other end.

Xolani: Okay. You know what? You can come. But I want to hear all about this man who's driving you this crazy.

Nelly: (Sniffling) Thank you. I'm packing now. I'll be there soon.

She hangs up and starts throwing clothes into a bag frantically. Then she stops. She picks up her phone and opens her messages.

She types out a long message to Zakhile, her hands shaking.

Nelly**:** Zakhile, I'm so sorry. There is no pregnancy. I lied. I know what I did was wrong and I know you'll never forgive me. I did it because I love you. I've always loved you. I thought if you believed I was pregnant; you'd give me a chance. I'm sorry for ruining things with your girlfriend. I'm sorry for everything. Please don't look for me.

She presses send before she can change her mind.

Then she grabs her bag and runs out the door.

Chapter 31

Ntombi

I've been indoors since Thursday after rehearsals. I don't really feel like being outside. Zakhile has been sending texts every morning and at night. Wishing me good morning. Telling me how much he loves me. I feel bad, but I'm the type of person who needs time alone to deal with emotions before I make decisions I'll regret later. I will talk to him eventually. I'll hear him out and we'll figure out how to move forward from this.

It's Sunday afternoon and I'm still in bed. I should probably start cooking something. I get out of bed and go shower. I dry myself, lotion my body, and then my phone rings. It's Okuhle.

Me: Diro.

Okuhle: Hi, how are you? I'm just letting you know I'll be there at 18:30 to pick you up, okay?

Me: Pick me up?

Okuhle: The dinner. You won't be able to come?

She sounds disappointed and sad now. Flip. I forgot about the dinner. Why did I even agree to this?

Me: Oh yes, yes! I'm still on. No problem.

Okuhle: Perfect! Byeee, see you soon!

Me: (Smiling) Bye.

I hang up and groan. No cooking for me then. I pray Zakhile won't be there. How on earth will I even face him? I'm not ready.

Zakhile

I haven't heard from Ntombi since Thursday. Njabulo says I should give her space. Honestly, it's very hard. What makes it even harder is the fact that we're in this situation because of lies. Complete bullshit lies.

I got that bitch's message. She thought she could hide from me. I've already tracked her down. She's at some guys place in Westville. She's a dead woman walking. No one messes with me and makes my woman cry over bullshit. She will feel my wrath. But first, I'll fix things with Ntombi. Then I'll deal with Nelly. She's not that important.

Okuhle told us she's bringing her lead actress, Ntombi, for dinner. She's going on about Dad's long-lost daughter again. She's crazy, that one. But I don't care about all that. I know Ntombi's not our sibling. I'm just excited to see her. Tonight we fix things.

I get home and Mom is still busy with the pots in the kitchen.

Me: It smells nice in here.

She turns around, smiling.

Mom: Hi, Khehla. I'm glad you're joining us today.

Me: Did I have a choice, Mom? Your Sunday dinners are by force.

She hits me with a dish towel.

Mom: It's tradition. And I'm doing you all a favor. You're all not married. I'll stop once you all marry.

I just smile and shake my head.

Me: Mhm. Where's Dad?

Mom: In his study.

I walk to Dad's study. He's drinking whisky, sitting in his chair, looking out the window.

Me: Nyambose.

He turns from the window.

Dad: You're early. That's unlike you.

Me: Yeah. I hear Ntombi is coming for dinner.

Dad: Okuhle told you. That rascal thinks Ntombi is my long-lost daughter.

Me: Don't tell me she told Mom that.

Dad: She did. You know her. She had the guts to say, "Dad, come clean now. The truth shall set you free." Nx, yazi Okuhle.

I chuckle.

Me: You spoil her too much. What did Mom say?

Dad: She knows Ntombi is my friend Khumalo's daughter. She knows about Khumalo. He used to come here with Ntombi when she was little.

I nod.

Dad: Any luck with the necklace?

Me: No. I don't know how to approach her with this. Worse, now we're not quite on good terms.

He laughs.

Dad: Already? It's too early for you guys to be fighting.

Me: I know. But I'll fix it. I need to act now. The more time wasted, the more time it gives Zondi to come up with ideas. He already wants to involve our enemies. He'll start a war. Because if anything, and I mean anything happens to Ntombi, I'm painting this town red.

He sighs and shakes his head.

Dad: Just be careful, son.

I nod and walk out. I go outside to the balcony to cool off. A few minutes later, I see Okuhle's car pulling up.

Ntombi

We arrive at the Mthethwa home. It's a very beautiful house. It screams filthy rich. The view here is also amazing, you can see the ocean from up here.

We enter the house and I'm so nervous. Maybe because I'm about to meet my boyfriend's parents “indirectly”. And they don't even know. I clutch my handbag tight.

We walk to the dining room and there's a woman busy setting the table. I assume she's the mother. She's so beautiful and elegant. Very classy.

Okuhle: Mommy!

They share a hug.

Okuhle: Ntombi, meet my mom. And Mom, this is Ntombi, my lead that I've been telling you about.

Mrs. Mthethwa turns to me with a warm smile.

Mrs. Mthethwa: Hi, baby. How are you?

Me: I'm good, Ma. How are you?

Mrs. Mthethwa: I'm doing okay, baby. Okay, girls, help me finish up here. Let's go get the dishes.

She seems like such a sweet person. We go to the kitchen to get the dishes. This house is beautiful. So homey and warm. We grab the dishes and bring them to the dining table. Then I hear loud voices coming from the entrance.

Okuhle: That must be my brothers.

Njabulo and Lizwi appear with a woman who looks like them. I guess that's the other sister. Okuhle hugs them all. Then Zakhile walks in with who I assume is Baba Mthethwa.

My heart stops. Zakhile is just staring at me and it's making me uncomfortable.

Okuhle claps her hands together.

Okuhle: Okay, family! This is Ntombi, the star of my show. And Ntombi, these are my siblings. Zakhile, we call him Khehla because he was named after our great-grandfather. He's the oldest. Followed by Lizwi, then Njabulo, and my sister Vuyiswa.

What do I say? Do I pretend like I don't know them? I don't know what to do.

Vuyiswa steps forward, smiling warmly.

Vuyiswa: Finally, I get to see you. Okuhle can't stop talking about you. You are so beautiful.

Me: Thank you. You're beautiful too.

She smiles and walks out with Okuhle to help Mrs. Mthethwa in the kitchen.

Baba Mthethwa extends his hand.

Baba Mthethwa: Nice to finally see you.

I shake his hand nervously.

Me: Nice to meet you too, sir.

He nods and sits down at the head of the table.

Lizwi walks past me, smirking.

Lizwi: Nice to meet you, makoti.

He laughs a bit and sits down. Lizwi, though. Always teasing.

Njabulo nods at me.

Njabulo: You good?

I nod back. Njabulo is very intimidating. So serious.

Zakhile comes and stands next to me. Not too close, though.

Zakhile: Hi.

I clear my throat.

Me: H... hi.

He chuckles softly and goes to sit in his chair next to his father. Mrs. Mthethwa and the girls return, and we all sit down. I'm uncomfortable, not going to lie.

We start eating. The food is delicious. But Zakhile keeps stealing glances at me, making it worse.

Vuyiswa looks at me curiously.

Vuyiswa: So, Ntombi, where's home?

Me: eMtubatuba.

Vuyiswa: Oh, really? Nice. Any siblings?

Mrs. Mthethwa: Vuyiswa, aa mahn. I know what you're doing.

Vuyiswa: But Mom, I was just asking.

Is this about Baba Mthethwa being my dad? This is hilarious.

Okuhle leans forward excitedly.

Okuhle: You feel it too, sis?

Vuyiswa nods.

Baba Mthethwa: Feel what?

I also want to know.

Vuyiswa: The pull. There's something about Ntombi. There's this pull that makes you want to protect her like your own. It's like we're blood-related. Okuhle felt it first. ``````````That's why we thought maybe she's your daughter. Well, she doesn't look like any of us, but you never know.

Baba Mthethwa laughs.

Baba Mthethwa: That's ridiculous. She's not my daughter. I know that for a fact. Tell them, sisi.

I smile and shake my head.

Me: I don't have any siblings, to answer your question. I grew up with both my parents. My dad passed away when I was thirteen. I am my dad's daughter, for sure. That I know.

The guys and Baba share a look I don't quite understand. It's quick, but I catch it.

Mrs. Mthethwa: Leave the poor girl alone. She's not your father's child.

Okuhle: Okay, but it has to be something. Long-lost cousin, maybe?

Zakhile's voice is sharp.

Zakhile: Okuhle, stop with this nonsense.

Mrs. Mthethwa smiles at me warmly.

Mrs. Mthethwa: You are a very beautiful girl, Ntombi. Right, Khehla? Isn't she pretty?

Lizwi chokes on his food. Zakhile looks at me for a long moment.

Zakhile: (Nodding) She's very beautiful.

Okuhle's eyes go wide.

Okuhle: Mom, did you hear that? Khehla just gave out a compliment.

Mrs. Mthethwa just smiles knowingly, glancing between Zakhile and me. Does she know?

Vuyiswa: Very shocking. Ntombi, girl, you are special, I tell you.

I just smile and shake my head, trying not to blush.

We have a wonderful time. The meal is amazing. Mrs. Mthethwa can really cook. Once we're done, I ask to use the bathroom. Okuhle shows me the way.

I do my business, wash my hands, and check myself in the mirror. When I open the door, Zakhile is leaning against the wall. Hands in his pockets. Waiting.

My heart skips a beat.

Chapter 32

Zakhile

I see Ntombi heading to the bathroom. I follow her and wait outside. The whole night has been torture. I just wanted to hold her and kiss her so badly.

The door opens and she's shocked to see me.

Me: (Softly) Hi.

Ntombi: (Barely a whisper) Hi.

I push off the wall and step closer.

Me: Can we talk? Please?

Ntombi: Zakhile, not here. Your family is downstairs.

Me: Then come outside with me. Just for a few minutes.

She sighs.

Ntombi: Okay. A few minutes.

I lead her down the hallway to a side door that opens onto a private balcony. The view of the city lights twinkling below is beautiful, but all I can see is her.

I close the door behind us and we're alone.

Me: I miss you.

Ntombi: (Looking away) Zakhile...

Me: No, listen. I know you asked for time. I'm trying to give you that. But it's killing me, Ntombi. Not hearing your voice. Not seeing you. Not holding you.

Ntombi: (Her voice shaking) I needed space to think.

Me: She lied.

Ntombi: What?

Me: She's not pregnant. She lied. She thought she could trap me.

Ntombi: She lied?

Me: (Nodding) She sent me a message. Admitted everything.

Ntombi: Oh my God!

Me: I'm sorry for hurting you.

She walks close to the balcony's protective railing and just stands there, looking out at the view.

Ntombi: I need to know…if she was pregnant, what would you have done?

I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her back against my chest. The ocean breeze hits our faces.

Me: I would've taken responsibility for the child. But I would've still chosen you. I'll always choose you.

Ntombi: But... you got hard when she touched you.

Me: (My voice firm) I know. And I'm sorry. But it didn't mean anything. My body reacted, but my heart? My heart is yours. Only yours Ntombi.

I turn her around gently and cup her face in my hands.

Me: Please, baby. Don't give up on us. Not over this.

She closes her eyes, leaning into my touch.

Ntombi: (Whispering) I'm scared.

Me: Of what?

Ntombi: Of getting hurt. And not being enough.

Me: (My voice breaking) You're everything, Ntombi. Everything.

I pull her into my arms and she lets me. She buries her face in my chest and I hold her tight, my hand running through her braids.

Me: I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for hurting you.

Ntombi: I missed you.

I kiss the top of her head.

Me: I missed you too. So much.

We stand there for a while, just holding each other. Eventually, she pulls back and looks up at me.

Ntombi: We need to go back inside before they notice we're gone.

Me: Are we okay?

She nods slowly.

Ntombi: We're okay. But Zakhile?

Me: Yeah?

Ntombi: Don't ever let another woman touch you like that again.

Me: (Smiling) Never. I promise.

I lean down and kiss her. Soft, gentle, full of love.

The door suddenly opens and Okuhle walks in. We pull apart quickly, but I keep Ntombi close, my arm still around her waist.

Okuhle: (Her eyes wide) And then?

Ntombi turns to look at her.

Ntombi: I think he should tell you.

Okuhle: Tell me what? Oh my God, are you two an item? No way!

Me: Yes, we are.

Okuhle: Wait a minute. Wait, but how? Khehla, you... you're... well, you...

Me: I'm what?

Okuhle: You're YOU. Ntombi, how did he even ask you out? I need all the details. Does he even have conversations? Laugh? Smile? I need every detail on how he got you to be his woman.

Ntombi laughs.

Me: Okuhle, don't start.

Okuhle: I'm serious! Anyway, lovebirds, Baba is looking for both of you. Says he has something to tell us.

Ntombi: Me too?

Okuhle: All of us.

We walk downstairs. Okuhle walks behind with Ntombi, whispering, but I can hear everything.

Okuhle: Girl, you can hide a dead body, I swear. How did you manage to hide this relationship? And how long have you been dating? Wait, was it from the auditions, or did you know each other before? Well, is he romantic at least?

Ntombi laughs.

Ntombi: Calm down, will you? I'll tell you everything later. Let's go hear what your dad has to tell us.

Okuhle: Fine. But I want every detail. Every... well, except the bedroom stuff. I don't want to hear that.

I chuckle and shake my head.

We get downstairs to the lounge and everyone is already waiting.

Lizwi looks at me with a smirk.

Lizwi: Where did you disappear to, heh, Khehla?

Me: Not now, Lizwi.

Dad clears his throat, getting everyone's attention.

Dad: I called you all here to talk about Ntombi. And why you all feel like she's one of you.

Okuhle: I knew it! She's your daughter! Oh my God, and now she's dating…

Dad: (Shouting) OKUHLE! Don't interrupt me when I'm talking. Siyezwana?

Okuhle shrinks back, nodding.

Dad: Now, as I was saying. Ntombi?

Ntombi: Yebo baba

Dad: I knew your father. He was my best friend. I'm sure if you ask your mother about a man named Mthethwa, she'll remember me.

Ntombi

I'm so shocked right now. Baba Mthethwa was best friends with my father? What a small world. But why call a meeting just for that? Unless there's more.

Baba Mthethwa continues, his expression serious.

Baba Mthethwa: We did something stupid without thinking. We went to a witch doctor in the mountains to perform a blood oath. We got involved in a dangerous business with dangerous people, so we wanted to be loyal to each other. To always have each other's backs and not sell each other out. We did the blood oath, mixed our blood, called upon our ancestors, and that was it.

What the hell am I hearing right now? What is this blood oath thing?

Mrs. Mthethwa's voice rises.

Mrs. Mthethwa: Baba, wenzeni?

Vuyiswa: Dad, that's witchcraft!

Okuhle: Do you even believe in those things? It probably didn't even do anything.

Baba Mthethwa: It worked. We were loyal, and no one was able to turn us against each other. And Zakhile and Ntombi were having dreams about each other before they even met.

I feel myself getting dizzy. The dreams were because of the blood oath? Zakhile notices immediately and holds my waist to steady me.

Vuyiswa: They dreamed of each other? What? When?

Okuhle: Ntombi, you dreamed of Khehla? Wait a minute... was that why he acted so strange during auditions after your performance?

Zakhile looks at me intensely.

Zakhile: Are you okay?

Me: You knew?

He nods. I see panick in his eyes.

Me: Baba Mthethwa, how is the oath connected to the dreams?

I need to know. And why didn't Zakhile tell me?

Baba Mthethwa: Your father pleaded with the ancestors to make you two connect. After his death, he wanted Zakhile to be the man for you. The man who would protect you.

Me: Protect me from what?

They all share a look, Zakhile, the brothers and Baba Mthethwa. A look I don't quite understand. Am I in danger? Is this what my grandmother was talking about?

Baba Mthethwa: See, we...

Zakhile: Baba.

He raises his hand, stopping him.

Baba Mthethwa: We were involved with dangerous people. So in case some of them reappear, I guess he wanted you to be safe.

I still don't understand. This is all so confusing. I sit down on the single couch near me. I can't take this.

Baba Mthethwa: Okuhle, what you've been feeling toward Ntombi is because of the blood oath. I'm pretty sure everyone here feels that pull. To protect her and care for her.

The brothers nod in agreement.

Vuyiswa: So the oath also affects us? But how?

Baba Mthethwa: We did it for our families. And only Zakhile fell in love.

Vuyiswa: Khehla? In love? It can't be.

Mrs. Mthethwa smiles knowingly.

Mrs. Mthethwa: That's why you couldn't keep your eyes off her the whole night.

Me: But all we feel was manipulated by the ancestors.

Zakhile steps forward, his voice firm.

Zakhile: No, it wasn't. It's all us. It's real. They only made us meet and connect, but everything else? It's all us. What we feel for each other, it's real.

His father looks proud, smiling and nodding.

Lizwi rubs his hands together with a grin.

Lizwi: Well, you all heard it. Dad was, or is a witch.

Baba Mthethwa: Lizwi! I will fuck you up, boy.

Lizwi runs and hides behind his mother. We all laugh. Zakhile and Njabulo just shake their heads.

Baba Mthethwa turns to me, all serious now.

Baba Mthethwa: I'm glad your father chose you for my son. You bring out the best in him. He's... well, he's Zakhile. Doesn't show emotions. Behaves like a robot. But since you came along, he's alive.

He puts his hand on Zakhile's shoulder.

Baba Mthethwa: Take care of her.

Zakhile nods.

Baba Mthethwa takes his wife's hand and they walk out of the lounge together.

Vuyiswa shakes her head in disbelief.

Vuyiswa: I can't believe we thought you were our long-lost sister.

We all laugh.

Okuhle: From now on, you're our oath sister. A sister from another mother.

We laugh again.

Vuyiswa: So you two are dating for real? Khehla is in love? I cannot believe this.

Okuhle: Exactly, sis. And he's in looooove.

Zakhile: I'm still here, you know.

I just smile because these two sisters are hilarious.

Zakhile stands and extends his hand to me.

Zakhile: Come. Let's go get some air.

I take his hand and we walk outside to the patio.

Zakhile: How do you feel after hearing all this?

Me: Still processing. It's quite a lot. Why didn't you tell me?

Zakhile: And say what, babe? Our dads performed witchcraft?

I hit his chest, laughing.

Me: I wonder what my mom will say. And to think of it, my grandma did say my dad sent someone to protect me. I didn't understand because she always has weird dreams.

Zakhile: This one wasn't weird. It was a message.

Me: I guess.

He holds both my hands and pulls me closer to him.

Zakhile: You don't want to leave yet?

Me: Uhm, Okuhle invited me, so...

Zakhile: Come with me. To my place.

I nod, smiling. I miss him.

Me: Let me tell Okuhle and your parents that I'm leaving.

Zakhile: Okay. Let's go.

We walk back inside together. Okuhle sees us and grins.

Okuhle: Let me guess, you're leaving?

Me: (Blushing) Yeah. I'm going with Zakhile.

Okuhle: (Singing) Somebody's getting some tonight!

Me: Okuhle!

Everyone laughs. I hug Mrs. Mthethwa and thank her for the meal. She pulls me close and whispers in my ear.

Mrs. Mthethwa: Take care of my son. He needs you.

Me: (Smiling) I will, Ma.

She kisses my cheek and lets me go. Baba Mthethwa nods at me approvingly. Vuyiswa hugs me tight.

Vuyiswa: Welcome to the family, oath sister.

I laugh and hug her back.

Zakhile takes my hand and we walk out to his car. As we drive away, I look back at the house. I came here as Okuhle's friend. I'm leaving as part of the Mthethwa family.

And somehow, it feels right.

Chapter 33

Ntombi

It's almost two months now and my life has been amazing. My relationship has been pure bliss. Zakhile treats me so good, like a queen, like I'm the only woman he sees. Yes, he can be a bit possessive and controlling at times, but he's perfect for me.

After having dinner with the Mthethwas, I told my mom what Baba Mthethwa revealed about the blood oath. She said she does know him; they were friends with Dad back then. She was really shocked. Shocked that my dreams actually meant something. She also said Baba Mthethwa is telling the truth because it does sound like something my dad would do. She said she's going to pray hard so that those dangerous people don't come back and hurt us.

This is the final week of rehearsal. It's getting real now, Monday we're performing. The show has already been

marketed, and since it's for June 16th Youth Day, it's going to be big. This show is a reminder that Black students in Soweto protested the apartheid government's decision to enforce Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools in 1976. June 16th became a symbol of youth resistance, sacrifice, and courage. And we have to nail our performance.

It's been a busy week. We were at the Playhouse the whole week with no rest. Thursday was our regular rehearsal. Friday was technical rehearsal that includes lighting, sound, set changes, cues. It ran till late into the night. Saturday was dress rehearsal that is full costume, hair, makeup. A complete run-through. Today is Sunday, and it's the final dress rehearsal before opening night tomorrow.

I'm exhausted but excited. This is what I've been working toward my entire life.

Sunday - Final Dress Rehearsal

I arrive at the Playhouse early. The energy backstage is electric. Everyone is nervous but ready. Okuhle is running around with her clipboard, giving last-minute notes and encouragement.

Okuhle: (Clapping her hands) Okay, people! This is it. Final dress rehearsal. Treat this like opening night. Full energy. No holding back. Let's show them what we've got!

We take our positions. The lights dim. The music starts. And we begin.

The rehearsal is incredible. Everyone is on point. The choreography is tight. The acting is powerful. The costumes and set design transport us back to 1976. I can feel the emotion of the story in every scene, the fear, the anger and the hope.

When we finish, the entire cast is buzzing with adrenaline. Okuhle is beaming.

Okuhle: (Wiping tears) That was perfect. You all are ready. Tomorrow, we make history.

Everyone cheers. We hug each other, some of us crying. This has been months of hard work, and it's finally happening.

I change out of my costume and head to my dressing room to pack up. There's a knock on the door.

Me: Come in!

The door opens and Zakhile walks in, holding a huge bouquet of red roses.

Me: (My eyes widening) Baby! What are you doing here?

He smiles that devastating smile and walks over to me.

Zakhile: I couldn't let you end today without knowing how proud I am of you.

He hands me the roses. They're beautiful.

Me: (Smelling them) These are gorgeous. Thank you.

Zakhile: There's more.

He pulls out a small velvet box from his pocket. My heart skips a beat. Is he..?

He opens the box. Inside is a delicate gold bracelet with a small heart charm.

Zakhile: For good luck. For tomorrow and every performance after.

I feel tears prick my eyes.

Me: Zakhile, this is beautiful.

He takes the bracelet out and fastens it around my wrist.

Zakhile: You're going to be amazing tomorrow. I know it.

Me: (Looking up at him) Will you be there?

Zakhile: Front row. Every single show.

I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him. He holds me tight, kissing me back.

When we pull apart, he rests his forehead against mine.

Zakhile: I love you, MaMbulazi.

Me: I love you too, Nyambose.

There's another knock on the door. Bonolo peeks her head in.

Bonolo: (Grinning) Am I interrupting?

Me: (Laughing) No, come in!

She walks in holding a gift bag.

Bonolo: I know you have your show tomorrow, so I wanted to give you this now.

I open the bag. Inside is a framed photo of me and her from years ago, when we were kids. We're both smiling, arms around each other.

Bonolo: To remind you how far you've come. You've been dreaming of this your whole life. Now go out there and kill it.

I hug her tight, tears falling now.

Me: (Sobbing) Thank you. Thank you for always believing in me.

Bonolo: (Pulling back, wiping my tears) Stop crying! Save the tears for your standing ovation.

We both laugh. Zakhile chuckles.

Monday - Opening Night

The day has finally arrived. I'm a bundle of nerves. I barely slept last night. I went through my lines a hundred times. Practiced my choreography. Now I'm backstage, in full costume and makeup, waiting for places to be called.

Okuhle comes over to me.

Okuhle: You ready?

Me: (Taking a deep breath) Ready as I'll ever be.

She squeezes my hand.

Okuhle: You've got this. Break a leg.

Me: (Smiling) Thank you. For everything.

Okuhle: (Smiling back) Thank you for being awesome. Now go out there and make me proud.

The stage manager calls places. I take my position. My heart is pounding. The house lights dim and the audience quiets. The music begins.

And then I step onto the stage.

The lights are blinding. I become the character. I feel her fear, her determination and her courage.

The performance is a blur. Every line, every movement and every emotion flows naturally. The cast is

incredible and the energy is electric. The audience is captivated; I can feel it.

When the final scene ends, there's a moment of silence. Then the entire theater erupts in applause. Standing ovation. People are cheering, crying, clapping.

We take our bows. The applause gets louder. I look out into the audience and see them. Zakhile, Bonolo, my mom, the entire Mthethwa family. They're all standing, clapping, beaming with pride.

I see my mom wiping tears. Bonolo is screaming. Zakhile is looking at me like I'm the only person in the world.

Tears stream down my face. This is it. This is everything I've ever dreamed of.

Backstage - After the Show

The dressing room is chaos. Flowers everywhere. People hugging, crying, laughing. Okuhle bursts in.

Okuhle: (Screaming) YOU DID IT! YOU WERE PHENOMENAL!

She hugs me tight. The rest of the cast piles in, everyone celebrating.

There's a knock on the door. I open it and my mom is standing there, tears streaming down her face.

Mom: (Sobbing) Ntombi, my baby. I'm so proud of you.

I hug her tight, both of us crying now.

Me: Thank you for always supporting me, Mama.

Mom: (Pulling back, cupping my face) Your father would be so proud. So, so proud.

Behind her, the Mthethwa family appears. Mrs. Mthethwa, Baba Mthethwa, Lizwi, Njabulo, Okuhle, Vuyiswa, everyone.

Mrs. Mthethwa: (Hugging me) You were absolutely stunning, my child.

Baba Mthethwa: (Nodding) Your father would have been honored.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Makoti killed it!

Njabulo: (Smiling) You were incredible.

Vuyiswa: (Hugging me) I cried the whole time!

Bonolo pushes through the crowd.

Bonolo: (Grabbing my hands) Girl! GIRL! You were amazing! I knew you could do it!

Then Zakhile appears. Everyone steps aside to let him through. He's holding another bouquet, this one even bigger than yesterday's.

He walks up to me, his eyes full of pride and love.

Zakhile: (His voice thick with emotion) You were perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Me: (Crying again) You really think so?

Zakhile: I know so.

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me. Right there in front of everyone. I don't care. Let them see.

When we pull apart, everyone is smiling.

Baba Mthethwa: (Chuckling) Alright. Let's go celebrate. Dinner is on me.

Everyone cheers.

Narrated

The week continues like a dream. Every show is sold out. Every performance receives a standing ovation. The reviews are glowing. Ntombi Khumalo is the name on everyone's lips.

Tuesday's show is just as powerful as Monday's. Wednesday's even more so. By Thursday, the buzz

around the production has grown so large that media outlets are covering it.

Friday night's performance is electric. Saturday brings two shows, a matinee and an evening performance. Both are packed. Both receive thunderous applause.

Sunday is the final show. The closing matinee. The entire cast knows this is it, the last time they'll perform this piece together. The emotion is palpable.

The performance is flawless. When they take their final bow, the audience gives them a five-minute standing ovation. Flowers are thrown onto the stage. People are crying, cheering, refusing to leave.

Backstage, the cast embraces. Some are sobbing. Others are laughing through tears. It's over. But what a journey it was.

Okuhle gathers them all together.

Okuhle: (Her voice shaking with emotion) I am so proud of every single one of you. You gave your hearts

to this show. You honored the memory of those who fought for our freedom. Thank you. Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for this gift.

They group hug, all of them crying now.

Ntombi

After the final show, I change out of my costume for the last time. I carefully pack away the bracelet Zakhile gave me. I look around the dressing room, flowers, cards, gifts from well-wishers.

This has been the most incredible week of my life.

There's a knock on the door. Zakhile.

Zakhile: Ready to go?

Me: (Smiling) Yeah. I'm ready.

He takes my hand and we walk out together. The Playhouse is quiet now. The stage is dark. The audience is gone.

As we drive home, I lean my head on his shoulder.

Me: Thank you for being there. Every single show.

Zakhile: (Kissing the top of my head) I wouldn't have missed it for the world. You were born for this, Ntombi.

Me: (Smiling) I love you.

Zakhile: I love you too.

Chapter 34

Zakhile

We're home and we just had a steamy session. Ntombi is sleeping peacefully beside me, her head on my chest, when my phone buzzes on the nightstand. It's Lizwi. I carefully slide out from under her and step out onto the balcony so I don't wake her up.

Me: Sure.

Lizwi: (His voice weak, breathless) R…ee…D

My blood runs cold. RED. Our distress code.

Me: Shit. What's wrong? I'm on my way. Where are you?

Lizwi: (Struggling to speak) I...

Me: Save your strength, Lizwi. I'll be there now.

I hang up and immediately dial Nathi. He answers on the first ring.

Nathi: Khehla, it was an ambush. There was a shootout at Lizwi's house. I don't know how they got in, but…

Me: Shit. How bad?

Nathi: He managed to take some of them down and locked himself in the safe room. He's hurt bad. We're five minutes out. Njabulo's with me. Dr. Govender is already on his way.

Me: I'm coming. Give me ten minutes.

I hang up and rush back inside. My mind is racing. Lizwi is hurt. Badly. And someone knows where he lives. Someone got inside his security.

I grab my gun from the safe, check the clip, and tuck it into my waistband. I pull on jeans and a hoodie. Then I walk over to the bed.

Ntombi is still sleeping, her face peaceful. I hate to wake her, but I can't leave her here alone. Not now. Not with whoever did this to Lizwi still out there.

I shake her gently.

Me: Baby. Baby, wake up.

She stirs, blinking her eyes open.

Ntombi: (Sleepily) Zakhile? What's wrong?

Me: Get up. We need to go. Now.

Ntombi: (Sitting up, alarm in her voice) What? What's happening?

Me: I'll explain in the car. Please, baby. Just get dressed. Quickly.

She sees the look on my face and doesn't argue. She gets out of bed and pulls on a tracksuit. I grab her sneakers and hand them to her.

Ntombi: Zakhile, you're scaring me.

Me: I know. I'm sorry. But we have to go. Now.

We rush downstairs. I grab my car keys and we head to the garage. I open the passenger door for her and she gets in, still confused and scared.

I get in on my side, start the engine, and pull out of the driveway. The gate opens and we speed out of the estate.

Ntombi

My heart is pounding. Zakhile's jaw is tight, his hands gripping the steering wheel. He keeps checking the rearview mirror.

Me: Zakhile, what's going on? Where are we going?

Zakhile: It's Lizwi. He's hurt. We're going to his place.

Me: What? How? What happened?

Zakhile: I don't know yet. Just…

Suddenly, headlights appear behind us. Fast. Too fast.

Zakhile: Fuck.

Me: What? Who is that?

Zakhile: Hold on.

He floors the gas pedal. The car lurches forward, speeding down the road. The headlights behind us speed up too, closing the distance.

Then I hear it. Gunshots.

Me: (Screaming) OH MY GOD!

The back window shatters. Glass flies everywhere. I duck down, covering my head, screaming.

Zakhile: Stay down! Stay down!

He's swerving now, trying to avoid the bullets. More gunshots. The side mirror explodes. My ears are ringing. I can't stop screaming.

Zakhile grabs his phone and yells into it.

Zakhile: WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! GET HERE NOW!

He throws the phone down and pulls out a gun from under his seat. A gun. Oh my God.

Me: (Sobbing) Zakhile, please! Please!

Zakhile: I've got you, baby. I've got you. Just stay down.

More gunshots. The car behind us is trying to pull up beside us. There are two men inside, guns pointed at us.

Then, out of nowhere, another car appears. It slams into the attackers' car from the side, forcing them off the road. That’s Zakhiles security team.

More gunshots. A full-blown shootout. I'm crying, shaking, curled up in my seat. This isn't real. This can't be real.

Zakhile: (Shouting) Hold on!

He makes a sharp turn, tires screeching, and speeds down a side street. Dark. Narrow. He pulls into a hidden alley and parks, turning off the engine.

We sit in darkness. The only sound is my sobbing and his heavy breathing.

Zakhile: (Touching my face) Baby, look at me. Look at me.

I can barely see him through my tears.

Me: (Hysterical) What's happening? Who are those people? Why are they shooting at us?

Zakhile: I don't know yet. But I'm going to find out. Stay here. Lock the doors. Don't open them for anyone but me. Understand?

Me: (Grabbing his arm) No! Don't leave me! Please!

Zakhile: I have to. I need to finish this.

Me: (Crying harder) No. No, please. Zakhile, please.

He cups my face and kisses me hard.

Zakhile: I love you. I'll be right back. I promise.

He gets out of the car before I can stop him. I lock the door. I'm alone in the dark, shaking, crying, terrified.

Zakhile

I move through the shadows, gun drawn. I can hear them, two, maybe three men still searching for us. Amateurs. They're making too much noise.

I crouch low, moving between the shadows. I spot them, twenty meters ahead, both armed, both looking the wrong way.

I take aim. I breathe then squeeze.

Bang.

The first one drops. Headshot.

The second spins around, firing wildly. Bullets spray the wall above my head. I drop and roll, coming up on one knee.

Bang. Bang.

Center mass. He goes down hard.

I stand, scanning the area. Listening.

Silence.

Then, a sound. A faint sound behind me.

I spin around just as a man lunges at me with a knife. I dodge, but the blade catches my arm. Pain flares. Blood soaks through my sleeve.

We grapple. He's strong. He slams me against the wall and the gun flies from my hand.

He swings the knife again. I block with my forearm, grab his wrist, and twist hard. Bone snaps. He screams.

I drive my knee into his gut. Twice. He doubles over. I grab his head and slam it into the concrete wall three times.

He collapses. Unconscious.

I pick up my gun, breathing hard, blood dripping from my arm.

I press the barrel against his head.

Me: (My voice cold) Who sent you?

He groans, barely conscious.

Me: (Louder) WHO. SENT. YOU.

Man: (Coughing blood) Go... to hell.

I press the gun harder.

Me: Wrong answer.

Bang.

I stand, wiping blood from my face. My arm is throbbing but I ignore it.

I need to get back to Ntombi.

I turn and start running back toward the car.

Then I hear it.

A scream.

Her scream.

Me: NTOMBI!

I sprint, my heart exploding in my chest. No. No. No.

I round the corner and my blood turns to ice.

A man has her. His arm is locked around her throat, dragging her backward. A gun is pressed to her temple. She's struggling, crying, her eyes wide with terror.

Ntombi: (Sobbing, screaming) ZAKHILE!

Me: (Raising my gun) Let. Her. Go.

Man: (Backing away, his voice shaking) Stay back! I'll fucking do it! I'll blow her brains out!

Me: (My voice deadly calm) You won't.

He presses the gun harder against her head

Man: TRY ME!

Ntombi is sobbing, gasping, her hands clawing at his arm. Her eyes lock on mine, pleading, terrified.

Me: (Taking a step closer) Let her go. And maybe I let you walk.

Man: (His voice rising) BULLSHIT! You'll kill me!

Me: Maybe. But right now, you've got a choice. Let her go and take your chances. Or hurt her and die screaming.

He's panicking. I can see it. His hand is shaking. Sweat dripping down his face.

I take another step.

Man: (Screaming) DON'T MOVE! DON'T FUCKING MOVE!

Me: (My voice cold, eyes locked on him) You're already dead. You just don't know it yet.

Ntombi: (Sobbing) Zakhile... please...

Me: (Softly) Close your eyes, baby.

She squeezes them shut.

The man shifts. Just barely. His head moves an inch to the left.

That's all I need.

I pull the trigger.

Bang.

The shot echoes through the alley. Blood sprays. The man's head snaps back. He drops instantly, releasing Ntombi.

She collapses to the ground, screaming, her hands over her face.

I run to her, dropping to my knees, pulling her into my arms.

Me: I've got you. I've got you. You're okay. You're safe.

She's shaking violently, sobbing uncontrollably into my chest. I hold her tight, my hand in her hair, my own hands shaking now.

Me: (Rocking her) You're safe, baby. I'm here. I'm here. Nobody's going to hurt you.

Behind us, tires screech. That’s my security team arriving.

But I don't move. I just hold her. Because I almost lost her.

And I will burn this entire world to the ground before I let that happen again.

Chapter 35

Zakhile

I manage to get Ntombi back into the car. She's not fighting me, but she's not really here either. Just a shell, staring at nothing, tears streaming silently down her face.

Lizwi is being taken to the warehouse. We can't risk a hospital; they'd finish him off there. And hospitals mean cops, questions, investigations we can't afford.

I need to take Ntombi somewhere safe. Somewhere I know she'll be protected while I deal with this. My parents' house. Dad has already doubled security by now. He knows the protocol.

The drive is silent except for her quiet crying. Each sob feels like a knife twisting in my chest. I hate seeing her like this. Broken and terrified.

When I heard her scream back there, when I saw that gun pressed to her head, I felt something I've never felt before. Pure, paralyzing fear. I almost lost her.

It's time to end this. I know it's Zondi. This has him written all over it, coordinated, ruthless, targeting my family. And now he's made the biggest mistake of his life. He's touched what's mine.

I'm going to kill everything and everyone he holds dear. No one messes with my family and lives to tell about it.

We pull up to my parents' house. The gates open immediately; security has been briefed. I see at least six armed guards visible, which means there are probably twice that many hidden. Good.

I get out and walk around to her side. She's just sitting there, staring straight ahead, tears still falling.

Me: Baby, give me your hand. Let's go inside.

She turns to look at me slowly. She takes my hand. Her fingers are ice cold.

We walk inside. Mom and Dad are waiting in the lounge. The moment Mom sees Ntombi, she rushes over.

Mom: (Pulling Ntombi into her arms) Oh, my poor baby. I'm so glad you're okay. How are you feeling?

Ntombi doesn't answer. She just collapses into Mom's embrace and sobs. Mom holds her tight, stroking her hair, whispering soothing words.

Me: Mom, I'm leaving her here. I need to check on Lizwi. How is Okuhle and Vuyiswa?

Mom: They are still sleeping; we didn’t want to wake them.

I nod.

Dad stands up, his face hard.

Dad: I'm coming with you.

I pull Ntombi gently to the side, away from Mom.

Me: (Softly) Sthandwa sami, I'll be back. I just need to find out who's behind this and make sure Lizwi is okay. I know you have so many questions, but I'll answer everything when I come back. Okay?

She nods, wiping her tears with the sleeve of her hoodie. She looks so small. So fragile.

Ntombi: (Her voice barely a whisper) Please come back.

Me: I promise. I'll always come back to you, mama.

I pull her into my arms and hold her tight. Then I kiss her forehead.

Me: I love you.

Ntombi: (Against my chest) I love you too.

Mom: (Gently) Come, nana. Let's get you to bed. You need to rest.

Ntombi lets Mom lead her away. She looks back at me once before disappearing up the stairs.

I turn to Dad and we head out.

We arrive at the warehouse. Security is everywhere, doubled, just as I ordered. Njabulo's car is already here.

We head inside to the small medical room we keep for situations like this. Dr. Govender is working on Lizwi, his hands moving quickly, efficiently. Njabulo and Nathi are standing against the wall, watching.

Me: Sure. How bad is it?m

Njabulo: (His voice tight) He lost a lot of blood.

Me: Shit.

Dad steps forward, his expression dark.

Dad: End this, Zakhile. Seems like they've forgotten who you are.

I nod, gripping his shoulder.

We walk out to the main area. I can't stand still. My mind is racing.

Me: Nathi, did you find anything? Who did this?

Nathi: My guess? Zondi. Because they went after Ntombi too. This wasn't just about killing Lizwi. This was about sending a message.

Njabulo: He wanted Lizwi dead. You dead. He was coming for the whole family afterwards. Kill us one by one.

Me: Someone's working with him. We have a rat. How else would they get past Lizwi's security?

Nathi: It has to be someone who knows the layout of the house. Someone with access.

We sit in silence, thinking. Then it hits me.

Me: SHIT. I'M GOING TO KILL THAT BITCH. I should have killed her a long time ago.

Dad: Who?

Njabulo: (His eyes widening) You've got to be kidding me. Nelly?

Nathi: Shit. Why didn't you kill her when you had the chance?

Me: I know. Fuck. Where is she?

Nathi: I'll find her. Then I'll send the team.

I sit down heavily, my head in my hands. This is my fault. I should have killed her and now Lizwi almost died because of it.

Me: I have to tell Ntombi everything. Everything about my life. About her father. She's going to ask questions after tonight, and I won't be able to lie. And I need her to agree to let me open that necklace.

Njabulo: (Cautiously) Are you sure? Revealing who you are might end your relationship.

I know. And that terrifies me more than any bullet.

Me: (My jaw tightening) I won't allow that. She's mine.

Dad: Khehla, you can't force the girl.

Nathi: Dad's right. She has to choose this. You can't trap her.

I nod, but inside, I'm panicking. What if she leaves? What if she can't accept this?

Dr. Govender walks out, pulling off his gloves.

Dad: (Standing) How is my son?

Dr. Govender: He's stable. Nothing vital was damaged. He lost a lot of blood, but he'll recover. He's strong.

Me: Can we see him?

Dr. Govender: He's still unconscious. Give him time.

I nod.

Me: Njabulo, organize security for Ntombi's mother. I want her house guarded from a distance. We don't want to scare her, but I need her protected.

Njabulo: Already done.

Me: (Looking at Nathi) Come with me. We need to act fast before they make another move.

Narrated

Zondi is pacing in his office, his face twisted with fury.

Zondi: Mfundo, the mission was simple! How on earth did they get away?

Mfundo: (Nervous) His security team appeared from nowhere. They were ready.

Zondi: And Lizwi? Is he dead?

Mfundo: I'm not sure. No one came out of that house alive. I haven't heard from any of the guys we sent.

Zondi: SHIT. SHIT!

He slams his fist on the desk. He knows they've fucked up. Their days are numbered now. Zakhile is going to come for them with everything he has.

But Zondi won't go down without a fight. He's already made the call. Leonid. The Russians. If Zakhile wants war, he'll get one.

Ntombi

I'm sitting in the guest room, staring at the ceiling. I can't sleep. Every time I close my eyes, I hear the gunshots. I see Zakhile's face. How cold, focused and lethal he was as he fired that gun. As he killed that man without hesitation.

I don't want to believe what I'm thinking. I can't. But the thoughts won't stop coming.

Who is he? What is he?

The door opens and I jump, my heart racing.

Zakhile: (Softly) Hey, baby. It's me.

I sit up on the bed, my heart still pounding. He walks over and sits next to me, taking my hands in his.

Me: How's Lizwi?

Zakhile: He's going to be fine.

Relief floods through me.

Me: I'm glad.

There's a pause. Then I ask the question I've been dreading.

Me: Did you find out who they were? Why they were shooting at us?

He runs his hand over his face, exhaling slowly.

Zakhile: I have to tell you something. But first, I need to know. Do you trust me?

Me: (My stomach dropping) Zakhile, you're scaring me. What's going on?

Zakhile: Do you trust me, Ntombi?

Me: (My voice shaking) Ye... yes. I do.

Zakhile: (Exhaling deeply) I know what you're thinking. What you saw tonight was my other side. The side I never wanted you to see. My brothers and I, we've built an empire in the shadows. That's where the real power lies. We deal with imports and exports. Shipments that don't appear on official manifests.

Oh my God. What is he telling me?

Me: (Standing up) What are you saying, Zakhile? You're into illegal stuff?

Zakhile: (Standing too) This is what I was born into. What my father built and passed on to me. I don't apologize for it, Ntombi.

Me: (My voice rising) You kill people?

Zakhile: Ntombi...

Me: I just want to know!

Zakhile: (His jaw tight) If I have to. Some business deals are sealed with blood. We do whatever it takes to protect our interests and stay on top.

I pull my hands away from him and stand up, moving toward the window. I need space. I need air.

Zakhile: (Following me) I would never hurt you, Ntombi. I love you. Before you, I never cared about anything else besides business and family. But you came along and changed everything.

I turn to face him, tears streaming down my face.

Me: I asked you what you do for a living. I asked if you were a criminal. And you lied to me, Zakhile. You looked me in the eyes and said no.

Zakhile: (Stepping closer) I know. I was scared to tell you the truth. I was scared you'd leave. I'm sorry for lying.

I turn back to the window, trying to process everything. My mind is spinning.

He comes up behind me and turns me around gently.

Zakhile: The people who tried to kill us tonight, they're after you and your family.

Me: (My eyes widening) What? Why? Are these the dangerous people your dad was talking about?

I can barely breathe.

Zakhile: Baby, breathe. I will protect you. No matter what it takes. When your father passed away, he left you that necklace you're wearing. What's inside is what they're looking for.

I touch my necklace, my hand shaking.

Zakhile: Your dad was murdered, Ntombi. By the cartel leader. Because of evidence he found about him, Zondi. I need what's inside that necklace to know why Zondi is so desperate to get his hands on it. That information will help me bring him down. And he won't rest until he finds it.

Me: (Whispering) What?

Zakhile: Remember Themba? That's Zondi's son. He was sent to get close to you. To find out where your dad hid the information.

Oh my God. Oh my God.

Me: (Stepping back) I've been in danger this whole time?

Zakhile: (Reaching for me) Yes. But I've been protecting you. Since the moment I met you. That's why I had Vusi drive you. That's why I've had security watching you. I would never let anything happen to you.

I sink onto the bed, my head in my hands. This is too much. Too much information. Too much danger.

Me: My dad... was murdered?

Zakhile: (Kneeling in front of me) Yes.

Me: And you've known this the whole time?

Zakhile: I found out recently. I didn't want to tell you until I was sure.

I look up at him, tears blurring my vision.

Me: That's why you've been so protective. That's why you wouldn't let me out of your sight.

Zakhile: I love you, Ntombi. I would die before I let anyone hurt you.

I believe him. God help me, I believe him.

Me: (Looking down at my necklace) What's inside?

Zakhile: We think it's a chip. A memory chip with evidence against Zondi.

Me: And if I give it to you? If we open it? What happens then?

Zakhile: Then I finish this. I end Zondi. And you'll be safe.

I touch the necklace. My father's last gift to me. The last piece of him I have.

Me: He gave this to me the night he died. He told me to never take it off. To keep it safe.

Tears fall harder now. I miss my dad so much.

Me: (Looking up at Zakhile) If I give you this... if we open it... will you promise me something?

Zakhile: Anything.

Me: Promise me you'll come back to me. That you won't get yourself killed going after these people.

Zakhile: (Cupping my face) I promise. I'll always come back to you.

I take a deep breath. Then I reach behind my neck and unclasp the necklace.

Me: (Handing it to him) Open it.

He takes it carefully, like it's the most precious thing in the world.

Zakhile: Thank you. For trusting me.

He pulls out his phone and makes a call.

Zakhile: Come to the guest room. Now. And bring your equipment.

He hangs up and sits next to me, still holding the necklace.

A few minutes later, there's a knock. Nathi walks in carrying a bag.

Nathi: She agreed?

Zakhile: (Nodding) She did.

Nathi sets up his equipment on the desk, a laptop, a small device that looks like a card reader with multiple ports, cables, and precision tools. He puts on gloves and takes the necklace carefully.

Nathi: Let me see what we're working with here.

He examines the locket under a magnifying lamp, turning it over in his hands.

Nathi: It's a custom piece. The clasp is modified. Very clever work. Let me...

He uses a tiny precision tool to work on the mechanism. Minutes pass in tense silence. I hold Zakhile's hand, my heart pounding.

Finally, there's a soft click.

The locket opens.

Inside, nestled in a small hollow lined with felt, is a tiny chip. No bigger than a thumbnail.

Nathi carefully extract it with tweezers.

Nathi: There it is.

We all stare at it. This tiny thing has caused so much pain. So much death.

Me: (Whispering) That's it? That's what they killed him for?

Zakhile: (Squeezing my hand) Yes.

Nathi places the chip carefully into the card reader. He connects several cables from the reader to his laptop, then powers everything on. The screen lights up. A loading bar appears.

Nathi: It's encrypted. Multi-layer encryption. Give me a second...

His fingers fly across the keyboard. Lines of code scroll down the screen faster than I can follow. Then suddenly, files start appearing. One by one.

Nathi: (His eyes widening) Oh shit.

Zakhile: What?

Nathi: (Scrolling through folders) There's... there's a lot here. Documents. Photos. Audio recordings. Video

files. Bank statements. Your father was incredibly thorough, Ntombi.

I stand up and move closer to the screen. Zakhile comes with me, his hand still holding mine.

The first folder is labeled "ZONDI - IDENTITY & ORIGINS."

Nathi clicks on it. Photos appear. Old photos. Faded. Black and white.

Two babies. Identical. Side by side in a hospital crib. A handwritten note beneath: "Twins - Mother deceased during childbirth. Father unknown."

Nathi: What the...

Zakhile: (Leaning closer) Are those...?

Nathi: Twins. Zondi has a twin?

Another photo. Adoption papers. One twin, Mzwakhe Zondi, adopted by the wealthy Zondi family in

Johannesburg. The other, Mzingeli Mnguni, adopted by a poor family in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

Nathi: They were separated at birth. Grew up in completely different worlds.

More files. More photos. The two boys growing up apart. One in wealth and privilege. One in poverty and struggle. But the same face. The same features.

Then photos of them as adults. Same face. Same build. Same height. Impossible to tell apart.

Zakhile: (His voice low, disturbed) What the fuck...

Nathi clicks on another folder labeled "AUDIO - RECORDED CONVERSATIONS."

Multiple audio files. Dates spanning several months. He plays the first one.

Static. Then voices. Two men talking.

Voice 1: "...it's done. My brother is gone. No one will ever know."

Voice 2: "You're sure? No loose ends?"

Voice 1: "I'm positive. The house fire took care of his adoptive family. Gas leak, they said. Tragic accident. And Mzwakhe... let's just say the ocean keeps its secrets."

My hand flies to my mouth. Oh my God.

The recording continues.

Voice 2: "And you're confident you can maintain the deception? You look identical, yes, but his associates, his business partners"

Voice 1: "I've been studying him for two years. Every mannerism. Every speech pattern. I know more about my brother's life than he did. Besides, the cartel only cares about results. As long as the money flows and the operations run smoothly, they won't question anything."

Voice 2: What about his wife? And the boy? Themba? He's what, seventeen now? Old enough to notice if his father suddenly changes."

Voice 1: (A cold laugh) His wife died three years ago. Cancer. And "Themba's at boarding school in Switzerland. Has been since he was eight. He only comes home for Christmas and a few weeks in summer. The boy barely knows his father. He sees him maybe six weeks a year. He suspects nothing.

Voice two: "You're raising your brother's son as your own? That's cold, even for you."

Voice 1: "It's necessary. Themba is Zondi's heir. The cartel expects Zondi to have a son to carry on the legacy. If I suddenly had no son, they'd ask questions. This way, everything stays intact. Besides, the boy is useful. He makes me look... human. And when he's old enough, he'll take over the business, never knowing his real father is dead."

Nathi plays another file. Same two voices.

Voice 2: "The National Commissioner position is secure. You kept your end of the bargain. The cartel's... contribution... to my campaign was most generous."

Voice 1: "And now you're Minister of Police. Just as we agreed. You protect our operations, and we protect your position."

Voice 2: "I must say, Mzwakhe, or should I say Mzingeli, this arrangement is quite profitable for both of us."

Voice 1: (Laughing) "You can call me Mzwakhe. That's who I am now. Mzingeli Mnguni does not exist. I'm Mzwakhe Zondi. Cartel boss. Untouchable."

The recording ends.

Silence.

I'm shaking. Tears streaming down my face.

Nathi: (Staring at the screen) Your father recorded them. He was at one of their meetings hidden. Recording everything.

He plays another file.

Voice 2: "What about the Khumalo problem? He's been asking questions. Digging into financial records."

Voice 1: " He's found documents from when I was still Mzingeli. Adoption records. He's putting it together."

Voice 2: "Then he needs to be dealt with. Permanently."

Voice 1: "I will find out how much he knows and get him dealt with."

My legs give out. Zakhile catches me, pulling me into his arms.

Me: (Sobbing) They planned it. They planned to kill him.

Zakhile: (Holding me tight) I know, baby. I know. And your father knew it too, that’s why he stored all the

evidence he found in that chip. That’s why he gave you the necklace before he died. He knew his days were numbered.

Nathi: (His voice thick) There's more. A lot more.

More files. Photos of Mzingeli meeting with the Minister. Bank transfers. Millions of rands. Bribes. Payoffs. Appointments. Promotions.

Documents showing how the Minister, then National Commissioner, was appointed to Minister of Police through corruption and cartel money.

Photos of a woman and children. A small homestead in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Hidden. Secret.

Nathi: (Reading the file names) He has a wife. A real wife and family. Living under his real name in the village where he grew up. No one in the cartel knows. No one in Johannesburg knows. He's been living two lives.

Zakhile: (His voice cold) That's his weakness. That's how we destroy him.

Then photos of a house fire. The Zondi family home. Everyone inside dead. "Gas leak. Tragic accident."

Zakhile: He killed everyone who could recognize that he wasn't the real Zondi.

I'm crying uncontrollably now. My father found all of this. He documented everything. And they murdered him for it.

Nathi: (Looking at us, his expression grim) This chip... it's not just evidence against Zondi. It's evidence that Zondi isn't even Zondi. He's an imposter. And he's working with the Minister of Police. This destroys everything. The cartel. The government. Everyone involved.

Zakhile: (His eyes hard) Which is why he'll kill anyone to get it back. If the cartel finds out he's not the real

Mzwakhe Zondi, they'll kill him and everyone he loves. His entire empire is built on a lie.

Me: (Looking up at him through my tears) What do we do now?

Zakhile: (His jaw tight, his voice deadly calm) Now? Now we finish this.

But as I look at the screen, at the photos of identical twins, at the evidence of murder and betrayal. I realize this is bigger than any of us thought.

My father died trying to expose a man who doesn't even exist.

Chapter 36

Zakhile

We're now headed to the warehouse. We left Ntombi to get some sleep and rest. This whole Mzingeli saga just changed everything. I know where to hurt him the most now. He was so desperate to find if Khumalo had any evidence against him because of his secret family. That's where I will strike. What he spent years protecting. I will destroy.

We get to the warehouse and Lizwi is now awake. Dad and Njabulo are with him in the medical room.

Me: Hey, man. You're awake.

Lizwi: (Smirking weakly) You can't keep a good man down. I've got nine lives.

I chuckle and shake my head.

Nathi: How are you feeling?

Lizwi: Like hell, but I’ll live. What did you find?

Nathi whistles low.

Nathi: A lot. You're all going to be shocked.

We tell them everything, about the twins, about Mzingeli killing Mzwakhe and taking over his life, about Themba being raised by his father's killer for ten years. We show them the evidence on Nathi's laptop. The photos. The recordings. The bank statements. Everything.

Once we're done, they're all in shock.

Njabulo: This motherfucker is evil. Pure evil.

Dad: That bastard! What's the plan?

Me: I've already sent Vusi and the team to get his family. His real family in the village. I know they'll pull it off.

Njabulo: We need Themba here as well. We need to have him on our side so we can bring Mzingeli down

along with the Minister. We need what he knows about the operations.

Lizwi: How do we get him here?

Me: We don't. I go to him. Alone. I need to get to him when he's alone at his place.

Nathi: Do you think he'll believe you?

Me: He will if he's smart enough.

They nod. Then one of our guys walks in, his face serious.

Guy: Boss, we found Nelly. She's tied up in the back room.

I feel my jaw tighten.

Me: Good. I'll deal with her now.

I stand up and walk toward the back of the warehouse. Njabulo follows me. Dad stays behind with Lizwi and Nathi.

The back room is cold, dimly lit. Nelly is tied to a chair in the center, her hands bound behind her back, her face swollen and tear-streaked. She's been crying. Good.

When she sees me walk in, her eyes widen with fear.

Nelly: (Her voice shaking) Zakhile, please. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

I walk up to her slowly. My face is blank and cold.

Me: Sorry? You're sorry?

She nods frantically, tears streaming down her face.

Nelly: I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt. I swear. I just…

I slap her h+ard. Her head snaps to the side.

Me: (My voice deadly calm) Don't fucken lie to me.

She sobs harder now, her whole body shaking.

Nelly: Please, Zakhile. Please don't kill me.

Me: Tell me everything. Who approached you? How much did they pay you? What did you tell them?

Nelly: (Sobbing) I... I don't know his name. He just said he worked for someone powerful. He said if I gave them information about Lizwi's house, the layout, the security, the schedules they'd pay me. A lot of money.

Njabulo: (Stepping forward) How much?

Nelly: (Her voice breaking) Five hundred thousand rands.

Me: What else did you tell them?

Nelly: (Her voice barely a whisper) About Lizwi's routine. When his staff leaves. Where the cameras are. The blind spots. That's all. I swear that's all.

Me: And what about Ntombi? What did you tell them about her?

She hesitates. That's all the answer I need.

I grab her by the throat and squeeze.

Me: (My voice shaking with rage) WHAT. DID. YOU. TELL. THEM?

Nelly: (Gasping, choking) I… I told them she’s your weakness. That you love her. That if they ever wanted to hurt you, she’s how.

My grip tightens.

Me: That’s all?

Nelly: (Crying hysterically) Yes. I swear on my life. I didn’t know about anything else.

I punch her. Hard. Blood sprays from her nose.

Me: My brother almost died because of you. The woman I love was almost kidnapped because of you. And you did it for money.

Nelly: (Sobbing) I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't think…

Me: (Cutting her off) No. You didn't think. Because if you did think, you’d know not to mess with me.

Nelly: Please, Zakhile. I'll do anything. I'll leave. I'll disappear. You'll never see me again.

Me: You're right. I won't.

I pull out my gun. She sees it and starts screaming.

Nelly: NO! PLEASE! PLEASE DON'T KILL ME!

I pull the trigger.

The shot echoes through the room. Her body slumps forward in the chair, blood pooling beneath her.

Silence.

I walk out of the room without looking back.

I go back to the medical room. Wiping blood from my hands and face.

Nathi: Good news. Themba is alone at his apartment. You need to go now if you're going to catch him.

Me: How do I get in?

Nathi briefs me on how to get in without being noticed. The security codes, camera blind spots, everything there is to know.

I rush to my car and drive to Themba's place.

It's already 1 AM. I haven't had any sleep. But that's the least of my worries right now.

I arrive at Themba's apartment building. High-rise. Secure. But not secure enough.

I manage to bypass security easily. Nathi's intel is perfect. I take the stairs to avoid cameras in the elevator. Fourteenth floor. I'm not even winded.

I pick the lock on his apartment door and slip inside. The place is dark except for a light coming from the bedroom.

I move silently down the hallway and push open the bedroom door.

Themba is sleeping. Sprawled across the bed, snoring lightly.

I walk over and shake him roughly.

Me: Hey. Wakey wakey.

He jumps up, his eyes wide with shock.

Themba: (His voice panicked) What the fuck?!

Me: Sit up and listen.

He scrambles back against the headboard.

Themba: Who the fuck do you think you are, coming into my house…

Me: (My voice cold) Shut the fuck up. I don't have all day. Sit the fuck up, shut your mouth, and listen. Now, you're going to help me bring down Zondi and the Minister of Police.

Themba: (His face twisting with anger) And why the fuck would I do that?

Me: Because he's not your father. He killed your entire family and took over your father's life.

He laughs. Actually laughs.

Themba: Come on, man. You can do better than that.

Me: I don't have time for jokes. That man you call a father is your dad's twin brother. Why do you think he's been after Ntombi for all these years? Don't you ask yourself what's so important that he'd go after her for this long? Why didn't he just kill her and be done with it?

He's quiet now. I can see his mind working, processing.

Me: When you're ready to talk and see everything about your so-called father, you know where to find me.

I turn and walk out the same way I came in.

He has a lot of thinking to do.

I drive back to my parents' house. All this rage I'm feeling, I just need to hold Ntombi in my arms. Then I'll be calm.

I arrive home and head straight to the guest bedroom. Ntombi is sleeping peacefully, her face soft in the dim light.

I go into the bathroom, strip off my clothes, and step into the shower When I'm done, I dry myself and slip into bed beside her.

The moment I pull her close, I feel the tension start to leave my body.

Ntombi: (Stirring, her voice sleepy) Zakhile? You're back.

Me: Yes, baby. Go back to sleep.

She turns around to face me, her eyes barely open.

Ntombi: (Whispering) My mom?

Me: She's safe. Protected. Rest, my love.

I kiss her lips softly, then her forehead. I'm so glad she didn't end things with me after I told her about my life. I don't know how I would've survived that.

She snuggles into my chest and falls back asleep almost immediately.

I hold her tight and close my eyes.

Ntombi

I wake up early in the morning. The sun is just starting to come through the curtains. I reach over, but Zakhile isn't next to me. He must have left early.

I sit up and see my things on the dressing table. My toiletries and clothes. He had everything picked up for me.

I make the bed and head to the bathroom. There's a shower in this room, thank God. I turn on the water and step under the spray, letting it wash away the exhaustion and fear from yesterday.

Once I'm done, I get dressed and try to call Zakhile. It rings. No answer.

I try again. Nothing.

Three more times. Still nothing.

I just want to hear his voice. To know he's okay. I'm worried. This whole thing is just... I'm not used to all this.

There's a knock on the door.

"It's us!"

That's Okuhle and Vuyiswa. I open the door.

Them: (Smiling) Morning!

Me: Hi.

Okuhle: (Her smile fading) We heard what happened. I'm so sorry you had to go through that.

Vuyiswa: How are you feeling?

Me: (Shrugging) Still a bit traumatized, to be honest. Where were you guys last night?

Vuyiswa: We were dead asleep. We'd had a lot to drink. We were out celebrating with friends.

I nod.

Me: Have you seen Zakhile?

Okuhle: No. Dad and Njabulo aren't here either.

Me: Maybe they're with Lizwi.

Vuyiswa: (Sitting next to me) Don't worry. He'll come back unharmed. He always does.

So they know. They know what their brothers do.

Okuhle: (Carefully) He told you, right? What they do?

I nod.

Me: You guys are acting as if all this is normal.

Vuyiswa: To us, it has become normal. It's our everyday life. We've been through so much as a family. But rest assured, we're always protected.

Okuhle: We've learned not to ask too many questions. They always have everything covered.

I shake my head in disbelief.

Me: What if one day it all goes wrong? What if they can't protect you anymore? Last night we almost died. Lizwi almost died.

Vuyiswa: But here you are, Ntombi. Safe. They're trained for this. All their lives they've been living this life. This is what they know. Zakhile will always protect you. You have to trust him.

I sink back onto the bed. I love him so much. But all this scares me. All I know is my simple, normal life. Not this. How do I adapt to this? How do I sleep at night when he's out there doing God knows what? What if he dies and doesn't come back?

This worries me so much. I'm not strong enough for this.

Narrated

Themba didn't sleep a wink last night. What Zakhile said to him is stuck in his head, playing on repeat like a broken record.

He keeps asking himself why Zakhile would lie. He has no reason to. And he said he has evidence.

Themba has always questioned how his entire family, his father's adoptive parents, their extended family all died in a gas leak. At the same time. It never made sense.

And now, thinking back, he remembers little things. How his father seemed... different after he came home from boarding school that one Christmas. How certain mannerisms changed. How he held his whiskey glass differently. How he laughed at jokes he used to hate.

Themba had dismissed it as his father getting older. Changing with time.

But now... now everything seems to add up.

He picks up his phone and stares at it for a long time.

Then he dials.

Zakhile: (His voice cold) Yeah.

Themba: Let's meet. I want to know everything.

On the other end, Zakhile smiles and nods to his brothers.

Zakhile: I'll send you the address.

Themba: Sure.

The call ends.

Themba sits there, staring at his phone, wondering if he's making the right decision.

But it's worth the risk. He needs to know.

He needs to know if the man who raised him is really his father.

Or his father's killer.

Chapter 37

Zakhile

I knew Themba would call. I planted something in his head last night. What I didn't expect was for him to call this quickly. The seed of doubt must have grown fast.

We're driving with Njabulo and Nathi to one of my other properties, a safe house in the industrial area. That's where I'm meeting with Themba. I'll show him everything. After that, I know he'll want to destroy Mzingeli more than I do.

We arrive and he's already waiting for us, leaning against his car, arms crossed. His face is hard. Angry.

I lead them all inside. The space is empty except for a table and chairs. Nathi sets up his laptop.

We display everything for Themba. The photos of the twins. The adoption papers. The recordings of Mzingeli confessing to killing his brother. The evidence of the house fire. The photos of his real family in the village.

I watch his face as he processes it all. His jaw keeps tightening. Veins keep popping on his forehead. His hands curl into fists.

When the final recording ends, the one where Mzingeli talks about taking over his brother's life and fooling Themba, his whole body is shaking with rage.

He exhales loudly, trying to control himself.

Themba: (His voice tight) What do you want from me?

Perfect. Exactly what I want to hear

Me: I want access to Mzingeli and the Minister. I want to capture them without bringing too much attention from the cartel or the government. I want a clean job. The Minister is too protected by his security detail and political connections. If he knows Mzingeli is gone, he'll know it's me. I want it smooth. I don't want the entire government on my back.

Njabulo: He'll soon be notified that we have his family. When he knows we know everything, he'll panic. He'll

definitely call the Minister for assistance. When they meet, we need to know. The exact location. The layout. Security. Everything.

Themba nods, thinking hard. His face is red with barely contained fury.

Me: Don't let him see that you know. You have to act normal. Can you do that?

Themba: (Through gritted teeth) I know. I'm not an idiot. I'll update you once he calls the Minister.

He pauses, his jaw working.

Themba: I have a condition.

Nathi: (Shaking his head) Of course you do.

Themba: (His voice deadly) I get to kill him. Personally.

I look him in the eye. I see pure hatred there. Good.

Me: He's all yours.

Njabulo: We'll be waiting for your signal.

The meeting is over. Themba heads out without another word, his whole body rigid with rage.

The plan is in motion. Mzingeli's family is on the way here from the village. He doesn't know yet, but soon he will. Very soon.

Nathi: (Watching Themba drive off) Do you think he'll deliver?

Njabulo: He's livid. He will.

Me: He spent ten years being lied to. Ten years living with his father's killer. He'll deliver.

We drive back to the warehouse. A few hours, then we strike.

Narrated

Themba is in his apartment, getting ready to face Mzingeli. Or Zondi. Or whatever the fuck his name is.

This whole thing pisses him off beyond measure. He made enemies with the Mthethwas for no goddamn reason. All because of this imposter's lies. And now he has to work with them to bring him down.

His phone rings. It's "Dad."

He stares at the screen, his stomach churning. He curses under his breath and answers.

Themba: D... (He clears his throat) Dad.

It doesn't feel right to say that word anymore. Not now that he knows the truth.

Mzingeli: (His voice sharp, angry) Where the hell are you? I've been trying to call you since morning. Get here now.

The call ends abruptly.

Themba grips his phone so hard he's surprised it doesn't crack. He takes a deep breath, forces himself to calm down, and drives to Mzingeli's house.

He finds him in the study, drinking whiskey. His hand is shaking slightly as he raises the glass to his lips.

Themba: Dad.

Mzingeli: (Spinning around, angry) We have a fucking target on our backs and you decide to sleep in and not answer your phone?

If he could, Themba would put a bullet in his skull right now. This fucking imposter.

Themba: (Forcing his voice to stay calm) I'm sorry. My phone died. What's going on?

Before Mzingeli can answer, his phone rings. He looks at the screen and his face goes pale.

He answers.

Mzingeli: (His voice tight) Yah?

Zakhile: (His voice cold) Zondi. Or should I say Mzingeli Mnguni?

Mzingeli's whole body goes rigid. He starts panicking. His breathing changes. His hand shakes so badly he nearly drops the glass.

Themba watches, pretending to be confused.

Zakhile: I have what belongs to you here. Say hi to daddy.

A voice comes through the phone. Crying and terrified.

Voice: Daddy, please help us! They have us! They're going to…

Mzingeli: (His voice breaking) I'm coming, baby. Don't worry, okay? I'm coming.

Zakhile: (A cold laugh) You better run fast. Time is ticking, old man.

The line goes dead.

Themba can see the panic written all over Mzingeli's face. He knows the plan is in motion now.

Themba: (Pretending concern) Dad, what's wrong? Who was that?

Mzingeli doesn't answer. His hands are shaking as he dials another number. The Minister.

Minister: (Answering) Zondi, what is it?

Mzingeli: (His voice urgent, panicked) Blackstone. NOW.

Minister: What? What happened?

Mzingeli: Zakhile. He knows. He knows everything.

Minister: (Cursing) Shit. Shit! I'm on my way.

Mzingeli hangs up and runs his hand over his face, trying to compose himself.

Themba: (Playing his role) Dad, what's going on? What does Zakhile know?

Mzingeli: (Not looking at him) Zakhile... he... I need to deal with him. I'm meeting the Minister now. I need his assistance to win this war.

Themba: Let me come with you. You need backup.

Mzingeli wipes his mouth with his hand, thinking fast.

Mzingeli: (Shaking his head) No. No, stay here. I'll call you. I'll be right back.

Themba nods.

Mzingeli rushes out in a hurry, not even looking back.

The moment the door closes, Themba pulls out his phone and types a message to Zakhile.

Themba: *They're meeting at one of the Minister's shell companies. Blackstone Infrastructure Group. Unit 1203, The Meridian Towers, 5 Signal Way, Umhlanga Ridge.*

He sends another message with detailed information, how to get in, security positions, camera locations, hiding spots. Everything.

Zakhile replies with a thumbs up emoji.

Themba sits down heavily on the couch, his whole body shaking with rage.

He waits for their call.

Zakhile

Themba gave us everything we need. Location. Layout. Security details. They think they're going to plan their next move. Instead, they'll find us waiting.

Perfect.

Me: Let's move. Now.

We gear up quickly. Guns. Extra clips. Knives.
Njabulo, Nathi, and six of our best men.

We drive in two vehicles to Umhlanga Ridge. The Meridian Towers is a high-rise office building. Expensive and secure.

We arrive before them. Nathi hacks into the building's security system from his laptop in the car.

Nathi: Cameras are looped. We're ghosts.

We enter through the service entrance Themba told us about. No security. No cameras. We take the stairs to the twelfth floor.

Unit 1203 is at the end of a long hallway. Empty. Quiet.

We pick the lock and enter. It's a small office space. Conference room. A few private offices. Windows overlooking the city.

Me: Positions. We wait.

My men spread out. Two in the conference room. Two in the private offices. Two by the door.

Njabulo, Nathi, and I wait in the main conference room.

We hear the elevator ding down the hall. Footsteps and voices.

Me: (Whispering) They're here.

The door opens. Mzingeli enters first, followed by the Minister and their security, four armed guards.

The moment they step inside, we move.

My men appear from every corner, guns drawn, trained on the guards.

Me: (Calmly) Drop your weapons. Now.

The guards freeze, eyes wide. They look to Mzingeli, who's gone pale.

Me: I said drop them. Or we paint these walls with your blood.

Slowly, the guards lower their weapons to the floor.

Njabulo: (To the guards) On your knees. Hands behind your heads.

They comply. My men zip-tie their hands and ankles, then drag them to the corner of the room.

Mzingeli and the Minister are left standing in the middle of the room, surrounded.

Minister: (His voice shaking) Do you have any idea what you're doing? I'm the Minister of Police! You can't…

Me: (Cutting him off) Sit. Down.

Njabulo forces them into chairs. My men tie them up, hands behind their backs, ankles to the chair legs.

Mzingeli: (His voice breaking) My family. What did you do to my family?

I walk closer to him and crouch down so we're eye level.

Me: (Coldly) That should be the least of your worries right now.

Mzingeli: (His voice tight) Zakhile. Let's talk about this. Whatever you want.

I pull out my phone and call Themba.

Me: We have them. Come now.

Themba: I was already on the way; I’ll be there just now.

I hang up and look at Mzingeli.

Me: Someone's coming to see you. Someone who's very interested in meeting the man who killed his father.

Mzingeli's eyes widen. He understands.

Mzingeli: (His voice panicked) No. No, you didn't. You didn't tell him.

Me: (Smirking) Oh yes I did, and he is hungry for blood.

Minister: Name your price, whatever you want.

Me: Ntombi’s dad.

Silence.

Me: Exactly. You can’t give me that can’t you? Thought so nx.

Few minutes the door opens. Themba walks in.

He stands there for a moment, just staring at Mzingeli. His face is blank. Cold.

Mzingeli: (His voice desperate) Themba. Son. Don't listen to anything they say. They're lying. I'm your father. I'm

Themba: (His voice deadly calm) Don't. Don't call me son.

He walks closer, his fists clenched.

Themba: You made me a fool. You made me follow Ntombi around, thinking she had evidence about

corruption and drugs. But it was so much more than that, wasn't it? You lied to me. About everything.

Mzingeli: (Pleading) Themba, please. I raised you. I took care of you. I

Themba: YOU KILLED MY FATHER!

His voice echoes through the room.

Themba: You murdered him. Your own brother. And then you took his place. You looked me in the eyes every day for ten years and lied to me.

Mzingeli: I did it for us. For the power. For the family. I…

Themba: (His voice breaking) LIAR. YOU DID IT FOR YOURSELF YOU BASTARD.

He pulls out a knife from his jacket.

Mzingeli: (Screaming) NO! THEMBA, my boy listen, don’t do this!

Themba walks behind him. He grabs Mzingeli's head and yanks it back, exposing his throat.

He slits Mzingeli's throat.

The sound is wet. Visceral. Blood pours down Mzingeli's chest as he gurgles, choking on his own blood.

Themba doesn't let go. He holds him there, watching the life drain from his eyes.

The Minister is screaming, trying to get free from the chair.

Minister: Fuck, fuck!!

Mzingeli's body goes limp. Dead.

Themba lets go and steps back, breathing hard, covered in blood.

He looks at me.

Themba: (His voice empty) It's done.

I nod.

Me: (To Njabulo) Take care of the Minister.

Njabulo: (Grinning) My pleasure.

The Minister: (Panicking) Wait! Wait! I can pay you! I can give you anything! Please!

Njabulo: (Walking up to him) You should have thought of that before you got yourself involved.

He pulls out his gun and shoots the Minister in the head. Clean and Quick.

Silence.

I look around the room. Two bodies. Four guards still tied up and gagged in the corner, too terrified to move.

Me: (To my men) Kill them then clean this up. Make it look like a meeting gone wrong. Shootout between the cartel and the Minister's security. Plant guns on the bodies. Make it messy.

My men get to work immediately.

Then we leave the same way we came in.

We're walking out of the building through the service exit when my phone rings. Themba.

Me: Yeah?

Themba: (His voice hollow) It's done?

Me: Where are you?

Themba: Parking garage. Few blocks away.

Me: Good. Stay there. We need to talk.

We drive to the parking garage where Themba is waiting. He's sitting on the hood of his car, still covered in blood, staring at nothing.

I park and walk over to him. Njabulo and Nathi stay in the car.

Me: You good?

Themba: (Not looking at me) I killed my father's killer. So yeah. I'm good.

Me: What are you going to tell the cartel?

Themba: (Finally looking at me) That my father died in a shootout with the Minister. That they met to discuss

protection and it went bad. That I'm taking over his operations. They'll accept it. I'm his son, after all.

Me: (Nodding) And if they ask questions?

Themba: I'll handle it.

I believe him. He's been groomed for this his whole life. He knows how to play the game.

Me: We're square now. You helped us. We helped you. We're done.

Themba: (Standing) Yeah. We're done.

He pauses.

Themba: His family. What are you going to do with them?

Me: (Shrugging) Nothing. They're being released as we speak. They're no threat to me.

He nods.

Themba: And the evidence?

Me: That's my insurance. In case anyone else tries to come after us. But as long as you don't become a problem, it stays buried.

Themba: (Meeting my eyes) I won't be a problem.

Me: Good.

He gets in his car and drives away without another word.

I walk back to my car.

Njabulo: Think he'll be a problem?

Me: No. He got what he wanted. And he's smart enough to know we have enough dirt on him to bury him if he tries anything.

Nathi: So it's over?

Me: (Exhaling) Yeah. It's over.

For the first time in weeks, I feel like I can breathe.

We're driving back to the warehouse when my phone rings. It's our contact, Mabaso, in the police department.

Mabaso: Boss, I'm at the scene. It's a mess. Minister and Zondi both dead. Looks like a shootout.

Me: Good. Make sure that's the official story.

Mabaso: Already done. The media is running with "Meeting Between Minister and Cartel Boss Ends in Violence."

Me: Perfect.

I hang up.

Chapter 38

Ntombi

It's afternoon and we're sitting by the pool with the girls and Mrs. Mthethwa having lunch. There are guards at every corner, and it's giving me chills. I can't shake the tension in my shoulders. We hear cars pulling up and we all jump, rushing to see who it is. I guess we're all on edge about this whole thing.

Zakhile, Njabulo, Nathi, and Baba Mthethwa get out of the cars. Zakhile is holding Lizwi for balance. He looks like hell, pale, drawn and exhausted but he's walking by himself. Vuyiswa and Okuhle run to their brothers. They try to hug Lizwi but he winces, clearly still in pain.

Mrs. Mthethwa: Oh my baby, look what they did to you.

She cups his face, her eyes filled with tears.

Lizwi: (Shyly) Mom, come on.

Mrs. Mthethwa: Hayi suka. Come, let's feed you.

Lizwi: (Turning to me with a small smile) Makoti, I hear you were ducking bullets.

I smile shaking my head.

Me: I nearly died. I'm just thankful to be alive. You look better though.

Lizwi: (Smiling) I'm glad you're okay.

Zakhile is looking at me intensely from where he stands, and I feel the weight of his gaze. They all walk inside the house and I decide to give them space as a family. I go back to the poolside and sit down, trying to continue eating, but my appetite has disappeared.

Within minutes, Zakhile joins me. He sits down and kisses my cheek softly.

Zakhile: Are you okay?

I nod, not trusting my voice.

Me: Yeah, I'm good. I thought I should give you guys space as a family.

He nods and reaches for my hands, holding them in his. He looks me straight in the eyes.

Zakhile: You are also family. You know that, right?

Me: Yeah.

He squeezes my hands gently.

Zakhile: You're safe now. Mzingeli and the Minister won't be a problem anymore.

Me: Are you sure?

Zakhile: One hundred percent. We can go home now.

I nod slowly. I know he killed them. I know what that means. But I just can't bring myself to ask him about it. It doesn't sit well with me, and I don't know how to process it.

Zakhile: What's wrong?

Me: Nothing.

Zakhile: Try again.

I exhale deeply, feeling the tears building.

Me: Zakhile, all this... it's just not normal for me. This life... it's just...

The tears fall before I can stop them.

Zakhile: Hey. Baby, listen.

He pulls his chair closer to mine.

Zakhile: I'm not expecting you to be okay with this now. I know you've been living a simple normal life and all this is too much. Just try not to think about it, okay? And I will never involve you in any of these things. My job is to protect you from this life. Protect you from the world.

Me: What if you can't protect me? What happens then?

His jaw tightens and his grip on my hands becomes firmer.

Zakhile: Over my dead body. That will never happen. I will die before I let anything happen to you, Ntombi. You are my life.

I sob harder. I don't want to lose him too. Not after everything.

Me: I don't want you to die. What if you die trying to protect me?

He stands up and extends his hand to me.

Zakhile: Come here.

I stand up and he pulls me into his arms, hugging me tight. He kisses my forehead and I breathe in his scent, trying to calm down.

Zakhile: Don't overthink this, okay?

I just nod against his chest.

Zakhile: Let's go inside.

We walk inside and the whole family is gathered in the living room, watching the news. The headline flashes across the screen: ***Minister involved in shootout with suspected cartel boss. Both men found dead at the scene.***

They really did it. My stomach turns but I push the feeling down. I guess I'm going to have to trust him. My dad trusted him with me, so I'll do the same.

We're back at his house now. It's evening and I'm curled up on the couch with a glass of wine, trying to let go of the tension in my body.

Zakhile: (Calling from the kitchen) Ntombi!

I get up and walk to the kitchen. When I get there, I see all the ingredients spread out on the counter. Cream, chicken, pasta, garlic, spices.

Me: Baby, what's going on?

He comes over and pulls me closer by my waist, a grin spreading across his face.

Zakhile: (Smiling) We're cooking.

Me: Cooking? Why though?

Zakhile: It's called bonding.

I burst out laughing. I remember when I said that exact thing to him and made him cook for the first time.

Me: Creamy pasta, really?

Zakhile: Mhm. That's what you made me cook. This is the only recipe I know.

I laugh, feeling lighter than I have in days. He's trying to cheer me up, and it's working. I find it so cute.

Me: Okay Mr. Mthethwa, let's cook then.

I walk past him toward the counter and he slaps my bum. I let out a scream and he laughs.

Me: Zakhile!

Zakhile: What? I couldn't resist.

We start cooking together, moving around the kitchen. He keeps finding reasons to stand close to me, his hand on my waist as he reaches for something, his lips brushing my forehead when he passes behind me.

I watch him hack at the chicken

Me: You're terrible at cutting that chicken.

Zakhile: I am not a chef.

Me: Clearly.

He shoots me a playful glare and I laugh. When the pasta is finally ready, we sit at the kitchen island with our plates and glasses of wine. The conversation flows easily between us, and I feel myself relaxing for the first time in what feels like forever.

Me: (Softly) I was so scared, you know. When we heard Lizwi was shot, when we were driving out and those

men ambushed us... and they tried to take me. I thought I'd lost you. I thought I will never see you again.

He puts down his fork and turns to face me fully. His hand comes up to cup my face.

Zakhile: You have me, Ntombi. I’ll always be here. I'm not going anywhere.

Me: (Whispered) Promise me.

Zakhile: I promise.

He leans in and kisses me. It starts gentle but quickly deepens. I can taste the wine on his lips and feel the heat radiating from his body. When we finally pull apart, we're both breathing hard.

Zakhile: (Voice low) Come.

He takes my hand and leads me upstairs to the bedroom. When we get inside, he turns to face me.

Zakhile: I love you. I love you and I need you to know that.

My eyes fill with tears, but they're different tears this time.

Me: I love you too.

He reaches for me and starts undressing me slowly. His hands are shaking slightly as they trace over my skin. He kisses my neck, my shoulders, taking his time.

Zakhile: (Whispering) You're so beautiful.

My hands explore his body as he guides me to the bed. He lays me down gently, his eyes never leaving mine. When he enters me, we both gasp at the sensation. We move together slowly, savoring every moment, every touch.

Zakhile: (Groaning against my neck) Ntombi... God, I love you so much.

Me: I love you. Don't stop.

the pleasure builds slowly between us, intense and overwhelming. Emotions hits me all at once, and tears

slip down my face. When I finally lose control, an orgasm hit me. I call out his name, and he comes right after, pressing his face into my neck as his body tremble.

After that, we just lie there together, tangled up, sweaty, catching our breath. It’s quiet. He runs his fingers over my skin without thinking about it, and I rest my head on his chest, feeling it rise and fall.

Zakhile: (Murmured into my hair) We're going to be okay.

For the first time since this nightmare began, I believe him completely.

Me: Yes. We are.

Zakhile: Stay with me. Always.

Me: Always

He pulls me closer and I close my eyes, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

Chapter 39

Ntombi

It's been four months since the shooting and everything has been going quite well for me. I managed to get over it, though it was hard. At one point I had to move in with Zakhile for the time being. I had nightmares and I was scared to be alone. He was so happy when I moved in, and our relationship has been wonderful.

Career-wise, I'm happy. Okuhle has been doing well for herself and she's growing as an artist. After the Sarafina show, many doors opened. The show trended for the rest of June and she got so many gigs after. Directing offers, choreography commissions, re-staging requests, remounts and tours, teaching and masterclass invitations, festival curation interest. She hired me as her choreographer, and I also do tutoring on the side. So I can say my life took a lovely turn.

Zakhile even turned one of the spare bedrooms into a dance and acting studio for me. I couldn't believe it. I came back from rehearsal one day and the spare bedroom had become something else entirely. Mirrors, a sprung floor, lighting positioned perfectly. He said it's for my classes and for me. I was so happy.

Zakhile has been gone for two weeks now. He said he has business to take care of in Cape Town. Two full weeks. And I've learned not to ask a lot of questions, but I don't like this at all.

We're on a video call right now.

Me: When are you coming back, Nyambose?

Zakhile: You know I can't say, love. It's still hectic.

I exhale and nod. Then tears fall from my eyes. I can't control them and I'm really trying.

Zakhile: Baby, please don't cry. I'm coming back, you know this. I hate to see you crying.

Me: I miss you so much.

Zakhile: And I miss you just as much, sthandwa sami. Listen, let's talk in the after…

I end the call. I don't even let him finish. I did say I'm not strong enough for this life. It's honestly not for me. He tries calling back but I just let it ring. I don't even bother answering.

A text from Bonolo comes through. She's asking if we can go out for lunch tomorrow. Music to my ears. I need some time out. Zakhile keeps calling and I just switch off my phone.

It's the following day and I'm getting ready to meet up with Bonolo. We definitely need to catch up. I wear a backless neck camisole top with a maxi flowy long skirt. I've gained a bit of weight, not too much, but noticeable. I eat like it's my last day on earth lately.

I drive to the restaurant. Yes, I drive one of Zakhile's cars now. Perks of dating a man with money. I haven't spoken to him since yesterday. I don't know why I'm so angry at him, but I'm honestly not in the mood.

I arrive at the restaurant and Bonolo is already here. We scream and I hug her tight. We place our orders and talk about almost everything.

Me: So how are you and Mr. D?

Bonolo: You know him. Still sweet as ever. I'm happy we're both in healthy relationships. Hey, we've been through a lot. Actually, you won't believe who I saw.

Me: Who?

Bonolo: Themba, that dog.

I laugh. I never told her about the whole cartel thing. I can't tell anyone for my safety and theirs.

Me: Where did you see him?

Bonolo: Bumped into him at the mall. I almost told him a piece of my mind. I was with Mr. D so I had to be a lady.

Me: (Laughing) You did good. Let him be.

We chat a bit more. It's always nice to be around Bonolo. I even forgot about my own problems for a bit. We ask for the bill and pay. Just then someone comes to our table and greets us.

Bonolo: Oh my God, Ntokozo! Hi!

She gives him a hug.

Ntokozo: Hi ladies.

He opens his arms for a hug. I smile and stand up.

Me: Hi.

He hugs me tight and holds on a bit longer than necessary.

Ntokozo: Last time I saw you guys, you were pretty wasted.

Bonolo: (Laughing) Right, that was a night to remember, I tell you.

He's staring at me, which makes me uncomfortable. Bonolo clears her throat.

Ntokozo: The last time we talked, it was a bit odd. I hope I didn't cause any problems for you.

I shake my head.

Me: No, not at all.

Bonolo: Okay, let me just wait for you in the car, neh.

Me: No, it's nice seeing you…

Ntokozo: A minute, please. I promise I won't be long.

I don't like this one bit.

Me: Uhm... sure.

Bonolo takes my keys and leaves. We sit back at the table.

Ntokozo: I'm sorry about last time. I know I called unexpectedly and didn't even ask permission. I'm sorry. I was just interested in you. I found you very beautiful and down to earth. I went about it the wrong way.

Me: Uhm, that's okay. Understandable.

Ntokozo: Can I try again? Ask you out?

Me: Ntokozo, I have someone in my life. And honestly, he's very possessive of me. I don't want any problems. I'll have to decline.

Then I hear someone clear their throat.

Njabulo.

I start to panic. He walks over and hands me his phone.

Njabulo: Your man wants to speak to you.

Shit. I take the phone.

Me: He... hello.

Zakhile: (Coldly) Your phone doesn't work anymore?

Me: It does.

Zakhile: So it's me you don't want to speak with. And who the fuck is that boy, Ntombi?

I just swallow. I can see Ntokozo is also looking at me, confused. And Njabulo is just standing next to me, face hard.

Zakhile: I hate repeating myself. So this is what you get up to? Entertaining other men? Do me a favour, Ntombi. Before I send a bullet through his skull, go home and don't fucking piss me off. Siyezwana?

Who the hell does he think he is, talking to me like I'm a child? I'll just agree because knowing him, he would definitely kill Ntokozo.

Me: Okay.

I give Njabulo the phone without listening to anything else.

Me: Ntokozo, thanks for stopping by. I've got to go.

I stand up and he attempts to stop me.

Ntokozo: Ntombi…

Njabulo: Boy, if you know what's good for you, you'll leave the same way you got in here.

I just continue walking to Zakhile's car. I find Bonolo listening to music.

Bonolo: And then, wena? What happened?

Me: Njabulo showed up and he was on the call with Zakhile. I've been ignoring him since yesterday. I even switched off my phone.

Bonolo: Holy shit. But I'm sure you explained what's happening, right? It's not like you were cheating. Why were you ignoring him, nawe?

Me: He's been gone for two weeks. Two full weeks. And he says he's still not sure when he's coming back. I'm just upset, okay? Because I miss him. And on that phone call, Bonolo... the way he was talking to me. Nx. I won't allow him to treat me like that. I'm moving out.

I drive the car at high speed.

Bonolo: Ntombi, don't make drastic decisions when you're angry. Calm down and wait for him so you can talk.

But I'm way too angry. I don't know where this much anger is coming from.

Me: I'm moving out.

We drive into his estate. I park the car and rush inside. I grab some of my clothes and toiletries and throw them into a suitcase.

I find Bonolo admiring the house.

Me: Let's go. I'm sleeping at your place till I find a place.

Bonolo: You're not even asking if I mind. And why leave this heaven for my small apartment? Girl, think straight.

I just shake my head and pull her out. We leave.

Bonolo: The car?

Me: We'll Uber. Asambe.

Bonolo: Ntombi, just calm down, babe. Please.

I cry. I cry like someone just stabbed me in the heart. She hugs me so tight.

Bonolo: I'm sorry, friend. I didn't mean to make you cry. Let's go. You can stay at my place for as long as you want, okay?

I don't even know why I'm crying. I'm crying because in the months we've been together, Zakhile has never

spoken to me like that. He has never gone on a business trip for this long. And to threaten to kill Ntokozo...

We walk out and I order an Uber.

We arrive at Bonolo's place and I go straight to the bedroom, throwing myself on the bed.

Bonolo: Are you okay? You know you can talk to me. What's going on?

Me: Nothing is going on, okay? I told you. Anyways, I'm hungry. Did you cook?

Bonolo: Oh my God, Ntombi! Bitch, are you pregnant? Because your moods are screaming pregnancy hormones.

I laugh.

Me: No, I'm not. I'm on contra…

No. No, no, no, no. I start counting months in my head. I forgot to go to my next appointment. I missed my appointment date. After the shooting, my mind was all over the place. I was supposed to go last month for my three-month shot.

I bury my face in my hands. My phone rings and Zakhile's name appears, and I just become angrier. I answer.

Me: Zakhile.

Zakhile: Ntombi, what's going on with you?

Me: I'm sure the security has already told you. I'm moving out.

Zakhile: No, you're not. I don't know what's going on in that head of yours, but your attitude is starting to piss me off.

I cry. Bonolo is looking at me, shaking her head.

Me: Zakhile, you don't get to talk to me like I'm a child, okay? You can stay in Cape Town for as long as you want. I won't bother you anymore.

Zakhile: NTOMBI. What the fuck is wrong with you?

Me: YOU ARE WHAT'S FUCKING WRONG WITH ME. I'M DONE, ZAKHILE. I AM DONE!

I drop the call, my hands shaking.

What did I just do?

Chapter 40

Zakhile

I know I messed up for losing my cool like that with my woman. That Zakhile is only for business and I failed to control him. She's been acting crazy these past few days and I don't know what's wrong with her. I understand she's mad at me for being gone for two weeks, but for her to act like that? It's really unlike her. She cries easily, which breaks me. I hate to see her cry. Her attitude is worse.

I want to know what she meant by "she's done." That will never happen. I need to go back home and fix this.

Two weeks ago, Leonid wanted to discuss business and new demands. We've been here with Lizwi trying to come to an agreement but nothing seems to work. He's not agreeing to anything reasonable. Then he mentioned Ntombi, and I lost my cool. That bastard Mzingeli told him about her. That's why Leonid wanted to make

demands out of the blue. We've been trying to find something to use against him and it's taking everything in me not to put a bullet through his skull. But if I do that, it means war between us and the Russians. I need to plan thoroughly.

We're having another meeting and I know we still won't agree on anything. My mind isn't even here. Ntombi is stressing me. Leonid knows about her and she decides to leave the house and stay with Bonolo. She was safer at the estate than at Bonolo's. I don't trust Leonid, he's capable of doing anything.

We're sitting in the conference room of the warehouse. Leonid sits across from me with two of his men flanking him, their faces hard and unreadable. Lizwi is beside me, his posture relaxed but I know better, he's ready to move at any second. The tension in the room is thick enough to cut.

Leonid leans in his chair.

Leonid: (Russian accent) We can go in circles for as long as you want, Zet man, but I am not changing. Fifty percent risk compensation. That or nothing.

I clench my jaw, my fingers tightening around the glass of whiskey in front of me.

Me: Thirty-five percent. That's as far as we're willing to go. Take it or leave it.

I don't want to go 50/50 with this man. He's reckless. The operation would fall to the ground. I won't allow that.

Leonid leans back further in his chair, a smirk playing on his lips. He lights a cigarette, taking his time, trying to get under my skin.

Leonid: (Smirking, blowing smoke) Mhmm. I guess I will have to take the Botswana offer then. I'm sure they will be thrilled to know the mighty Zakhile has a weakness now.

He pauses, his eyes glinting with malice.

Leonid: A beautiful weakness. Ntombi, is it?

The air shifts. My blood runs cold, then hot. Lizwi tenses beside me, his hand moving subtly toward his waist. Before anyone can blink, I'm out of my chair. The glass shatters on the floor as I lunge forward. I charge toward Leonid with speed and grab him by the neck, lifting him slightly off his seat. His cigarette drops from his lips.

My face is inches from his. My voice low and deadly.

Me: Are you threatening me Leonid?

His men reach for their weapons but Lizwi is faster, his gun already drawn and pointed at them. The click of the safety echoes in the room.

Leonid: (Choking slightly) Calm down, Zet man. I was just saying…

Me: (Tightening my grip) You were just saying what? That you'd use my woman to get what you want? Is that what you're saying?

His face is turning red. I can feel his pulse racing under my palm. Good. Let him feel fear.

Leonid: (Struggling, gasping) Just... business.

I lean in closer, my voice dropping to a whisper that's somehow more terrifying than a shout.

Me: You even think about touching what's mine, and I'll start a war that will wipe your entire organization off the map. I don't care about the consequences. Your father and every single person you love. I'll make them disappear. Do you understand me?

His eyes grow wide. I hold him there for a moment longer, letting him feel my anger, then drop him roughly back into his chair. He coughs violently, rubbing his neck, gasping for air.

I straighten my shirt.

Me: This meeting is over.

I walk toward the door, my heart pounding with rage.

Leonid calls out, voice hoarse.

Leonid: Think about what I said, Zet man! You'll regret this!

I stop at the door, my hand on the handle. I don't turn around.

Me: The only person who's going to have regrets is you. Watch your back, Leonid.

I walk out, slamming the door behind me. Lizwi follows, holstering his weapon.

I get to my car and grip the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turn white. I need to see her. I need to know she's safe. I drive to the hotel I'm staying in, my mind racing. Lizwi follows in his own car. When we get to my room, I shut the door and sit on the chair, pouring myself some whiskey. My hands are shaking slightly, not from fear, but from the rage still coursing through me.

Me: (Downing the drink) I'm leaving this afternoon.

Lizwi: Whats wrong?

Me: I need to see my woman and fix things with her. Maybe then I'll be able to think straight. Did Nathi find anything on Leonid?

Lizwi: (Shaking his head) Nothing yet. I regret the day Leonids' father retired. Business was smooth with the old man. This boy is a headache.

I run my hand over my face.

Me: I'll talk to Dad. He knows them more than us. Maybe he can help with something.

Lizwi: Do that. I'll stay behind and try to enjoy Cape Town. It's been the worst two weeks of my life.

I chuckle despite everything. He's right. It's been hell.

Ntombi

I've just taken a shower and I'm done getting ready. My hands are trembling slightly as I grab my bag. I'm going to the mall to buy pregnancy tests. I still can't believe that I might be pregnant. The thought terrifies me. Zakhile hasn't called since yesterday's call. I guess we're done. But if I am pregnant, how are we going to do this? Co-parent? I was so reckless. Will he even want this baby when he finds out?

I shake my head, trying to push the thoughts away. Bonolo has gone to work. She asked me to video call her when I take the test. She even promised to be the best deputy mother. I laugh, shaking my head when I think of how seriously she said it.

I get to the mall and purchase three pregnancy tests, just to be sure. My heart is racing as I pay. As I'm walking to the exit to request an Uber, Themba approaches me. My stomach drops.

Themba: Hi. Long time.

I freeze for a moment. I don't know how I feel seeing him. I never thought about how I'd act when I saw him. There's no anger anymore, just... nothing.

Me: Yeah. How are you?

Themba: Doing well. Uhm, you look good.

Me: Thanks.

He's fidgeting with his car keys.

Themba: Let me just cut to the chase. I just wanted to apologize for everything. Using you. I was following my dad's... Mzingeli's orders.

I nod slowly, processing.

Me: There's absolutely no excuse for what you did. But it's cool. I did say no hard feelings.

He smiles, relief washing over his face.

Themba: You're a beautiful woman. A good woman. Zakhile is lucky to have you.

"You're right. I am lucky."

That deep voice. My heart skips. Zakhile. When did he get here? I turn and there he is. I can't read the expression on his face at first, but then I see it, his jaw is tight, his eyes are dark and possessive, his whole body radiating tension. He seems to always know where I am. Of course. The guards I have from a distance. They report to him. Despite everything, I'm happy to see him. God, I missed him so much.

Themba: Hey, man.

Zakhile walks up and immediately stands beside me, his hand finding the small of my back. The touch is firm, possessive, claiming. He pulls me slightly closer to him, and I can feel the heat radiating from his body. The possessiveness in the gesture is clear.

Zakhile: What are you doing here with my woman, Zondi?

His voice is cold. Themba takes a step back

Themba: I just wanted to apologize, man. Nothing personal.

Zakhile: It's personal to me.

His hand tightens on my waist, his thumb rubbing small circles that somehow feel both comforting and possessive. I can feel the tension in his body, the barely controlled anger.

Themba raises his hands defensively.

Themba: Hey, man, look, I didn't mean any harm. I'll be out of your way.

He leaves quickly. Zakhile's jaw is still tight as he turns to look at me. His eyes soften when they meet mine, the hardness melting away. For a moment, we just stare at each other. I can see so many emotions on his face, anger, relief, love, worry.

Zakhile: (Softly) Mambulazi.

Me: Hi.

His eyes scan my face, then drop to the Clicks bag in my hand. Something flickers in his expression but he doesn't ask.

Zakhile: Let's go home so we can talk.

I nod, suddenly feeling emotional. He leads me to where he's parked, his hand never leaving my waist until he opens the car door for me. He helps me in gently.

The drive to the estate is quiet. No one is saying anything. I can feel the tension between us. I steal glances at him. His jaw is still tight, his hands gripping the steering wheel. I want to reach out and touch him but I don't know if I should.

We arrive and he opens the door for me, his hand finding mine. We get inside and he puts his car keys and phone on the counter with more force than necessary, then turns to face me. His eyes are intense, searching mine.

Zakhile: Is this how this relationship will be? We have disagreements, you pack up and leave, and end things? We don't know how to communicate anymore?

Me: I was mad, okay? Why did you talk to me like that? You didn't even let me explain.

My voice breaks and his shoulders drop slightly and he steps closer.

Zakhile: I know. I know, and I'm sorry. It was wrong of me. I am sorry, Mambulazi.

He pulls me closer, his hands cupping my face tenderly. He kisses my forehead, letting his lips linger there, and I feel some of the tension drain from my body.

Me: I'm sorry too. I should have been supportive of your work. I just missed you so much.

Tears stream down my face and I can't stop them.

He wipes my tears with his thumbs.

Zakhile: Hey, don't cry, mama. What's going on, Ntombi? You've been acting strange lately.

I laugh through my tears, the sound shaky. I shake my head and reach for the paper bag from Clicks with trembling hands. I show it to him.

He takes it, confused.

Zakhile: What's this?

He takes out the pregnancy tests and reads the label. His eyes widen and his whole body goes still. He looks from the tests to me, then back to the tests.

His voice barely a whisper.

Zakhile: Pregnancy test? You... you think you're pregnant?

Me: (Nodding) Bonolo thinks I've been acting this way because of pregnancy hormones. And I didn't go for my shot last month. I forgot. A lot had just happened. I don't know how I forgot.

More tears stream down my face. I'm scared. Terrified, actually.

He takes my hands in his, squeezing gently.

Zakhile: Hey, don't cry. Let's just take these tests and see, okay?

His voice is calm but I can see his hands are shaking too. I nod. We walk up the stairs together, his hand in mine, neither of us letting go. I go to the bathroom and take all three tests with shaking hands, then come back out.

We wait.

Zakhile is pacing up and down, and that's making me more stressed. I sit on the edge of the bed, my leg bouncing nervously.

Me: Baby, stop pacing.

Zakhile: (Still pacing) I can't. What if you are? What if we're going to be parents?

Me: And what if I'm not?

He stops abruptly and looks at me, his eyes intense.

He kneels in front of me, taking my hands.

Zakhile: I have a feeling you are. I can feel it.

The timer on my phone goes off and we both jump. My heart is pounding so hard I think it might burst out of my chest. I stand up on shaky legs and walk to the bathroom. Zakhile follows close behind. I pick up the first test.

Two lines.

The second one. Two lines.

The third one. Two lines.

My hands are shaking so badly I almost drop them. I walk back out to where Zakhile is standing.

My voice trembles.

Me: Here.

He takes the pregnancy tests from me with careful hands, looking at each one slowly, thoroughly.

Zakhile: What does it mean, baby?

Me: Two lines. I'm pregnant.

He just stares at the tests, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Then I see it, the widest, most beautiful smile I've ever seen spread across his face. His eyes fill with tears.

Zakhile: Ntombi... we're having a baby?

I nod, my own tears falling freely now.

Me: We're having a baby.

He drops the tests gently on the bed and pulls me into his arms so tight I can barely breathe. He's shaking. He kisses me all over my face, my forehead, my cheeks, my nose, my lips. Each kiss desperate and full of love.

Zakhile: (Voice breaking) Thank you. Thank you so much, Mambulazi. You don't know how happy this makes me. You don't know...

He picks me up carefully and spins me around slowly, gently. I giggle through my tears, holding onto his shoulders.

Me: (Laughing) Zakhile, put me down!

He sets me down like I'm made of the most precious glass. His hands cup my face and he just looks at me, really looks at me, his eyes shining with tears.

Zakhile: (Whispering) You're carrying my child. Our child.

Then he kneels in front of me. His hands come to rest on my stomach, trembling slightly. He looks up at me with tears streaming down his face, and I've never seen him look more vulnerable, more open.

He looks up at me.

Zakhile: There's a piece of us in here. Our baby.

I smile through my tears, running my hand on his head. He leans his forehead against my stomach.

Me: It hasn't fully sunk in for me yet. But seeing you like this makes it feel more real.

He kisses my stomach tenderly, reverently, his lips lingering there.

Me: We still need to go to the doctor, baby. To confirm and make sure everything is okay.

He stands up pulling me close.

Zakhile: Tomorrow morning. First thing. I'm not wasting any time.

He bends down again and kisses my belly, his hands cradling it protectively.

He then talks to my stomach.

Zakhile: Oh, so this is why mama's been driving me crazy, huh? You've been in there causing trouble already. That's my baby.

I laugh, the sound light and free.

Me: I'm not that bad.

He stands and laughs, pulling me in for a deep kiss. He smiles against my lips.

Zakhile: Of course not, baby. You're perfect. You're giving me everything I've ever wanted.

That's not convincing at all, but I don't argue. I just rest my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Me: Can you drive me to Bonolos' place? I need to get my stuff.

His arms tighten around me and his expression changes slightly, becoming more serious, almost pained.

Zakhile: You were really leaving me, Mambulazi?

Me: Come on, you know I was being crazy. I would never leave you.

Relief washes over his face. He pulls me even closer, his arms wrapping around me protectively.

Zakhile: Really? I'm happy to hear that. You are my life, Ntombi. My everyday purpose. And I will never, ever leave you. And now we have something connecting us together forever. The little Mthethwa in the making.

He places his hand on my stomach again, and the gesture is so tender, so full of love, that I start crying again.

Me: I love you.

He kisses my tears away.

Zakhile: I love you more, mama. So much it scares me.

Me: Let me call Bonolo. We were supposed to be on a video call when I took the test.

He nods.

I video call Bonolo and she answers immediately, her face filling the screen.

Bonolo: Friend! Did you take the test?

I don't say anything. I just hold up the pregnancy test, turning it so she can see the two lines clearly. She screams so loud I have to pull the phone away from my ear.

She is screaming and jumping.

Bonolo: Oh my God! Oh my God! Girl, we're going to be mothers!

I laugh at "mothers," shaking my head.

Me: I still have to go to the doctor to confirm.

She waves her hand dismissively.

Bonolo: You're just going to check how far along you are. Those three pregnancy tests are correct. Oh my God, I have to start buying stuff for the little guy!

Me: (Smiling) What if it's a girl?

Bonolo: It doesn't matter! I'm buying everything! And where are you? That's definitely not my place.

Me: I'm at Zakhile's.

Bonolo: (Grinning) Oh, he's back! I hope you didn't go all crazy on the poor guy.

Me: (Laughing) We talked. We're good now.

Bonolo: Music to my ears. He better be ready though, because I can already see your hormones are going to drive us all nuts.

Zakhile laughs beside me, his arm still around my waist, his other hand resting protectively on my stomach.

He calls out, grinning.

Zakhile: I'm ready for anything!

Bonolo: (Laughing) That's what they all say! Okay, I have to go back to work but I'm so happy for you guys!

Me: (Smiling) Love you!

Bonolo: Love you too, mama!

I end the call and turn to Zakhile. He's looking at me with so much love in his eyes that it makes my chest ache. It's overwhelming, all-consuming.

Zakhile: Come here.

He pulls me onto his lap on the bed and holds me close, one hand resting protectively on my stomach, the other stroking my back.

Zakhile: Thank you for this gift, Mambulazi. Thank you for choosing me. For staying with me despite everything. Despite my life, my world. You're giving me a family. Do you know what that means to me?

I turn and cup his face.

Me: There's nowhere else I'd rather be. You're my home, Zakhile.

He kisses me deeply, desperately, pouring all his love and emotion into it. When we finally pull apart, we're both smiling.

Zakhile: Let's go get your things from Bonolo's, then we're coming straight back home. You need to rest.

Me: Okay

He kisses my forehead, long and tender, his lips warm against my skin.

Zakhile: (Whisperes) I'm going to take care of you. Both of you. I promise.

I believe him. Looking into his eyes, seeing the love and determination there, I know that everything is going to be okay.

Chapter 41

Zakhile

Coming home yesterday, I was prepared to fuck Ntombi back to her senses, not knowing I'd get the best news ever. The love of my life is carrying my seed. We didn't plan it but I'm thrilled. I'm going to be a father. I'm a lucky bastard.

I wake up very early and ask the chef to make us breakfast. My baby is still sleeping. I did give it to her good last night, back to her senses. I smile, remembering how she screamed my name. I lean over and kiss her all over her face. She stirs, mumbling something incomprehensible.

I kiss her cheek.

Me: Wake up, baby. We have breakfast and then we're heading to the doctor.

Her eyes are still closed and voice groggy.

Ntombi: Now? Baby, can I sleep a bit more, please?

Me: (Chuckling) No, no. Wake up.

She groans and buries her face in the pillow. I laugh and scoop her up into my arms, blankets and all. She squeals.

Ntombi: Zakhile! Put me down!

I walk to the bathroom.

Me: Nope. We're getting you ready.

I carry her to the bathroom and set her down gently. I turn on the shower, adjusting the temperature. She's standing there, still half asleep, looking adorable with her messy hair and sleepy eyes. I pull off her nightshirt and she doesn't even protest, just leans against me.

Me: Come on, mama. Let's get you fresh.

We both get in the shower. The warm water wakes her up a bit and she sighs, leaning back against my chest. I

wash her hair gently, massaging her scalp, and she hums in contentment.

Ntombi: This is nice.

I kiss her shoulder.

Me: Only the best for my girls.

Ntombi: (Smiling) Girls? How do you know it's a girl?

Me: (Shrugging) I don't. But whether it's a boy or girl, they're both my babies.

After our shower, we get dressed and head downstairs. Breakfast is already served on the dining table, a spread of fresh fruit, scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and freshly squeezed juice. Her eyes light up when she sees the food.

Ntombi: (Smiling) This looks amazing.

We sit down and eat. I watch her as she eats, a smile permanently fixed on my face. She's glowing already, even this early. She catches me staring.

Her mouth full.

Ntombi: What?

Me: (Smiling) Nothing. Just admiring my beautiful girlfriend.

She blushes and looks down at her plate.

We finish breakfast and I practically drag her to the car. I'm too excited to wait. We drive to Dr. Frances office, my hand resting on her thigh the whole way.

We arrive at the doctor's office and sit in the waiting room. I'm bouncing my leg nervously. Ntombi puts her hand on my knee.

Ntombi: Baby, relax.

Before I can respond, a nurse calls us.

Nurse: Ntombi Khumal?

We both stand up immediately. I take Ntombi's hand and we follow the nurse down a corridor. She leads us into an examination room where Dr. Frances is waiting. She's a woman in her late forties with warm eyes and a professional demeanor.

She extends her hand, smiling.

Dr. Frances: Good morning. I'm Dr. Frances.

I shake her hand firmly.

Me: Hi, Doc. I'm Zakhile and this is my girlfriend, Ntombi.

She shakes her hand.

Ntombi: Hi, Doctor.

Dr Frances gestures to the examination bed.

Dr. Frances: Please, have a seat, Ntombi. So, you think you might be pregnant?

Ntombi Nods, pulling out the tests from her bag.

Ntombi: Yes. I took three home pregnancy tests yesterday and they all came back positive.

She hands them to the doctor. Dr. Frances examines them and nods.

Dr. Frances: These are definitely positive. When was your last period?

Ntombi: About six or seven weeks ago? Maybe longer. I honestly can't remember exactly. Things have been... chaotic.

Dr. Frances nods understanding.

Dr. Frances: That's okay. We'll do a urine pregnancy test first to confirm the pregnancy. Then we'll do an ultrasound to see how far along you are and make sure everything is developing properly.

I lean forward, concerned.

Me: Is there any risk?

Dr. Frances: (Smiling) Let's not worry until we have reason to. The home tests are quite accurate, and if she's been feeling symptoms, that's actually a good sign.

She gives Ntombi a small cup to pee in and shows her the bathroom. Three minutes Ntombi comes back and gives her the cup with urine. She then tells us to wait. The fifteen minutes feel like hours. I pace back and forth in the small room.

Ntombi: Zakhile, please sit down. You're making me nervous.

I sit beside her, and take her hand.

Me: I'm sorry, baby. I just... I am nervous

She squeezes my hand and I bring it to my lips, kissing her knuckles.

Finally, Dr. Frances comes back in with a smile on her face and I feel my heart jump.

Dr. Frances: (Smiling) Congratulations. You're definitely pregnant. Your hCG levels are excellent and consistent with early pregnancy.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. Ntombi's eyes fill with tears.

Ntombi: (Voice shaky) Really?

Dr. Frances: Really. Now let's do an ultrasound and see your baby.

Ntombi

My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears. Dr. Frances dims the lights and asks me to lie back and lift my shirt. She squirts some gel on my stomach and I flinch at how cold it is. Zakhile is standing beside me, his hand gripping mine tightly, his eyes fixed on the screen.

At first, there's just static and grey shapes that don't make any sense. Then she stops moving the transducer and smiles.

Dr. Frances: There we are.

She points to a tiny bean-shaped blob on the screen. It's so small, but there's a fluttering movement inside it.

Dr. Frances: That's your baby. And that flickering there? That's the heartbeat.

I gasp, my free hand flying to my mouth. Tears stream down my face. I look up at Zakhile his eyes wide with wonder, his mouth slightly open.

He squeezes my hand. His voice breaking.

Zakhile: That's... that's our baby?

Dr. Frances smiles warmly.

Dr. Frances: That's your baby. Based on the measurements, I'd say you're about seven weeks along. Let me turn up the volume.

She adjusts something on the machine and suddenly we hear it, a rapid whooshing sound, like a tiny drum beating impossibly fast.

Dr. Frances: And that's the heartbeat. Strong and healthy. About 150 beats per minute, which is perfect for this stage.

I see a tear escape Zakhile’s eye, his hand trembling in mine.

Zakhile: Oh my God. Ntombi, do you hear that? That's our baby's heart.

I can't speak. I'm sobbing, completely overwhelmed. That's our baby. Our baby has a heartbeat. Our baby is real.

Me: I hear it baby.

Zakhile leans down and kisses my forehead, then my stomach. His hand is shaking as it rests on my belly. He starts talking to my stomach.

Zakhile: Hi, baby. It's your daddy. I love you so much already. So, so much.

I'm crying even harder now, my hand in his head, stroking it gently. Dr. Frances is smiling at us, giving us this moment.

Dr. Frances: Everything looks perfect. Baby is measuring right on track and the heartbeat is strong. This is a very healthy pregnancy so far.

She moves the transducer around a bit more, taking measurements, and we watch our baby on the screen. It's surreal. There's a tiny life inside me. Our tiny life. He wipes the gel off my stomach.

Dr. Frances: I'm going to prescribe some prenatal vitamins. It's important you take them every day. And we'll schedule your next appointment for four weeks from now. At that appointment, we'll do another ultrasound and you'll be able to see the baby's

development. By then, we might even be able to see the arms and legs forming.

Zakhile: Can we come back sooner? Just to check?

Dr. Frances: (Smiling) You can, but there won't be much change week to week at this stage. Four weeks is standard. But if you have any concerns, bleeding, severe cramping, anything unusual you call me immediately.

She prints out some pictures from the ultrasound and hands them to us. Zakhile takes them with shaking hands, staring at the images like they're the most precious things in the world.

He looks at the pictures.

Zakhile: That's our baby. That's really our baby.

I sit up and wipe my tears.

Me: That's really our baby.

Dr. Frances: I'll give you two a moment. Congratulations again. This is wonderful news.

She leaves the room. Zakhile helps me sit up properly and then pulls me into his arms, holding me so tight I can barely breathe.

Zakhile: Thank you. Thank you for giving me this. For giving me everything. You've made me the happiest man alive, Ntombi.

Me: I love you so much.

He cups my face with both hands.

Zakhile: I love you more. Both of you. I'm going to be a father. We're going to be parents.

He kisses me deeply, passionately.

I smile through my tears.

Me: We're going to be parents.

He kneels in front of me again, his hands on my stomach, looking up at me with so much love it takes my breath away.

Zakhile: I promise you, Mambulazi, I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to protect you both. Nothing will ever harm you. You're my world. My entire world.

Me: I know. I trust you completely.

He stands up and helps me off the examination bed. We leave the doctor's office hand in hand, the ultrasound pictures clutched in Zakhile's other hand. He can't stop looking at them, a permanent smile on his face.

I laugh softly.

Me: You're going to wear those pictures out from staring at them.

Zakhile: (Grinning) I can't help it. Look at this. This is our baby, Ntombi. Our baby.

We get to the car and he opens my door for me, making sure I'm settled before closing it. When he gets in on his side, he immediately reaches over and places his hand on my stomach.

He leans over and kisses me softly.

Zakhile is over the moon. This baby really seems like it's what he's wanted for a long time. He keeps kissing me every chance he gets, my hand, my forehead, my stomach. He said he wants to take me somewhere for lunch after the doctor's appointment. I wonder where we're going.

We're in the car now, driving away from the doctor's office. The ultrasound pictures are in my bag and I can't stop smiling. Seeing our baby's heartbeat made everything feel so real. Zakhile keeps bringing my hand to his lips and kissing it.

He kisses my knuckles.

Zakhile: How are you feeling, mama?

Me: Happy. A little overwhelmed, but happy.

Zakhile: Me too. Best day of my life.

We drive for a bit longer and then I notice we're heading toward the Playhouse.

We pull up and he parks the car. He comes around to open my door, taking my hand to help me out.

Me: Zakhile, what are we doing here?

I'm confused. The theater looks closed.

Zakhile: (Smiling) Come, you'll see.

He leads me to the entrance. My confusion grows. We walk inside the theater and it's quiet. The lights are dim and as we walk further in, I see it, a romantic setup on the stage. There's a table for two in the middle, surrounded by rose petals scattered on the floor. Candles are everywhere, their flames flickering softly.

It's breathtakingly beautiful. There's soft music playing through the speakers.

Me: (Whispering) Nyambose!

My hand flies to my mouth. I can't believe he did this.

He squeezes my hand, smiling.

Zakhile: Come, love.

He leads me down the aisle and up the steps to the stage. My heels click on the wooden floor as we walk through the rose petals. He pulls out a chair for me and I sit down, still in shock. He sits across from me, looking at me with so much love in his eyes.

A chef appears from the wings. I hadn't even noticed him there. He brings out our food, beautifully plated. We eat, and I keep looking around, trying to take it all in. The food is delicious, but I can barely focus on it. My mind is racing.

After the main course, the chef brings out dessert, a rich chocolate mousse that melts on my tongue. I'm savoring every bite when suddenly the wall behind the stage lights up. A projector!

I gasp. It's a video of me. On the day of the auditions. I watch myself on that screen, nervous and excited, dancing my heart out. I remember that day so clearly. The day everything changed.

Tears fall from my eyes.

Me: Oh baby, this is beautiful. Thank you, Nyambose.

He takes my hands in his.

Zakhile: I chose the Playhouse because this is where everything started. The first time I saw that you were real. The woman I'd been dreaming about was real, standing right in front of me. I fell in love the moment I laid eyes on you. I knew I had to make you mine. This theater will always be a reminder of our beautiful love story.

I'm a crying mess now, tears streaming down my face. He wipes them gently with his thumbs.

Zakhile: (Smiling) I think I should also thank Okuhle for forcing me to come to these auditions. Because I saw you. The love of my life.

Me: (Sobbing) I love you so much, Zakhile. I thank our ancestors for connecting us.

He smiles, and then he stands up and moves in front of me, kneeling on one knee. My breath catches. He pulls out a small velvet box from his pocket. My hands start shaking uncontrollably. Is he...?

He opens the box to reveal a stunning diamond ring.

Zakhile: I bought this ring a day after we made things official. I wanted to propose then but I didn't want you to think I was crazy. But I can't hold it anymore, Ntombi. I feel like this is the perfect time. We're having a mini us. So why not get married?

He pauses, his voice breaking slightly.

Zakhile: I know it's still early, but MaMbulazi, I know what I want. I've known from the moment I met you.

He wipes my tears with his thumbs, his own eyes glistening.

Zakhile: Be my wife and make me the happiest man alive. Will you marry me?

I nod frantically, unable to speak. I don't care if we've only been together for a few months. I love him. All of him. With everything I have.

Zakhile: (Smiling) You know I want to hear you say it.

Me: (Nodding) Yes! Of course I'd love to marry you. I will make you the happiest man alive and be your wife.

He stands up and pulls me into his arms, hugging me so tight I can barely breathe. I'm crying into his shoulder, my whole body shaking with emotion. He pulls back and takes my left hand, sliding the ring onto my finger. It fits perfectly. I can't believe he's had this ring for months, just waiting for the perfect moment.

I look at the ring through my tears. It's beautiful, a princess-cut diamond surrounded by smaller stones, sparkling under the stage lights.

He kneels down and kisses my stomach tenderly.

Zakhile: You heard that, son? Mommy and daddy are getting married.

I laugh through my tears and he stands up, coming back to me. He cups my face and looks into my eyes.

Zakhile: (Whisperes) Thank you.

Me: The ring is so beautiful, baby. Thank you so much. Bonolo is going to go crazy when I tell her. Oh my God, this is amazing!

He chuckles and pulls me closer by my waist, his hands settling there possessively. He's looking at me like I'm the only woman in the world.

Zakhile: (Smiling) Don't you want us to go see Mom and Dad and tell them the good news? I also want to

speak to my dad about sending my uncles for lobola negotiations.

My eyes widen.

Me: Already? You're not wasting any time.

Zakhile: The sooner the better. I've waited long enough, my love. I want you to be my wife. Officially.

I kiss him and the kiss deepens, becoming more heated. I can feel his arousal already pressing against me. We break out of the kiss, both of us breathing heavily.

Me: (Laughing) Let's go before you have me right here on this stage.

He laughs, a deep rumbling sound that I feel in my chest.

Zakhile: Don't tempt me, Mrs. Mthethwa to be.

We leave the theater hand in hand. I'm now a fiancée. It feels so surreal and wonderful to say that. I keep looking at my ring, watching it sparkle in the sunlight.

We drive to the Mthethwa house to tell them the good news. When we get there, to my surprise, everyone is here; baba Mthethwa, Mrs. Mthethwa, Njabulo, Okuhle, Vuyiswa, and even Nathi except Lizwi.

Zakhile bursts through the door, pulling me along.

Zakhile: (Grinning) Family!

He sounds so excited.

They all turn to look at us, shocked expressions on their faces. Probably because Zakhile is never this hyper, let alone greeting them like that.

Mrs. Mthethwa: Haibo, why are you so happy?

Okuhle: (Laughing) Jesus is coming back, ngeke.

Vuyiswa: Why are you smiling this much, Khehla? That's creepy.

I laugh and Zakhile just chuckles, holding my hand tightly.

Zakhile: I have good news. Ntombi and I are expecting a little Mthethwa.

He brushes my stomach gently. Everyone stands up from their seats, mouths open in shock.

Zakhile: And I asked her to be my wife. She said yes.

I hold up my left hand, showing off the ring. The room erupts. Everyone starts screaming and rushing toward us. The girls. Mrs. Mthethwa, Okuhle, and Vuyiswa surround me, pulling me into tight hugs. Njabulo and Baba Mthethwa shake hands with Zakhile and hug him, congratulating him with hearty slaps on the back.

Mrs. Mthethwa: (Crying) This is the best news! My first grandchild! Oh Ntombi, thank you, sisi, for loving this weird child of mine and giving him a child.

I laugh, wiping my own tears.

Me: It's my honor, Ma.

Baba Mthethwa opens his arms for me.

Baba Mthethwa: Come here, my daughter.

I walk into his embrace and he hugs me tightly.

Baba Mthethwa: Siyabonga. Your father must be happy where he is. He chose well for my son.

I smile through my tears, thinking of my father. He would have loved this. He would have been so happy.

Njabulo hugs me next.

Njabulo: (Grinning) Congratulations, Makoti. This is great news. I'm happy for you guys.

Me: Thank you, bhuti.

Vuyiswa: Oh my God, I'm going to be an aunt! I can't believe this. When is the baby shower?

Okuhle grabs my arm.

Okuhle: What about the bridal shower? Oh, we have so much to plan!

Mrs. Mthethwa: Let me make you something to eat. You're eating for two now.

I laugh because I'm actually hungry already, and we just ate at the Playhouse.

Me: (Smiling) Thank you, Ma.

Okuhle: Come, I want to know how he proposed. I don't trust Khehla to be romantic.

Vuyiswa: Yes! Tell us everything!

They pull me toward the kitchen, one on each side of me, talking over each other excitedly. I look back at Zakhile, who's standing with his father and brother, watching me with the biggest smile on his face. He winks at me and I feel my heart swell with love.

This is my family now. This is my life. And I wouldn't change a single thing.

Chapter 42

Zakhile

To say I'm happy would be an understatement. I'm over the moon. We're really pregnant. I can't explain how I'm feeling right now but I can't wait to hold my little champ in my hands. Every time I think about it, my chest swells with pride and love.

But the Leonid issue is still in the way. I have to protect Ntombi more than ever. With her being pregnant, I don't want anything happening to them. We're in the study now. Dad, Nathi, Njabulo, and I.

Dad leans back in his chair, smiling.

Dad: I'm proud of you, son. This step you're taking is big. Are you ready? Marriage is nie pap en vleis.

Me: (Nodding firmly) I'm ready for anything.

Nathi: (Grinning) Washa. No, for real, man, you deserve this. Ntombi is good for you.

Njabulo: (Laughing) She turned that stone-cold heart into something, hey.

Nathi: Into a sweet man.

I chuckle, shaking my head.

Me: Only for her.

Dad: You need to take her to see your grandma. She will be very happy about this news.

Me: Yeah, definitely. Can the lobola letter be sent soon? I don't want to wait any longer.

Dad laughs, a deep rumbling sound.

Dad: I will talk to your uncles later today. They'll prepare everything.

I nod and go stand by the window with my hands in my pockets.

Njabulo: It Didn't go well in Cape Town?

I shake my head and turn to face them. This is what's stressing me.

I tighten my jaw.

Me: He's adamant. Fifty percent or nothing. He's using Ntombi to get what he wants.

Nathi: Mzingeli fucked us up. This is a mess.

Dad: Leave it to me. I will deal with Leonid. His father owes me a few favours. I'll get in touch with him.

Me: If he doesn't back off, I don't have a choice but to kill him.

Njabulo: That means war, Khehla.

I turn to face them, eyes hard.

Me: So be it.

Right now, I don't care. I won't let anything happen to Ntombi and my child. I'll fight everyone and everything

before they get to her. I'll burn the whole world down if I have to.

Dad stands up and walks over to me.

Dad: I understand how you feel, son. But let me handle this first. Dimitri Petrov and I go back many years. He's a reasonable man. His son is a hot-headed fool, but Dimitri will listen.

I clench my jaw.

Me: And if he doesn't?

Dad: Then we do what needs to be done. But we try diplomacy first.

I nod slowly. He's right. I need to be smart about this, not reckless.

Ntombi

It's the following week now. I had a nice time with the Mthethwas last week. I still can't believe I'll be a Mthethwa soon. And there's a little human growing inside me. The thought makes me smile every time.

I'm at one of the plays Okuhle is directing right now. I'm the choreographer for this production. It's a small show, intimate and powerful. Zakhile wanted me to quit and stay at home just because I'm pregnant. Imagine that. I'm pregnant, not sick. And he's not happy about me dancing in my "condition." We had a whole argument about it this morning.

We're on break now and I'm sitting in the rehearsal room, drinking water, when I receive a call from my mom. I pick up and don't even get a chance to say anything. She's ululating and screaming.

Mom: (Ululating) Lilililililili! Hey wena, why didn't you tell me that boy wants to marry you?

Me: Ma?

Mom: Ma yani! The Mthethwas sent a letter. They're asking for your hand in marriage!

Oh my God, it's happening. Zakhile didn't even warn me that it would be today.

Me: (Laughing) Uhm... yes, Ma, he proposed last week. I was going to tell you when I come home. I didn't think they'd send the letter so soon.

Mom: (Excited) There's no "soon" here. This is perfect, my child. It shows he knows what he wants. Oh my child, I am so happy! Send me the picture of the ring on WhatsApp. I want to show those bitter aunties of yours.

I laugh. She's not even joking, I know.

Me: I will send it, Mom.

Mom: And when are you telling me about the baby, hm?

I freeze. I wanted to tell her all at once when I go home. I don’t even know what to say right now.

Mom: (Laughing) Ntombi, I'm your mother. You think I don't know? The way you were glowing last time I saw you? Plus, why else would they rush the lobola negotiations?

I start crying. I don't know why I'm crying, but the tears just come.

Me: Ma, I'm sorry. I was going to tell you. I'm seven weeks pregnant.

Mom: Oh my baby. This is wonderful news. I'm going to be a grandmother. Your father would have been so proud.

Me: I miss him, Ma.

Mom: I know, baby. I know. But he's watching over you. He chose well for you. Zakhile is a good man.

Me: He is, Ma. He really is.

Mom: Alright, bye, my baby. Go rest. You're eating for two now!

I laugh and end the call, then immediately call Zakhile.

He answers immediately.

Zakhile: Wifey.

I blush at the nickname.

Me: Baby, why didn't you tell me your family was sending the letter today?

Zakhile: (Chuckling) I did say, my love, I want it sent out as soon as possible. Is everything okay?

He asks that, his voice shifting to concern.

Me: It's all good. Mom called and told me she got the letter. She's so happy.

Zakhile: I'm glad she's happy. You'll be my wife officially soon.

Me: I can't wait, baby. Oh, look at the time. Let me get back to work.

Zakhile: Don't overstrain yourself. Remember you're pregnant.

I roll my eyes playfully.

Me: I know, babe. Bye, I love you.

Zakhile: I love you more. And Ntombi?

Me: Yes?

Zakhile: The security is there. Don't leave without them.

Me: I know, baby. I promise.

I end the call and rush back inside. The rest of the day flies by. Before I know it, rehearsal is over and everyone is packing up. They all leave and I am the last to walk out of the room, I then head to the parking lot.

I'm walking to my car, my keys in hand, humming to myself. I'm thinking about what to make for dinner when I hear footsteps behind me.

Voice: Ntombi!

I turn around. It's Ntokozo. What is he doing here?

Me: Nto….

Everything happens so fast. He lunges toward me just as I hear a loud crack, like a firecracker, but louder, sharper. Then blood. Blood everywhere. Warm droplets splash across my face. Ntokozo falls to the ground right in front of me.

I look down. There's a hole in his head. Blood is pooling around him, spreading across the concrete. So much blood.

I open my mouth to scream but no sound comes out at first. Then it erupts from me, a scream so loud, so raw, it tears through my throat.

Me: (Screaming) HELP! SOMEBODY HELP!

I can't breathe. I look at my hands. They're covered in blood. Not mine. His.

Then everything goes black.

Narrated

Leonid is sitting in a dingy hotel room in Cape Town, waiting for the good news that Ntombi has been shot dead. He's supposed to fly back to Russia as soon as possible. He's angry that the Mthethwas had to involve his father. His father is retired; he wants all the respect to go to him now. He wants to be feared, but no, they still want to involve his father like he's some child who needs supervision.

He's very angry. And now he wants to show the Mthethwas that he doesn't fear them. He wants to send a message to everyone who thinks of crossing him. The Mthethwas are feared throughout the underworld, and if he can shake them, he'll be respected. That's what he believes. That's what drives him.

He receives a call from his hitman. He answers immediately.

Leonid: Tell me the good news.

Sniper: (Hesitant) Mission failed. There was a boy who came out of nowhere and the bullet hit him.

Leonid's breathing changes. His grip on the phone tightens.

Leonid: What are you saying to me? You missed?

Sniper: I didn't miss. I don't miss. I aimed perfectly and I pulled the trigger, but the boy came out of nowhere and stood in front of her just as I pulled the trigger. Her security team was there in seconds. I had to abort.

Leonid screams throwing things across the room.

Leonid: AAAHHHHHH! ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW?

He ends the call and paces up and down, running his hands through his hair. His heart is racing. He knows what this means. The Mthethwas will come for him now. They'll hunt him down like a dog.

He grabs his bags in a hurry, throwing clothes in without caring about folding them. He needs to get out of South Africa. Now. He runs out the door, leaving the hotel room a mess behind him.

In Russia, he'll be safe. Or so he thinks.

Zakhile

I'm sitting in my office, busy with some paperwork. I'm glad my uncles finally sent the letter to the Khumalos. Soon Ntombi will officially be mine. The thought makes me smile despite the stress.

But now she doesn't want to stay at home and relax. She says she's pregnant, not sick. I don't like this at all. She should be resting at home and I'll do everything she wants and needs. But I know better than to argue with a pregnant woman. I'll let her be. For now.

My phone rings. It's Vusi. I answer.

Me: Vusi.

There's shuffling on the other end. Noise. Panic in the background.

Vusi: (Breathless) Eish, boss man, there was a shooting and we're rushing the boss lady to the hospital.

My body tenses. My mind freezes instantly. The phone nearly slips from my hand.

My voice barely above a whisper.

Me: What?

Vusi: There was a sniper, boss. Someone tried to take a shot at her but…

I don't hear the rest of what he's saying. My mind just freezes. I can't breathe anymore. I feel my chest tightening, constricting. The room starts spinning. My hand flies to my chest, gripping it tight.

The office door bursts open. Njabulo and Lizwi rush in, their faces urgent.

Njabulo rushes over to me.

Njabulo: Shit, Khehla, breathe! Come on, man!

I'm gasping for air, my vision blurring. Lizwi grabs a water bottle and splashes water on my face. The cold shock helps, but barely.

Lizwi grips my shoulders.

Lizwi: Breathe, man! We need to rush to the hospital. Ntombi needs you right now. Come on, breathe!

I force air into my lungs, bit by bit. My breathing comes back slowly, painfully.

Me: (Gasping) Ntombi... she's...

Njabulo helps me stand.

Njabulo: She will be fine. The boys just called, she passed out but she's alive. Let's go. Now.

We rush out of the office. Lizwi is driving because I can't even see straight. My hands are shaking. I'm in the

back seat, trying to control my breathing. Tears stream down my face and I don't even try to stop them.

Njabulo is in the passenger seat, he turns to look at me.

Njabulo: She will be fine, man. Calm down.

Me: (Voice breaking) What about the baby, Njabulo? She's pregnant and...

Njabulo: Hey, man, don't think the worst right now, okay? Don't do that to yourself.

I put my head in my hands

Me: She's going to leave me. I promised to protect her and I failed. Again.

I rub my hands on my face roughly, trying to compose myself. I need to find whoever did this. I need to make them pay.

Me: Do we know who did this?

Lizwi: Not yet. Nathi will update us soon.

I nod, tapping my foot anxiously. Every second feels like an hour. I just want to arrive at the hospital. I need to see her. I need to know she's okay.

We arrive at the hospital and rush inside. Vusi is at the front desk, filling out paperwork. When he sees us, he straightens up.

Me: (Grabbing his arm) Where is she?

Vusi: Boss, ward 19. Dr. Govender is checking her now.

We rush to ward 19. Dr. Govender steps out just as we approach, holding up his hand to stop us.

Dr. Govender: Hey, man, let me check her and see if everything is okay first.

Me: I just want to see her, man. Please.

Dr. Govender: Give us a moment, okay? I'll be back with an update.

Me: (Voice breaking) She's pregnant. Please check the baby as well.

He nods and walks back inside. I pace back and forth outside the door. Vusi walks toward us, and I turn on him immediately.

I feel myself getting angry. I grabb his collar.

Me: What the fuck happened, Vusi? I pay you to keep her safe! What the hell is this?

Vusi: It was a sniper, boss. We…We were there as always, watching. There's a boy who came out of nowhere. Boss lady seemed to recognize him and we went closer, but everything happened so quick. He was shot instantly. The bullet came from one of the tall buildings opposite the parking lot.

I let him go, my mind reeling. Then realisation hits me.

Me: They were shooting at her. If that boy didn't show up, we...

I can't finish the sentence. My legs give out and I slide down the wall, sitting on the floor. I almost lost her again. I keep failing her.

Me: (Voice hoarse) Who's the boy?

Vusi: One of the guys says they recognize him. He's one of Okuhle's friends. Ntokozo something.

Njabulo: Let me hear how far Nathi is. I'm sure he found something.

He pulls out his phone

Chapter 43

Zakhile

Minutes feel like hours. Finally, Dr. Govender appears. I stand up quickly, my heart in my throat.

Me: How are they?

Dr. Govender: (Smiling slightly) They're both okay. She woke up but her blood pressure went up from the trauma, so I had to sedate her. She'll be up in a few hours.

I exhale, my whole body sagging with relief.

Me: Thanks, man. Thank you.

He nods and walks off. Lizwi puts a hand on my shoulder.

Lizwi: She will be fine, man. She's just traumatized. Give her time.

Me: I pray she doesn't leave me.

Nathi appears, rushing down the corridor. Okuhle is with him, her face red from crying.

Nathi: Hey, guys.

Okuhle: (Frantic) How is she?

Me: Her and the baby are both fine.

Okuhle sags with relief. Nathi nods and touches my shoulder in support.

Okuhle: (Voice shaking) When the security called from where we rehearse and told me someone got shot, I thought it was Ntombi. She was the last to leave. And now it's Ntokozo. I don't even know what he was doing there. I'm so confused.

Me: (Jaw tightening) Tell me about this Ntokozo.

Okuhle: Please don't be mad, okay? I didn't know you two were dating when this happened. We went clubbing with Ntombi and my friends were there, Ntokozo

included. He was interested in her and he kept begging for her number. I was drunk and I just... I gave it to him.

I tighten my jaw, feeling anger brewing inside. I choose to just not say anything.

Nathi: Guys, let's go to Govender's office. I want us to discuss something.

I know he found something. And we won't like whatever he found.

Lizwi: Okuhle we'll be right back.

She nods, looking devastated. We follow Nathi to Govender's office. He gives us space to discuss.

Lizwi: What did you find?

Nathi: This boy Ntokozo has been stalking Ntombi for months. His phone and laptops are full of Ntombi's pictures. Everywhere, the mall, rehearsals, even when she was with you. It's like he was obsessed or something.

I feel myself getting angrier. Angry at myself. There's a man who's been stalking my woman right under my nose and I didn't see it.

I slam my fist on the desk.

Me: How didn't we see this? How did he do this right under our noses?

Nathi: And it's the same guy Njabulo found her with at the restaurant.

Njabulo: (Shocked) It's that boy? We did a background check on him and he was clean.

Nathi: He is clean. A nobody who was just obsessed with Ntombi. Wrong place, wrong time. He saved her life.

Me: Too bad he's dead. I would've made him suffer before killing him for stalking her. Nx.

Lizwi: Good riddance either way.

Njabulo: Who ordered the hit?

Me: I already know. This is Leonid's style. Snipers? That's him.

Nathi: It is him. And he's on his way to Russia as we speak.

Lizwi: I guess dad's warning didn't work. His father failed to put him on a leash.

Me: (Smirking darkly) He thinks we won't do anything to him in Russia. He's right. I won't do anything to him while he's there.

They all look at me, confused.

Me: We have friends in Russia. They owe us some favors and they will get me Leonid and his father. I want them here in South Africa.

Njabulo: That's smart. We don't want to create war with the Russians. We do it your way and we don't cause unnecessary attention.

I pull out my phone.

Me: I'll make a few calls. That bastard will know my wrath. He tried to kill my family. He's a dead man walking.

Ntombi

I wake up slowly, my head pounding. I scan the room around me and realize I'm in a hospital bed. What happened floods my mind and I cry. Tears stream down my face uncontrollably. Oh my God, Ntokozo is dead. What was he even doing there? Was I supposed to be the one shot?

Or did Zakhile shoot him? He did say he would put a bullet through his skull. Did he really do it?

I start panicking, my breathing becoming rapid. The door opens and Zakhile walks in. His eyes are red and bloodshot. He looks exhausted, disheveled, all over the place.

He sits on the chair next to the bed and reaches for my hand. I yank it away.

Zakhile: Mama...

He sounds hurt by me yanking my hand.

Me: (Voice shaking) Did you do it?

He looks confused, his brow furrowing.

Zakhile: Do what?

Me: (Louder) You know what I'm talking about. DID YOU SHOOT NTOKOZO?

He looks at me as if I've just said the most ridiculous thing ever. He looks hurt. Disappointed.

Zakhile: (Voice low) What do you think, Mambulazi? You think I did it?

Me: You said it yourself, Zakhile. You said you would shoot him when Njabulo found us at the restaurant.

Zakhile: Mhm. I thought you knew me. But I guess you don't. Why would I shoot him when you're there? Why would I want to traumatize you like that, Ntombi? Knowing you're pregnant, and I shoot him right in front of you?

I look down, guilt washing over me. I turn away from him.

Zakhile: You should know by now how much I love you. How much I care. How much I fucking want to protect you from this life. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. Ever.

Tears stream down my face. If he didn't do it, then who did? Were they shooting at me? But why?

He reaches over, holding my chin gently and turning my head to face him. He rubs my stomach tenderly.

Zakhile: (Softly) How are you feeling?

Me: (Sobbing) I'm scared. What I saw is... I've never seen such horror in my life.

My eyes are wet from crying. He stands up and kisses my forehead, long and tender.

Zakhile: I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not being there. I feel like I've failed you, Ntombi. I promised to protect you and I'm being sloppy. I'm failing to do the one thing I vowed to do.

Me: Who did it? Do you know? Were they shooting at me?

He nods slowly. I look at him, waiting to hear who wants me dead.

He sits down and takes my hand.

Zakhile: Leonid did this. We're in business with him but he's always wanted something to bring us down. Mzingeli told him about you before he died, and Leonid used you to get a percentage increase in our deal.

Me: You declined?

Zakhile: Ntombi...

I pull my hand away getting angry.

Me: YOU DECLINED AND PUT MY LIFE IN DANGER? A percentage is more important than my life?

Zakhile: No, of course not. Calm down, mama. Please think of the baby.

Me: (Voice rising) Did you think of the baby when you put my life in danger?

Zakhile: Baby, it doesn't work like that. Even if I gave him what he wanted, he was still going to try to come for you again. Men like him don't stop. They keep taking until there's nothing left.

I just look away, wiping my tears roughly.

Zakhile: I'm sorry, Mambulazi. I failed you. I'm very sorry. Please forgive me, mama.

I don't say anything. I did ask him what happens if he fails to protect me. I almost died. And if Ntokozo didn't

show up, I don't even want to think about it. He took a bullet for me, poor guy. But what was he doing there in the first place?

Me: (Quietly) Ntokozo... did you find out what he was doing there?

He looks down, then exhales heavily.

Zakhile: He was stalking you. He's been stalking you for months now. He was obsessed with you.

I gasp, my hand flying to my mouth.

Me: What? Oh my God.

Zakhile: I don't know what he was planning when he showed up. But he saved your life.

Me: When did my life get so complicated?

He stands up and cups my face.

Zakhile: I'm sorry for all this. You don't deserve any of this.

Me: I'm hungry.

He smiles slightly, relief washing over his face.

Zakhile: Let me fix that for you. I'll be right back.

He kisses my cheek and stares at me for a while, his eyes searching mine.

Zakhile: (Serious) I promise I will do better. We've been sloppy, me and my brothers, but never again. I promise you.

He walks out. I don't even know what "being sloppy" means in his world. He should stop making promises. Next thing you know; we'll be ducking bullets again.

My life will never be normal. I chose this man and somehow, I don't think I'll be leaving him. Despite everything. Despite the danger. I love him.

The door opens again and Okuhle and the brothers walk in.

Okuhle: Oh my God, oath sis, how are you?

I smile, shaking my head.

Me: I'm okay. Just... processing everything.

She hugs me tight, crying into my shoulder.

Njabulo: (Stepping forward) How are you feeling, Makoti?

Me: Tired. Scared. Confused.

Lizwi: (smiling) The baby?

I touch my stomach and rubs it gently.

Me: The baby is fine. Dr. Govender checked.

They all nod. Okuhle sits on the edge of the bed, holding my hand.

Okuhle: I was so scared. When they called and said there was a shooting, I thought... I thought we lost you.

Me: (Squeezing her hand) I'm still here. Thanks to Ntokozo.

The room falls silent. The weight of that statement hangs in the air.

Njabulo: (Clearing his throat) He saved your life. Whatever his intentions were, he saved your life.

I nod, tears streaming down my face again. A man I barely knew died on my behalf. And I don't even know why he was there.

Zakhile walks back in with a tray of food. When he sees everyone, he stops.

Zakhile: Give us a moment?

He asks his siblings.

They nod and file out, Okuhle squeezing my hand one more time before leaving. Zakhile sits beside me and sets the tray on the table.

Zakhile: (Softly) Eat, mama. You need your strength.

I look at the food but I'm not hungry anymore. I just want to go home. I want to feel safe again.

Me: When can I leave?

Zakhile: Tomorrow morning. Dr. Govender wants to keep you overnight for observation.

Me: (Looking at him) And then what? We just go back to normal? Pretend someone didn't just try to kill me?

Zakhile: (Jaw tightening) No. Then I handle this. Once and for all.

The coldness in his voice sends a chill down my spine. This is the Zakhile the world fears. The one I rarely see.

And somehow, that scares me more than anything.

Narrated

Twenty-four hours later, Leonid is in his father's study in Moscow. His father, Dimitri Petrov, sits behind a massive oak desk, his face red with rage. Leonid has just finished telling him what he did.

Dimitri Petrov stands up and slams his hands on the desk.

Petrov: YOU DID WHAT?

Leonid: I wanted to teach them a lesson. Show them we're not to be pushed around.

Petrov: Are you insane? Why the hell would you do that? They called to warn me, Leonid. Baba Mthethwa himself called me. That means they care about that girl. And you do what? You try to kill her?

He walks around the desk, getting in his son's face.

Petrov: You are as good as dead, boy. You understand that?

Leonid: They won't touch me here. This is Russia. Our territory.

Petrov laughs, but it's not a pleasant sound. It's bitter and afraid.

Petrov: (Shaking his head) You should have done better research about them before making STUPID DECISIONS, YOU FOOL.

He stands up. His voice rising

Leonid: I AM NOT A FOOL! I stood up to them. Something you failed to do all those years. You let them walk all over you!

Mr. Petrov: You will find out why soon enough.

Petrov rubs his hands over his face, suddenly looking much older.

Petrov: Where did I go wrong with you? Now you have killed us all.

Leonid: (Scoffing) You're being dramatic. They're in South Africa. We're in Russia. What can they do?

Petrov looks at his son with something like pity.

Petrov: Everything, boy. They can do everything. You have no idea who you've crossed. The Mthethwas don't

forgive. They don't forget. And they sure as hell don't let attempts on their family go unpunished.

Leonid walks out and slams the door behind him. He wanted his father to be proud that he went against the most feared family in the African underworld. He wanted him to support him and help him fight them. Instead, he just pissed him off.

He storms down the hallway, his jaw clenched. His father is weak. Scared. But Leonid isn't. He'll show them all.

Chapter 44

Ntombi

It's been two days since I've been discharged from the hospital. I'm glad my baby and I are okay, physically at least. But I don't know if I'll ever be okay mentally. Every time I close my eyes, I see Ntokozo's blood splashing all over me. The horror that happened keeps repeating itself in my head like a broken record I can't turn off.

Zakhile has been restless ever since. He's hardly at home anymore. He said the people who tried to kill me will die painfully and he'll make sure of that. I think that's what he's been busy with these past two days. I don't even want to know the details; it scares me when I think about it.

I can't even go to rehearsals to busy myself with something and clear my head because rehearsals have been stopped for now. There's an investigation taking

place regarding Ntokozo's death. I know the police won't ask me anything because Zakhile told me he took care of it. Poor Ntokozo. His only crime was being obsessed with me, and now he's paid the ultimate price. I feel for his family, for his mother who'll never see her son again.

I snap out of my thoughts and continue eating my snacks, watching TV in the living room. I'm mindlessly chewing when I hear the front door open. Zakhile enters, looking exhausted. He walks over and kisses my cheek, then bends down to kiss my stomach.

Zakhile: How are you, mama?

Me: I'm fine. I just wish I could also be busy like you, you know. To get my mind off things.

He sits besides me.

Zakhile: My love, let me fix this first. Once I know you're safe, one hundred percent, then we can do

anything you want. We can even take a trip anywhere in the world you'd love to go.

I smile at the thought and shift to settle on top of his lap, facing him. His hands immediately go to my back, holding me.

Me: Anywhere? Really?

He looks into my eyes.

Zakhile: Anything for you.

Me: I'd love that. Uhm… Do you know how long the investigation is going to take?

Zakhile: (Frowning) Why?

Me: I want to go back to rehearsals. We're going to be so left behind with the schedule.

His entire body tenses beneath me.

Zakhile: No. That's not happening, Ntombi. You're not going back.

Me: What? Why? I have to.

He huffs, his jaw tightening.

Zakhile: I almost lost you both. Just rest, mama, until you give birth. I will do everything and anything you need, Ntombi. You don't have to work.

Me: That's not happening, Zakhile. It's not about working, it's about passion, okay? I love what I do. And besides, I have to continue. We've already started, I can't just leave in the middle of things. And I'm still very capable.

I feel myself getting angry and try to get off him, but he holds me tight, not letting me move.

Zakhile: Mhm, I hear you.

Me: (Sighing) What I can do is take a break after this show, until I give birth. Once I start getting huge, it'll be hard for me to do intense movements anyway.

He nods slowly, considering this compromise. Then he starts planting kisses all over my face. I giggle.

Zakhile: Allow me to build an academy for you. I know that's your goal. Let me build it for you, my love. And the rest will follow, registering it and all that. Let me do this for you.

Me: (Eyes widening) Are... are you serious?

Zakhile: Yes. You just give me the go-ahead and I'll start immediately.

I feel tears threatening to spill from my eyes. This man. This wonderful, complicated, dangerous man wants to build my dream for me.

Me: (Voice breaking) Yes. Yes, please.

He kisses me then, deep and passionate. His tongue explores my mouth and I moan softly. The kiss deepens and I feel his shaft hardening beneath me. I'm already getting wet, my body responding to him instinctively.

I grind against him and he groans into my mouth.

He breaks the kiss, breathing hard.

Zakhile: Fuck, Ntombi. You're driving me crazy.

I grind harder.

Me: Then do something about it Mr Mthethwa.

His eyes darken with lust. In one swift motion, he lifts me slightly and pulls my leggings and panties down to my thighs. I help him, kicking them off completely. He unbuckles his pants and pulls them down just enough to free himself. He grabs my hips.

Zakhile: Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you or the baby.

I position myself above him.

Me: We're fine. I need you, Zakhile. Now.

He doesn't need more convincing. He grips my hips tightly and slams me down onto him. I cry out at the sudden fullness, my nails digging into his shoulders.

Zakhile: (Groaning) Fuck. You're so tight, mama.

He doesn't give me time to adjust. His grip on my hips is bruising as he lifts me and slams me back down, setting a brutal pace. I'm bouncing on him, my breasts bouncing with each thrust.

I moan loudly.

Me: Oh God, Zakhile! Yes!

Zakhile: (Growling) You're mine, Ntombi. Say it. Say you're mine.

Me: (Crying out) I'm yours! Only yours!

He stands up, still inside me, and lays me down on the couch. My legs wrap around his waist as he pounds into me relentlessly. The couch is creaking beneath us, but neither of us cares.

His hand wraps around my throat, not squeezing, just holding. His other hand is gripping my hip, pulling me to meet each of his thrusts.

Zakhile: This pussy is mine. You are mine. Every fucking part of you belongs to me.

Me: (Gasping) Yes! Fuck, yes!

He's hitting that spot deep inside me that makes me see stars. I'm so close, my whole body tightening.

Zakhile: Come for me, mama. Let me feel you.

That's all it takes. I shatter around him, screaming his name, my body convulsing. He follows right after, groaning loudly as he spills inside me, his thrusts becoming erratic.

He collapses on top of me, both of us breathing hard. After a moment, he lifts his head, concern replacing the lust in his eyes.

Zakhile: Shit, I'm sorry, babe. I lost control. Are you okay?

I am breathless but I manage to smile.

Me: I'm fine.

His hand goes to my stomach.

Zakhile: And the baby?

Me: (Laughing softly) We're fine, Nyambose. But I need a hot bath to soak because my nana is on fire.

He chuckles and plants a gentle kiss on my lips, so different from the roughness of moments ago.

Zakhile: I'm sorry, mama. Let's go upstairs and I'll run you a hot bath. But I also need to go back to the office after.

Me: At this time?

Zakhile: Baby...

Me: It's fine.

But it's not fine. This Leonid or whatever his name is has turned Zakhile into something else. He's obsessed with eliminating the threat, and I understand why, but I miss him. I pray he gets it over and done with soon. I can't do this much longer.

Zakhile: This will be over soon, I promise.

Me: Is that why you went so hard on me? Because it's stressful?

Zakhile: Yeah. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so rough.

I nod. He picks me up effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around him as he carries me upstairs. He lays me gently on the bed, then goes to run a bath. I hear the water running, smell the bath salts he's adding.

He comes back, lifts me gently, and lowers me into the bathtub. I ease myself into the hot water, sighing as it soothes my aching body. He steps away and takes a quick shower. When he’s done, he wraps a towel around his waist and leaves the bathroom. A moment

later, he returns, fully dressed in dark jeans and a black shirt.

He leans down to and kiss my forehead.

Zakhile: I'll be back soon, love. I love you.

Me: (Exhaling deeply) I love you too. Be safe.

He nods and kisses me again, this time on the lips, lingering for a moment. Then he's gone, and I'm alone with the water and my thoughts.

Zakhile

It's been such a stressful two days. We're busy making arrangements for Leonid and Petrov's capture. It's going to be complicated, but we'll eventually figure it out. We have people in Russia who owe us favors, and they're working on the logistics now.

I can see all this is frustrating Ntombi. She needs me home, present, but I need to make sure she's protected

first. After this, I'll give her all my attention. All of me. But right now, I have to deal with this Russian boy and his father.

I felt so bad and scared after our lovemaking. I really went hard on her, too hard. I failed to control myself. The stress, the anger and the fear of losing her, it all came out in that moment. She said she's fine, but I need to be more careful. She's carrying our child.

I'm driving to the warehouse now for a meeting with my brothers. When I get there, they're eating on the couches. Nathi is on his computer as usual, his face illuminated by the screen.

Me: Sure, guys. How far with the plan?

Lizwi: It's coming along. They just need to find a guard to buy, then we're in. The guys in Moscow are still cooking something up.

Nathi: How's the madam?

I sit down and sign heavily.

Me: She's fine, but frustrated by these night meetings. That's why I need this plan to work so I can be with my woman, man.

Njabulo hands me a drink.

Njabulo: We're close, Khehla. By midnight, we should have movement.

Me: Good. Because I'm tired of this shit. I want him dead, and I want to go back to my life.

Lizwi: Dad spoke to his contact in Moscow. They're ready to move as soon as we give the word.

Me: (Nodding) Then give the word. I want them on a plane to South Africa within forty-eight hours.

Nathi: And when they get here?

I lean back, my jaw tightening.

Me: When they get here, I'm going to make them suffer. Slowly. I want Leonid to understand what it feels like to fear for your life. To think you're about to die.

The room falls silent. My brothers know this side of me, the cold, calculating side that emerges when someone threatens my family.

Njabulo: And the father?

Me: He raised the boy. He failed to stop him. He pays the price too. And we don’t want him coming after us in the future.

Lizwi nods. There's no argument. This is how our world works. You protect your own, and you punish those who threaten them.

I stand up.

Me: Keep me updated. Any movement, I want to know immediately. I'm going home to my woman.

Nathi: (Smirking) We'll handle it, brother. Go be with your family.

I nod and head out. As I drive home, my mind is already on what's coming. Leonid and his father will be

here soon, and when they arrive, they'll learn what it means to cross the Mthethwas.

But for now, I'm going home to Ntombi. To hold her. To remind myself what I'm fighting for.

And I'll do whatever it takes to keep them safe.

Chapter 45

Narrated

Moscow, Russia. 2:47 AM.

The Petrov estate sits on the outskirts of the city, surrounded by high walls and security cameras. But tonight, none of that matters. The Russians who owe the Mthethwas favors have been planning this extraction for three days, ever since Baba Mthethwa made the call.

Dimitri Petrov is in his study, nursing a glass of vodka, when the lights go out. He stands up, his heart racing. Before he can reach for his phone, the door bursts open. Four men in black tactical gear storm in, their faces covered, weapons raised.

He raises his hands up.

Dimitri: (In Russian) Кто ты? Что тебе нужно? (Who are you? What do you want?)

The leader steps forward and speaks in English.

Leader: Compliments of the Mthethwa family. You and your son have an appointment in South Africa.

Dimitri's face goes pale. He knew this was coming. He warned Leonid, but the boy wouldn't listen.

The leader nods to two of his men. They disappear upstairs. Within minutes, there's shouting, a brief struggle, and then Leonid is being dragged down the stairs in his pajamas, his face bruised, a gun pressed to his back.

Leonid: Get your hands off me! Do you know who I am?

Leader: We know exactly who you are. That's why we're here.

They bind both men's hands with zip ties and place black bags over their heads. Within twenty minutes, they're in a van, speeding toward a private airfield outside the city.

The private jet is small but equipped. Leonid and Dimitri are strapped into seats, the bags still over their heads. The plane takes off within the hour.

Dimitri sits in silence, his mind racing. He knows what's coming. He's heard the stories about what happens to people who cross the Mthethwas. He tried to stop his son, but it's too late now.

Leonid, on the other hand, is still full of bravado. He muffles through the bag.

Leonid: This is a mistake! You're making a huge mistake! When my people find out…

Guard: Shut up. Or I'll make you shut up.

Leonid falls silent. The flight is long, approximately thirteen hours. Neither man is given food or water. The guards don't speak to them. The only sound is the hum of the engines.

As the hours pass, Leonid's confidence begins to crack. His breathing becomes shallow. He's starting to

understand that his father was right. He's made a fatal mistake.

Narrated

Johannesburg, South Africa. The Warehouse.

Twenty-four hours later the plane lands at a private airstrip outside Johannesburg. It's mid-night, dark and quiet. A convoy of black SUVs is waiting on the tarmac.

Leonid and Dimitri are roughly pulled from the plane and shoved into separate vehicles. They drive for forty minutes, winding through back roads until they reach an isolated warehouse in an industrial area.

The guards drag Leonid and Dimitri to the back room and force them to sit on the chairs. They remove the bags from their heads. Both men blink in the harsh light, their eyes adjusting.

That's when they see them.

Standing in the shadows: Lizwi, Nathi, Njabulo, and in the center, Baba Mthethwa. The old man steps forward into the light, his face calm but his eyes cold.

Dimitri's breath catches.

Dimitri: (Voice hoarse) Mthethwa.

Baba Mthethwa: (Nodding) Dimitri. It's been a long time.

Dimitri: I tried to stop him. I swear to you, I tried.

Baba Mthethwa: (Sighing) I know you did. That's why I called you first. I gave you a chance to handle this quietly, as a courtesy to our past friendship. But your son... your son doesn't listen, does he?

Leonid: I'm not afraid of you, old man.

Njabulo steps forward and backhands Leonid across the face so hard his head snaps to the side. Blood trickles from his lip.

Njabulo: You will show respect when Baba is speaking.

Leonid spits blood onto the floor but stays quiet.

Baba Mthethwa: (To Dimitri) I warned you what would happen if he touched what's ours. And still, your boy sent a sniper to kill her.

Dimitri: I know. I'm sorry. Please... he's my son.

Baba Mthethwa: And she's my son's world. You understand what happens now?

Dimitri nods slowly, tears streaming down his face. He knows. He's always known.

The door to the warehouse opens.

Zakhile walks in.

Zakhile

I walk into the warehouse and the temperature seems to drop. I can feel the tension, the fear. Good. They should be afraid.

I'm wearing all black, black shirt, black pants, black gloves. My face is expressionless, but inside, I'm burning. This man tried to take everything from me. He tried to kill the mother of my child.

I walk slowly toward the center where they're seated. Leonid looks up at me and I see it, the fear in his eyes now. The realization that his father was right. That he's fucked.

Me: (Voice calm, almost conversational) Leonid Petrov. Do you know who I am?

He looks confused by my question. He doesn’t say anything.

Me: Leonid, DO YOU FUCKEN KNOW WHO I AM?

Leonid: Yes. Zakhile Mthethwa.

He is trying to sound brave.

Me: (Nodding) That's right. And do you know what you did?

Leonid: You think you are untouchable. ALL OF YOU. I was just sending a message.

I laugh, but there's no humor in it.

Me: A message. You tried to kill my woman. My pregnant woman. The mother of my unborn child. To send a message.

I circle around him slowly, like a predator. An evil smirk appears on my face

Me: Let me show you what I do to people like you. Let me send a message. Yeah?

I nod to Nathi. He steps forward with a pair of bolt cutters. Leonid's eyes widen.

Leonid: Wait…wait, please…

Me: Did she beg? When your sniper had her in his sights, did she get a chance to beg?

I grab his right hand and force it onto the armrest of the chair. Lizwi holds his arm down.

I take the bolt cutters from Nathi. Leonid is screaming now, trying to pull away, but Lizwi's grip is iron.

Me: Every finger you have is a chance you had to leave her alone. To walk away.

I position the bolt cutters around his pinky finger.

Me: But you didn't.

SNAP.

The sound is sickening. Leonid's scream is worse. His pinky finger falls to the concrete floor. Blood pours from the wound.

Dimitri: (Crying) Please! Please, he's my son!

Dad: And Ntombi is his son's entire world.

I move to the next finger. Leonid is sobbing now, begging.

Leonid: (Crying) Please! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

Me: You're sorry you got caught. You're not sorry for what you did.

SNAP.

Another finger. Another scream. I feel nothing. No remorse. No satisfaction. Just cold, calculated justice.

I do this three more times until all the fingers on his right hand are gone. Leonid has passed out from the pain. Njabulo throws water on him to wake him up.

I lean close to his face.

Me: Wake up. I want you awake for this.

Leonid is barely conscious, his face pale from blood loss.

Me: You see, Leonid, the problem with men like you is you think power is about who you can hurt. But real power? Real power is about who you can protect.

I walk over to a table in the corner and pick up a knife. It's long, sharp, gleaming under the light.

Me: I would have considered giving you the fifty percent if you understood business. But you don’t. You’re a fool, Leonid. Dimitri, I still don’t understand why you let this boy run things. You could’ve left my woman alone. But you didn't. You made this personal.

I walk back to him.

Me: And now, so will I.

What happens next is methodical. Calculated. I make sure he feels every cut, every slice. I want him to understand the fear Ntombi felt when she saw that man's head explode in front of her. When she thought she was next.

His screams echo through the warehouse. Dimitri is sobbing, begging, but I don't stop. I can't stop. Not until this is finished.

Finally, when Leonid is barely breathing, barely conscious, I stand back. He's slumped in the chair, blood everywhere.

Me: You raised a fool. And fools don't survive in our world.

I say that to Dimitri and I pull out my gun. I press it against Leonid's head.

Me: This is for Ntombi. For my child. For every moment of fear, you caused them.

I pull the trigger.

The sound echoes. Leonid's body slumps forward, lifeless.

Dimitri is wailing now, a broken sound that fills the warehouse.

Dad: I gave you a chance to control your son, old friend. You failed. And now you pay the price for his sins.

Dimitri: (Sobbing) I tried to stop him! I… I tried!

Me: Not hard enough.

I raise the gun again. Dimitri closes his eyes, accepting his fate.

Me: You should have killed him yourself when you had the chance. Before he brought this to my door.

I pull the trigger.

The warehouse is silent now except for the sound of our breathing. I holster my gun and turn to my father.

Dad: Are you okay son?

Me: I will be. Once I hold Ntombi in my arms. Knowing shes safe now.

He nods, understanding.

Dad: Clean this up. Make sure there's no trace.

Nathi and Lizwi nod. They know the drill. By morning, it will be like this never happened. The bodies will disappear. The warehouse will be scrubbed clean.

But the message will be clear to everyone in the underworld: You don't touch a Mthethwa's family and live.

I walk out of the warehouse. I pull off my gloves and throw them into a barrel fire burning nearby. I watch them catch flame and burn.

It's done. Leonid is dead.

I pull out my phone and dial Ntombi's number. She answers on the second ring.

Ntombi: (Sleepy) Zakhile?

She sounds sleepy. Her voice sexy as fuck.

Me: Hey, mama. I'm sorry for calling so late. I just... I needed to hear your voice.

Ntombi: Are you okay?

I look up at the stars.

Me: I am now. Go back to sleep. I'll be home soon.

Ntombi: (Yawning) Okay. I love you.

Me: I love you more. Both of you.

I get in my car and drive home.

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Chapter 46

Ntombi

It's morning and I feel hands holding me from behind. It's Zakhile. I'm actually surprised that he's here this morning. The past few days I would wake up with him not in bed and go to sleep without him. So I wasn't expecting him to be here. I try to get out of bed but he holds me tighter.

Zakhile: Where are you going?

His voice is so deep, rough from sleep. It sounds so sexy that my clit literally throbs.

Me: I'm waking up.

He brings me even closer. I was already close, but now I can feel his hard shaft poking against my backside.

He kisses my neck softly and I giggle.

He murmurs against my skin.

Zakhile: Let's sleep a bit more, baby. We'll wake up later.

I try to wiggle free but he's too strong.

Me: No. You sleep. I want to make breakfast. I'm hungry.

Zakhile: Here I am, baby. Why not have me for breakfast?

I laugh and turn to face him. His eyes are half-open, heavy with sleep. He is smirking seductively.

Me: You're not what I'm craving right now, my love.

He chuckles, his hand sliding down my body.

Zakhile: Is that so?

Me: Mhm... yes.

Zakhile: (Smirking) Let's see about that, shall we?

His hand slides between my legs and starts massaging my clit through my panties. I gasp, my body immediately responding.

I am now breathless.

Me: Zakhile...

He kisses my neck.

Zakhile: Still not craving me, mama?

I moan as his fingers work their magic. He pulls my panties to the side and slides two fingers inside me. I'm already wet.

Me: (Moaning) Oh God...

He pumps his fingers slowly, torturously, while his thumb circles my clit. I'm grinding against his hand, desperate for more.

He watches me.

Zakhile: So beautiful. Look at you, mama.

He pulls his fingers out and I whimper at the loss. He brings them to his mouth and sucks them clean, his eyes never leaving mine.

Zakhile: (Groaning) You taste so sweet.

He pulls off my panties completely and positions himself between my legs. He slides into me in one smooth thrust and we both moan.

Zakhile: (Groaning) Fuck, you feel good.

He starts moving, slow and deep, hitting that spot that makes me see stars. His hand finds my clit again, rubbing in time with his thrusts.

I cry out.

Me: Yes! Right there, baby!

Zakhile: (Grunting) You love it?

Me: (Moaning) Yes! Oh God yes!

He picks up the pace, pounding into me harder. I can feel my orgasm building.

Zakhile: Come for me, mama. Let me feel you.

That's all it takes. I shatter around him, my body convulsing, screaming his name. He follows right after, groaning as he spills inside me.

He collapses on top of me, both of us breathing hard. After a moment, he lifts his head and looks at me, still inside me.

Zakhile: (Smiling) Let's make it next week.

I am still catching my breath.

Me: Make what?

Zakhile: The lobola. Let me pay lobola next week. I don't want to wait, Ntombi. I want when the baby is born, you are a Mthethwa officially. My wife.

He's claiming me. He sounds possessive as always, but I love it. I love how much he wants me to be his.

Me: (Smiling) Let me talk to my mom so we can prepare early and let my uncles know. She'll be thrilled.

Zakhile: And I want you to meet my grandma in the village. She will love you.

Me: When? And where in the village?

Zakhile: Empangeni. That's our home. Where my dad grew up and where we also grew up.

Me: Oh, I thought you all lived here in the city your entire life.

He laughs, the sound rumbling in his chest.

Zakhile: Really? Well, no. Grandma raised us in the village. We only moved to the city when Dad's business grew.

Me: Oh. When do you want me to meet her then?

Zakhile: After the negotiations, we can go to Empangeni.

I nod. It's not far from Mtubatuba, so I don't mind.

He looks into my eyes.

Zakhile: I love you, Mambulazi wam.

Me: I love you too, Nyambose.

He pulls out slowly and I wince slightly. He kisses my forehead apologetically, then goes to the bathroom. He comes back with a warm, wet towel and gently wipes me clean.

We then go to the bathroom together to take a shower. He washes my back, and I close my eyes in contentment.

We head downstairs after getting dressed. The chef isn't here today, so we'll have to make our own breakfast. And I'm tired, but I'm also starving.

Me: Babe, let's go make breakfast. Something quick though.

Zakhile: (Shrugging) We can have cereal.

I pout.

Me: I'm craving some nice breakfast though.

He takes my hand.

Zakhile: You need to rest, mama. Let's go out for breakfast.

Me: (Grinning) You've just read my mind. I'm so lazy to even begin with breakfast.

He chuckles and kisses my forehead.

Zakhile: Let me grab my car keys.

He goes to get his keys and suddenly panic sneaks in, gripping my chest. This is the first time I'll be going outside in public after the shooting. My hands start trembling.

He comes back and notices immediately. He wraps his arm around my waist, leading me toward the car. He opens the door for me but I just stand there, frozen.

Zakhile: What's wrong, mama?

I force a smile.

Me: Nothing. Let's go.

Zakhile: Ntombi!

Me: I... it's the first time going out after... you know, the shooting. I'm scared, okay? I don't want to be killed by another sniper.

My voice cracks on the last word and tears start falling.

Zakhile: Come here.

He embraces me in a tight hug and kisses the top of my head, holding me as I shake.

Zakhile: You don't have to worry anymore. I've dealt with that. Leonid will no longer be a problem. Trust me.

I know what that means. He's dead. That's why Zakhile was here this morning. Why I woke up wrapped in his arms. It's over.

I nod against his chest and he wipes my falling tears with his thumb.

I take a deep breath.

Me: Okay. Let's go then.

He looks worried and concerned, studying my face. Then he helps me into the car and gets in on his side. He starts the engine and we drive out of the estate.

Zakhile

Looking at Ntombi, I can see she's still traumatized by the shooting. Which I understand completely. What she saw was horrific, and to know someone wanted her dead is something else entirely.

If it were possible, I would wake up that bastard Leonid from the dead just to kill him again for making my woman scared like this. Oh, and the sniper who shot at Ntombi? Our boys found him. He's with his maker, if not in hell, as we speak.

I watch Ntombi across the table, enjoying her breakfast. We're at Mugg & Bean. She's eating her food with such contentment that I can't help but smile.

She catches me staring.

Ntombi: Why are you smiling and staring at me, Mr. Mthethwa?

Me: I'm asking myself how I got this lucky. To have you in my life.

She blushes, that beautiful pink spreading across her cheeks.

Ntombi: (Smiling) Well, we have our ancestors to thank, huh?

I laugh.

Me: And the one who created them. God.

She smiles wider.

Ntombi: Look at you, Mr. Believer.

I just chuckle and reach across the table to take her hand.

Me: I believe in you. In us. In our family.

She squeezes my hand, her eyes soft with love.

Ntombi: Me too.

We finish our breakfast in comfortable silence, just enjoying each other's presence. For the first time in days, I feel at peace. The threat is eliminated. My woman is safe.

Now I can focus on making her my wife and building the life we both deserve.

Chapter 47

Ntombi

It's three days before my lobola negotiations. My mom is already fussing over every detail and preparations are in full swing. I'm driving to Mtubatuba with Bonolo today. First, we have to go collect our dresses from the boutique. Then we'll head straight to my mother's house.

I'm in the bedroom, packing my overnight bag when Zakhile walks in.

Zakhile: Are you done?

Me: Almost. Are you coming with us?

Zakhile: Yeah.

I shake my head.

Me: But baby, you can't see the dress till the day. I want you to be surprised.

He chuckles, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed.

Zakhile: I won't go inside with you. I'll just wait in the car.

Me: No, I will drive us. Please, let's not argue about this. And besides, after we collect the dresses, I'm driving straight to Mtubatuba.

Zakhile: (Frowning) You didn't say you'd be leaving immediately.

Me: I did. You were just not listening.

He walks over to me, his jaw tight.

Zakhile: Okay, okay. Vusi will drive you then.

Me: Zakhile!

Zakhile: That's final, Ntombi. Vusi is driving you and Bonolo. I want you safe.

I sigh heavily. There's no winning here. Not when he gets like this, all protective and stubborn.

Me: Fine.

He walks closer and wraps his arms around me, pulling me against his chest.

Zakhile: I'm going to miss you. Leave tomorrow instead.

Me: I'll miss you too, but I'm leaving today. I have to make sure everything is in order at home. It's only three days.

Zakhile: How will I survive three days without you, Mambulazi?

Me: (Smiling) You'll be fine. You survived before you met me.

Zakhile: That wasn't living. That was just existing.

My heart swells at his words. I reach up and cup his face.

Me: It's only three days, and then I'll be yours forever.

He kisses my forehead.

Zakhile: You're already mine. Have been since the moment I saw you.

He kisses me deeply, desperately, like he's trying to memorize the taste of my lips. When we pull apart, we're both breathing hard.

He rests his forehead against mine.

Zakhile: Call me when you get there. And when you go to bed. And when you wake up.

Me: (Laughing) That's a lot of calling.

Zakhile: I need to know you're safe. Always.

Me: I promise. I'll call you.

An hour later, Bonolo arrives. She's practically bouncing with excitement when I open the door.

Bonolo: Are you ready? Three days, friend!

Me: (Grinning) I know! I can't believe it's actually happening.

Zakhile comes downstairs, car keys in hand, just as Vusi pulls up in one of the SUVs.

Zakhile: Keep them safe. Don't let her out of your sight.

He says that to Vusi.

Vusi: (Nodding) Yes, boss.

Bonolo whispers to me.

Bonolo: He's so intense.

Me: (Whispering) You have no idea.

Zakhile loads our bags into the car. Then he pulls me aside one more time.

His hand on my stomach.

Zakhile: Take care of yourself and my baby, okay?

I cover his hand with mine.

Me: We'll be fine. It's just three days.

He kisses me on the lips.

Zakhile: Three very long days.

I laugh and kiss him back, then climb into the car. Bonolo is already in the back seat, grinning at us.

Bonolo: You guys are so cute it's disgusting.

He leans into the car window.

Zakhile: Take care of her, Bonolo.

Bonolo: (Saluting) Yes, sir!

As Vusi drives away, I look back through the rear window. Zakhile is standing in the driveway, hands in his pockets, watching us leave. He looks so lonely standing there that my heart aches.

Me: (Sighing) I miss him already.

Bonolo: (Laughing) Girl, you just left! But I get it. You two are sickening levels of in love.

We arrive at the boutique and Vusi parks outside, staying in the car as promised. Bonolo and I rush inside excitedly.

Attendant: (Smiling) Hi ladies, please follow me. Your dresses are ready. Come, come!

She leads us to the back where our dresses are hanging, protected by garment bags. When she unzips mine and I see it again, I gasp. It's even more beautiful than I remembered. A deep blue traditional dress, big and full at the bottom, made to stand out. The skirt has layers that give it weight, and the top is fitted with beadwork and patterned fabric. It sits off the shoulders and looks firm, well-made, and respectful.

Bonolo touches the fabric.

Bonolo: This is stunning.

The attendant brings Bonolo’s dress.

Attendant: And here's yours.

Bonolo's dress is a gorgeous royal blue with silver beading, perfect for the best friend of the makoti.

Bonolo: (Squealing) Oh my God, I love it!

We carefully pack the dresses and all the accessories, the beaded necklaces, headpieces, everything we'll need for the lobola day. The attendant also brings out the beautifully wrapped gifts we selected for Zakhile's family.

Attendant: Everything is here. I hope you have a beautiful day.

Me: Thank you so much. For everything.

We load everything into the car and Vusi helps us secure it all in the trunk.

The drive to Mtubatuba takes about two hours. Bonolo and I spend the time talking, planning, and laughing. She's telling me stories about Mr. D and their relationship when my phone rings. It's Zakhile.

I answer.

Me: Miss me already, Mr Mthethwa?

Zakhile: Always. Where are you?

Me: We're on the road. About an hour away from home.

Zakhile: How are you feeling? Not tired?

Me: I'm fine, baby. Vusi is driving, remember? I'm just sitting here.

Zakhile: Good. Call me when you get there.

Me: I will. I love you.

Zakhile: I love you more. Both of you.

I hang up and Bonolo is grinning at me.

Bonolo: He called to check on you already?

I blush.

Me: He worries. Too overprotective even.

Bonolo: That's because he loves you. You're lucky, friend.

Me: (Smiling) I know. I really am.

We finally arrive at my mother's house in Mtubatuba, and as soon as Vusi pulls into the yard, I see my mother rush out of the house.

Mom: (Ululating) Lilililililili! My baby is home!

I barely get out of the car before she's hugging me tight, her hands immediately going to my stomach.

Mom: Let me see you! Oh, you're getting rounder. The baby is growing nicely!

Me: (Laughing) Ma, I'm only a few weeks along.

Mom: A mother knows these things.

Bonolo gets out and my mom hugs her too.

Mom: Bonolo, my daughter! Thank you for taking care of my baby in the city.

Bonolo: (Smiling) It's my pleasure, Ma.

Vusi helps us unload all the bags and packages. My mom's eyes widen when she sees how much we have.

Mom: Haibo! All of this?

Me: Zakhile said not to hold back.

She nods in approval.

Mom: He's a good man. Come inside, let me make you some food. You must be hungry after that drive.

We follow her inside. The house smells amazing, she's been cooking. The kitchen table is laden with food.

Me: Ma, when did you make all this?

Mom: This morning. I wanted to make sure you babies eat well. Plus you are eating for two now!

She dishes up plates for all of us, rice, chicken curry, vegetables, salad. Bonolo and I dig in hungrily.

Bonolo: (Mouth full) Ma, this is delicious!

Mom: Eat, eat! There's plenty.

After we eat, my mom insists on seeing the dress. We go to my bedroom and I carefully remove the dress from the garment bag.

When my mom sees it, she gasps, her hand flying to her mouth. Tears fill her eyes.

Mom: Oh, Ntombi. You're going to be the most beautiful makoti.

Me: You really think so?

She holds my face.

Mom: I know so. You've been through so much my baby; you deserve all the good things coming your way. Both of you girls.

We both start crying, holding each other. Bonolo joins in, and soon we're all crying and laughing at the same time.

Bonolo: We're a mess!

Mom: These are happy tears. The best kind.

Its Mid-night, Bonolo is snoring next to me, and my mom has long gone to bed, I'm lying in my old bed, staring at the ceiling. My phone rings. Zakhile.

Me: Hi, baby.

Zakhile: Hi, mama. You good? Hows the baby?

Me: (Smiling) The baby is fine. We're both fine.

Zakhile: I miss you, Ntombi. The house feels empty without you.

Me: I miss you too. But it's just two more days.

Zakhile: Two more days until you're mine forever.

Me: I'm already yours Nyambose.

We talk for another hour, about nothing and everything. About the lobola, about the baby, about our future. When we finally hang up, I'm smiling.

Only two more days until I officially begin my journey to becoming Mrs. Mthethwa. And I can’t wait.

Chapter 48

Ntombi

It's 4 AM on the day of my lobola. I'm wide awake, staring at the ceiling of my bedroom. My heart is racing with excitement and nerves. Everything is in order. We bought everything that was needed. The food is being prepared in the kitchen. I can hear my aunt’s voices from here.

Aunt Khethiwe, her husband and my uncles from my dad's side are here. The two bitter aunties, my father's sisters are also here. And already, I'm fucked up.

I heard them last night, talking in hushed voices in the kitchen when they thought no one was listening. They said Zakhile is only marrying me because I'm pregnant. That I probably trapped him. I couldn't believe my ears. After everything, they're still bitter as ever.

My grandmother is also here. It's a full house. Some family members I haven't seen in years showed up, and

the yard is already bustling with activity even at this ungodly hour.

It's really happening. Today, I officially begin my journey to becoming a Mthethwa.

I hear the door open.

Bonolo: (Whispering) Friend, are you awake?

I sit up.

Me: Yes, you're up already.

She slips inside, already dressed in her robe, her hair wrapped. She sits on the bed.

Bonolo: I couldn't sleep. I'm too excited!

Me: (Smiling) Me neither. Is my mom up?

Bonolo: Up? She's been up since 3 AM, directing everyone like a general. Your grandma too.

I laugh softly. Of course they are.

Bonolo: How are you feeling?

Me: Nervous. Excited. Scared. Happy. All at once.

Bonolo: That's normal. But girl, today is your day. Don't let anyone, and I mean anyone steal your joy.

I know she's talking about the aunties. She must have heard them too.

Me: (Nodding) You're right.

Bonolo: Now come on. Let's get you ready. You have a man to claim.

Right then my phone rings. It's my ‘husband to be’. I smile and answer.

Me: Nyambose.

Zakhile: The one who owns my heart. You sound awake. Did you sleep nje, mama?

I blush, my cheeks turning red.

Me: I just woke up. I can't sleep. I'm excited and nervous all at once.

Zakhile: I'm nervous too. I can't wait to make you mine and see you. I miss you.

Me: Me too, babe. Have you guys left yet?

Zakhile: No, we're still getting ready. We'll be on the way by 5 AM.

Me: Okay then love.

"Khehla, you're needed here," I hear someone say in the background.

Zakhile: Mama, we'll talk. Let me hear what these old folks are saying.

Me: Okay, babe. Be safe on the road. I love you.

Zakhile: I love you more.

We end the call and I continue getting ready, my heart full.

Before we know it, it's 7 AM. My family and some of my mom's friends are here. The kitchen is full of my aunts cooking a storm for the guests. The smell of traditional food fills the entire house, everything prepared to perfection.

My makeup is done. I'm just waiting for them to arrive, then I'll change into my dress.

Bonolo: Ntombi, you need to eat something. Let me get you something light.

I haven't eaten. I can't stomach anything. I'm too nervous. She comes back with some fruit and tea.

Me: Thanks, friend.

My mom comes into the bedroom. She smiles when she sees me.

Mom: Oh, my child, look at you. You look so beautiful.

Me: Thanks, Mom. Wait until you see me in that dress.

Mom: Yes, girl. Listen keh, my baby. Today it's all about you. It's your big day. Don't let anything or anyone ruin your day for you.

Bonolo nods and I nod as well.

Mom: Your uncles will represent you well. I trust them. I don't trust those aunties of yours, though. Very jealous beings, I tell you.

I laugh.

Me: I don't even want to entertain them, shame.

Bonolo: You shouldn't vele. They don't deserve your attention, my friend.

Mom: Anyway, let me go check on the pots. Your cousins will be here soon.

She walks out of the room. My cousins are going to be here so we can all go to the negotiations when they have to choose the bride they're paying lobola for.

It's 10 AM and word comes that Zakhile's family has arrived. They're parked outside the gate. My heart starts racing.

Me: They're here?

Bonolo looks out the window.

Bonolo: Yes! I can see the cars!

We start getting me into the dress. The deep blue traditional dress is breathtaking. Bonolo carefully helps me with each layer, the beaded accessories, the headpiece.

When I'm finally ready, I look at myself in the mirror. The blue fabric contrasts beautifully with my skin, the beadwork catching the morning light. I look like royalty. A makoti. His makoti.

Bonolo stands behind me, hands on my shoulders.

Bonolo: You're stunning.

Me: I can't believe this is happening.

Bonolo: Believe it friend. In a few hours, you'll officially be on your way to being Mrs. Mthethwa.

I hear the Mthethwas outside the gate saying our clan names "Khumalo! Mntungwa**!** Mbulazi**!** Mzilikazi kaMashobane!" calling out respectfully. I look out the window and still no one is going to open for them. This is tradition. Make them wait and test their patience.

My mom rushes in.

Mom: They're here! Oh, Ntombi, you look so beautiful. A beautiful bride.

I smile, trying to control my tears from falling.

Bonolo: This is it, friend.

Me: I can't go out yet, right? I'm not supposed to see them until later?

Mom: Correct. You stay inside until we call you. The negotiations will happen in the rondavel. Let the men handle everything first.

I nod, my hands trembling. The rondavel has been prepared for both families to sit and negotiate properly. My uncles are already inside, waiting.

Zakhile

We've arrived. We're parked outside Ntombi's family home. I can see the yard through the gate, beautifully decorated, people moving about. But I can't go in. Not yet. Tradition dictates that I don't enter the yard until they officially welcome me. My uncles and father will go in to negotiate on my behalf.

My uncles are at the gate now, calling out the Khumalo clan names, greeting respectfully. And now we wait for them to be let inside.

It's been thirty minutes and still nothing. I'm getting frustrated now. I'm so nervous. I just want to see Ntombi, uMakhumalo wam.

I smile thinking about her.

My leg is bouncing uncontrollably. I keep checking my phone, even though I know Ntombi can't call. She's probably getting ready. I picture her in that dress she wouldn't let me see, and my heart races.

Dad: Why are you so restless? Relax.

I run my hand over the seat, laughing.

Me: I don't know, Dad. I just... what if something goes wrong?

Njabulo: What could go wrong? You're here to pay lobola, not coming for war.

Lizwi: (Chuckling) He's nervous. Look at him sweating.

Nathi: The mighty Zakhile Mthethwa, feared by many, brought to his knees by a woman.

Me: Shut up, all of you.

But I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips. They're right. I've faced down Russian mobsters, dealt with cartels, survived shootouts. But the thought of my

family having negotiations with her family, asking for her hand officially, has me more nervous than anything else in my life.

Dad: You love her, right?

Me: More than life itself.

Dad: (Nodding) Then there's nothing to be nervous about. What you're doing today is proof. They'll see how much you love her, how you'll protect her, provide for her. That's all they want to know.

Me: What if they think I'm not good enough for her?

My father laughs, a deep rumbling sound.

Dad: Son, you're a Mthethwa. We've been good enough for centuries. But more than that, you've already proven yourself. You protected her when she was in danger. You're giving her family everything they need for this ceremony. She's carrying your child, and you're here to rectify that and show respect. They know you're serious.

I nod, trying to let his words calm me. But my leg keeps bouncing.

Njabulo: (Leaning forward) Khehla, breathe. We've got this. The uncles know what to do. All you have to do is wait here and look respectful.

Lizwi: And try not to smile too much when you see her. You look like a lovesick fool.

Nathi: He is a lovesick fool.

Me: I will kick all of you out of this car.

They laugh, and despite my nerves, I laugh too. These are my brothers. My family. And today, we're making Ntombi officially part of that family.

My uncles are still at the gate. No one has opened or said anything. One of my uncles comes to the car.

Me: What's happening now? It's been more than thirty minutes.

Uncle Mthobisi: They will come. It's tradition. They might even make us wait an hour. Are you ready?

I take a deep breath.

Me: Yes, Malume. I'm ready.

Uncle Mthobisi: Good. Today we bring home a wife for you. This is a good thing you're doing, son.

Me: Thank you, uncle.

Finally, I see one of Ntombi’s uncles come near the gate. My dad, lizwi and uncle Mthobisi also return to the gate. The cars are parked a bit far from the gate so I can't hear clearly what's being said. My dad takes out some few notes and puts them on the ground through the bars. Then Ntombi's uncle opens the door.

Here it goes. I pray they give them whatever money they ask for. I don't care as long as they bring me my wife.

I'm sitting in the back seat of the car, my leg still bouncing uncontrollably. The negotiations are happening in the rondavel. I can see it from here, the traditional round hut next to the main house. That's where my family is right now, speaking for me, asking for Ntombi's hand.

And I'm stuck out here, waiting.

Njabulo stayed behind with me. He's sitting in the front seat, turned around to face me.

Njabulo: Khehla, you need to relax. You're going to wear a hole in the floor with all that bouncing.

Me: How long have they been in there?

He checks his watch.

Njabulo: Twenty minutes.

Me: (Groaning) It feels like hours.

Njabulo: They're probably just going through the formalities. You know how these things go, introductions, establishing lineage, all that.

I nod but my heart is still racing. What if something goes wrong? What if her uncles reject me? What if…

My phone buzzes. It's a text from my father: "All is well. They're asking the right questions. Stay calm."

I exhale slowly. Stay calm. Right.

Njabulo: (Grinning) You know what's funny? I've seen you face down armed men without flinching. But sitting outside your woman's house has you sweating bullets.

Me: I'm not sweating.

Njabulo: Your shirt says otherwise.

I look down and realize he's right. I'm actually sweating. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand.

Me: This is different. Those men? I could control that situation. This? I'm completely powerless. Everything depends on what's being said in that rondavel right now.

Njabulo: But you've done everything right, Khehla. You've protected her, you're providing for her, you're here following tradition. What more can they ask for?

I appreciate his words, but the nerves don't go away. I check my phone again. Nothing. I look toward the rondavel, wishing I could hear what's being said inside.

Somewhere in that house, Ntombi is waiting too. I wonder if she's as nervous as I am. I wonder if she's thinking about me the way I can't stop thinking about her.

Me: Do you think she's okay?

Njabulo: (Smiling) She's probably pacing a hole in her bedroom floor, just like you're bouncing a hole in this car.

That makes me smile despite my nerves. We're probably both driving everyone around us crazy with our anxiety.

Another thirty minutes pass. I'm about to lose my mind when I see my father, Lizwi and uncles emerge from the rondavel and approach the gate, coming toward me.

Dad laughs when he gets near the car.

Dad: Zakhile, you're even sweating. Hayi, mahn.

Me: Dad, what's happening?

Uncle Mthobisi: They're asking for R85,000. Lobola and damages for getting her pregnant.

Uncle Khefu: We can negotiate so it goes down. They're being ridiculous if you ask me. They asked for R150,000, we negotiated till it reached R85,000. If they don't go lower, we're leaving them with their child. They can marry her themselves.

I get angry. My dad is just smiling. How can he allow this? I told him to give them any amount they want.

Me: That's fine. Give them R150,000.

Lizwi: I told you he wont mind.

Uncle Khefu: Zakhile…

Me: That's final, Uncle.

Dad: (Smiling) My son has spoken. I wanted your uncles to hear from you. I knew you'd want to pay any amount. But because we've negotiated to R85,000, we'll give them that. It will show respect. It's tradition. We don't just give in immediately, that would be disrespectful to both families.

I just nod. Honestly, any amount, I don't care. I'd pay millions if they asked.

They walk back inside and we wait again. My leg resumes its bouncing. Njabulo just shakes his head, amused.

Njabulo: You've got it bad, Khehla.

Me: Worse than bad.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Chapter 49

Ntombi

My mom rushes in and tells me, Bonolo, and two of my cousins to cover ourselves with blankets. We're now going to the rondavel so they can pick their bride. It's just a game, a guessing game. If they pick the wrong girl, they'll be fined.

We cover ourselves completely with the blankets and walk inside the rondavel, still covered. We sit on the traditional mats on the floor.

I feel my blanket being removed and my mom starts ululating, with other women joining in immediately.

That means they chose right. The one who chose should play lotto. Such a good guess.

Uncle Thando: Siyabonga. You've chosen well.

They shake hands. And they give my mom a beautiful scarf for my shoulders. I have to cover my shoulders

now. She drapes it over me carefully, and we leave the rondavel.

The women start ululating louder, sweeping the floor in celebration with their brooms. And I know it's done. The negotiations went well.

I'm officially the Mthethwa fiancée by tradition. On the road to being Mrs. Mthethwa. We start singing traditional songs. It's so beautiful to watch and be part of. Right now, I need to hug my man and thank him for choosing me.

I go inside the house to get my phone and I already have missed calls from him. I call him back and he answers immediately.

Zakhile: Mama.

Me: It's done, babe. I'm yours officially now.

I hear him exhale, relief washing through him.

Zakhile: I'm happy mama. I almost shit my pants. But I knew it went well when I started hearing the ululations. You're mine now, Ntombi. I will forever cherish that. I love you so much.

Me: I love you, sthandwa sami. Thank you for choosing me to be your wife.

Zakhile: Manje, you don't want to come see your husband?

I giggle.

Me: I'm coming, baby. Let me prepare food for you, then I'll be there.

I end the call and go to the kitchen to dish up for him. I prepare a generous plate, meat, rice, vegetables, salads, everything he likes. I cover the food and take it to him outside.

He's standing outside the car, leaning against it, on his phone, probably checking in with his people. When he

sees me approaching with the plate, his whole face lights up.

Our eyes meet and he smiles. That smile nearly brings me to my knees. I return the smile, my heart racing.

Zakhile

She walks toward the car and I look at her. I must admit, I'm one lucky son of a gun. She looks beautiful. The blue on her looks amazing, she's glowing, looking like a real wife. My wife.

Me: Mambulazi.

Ntombi: Hi.

I take the food from her and place it on the seat in the car.

Me: Come here.

She comes closer and I hug her so tight, breathing in her scent. We then share a very passionate kiss, forgetting we're outside her house and there are uncles around.

We break out of the kiss, both breathless.

Me: You look beautiful.

Ntombi: Thank you, hubby.

Oh, she doesn't know what hearing her say that does to me. Something stirs inside me.

Me: (Smiling) I love that. Call me that from now on.

She laughs. And Njabulo comes out of the car.

Njabulo: Makoti. How are you?

Ntombi: Bhuti, I'm good.

He nods approvingly.

Njabulo: Manje, where's my food?

Ntombi laughs.

Ntombi: Please go inside. They'll dish for you. There's plenty of food.

Njabulo: Oh, mhm, I see.

I just smile and he walks to the gate and enters the yard.

I open the back door for her to get in and I follow, closing the door behind us. We're in our own little bubble now.

I take a bite of the food and she joins me, eating hungrily.

Me: This is delicious. You didn't eat today?

Ntombi: I only ate fruits and tea. I was too nervous to stomach anything.

I nod. At least she's eating now.

Me: You're coming with me today?

Her eyes widen.

Ntombi: Not today, baby. Tomorrow morning.

Me: I'm sleeping another night without you? Ngeke, Ntombi, this is torture.

She laughs and I'm serious.

Ntombi: Come on, baby. You won't die.

Me: You don't know that.

She shoots me a stare and I laugh. I see a smile form on her face.

Ntombi: It's always refreshing when you laugh. Something you hardly do.

Me: I always laugh with you.

Ntombi: Mhm, but not in public.

I laugh again.

Me: I've never noticed. It's unintentional, honestly.

Ntombi: Right.

Then we hear a knock on the window and we both look up. A woman, and she looks unhappy.

Ntombi: (Sighing) That's my aunt Joyce. What does she want?

I roll down the window.

Joyce: Wena, Ntombi, they are looking for you inside. You are busy here galavanting.

Ntombi: I'm coming, Aunt Joyce.

Joyce: NOW. We won't wait for you the whole day.

Me: She said she's coming. Are you deaf?

Her eyes widen. I guess she wasn't expecting me to say that.

Joyce: Don't…

Me: Woman, if you don't step away from my car...

Ntombi holds my hand. She can see I'm angry now. Joyce clicks her tongue and leaves with an evil look.

Ntombi: Babe, relax. Don't mind her, please. She's bitter like that.

Me: I don't like it when people mistreat you, Ntombi. There's no way I can just sit back and watch when someone talks to you like that.

She smiles.

Ntombi: I know. Please don't kill the poor woman. I'm sure you're thinking of how to put a bullet through her skull.

Me: Mhm, I was vele.

She laughs and I just smile.

Ntombi: Let me go back and hear what's happening.

I get out of the car and open the door for her, then pull her by her waist. We share a kiss, a quick one. I look deep into her eyes.

Me: I love you, mama. So much it even scares me.

Ntombi: I love you too, Nyambose. Let me get going.

Me: Okay.

I watch her walk to the gate and into the yard, my heart full.

It's late now and we have to return home. My uncles are drunk already. I've asked Njabulo to drive their car. Everything went well. The uncles ended up inviting me inside the yard. It was hard for me to sit with them while looking at my woman busy going up and down, serving everyone. And I couldn't even hold her close. I kept looking at her and she would find me staring and just smile, shaking her head.

We're leaving now and I've said goodbye to the family. I'm now on the side with Ntombi for our final goodbye.

Ntombi: Be safe on the road, okay?

Me: I will be. You should be coming with us.

She tries to speak. I steal a kiss quickly.

Me: I know, I know. You don't have to say it.

Ntombi: Okay then, you better get going so you can rest, hey.

Me: I love you. Both of you.

I touch her stomach gently.

Ntombi: We love you too.

Ntombi

My phone rings, waking me up from sleep. Everyone is sleeping. The celebration is over. Zakhile and his family arrived safe. He called to let me know and that they did a small ritual to let the ancestors know all went well and they should expect the wife, you know, all that cultural stuff.

It rings again. I answer without looking at the screen.

Me: What?

Zakhile: Is that how you answer calls?

Shit, it's Zakhile.

Me: Baby, I'm sorry. I didn't check the caller ID. I was sleeping.

He chuckles.

Zakhile: I know, mama. I'm outside. Can you please come?

I sit up.

Me: Zakhile! Outside? You're supposed to be in Empangeni. Did you even see the time?

It's past midnight.

Zakhile: I drove back. I couldn't sleep. I miss you.

I melt at that, but he's crazy.

Me: Okay, I'm coming.

I end the call and wake Bonolo up.

Bonolo: (Mumbling) What?

She then jumps up.

Bonolo: Oh my God, is it the baby?

Me: Zakhile is outside. I'm going to him.

Bonolo: (Yawning) What the hell? Did he see the time? And isn't he supposed to be in Empangeni?

Me: I know. You know he's weird like that.

She laughs.

Bonolo: That man is obsessed, I'm telling you.

I know he is. But I love him like that. She walks me out just to make sure it's really Zakhile and not some witches trying to snatch my soul. That's what she said, actually. She sees Zakhile outside the car, hugs me, and runs back inside.

I get outside the gate and he embraces me in a hug.

Me: You're insane, you know that?

Zakhile: I know, but you love it.

I laugh, hitting his chest playfully.

Zakhile: Let's go. Sleep with me. Vusi booked a place for us in town. It's not far.

Me: Uhm…

I look back at the house, then at him. His eyes are pleading.

Me: Okay. Let me just text Bonolo so she doesn't worry.

I quickly send Bonolo a message: "Going with Zakhile. Back in the morning"

She responds immediately: "Girl, be safe! And use protection... oh wait, too late for that 😂"

I roll my eyes and get into the car.

The drive to the lodge is quiet but comfortable. His hand is on my thigh the whole time, his thumb rubbing circles.

We arrive at a beautiful boutique lodge on the outskirts of town. It's private, secluded, perfect. Vusi must have chosen well.

Zakhile comes around to open my door and takes my hand, leading me inside. The room is stunning, king-sized bed, ambient lighting, rose petals scattered everywhere, champagne on ice.

Me: Baby, this is beautiful.

He pulls me close.

Zakhile: Not as beautiful as you.

He kisses me, soft at first, then deeper. His hands roam my back, finding the fastenings of my dress.

Zakhile: I've been thinking about this all day. Watching you in that dress, not being able to touch you...

Me: Touch me now.

He doesn't need to be told twice. He carefully removes my Pajamas, piece by piece, reverent and slow. When

I'm finally standing in just my underwear, he steps back to look at me.

Zakhile: You're perfect. Carrying my baby... you're so fucking perfect.

He picks me up and I wrap my legs around his waist. He carries me to the bed and lays me down gently. He strips off his own clothes quickly and I admire his body, all muscle.

He climbs over me, settling between my legs. Kissing my neck. He takes one nipple into his mouth while his hand kneads the other breast. I moan, my hands threading through his hair.

Me: Zakhile...

He looks up at me.

Zakhile: I love you, Ntombi. Everything about you.

He continues kissing down my body, across my stomach where our baby grows. He places tender kisses there.

Then he moves lower, removing my panties. He spreads my legs and settles between them. He dips his head and his tongue finds me. I gasp at the sensation, my back arching off the bed. He works me with his mouth, his tongue doing things that make me see stars.

Me: (Moaning) Oh God, Zakhile!

He slides two fingers inside me while his tongue continues its assault on my clit. The combination is too much. I'm climbing higher and higher.

Me: (Gasping) I'm going to... I'm going to...

Zakhile: Let go, mama. Come for me.

I shatter, crying out his name, my body convulsing. He doesn't stop, drawing out my orgasm until I'm shaking.

When I finally come down, he kisses his way back up my body. I can taste myself on his lips when he kisses me.

He enters me slowly, carefully, watching my face. We both moan at the sensation.

Zakhile: Fuck, you feel amazing!

He pounds into me harder, faster. The bed is creaking beneath us but we don't care. His hand finds my clit, rubbing in time with his thrusts.

Zakhile: Come with me, mama. I want to feel you.

Me: (Gasping) I'm close! So close!

Zakhile: Me too. Fuck, Ntombi!

A few more thrusts and we both explode together, crying out each other's names. He collapses on top of me, both of us breathing hard.

After a moment, he rolls to the side, pulling me with him so I'm tucked against his chest. His hand rests protectively on my stomach.

He kisses my head.

Zakhile: That was...

Me: (Smiling) Amazing.

Zakhile: Beyond amazing. You're everything, Ntombi. Everything I've ever wanted.

Me: I love you so much.

Zakhile: I love you more.

We lie there in comfortable silence, just holding each other. Then he shifts slightly.

Zakhile: Are you okay? The baby?

Me: (Laughing softly) We're fine, Zakhile. The baby is fine.

Zakhile: Good. I just... I worry.

Me: I know. But we're both okay. More than okay.

He kisses me again, soft and tender this time. Then he pulls the covers over us.

I snuggle closer to him, feeling safe, loved, complete.

Me: Thank you. For everything.

Zakhile: Thank you for saying yes. For being mine. For giving me a family.

As I drift off to sleep in his arms, I know that this is exactly where I'm meant to be. With him.

We wake up early and take a shower together. Toiletries are already bought and laid out. Zakhile literally has people everywhere, always planning ahead. We dry ourselves and then my phone rings. It's Bonolo.

Bonolo: Girl, you better get here now. I lied to your mom, can you imagine?

I laugh. She's so dramatic.

Me: Why lie? It's not like I'm with a boyfriend mos.

Bonolo: Hey, sisi, come tell your mom that. I said you went jogging.

I laugh harder.

Me: Really, Bonolo? Me and jogging?

Bonolo: Get some gym clothes and sprinkle water on your face when you get here.

I laugh and end the call.

Me: Bonolo is dramatic. Can you believe she told my mom I went jogging?

He raises an eyebrow.

Zakhile: In the village?

I laugh. My mom definitely didn't buy that.

Me: Let's finish up. I have to go pack so we can go see your grandma.

He smiles, his whole face lighting up.

Zakhile: She can't wait to meet you.

We drive back to my home and I ask him to park outside the gate. I'm still not sure how my mom will react. I get inside the yard and into the house. My mom is busy with breakfast.

Me: Morning, Ma.

She turns and looks at me, then shakes her head with a smile.

Mom: I thought you went jogging, sisi. BONOLO!

She calls out loudly. Bonolo comes out the bedroom, still in her pajamas, and she gives me a nasty look. I guess because I didn't do as she said.

Bonolo: Ma?

Mom: I thought you said she went jogging? Young lady, did you lie to me?

Me: Mom, I...

Mom: Bonolo!

Bonolo: Ma, it's not lying. It's just twisting, you know. Ntombi, tell Mom what you said on the call earlier.

Oh, she's throwing me under the bus. Mom laughs, shaking her head.

Mom: Yab' nina, you think I'm your mate ngiyabona. Wena, Ntombi, go and call that man of yours for breakfast.

Me: Ma?

I'm confused.

Mom: You heard me. I know you were with him. I was surprised he went this long without you. That boy is attached.

I look down, embarrassed as hell.

Me: Uhm, okay. Let me get him.

Mom: No need to be embarrassed, baby. That's your husband.

I walk out without saying anything. He sees me approaching and steps out of the car.

Zakhile: Hey, everything okay?

Me: (Nodding) Mom is inviting you in for breakfast.

Zakhile: Are you sure?

Me: Yeah.

He suddenly looks nervous. I want to laugh right now.

He clears his throat.

Zakhile: Okay, let me park inside the yard then.

He gets inside the car and I just walk to the yard. I wait for him to park, then we walk inside the house together. Mom is busy setting the table.

Zakhile: Sawubona, Ma.

Mom: Son, how are you?

Zakhile: I am well. How are you, Ma?

Mom: I am alive. Come sit here. I've made breakfast. I don't know why you were hiding outside in that car.

She leads him to the table. Breakfast is nice. It starts off awkward with Mom giving us weird stares. Bonolo talks non-stop, filling the silence. Zakhile is just focusing on his food, all serious. He's literally said three words ever since we sat down.

After breakfast, I go to my room to pack my stuff. I look around my childhood bedroom one more time, at the posters still on the walls, the bed I grew up in, the memories

Bonolo is leaning against the doorframe.

Bonolo: You okay, friend?

Me: (Smiling) Yeah. Just... taking it all in, you know?

Bonolo: You're going to be amazing. This will always be your home. And this bedroom, will always be yours.

I smile nodding.

Me: I know. When are you going back to Durban?

Bonolo: Vusi is driving me back later today.

I hug her.

Me:

Thank you for everything. For being here through all of this.

She hugs me back tight.

Bonolo: Always, friend. Always.

Zakhile helps me carry my bags to the car. When everything is packed, I go back inside to say my final goodbyes.

Mom is in the kitchen, wiping down the counters. When she sees me, she stops.

Me: Ma, we're leaving now.

She walks over and cups my face.

Mom: My baby. You've grown so much. Look at you. I thank God for keeping alive to witness every good thing happening in your life.

Me: Ma, don't make me cry.

She smiles through her own tears.

Mom: These are happy tears, my child. I'm so proud of you. Your father would be so proud.

Me: I wish he was here.

Mom: He is here. In here.

She touches my chest, over my heart.

Mom: And he's smiling down on you. You chose well, Ntombi. Zakhile is a good man.

Me: (Nodding) He is, Ma.

Mom: Go. Build your life. Build your family. But know that this will always be your home. You can always come back.

I hug her tight.

Me: I love you, Ma.

Mom: I love you too, baby. So much.

Bonolo comes and hugs me next.

Bonolo: Call me when you get there, okay?

Me: I will. And you call me when you get to Durban.

Bonolo: Yes, ma'am.

We walk outside together. Zakhile is waiting by the car. Mom hugs him.

Mom: Zakhile, they better treat my daughter well.

Zakhile: I will make sure of that, Ma. I promise.

Mom: And take care of my grandchild.

Zakhile: (Smiling) With my life.

We get into the car and I wave as we drive away, watching my mom and Bonolo get smaller in the rearview mirror.

The drive to Empangeni is beautiful. Zakhile holds my hand the entire way, occasionally bringing it to his lips to kiss.

Zakhile: You okay, mama?

Me: (Smiling) Yeah. Just thinking about everything that's happened.

Zakhile: Any regrets?

I look at him.

Me: Not a single one.

When we arrive at the family homestead, I'm taken aback by how beautiful it is. Traditional rondavels are

scattered around a main house, everything well-maintained and proud. There are people everywhere family members I haven't met yet, all here to welcome us.

Gogo is waiting outside, a blanket draped over her shoulders. When she sees Zakhile, her face breaks into the biggest smile.

She opens her arms for Zakhile.

Gogo: Zakhile! My boy! Oh, I wondered where you disappeared to last night. You were bringing me my daughter-in-law.

Zakhile: Sawubona, Gogo. Yebo. Here she is. The woman we went to ask for her hand in marriage. The one who owns my heart.

I look down, blushing.

Then she turns to me, her eyes taking me in from head to toe. I hold my breath.

She smiles warmly.

Gogo: Ntombi. Come here, my child.

I walk into her embrace and she hugs me tight.

Gogo: Welcome to the family. I've been praying for this day. Zakhile has told me so much about you.

Me: Thank you, Gogo. It's an honor to meet you.

Gogo: You're even more beautiful than he said. And you're carrying my great-grandchild. This is a blessing.

I smile and we enter the main house.

The whole family is here. Njabulo, Lizwi, Nathi, Vuyiswa, Okuhle, Mrs. Mthethwa, Baba Mthethwa, everyone. It's all so warm and beautiful. Although the Mthethwas are feared in their world, with family they're so warm and loving. A side you never see. Everyone is happy to meet me, hugging me, welcoming me.

We spend the day together, listening to Gogo's stories about Zakhile's childhood, about the Mthethwa history,

about the ancestors. She's kind, wise, and funny. I can see where Zakhile gets his strength from.

That evening, we sleep in Zakhile's rondavel, the one built for him when he became a man. It's outside the main house, as all the male children have their own houses on the property. It's simple but comfortable, and falling asleep in his arms in his childhood home feels significant, like I'm truly becoming part of his world.

Chapter 50: Forever Begins

On Month Later

Ntombi

It's been a month since the lobola, and my baby bump is visible now, a small, cute swell that I can't stop touching. We've decided to have a signing ceremony instead of a big white wedding. We're going to have two traditional celebrations, so there's no need for a big white wedding.

We managed to plan everything in just a month. Zakhile couldn't wait anymore, and honestly, neither could I. Today is the signing ceremony, and next week is umembeso, the gifting of the bride's family. Then the traditional wedding where I'll be introduced to the Mthethwa ancestors.

We're doing the signing ceremony in the backyard of the estate. It's very beautiful. Only our close families and friends are here.

I'm standing in front of the mirror in our bedroom, looking at myself. I'm three months pregnant, and today we're getting legally married.

Bonolo comes up behind me.

Bonolo: You look beautiful, friend.

I'm wearing a simple white dress, elegant, fitted on top, flowing at the bottom to accommodate my small bump. Nothing too elaborate. Today is about family, about making it official in the eyes of the Lord and law ofcourse, before we do the traditional ceremonies.

Me: I can't believe this is happening.

She squeezes my shoulders.

Bonolo: Believe it. You're about to become Mrs. Mthethwa officially.

My mom walks in, smiling.

Mom: Oh, my baby. You look stunning.

She's wearing a beautiful peach dress, looking elegant and proud.

Me: Thanks Mom. You look beautiful too.

She smiles and helps me with my final touches, fixing my hair, adjusting my veil.

Mom: You're ready, my baby.

Zakhile

I'm standing in the garden, watching as they set up the last few chairs. We opted for a signing ceremony, intimate, just family and close friends. This is perfect.

The garden looks beautiful. White flowers everywhere, an arch decorated with white roses and greenery, chairs set up in neat rows on either side of the aisle. It's simple but elegant, exactly what Ntombi wanted.

Njabulo claps my shoulder.

Njabulo: Ready, Khehla?

Me: More than ready.

Lizwi: (Grinning) Who would have thought? Zakhile Mthethwa, getting married.

Nathi: And having a baby. A family man now.

I smile. They're right. A year ago, I never would have imagined this. But now, I can't imagine anything else.

Dad walks over and places his hand on my shoulder.

Dad: Son, it's time.

I nod and take my place under the arch. The magistrate is already here, waiting, dressed formally. Family starts taking their seats. Gogo in the front row, dabbing her eyes already; my mother beside her, also crying; Vuyiswa and Okuhle grinning at me from the second row; Ntombi's mom, her grandmother, her uncles. Bonolo is standing to the side, holding her phone to record everything.

Then the music starts, a soft instrumental version of "A Thousand Years" and I look up.

Ntombi appears at the back door, and my breath catches. She's stunning. The white dress hugs her body perfectly, showing off her growing belly. Her mother is walking her down the aisle since her father isn't here.

Our eyes lock and she smiles, that smile that brought me to my knees the first time I saw it. Tears are already streaming down her face, and I feel my own eyes getting wet.

She walks slowly, gracefully, her hand on her mother's arm. When she reaches me, her mother places Ntombi's hand in mine.

Mrs Khumalo: (Whispering) Take care of my baby.

Me: With my life, Ma. I promise.

She nods, kissing Ntombi's cheek, then takes her seat. Ntombi and I face each other, hands clasped. I can't stop looking at her.

Magistrate: (Smiling) We are gathered here today to witness the union of Zakhile Mthethwa and Ntombi Khumalo. This is a sacred moment, the joining of two souls, two families, two hearts.

He pauses, looking at both of us.

Magistrate: Before we proceed with the legal formalities, the couple has prepared their own vows. Zakhile, you may begin.

I take a deep breath and look into Ntombi's eyes. I didn't write anything down. These words are coming straight from my heart.

Me: Ntombi. Mambulazi. I've been dreaming of you. Long before I knew your name, your face, your voice, I knew you. I knew you in my soul. And when I finally saw you that day at the auditions, it was like everything in my life suddenly made sense.

She's crying now, and I wipe her tears with my thumb.

Me: You've made me a better man. You've given me purpose beyond the darkness I've lived in. You've shown me what it means to love someone more than yourself. And now, you're giving me the greatest gift, a family. A child. A future I never thought I deserved.

My voice breaks and I have to pause.

Me: I promise you, Ntombi, that I will protect you and our child with everything I have. I will love you every single day, in every way I know how. I will make you laugh when you're sad, hold you when you're scared, and stand by you through everything life throws at us. You are my wife, my partner, my everything. And I will spend the rest of my life making sure you never regret choosing me.

There's not a dry eye in the garden. Even my brothers are wiping their faces. Ntombi is sobbing, and I'm barely holding it together.

Magistrate: Ntombi?

She takes a shaky breath, looking up at me through her tears.

Ntombi: Zakhile. Mthethwa! Nyambose! I've been dreaming of you too. All my life, I felt like something was missing. And then I saw you, and everything clicked into place. You were the missing piece.

She squeezes my hands.

Ntombi: You scare me sometimes, not because of who you are, but because of how much I love you. It's overwhelming, this love. It consumes me. But I've never felt safer, more cherished, more seen than I do with you.

Her voice is shaking but strong.

Ntombi: You've protected me, fought for me, chosen me every single day. And I choose you too. I choose your strength and your gentleness. I choose your darkness and your light. I choose all of you, forever.

She touches my face.

Ntombi: I promise to love you through everything. Through the good days and the hard days. Through the chaos and the peace. I promise to be your safe place, your home, your partner. I promise to raise our children with you, to build a life with you, to grow old with you. You are my dream come true, Zakhile. And I will love you until my last breath.

I can't hold back anymore. Tears are streaming down my face. I pull her close and rest my forehead against hers.

Me: (Whispering) I love you so much.

Ntombi: I love you more.

Magistrate: (Clearing his throat) Those were beautiful vows. Now, for the legal portion. Do you, Zakhile Mthethwa, take Ntombi Khumalo to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in

sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?

Me: I do.

Magistrate: And do you, Ntombi Khumalo, take Zakhile Mthethwa to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?

Ntombi: (Smiling) I do.

Magistrate: The rings, please.

Njabulo steps forward with the rings. I take Ntombi's ring, a beautiful platinum band with diamonds, and slide it onto her finger.

Me: With this ring, I marry you. You are mine, Mambulazi. Forever.

She takes my ring, a simple platinum band, and slides it onto my finger, her hands shaking.

Ntombi: With this ring, I marry you. Nyambose. Forever and ever.

Magistrate: (Smiling) By the power vested in me by the Republic of South Africa, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Zakhile, you may kiss your bride.

I don't wait. I pull her into my arms and kiss her deeply, pouring everything I feel into that kiss. The garden erupts, cheers, ululations, clapping, whistling. When we pull apart, we're both crying and laughing at the same time.

We're married. Officially, legally, completely.

Magistrate: Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Zakhile Mthethwa!

Everyone stands, cheering louder. We walk back down the aisle together, hand in hand, as husband and wife.

Ntombi

The celebration is beautiful. There's food, music, dancing. Everyone is so happy for us. Gogo keeps hugging me, crying happy tears. My mom and Mrs. Mthethwa are taking pictures together, bonding. The families are united.

Zakhile barely lets go of my hand the entire time. We cut the cake together, a simple two-tier white cake with fresh flowers. We feed each other and he smears a bit of frosting on my nose, making everyone laugh.

As the sun sets and the fairy lights come on in the garden, Zakhile pulls me aside.

He holds both my hands.

Zakhile: How does it feel, Mrs. Mthethwa?

Me: (Smiling) Perfect. Everything feels perfect.

He places his hand on my stomach.

Zakhile: And how's our baby?

Me: I think they enjoyed the ceremony.

He laughs and kisses me softly.

Zakhile: I can't wait for the traditional weddings. For all of it.

Me: Me neither. But right now, I just want to enjoy this moment. With you. My husband.

Zakhile: (Smiling) Say it again.

Me: My husband.

Zakhile: I'll never get tired of hearing that.

We stand there, wrapped in each other's arms, watching our families celebrate our love.

Its three weeks after our traditional wedding. The umembeso and traditional wedding (umabo) were beautiful. More beautiful than I could have imagined. The gifting of my family was generous and respectful.

My mom cried the entire time. My uncles were pleased. Even the bitter aunties seemed happy.

And the traditional wedding at the Mthethwa homestead in Empangeni was everything. I wore the full Zulu bride regalia, Zakhile in his traditional warrior attire. We danced, we sang, we honored the ancestors. We were blessed by the elders. Our families became one.

Now, as I sit here in our home, my hand on my growing belly, I think about how far we've come. From dreams to reality. From strangers to soulmates and from fear to love.

Zakhile walks in and sits beside me, pulling me into his arms.

Zakhile: What are you thinking about, mama?

Me: Us. Our journey and how perfect everything turned out.

Zakhile: It's just the beginning, Mambulazi. We have a whole lifetime ahead of us.

Me: (Smiling) I can't wait.

And as we sit there together, our baby moving between us, I know one thing for certain:

This is what I was always meant for. This love. This family. This life.

With him. Forever.

Six Months Later

Zakhile

I'm pacing outside the delivery room, my brothers sitting nearby watching me with amused expressions. My hands are shaking. I can hear Ntombi inside, she's been in labor for hours.

Njabulo: Khehla, She will be fine both of them.

Lizwi: She's been in there for three hours. It's normal.

Nathi: Women have been giving birth for thousands of years. She'll be fine.

I run my hands over my face.

Me: You don't understand. She's in pain. I can hear her.

Njabulo: And she's strong. The strongest woman you know.

But I can't stop pacing. My wife is in pain, bringing our child into the world, and I can't do anything about it. I feel helpless.

The door opens suddenly. Dr. Naidoo appears, still in her scrubs, a huge smile on her face.

Dr. Naidoo: Congratulations, Zakhile. You have a healthy baby girl.

A girl. I have a daughter.

My legs almost give out. Njabulo steadies me.

Me: Can I... can I see them?

My voice is shaking.

Dr. Naidoo: (Smiling) Of course. Come.

I rush into the room and there she is, my wife, exhausted but glowing, her hair sticking to her forehead with sweat, holding a tiny bundle wrapped in a pink blanket.

She smiles through tears, looking up at me.

Ntombi: Come meet your daughter.

I walk over on shaky legs and look down at the tiny face peeking out from the blanket. She's perfect. Absolutely perfect. She has Ntombi's nose, my mouth, a full head of dark hair.

Me: She's beautiful. She's so beautiful, mama.

Ntombi: Here, hold her.

I take my daughter into my arms carefully, like she's made of glass. She's so small, so fragile. She opens her

eyes dark, like mine and looks at me. I swear my heart stops.

Me: Hi, princess. I'm your dad. And I'm going to protect you forever. Nothing will ever hurt you. I promise.

Ntombi: What should we name her?

I think for a moment, looking at this perfect little person in my arms.

Me: Liyema. Because she stands. Because she is our foundation. Because after everything, we are still standing.

Ntombi breaks down, nodding.

Ntombi: Liyema Mthethwa. It's perfect, baby. It's so perfect.

I sit on the edge of the bed carefully, my wife and daughter both right here. My family. My everything.

Me: Thank you. Thank you for her. Thank you for everything. You've given me everything I've ever wanted.

Ntombi: We did this together.

I lean down and kiss her softly, then kiss Liyemas' forehead.

Me: I love you both so much. More than words can say.

There's a knock on the door. My brothers peek in.

Njabulo: Can we meet our niece?

I nod and they file in quietly. When they see baby Liyema, their faces soften.

Lizwi: She's beautiful, Khehla.

Nathi: (Smiling) She looks like Ntombi. Thank God.

Everyone laughs softly. I carefully hand Liyema to Njabulo, who holds her like she might break.

Njabulo: Hi, little one. I'm your uncle. And I'm going to spoil you rotten.

They take turns holding her, each one falling in love with her immediately. Then my parents arrive with Ntombi's mom, Gogo, and the sisters.

Mom: My grandbaby. Oh, she's perfect.

Shes crying, holding Liyema.

Ntombi's Mom: (Also crying) My first grandchild. Ntombi, she's beautiful, my baby.

Gogo: Liyema Mthethwa. May you grow strong and wise. May the ancestors watch over you always.

Everyone wants to hold her, to bless her, to welcome her. But after a while, I take her back. I'm not ready to share her yet.

I sit back down next to Ntombi, Liyema in my arms, and just watch her sleep. Her tiny fingers, her perfect

little nose, the way her chest rises and falls with each breath.

Ntombi: What do you think she'll be like when she grows up?

Me: (Smiling) Strong, like you. Brave, like you. Beautiful, like you.

Ntombi: (Laughing softly) And stubborn like you. Protective like you.

Me: God help us if she inherits my temperament.

Ntombi: (Yawning) We'll love her through it all.

Me: Always.

As the room empties out and it's just the three of us, I look at Ntombi, at baby Liyema, at the future we're building together.

This is what I was dreaming of all those years. Not just a woman, but this. This love. This family. This life.

And as I look at Ntombi, at Liyema sleeping peacefully in my arms, at the future stretching out before us, I know one thing for certain:

Every bullet I've dodged, every battle I've fought, every dark thing I've done, it was all worth it.

Because it led me here.

To them.

To home.

To the life I never thought I deserved but will spend every day earning.

Me: I love you. Both of you. Forever.

Ntombi: (Sleepily) Forever, Nyambose.

And in that moment, holding my daughter with my wife beside me, I finally understand what it means to be complete.

THE END