

# **The Complete Family**

**by**

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## CHAPTER ONE

“You’re not an easy woman to find,” said a voice. Linda felt as if she had been thrown into the past. She stopped typing, and looked up slowly.

“Why are you looking for me?” she asked. Her heart was pounding furiously. Jake had aged, badly. She could not believe how different he looked. He was slightly stooped. When she had last seen him, he had stood straight, at six feet.

“The children need you,” he said. Linda removed her hands from her laptop, and clenched them tightly in her lap.

“What do you want, Zwane?” she asked. He sat down in front of her desk. She could smell the alcohol fumes from across the desk, and it was still early in the day.

“The girls need a mother’s advice on women’s issues, and the boys need a mother’s love. We all need you. I’ve come to fetch you home. You should never have left.”

Linda looked at him in disbelief. She should never have left? She had not wanted to leave, but he had said...that was not going to help. I use energy on productive endeavours, she told herself. She took several deep breaths, counting backwards from ten.

“If you’d use makeup, no one need ever know how old you are,” said Jake. Linda started counting backwards again. She had forgotten that he had enjoyed making snide remarks about her looks. She stood and walked to her office door.

“Get out,” she said, opening it wider.

“Linda...”

“Get out!” she shouted.

“Anger doesn’t look good on a woman, especially one your age,” he said, as he walked past her. She closed the door, and leaned on it. Her hands were shaking. She needed to bash something, but she was not going to. Nothing would be improved by such an act of futility. She decided to focus on work. She was always productive there.

She went home several hours after close of business. She was exhausted. She soaked in a hot tub.

After her bath, she stood in front of the mirror, remembering Jake's words. He had told her many times that she was ugly, and that she had been lucky to get married at all. The naked woman in the mirror was not ugly. She would not win beauty prizes, but she would not win ugliness prizes either. She was five foot seven, curvy, with a natural afro that had some grey hairs in it. She looked like she was in her late forties, which was not bad, considering that she was fifty one years old.

Linda slipped into her nightie, then she went to sleep. She woke up sweating. She had dreamt that Jake was sending her from their home. It had been years since she had thought of that night. She sat up, and took several deep breaths. She looked at the time, it was after two in the morning. She lay down, visualising the success of her meeting first thing in the morning.

The meeting went well, then she returned to her office. She found Jake in reception.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“We need to talk.”

“Talk to my lawyer. You made that arrangement, remember? My PA will give you the details.”

“Linda...” Linda walked off. Jake followed her. She closed her office door in his face. He opened it and followed her into her office.

“What do you want?” she shouted.

“I won’t have you shouting at me in my home,” he said.

“Good, because I’m not coming to your home.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You sent me away.”

“Now, I’m calling you back.”

“I’m not coming.”

“You have to, you’re my wife.”

“We’re divorced.”

“I never signed any divorce papers.” Linda opened her mouth to contradict him, then she remembered that no divorce papers had been drawn up or exchanged.

“I’m still not coming back,” she said.

“The children need you.”

“They haven’t needed me in years, they certainly don’t need me now. They must be married.”

“Not all of them.”

“I have an appointment now.”

“This is important.”

“Go away, Jake. I’ll send you the divorce papers.”

“I won’t sign them.”

“Go away.” Jake gave her a long look, then he left. It took Linda over an hour to calm down after his visit.

At the end of the work day, she sat thinking about the best way to get him to sign the divorce papers. She was not going back to him, under any circumstances. She had recovered from the treatment that he and his family had meted out to her, and she was not going to subject herself to them again. Satisfied with the plan that she had come up with, she went home.

She went shopping on Saturday. On Sunday, she spent most of the day in bed. In the late afternoon, she freshened up, and cooked dinner.

She opened the front door when she heard a car stopping outside her home. She smiled as Bongsi and Themba climbed out of Kgomotso’s car. She went to hug them, then they went into the house. She greeted Kgomotso and invited him in for dinner. Her heart was pounding, she needed him to come into her home.

At six foot, he towered over her slightly. She noticed that he had some grey hairs, and looked broader than usual. She supposed that was a result of the gymning that the children had told her about.

He was surprised by her invitation, she had not invited him into her home in ages. He locked the car, and followed her into her home. After dinner, the children bade Linda and Kgomotso goodnight, and went to their bedrooms.

“I need your help,” said Linda.

“With what?” asked Kgomotso.

“The man I was married to wants a reconciliation.”

“What?” asked a shocked Kgomotso.

“He’s been to see me twice, and says, correctly, that we’re not divorced.”

“You’re not divorced?”

“No, we didn’t get round to it. I’m sending him the divorce papers next week. He swears he won’t sign them.”

“Where do I come into all this?”

“Pretend we’re involved.”

“Linda...”

“Are you involved with anyone?”

“No, but...”

“Please help me with this. I think it’s the only way to convince Jake to sign the divorce papers. He won’t want me if he thinks another man’s touched me. He’s very puritanical in that respect.”

“Are you sure you don’t want him back?”

“Absolutely.”

They shared a long look, then Kgomotso shook his head.

“I can’t help you,” he said.

“Why not?” Linda demanded in disbelief. He did not respond.

“You have to help me! This is the only plan that’ll work,” she said.

“Find another man,” he said.

“I want you! I know you, I trust you, we like each other, we can pull it off.”

“I won’t do it.”

“Kgomotso...”

“No!”

“Why not? Why won’t you help me?”

“Because I don’t want to pretend.”

“It won’t be for long.”

“No,” said Kgomotso, then he left.

Linda stared after him in disbelief. She had been certain that they would laugh together, as they planned outings to convince Jake that they were an item. She was still in shock when she went to bed. She tossed and turned most of the night, wondering what she would do.

“Are you alright, Mama?” asked Bongi at breakfast.

“I’m fine, Bongi. How was your outing with Papa?” asked Linda.

“It was fine, it’d have been better if you’d come too. Why didn’t you come?” asked Themba. Linda made an apologetic face.

Kgomotso had stopped inviting her to join him and the children several years before, and he had refused all her invitations since then. She had stopped inviting him two years before, because he always said no to her invitations. He had been surprised by her invitation the night before, and she had been surprised by his acceptance. She had been prepared to go and discuss her plan with him in his office if necessary.

In her office, Linda phoned her lawyer, and instructed him to draw up divorce papers, and send them to Jake.

The following Saturday, Linda and the children went grocery shopping.

“Linda? Linda. Linda, I’m talking to you,” said Jake. Linda tried to ignore him by walking away from his voice, but he walked faster. He pushed his trolley in front of her, blocking her. He was with someone. Linda looked at the

young man briefly, then she decided not to crack her head trying to identify him.

“Thabiso, this is your mother. Linda, I’m sure you remember our son,” said Jake. Linda heard Bongi and Themba gasping in shock.

“Who the hell are you?” demanded Jake, looking from one to the other.

“These are my children,” said Linda.

“The only children you have, you left with me!” he shouted.

“Let’s go,” Linda said to her children. She made to side step Jake, and he blocked her way.

“Get out of my way,” she said.

“You’re coming home with me. Thabiso, take your mother’s trolley,” said Jake.

“Leave me alone!” shouted Linda.

“You’re my wife, you belong in my home.”

“You sent me away.”

“I want you back.”

“I don’t want you.”

“The children need you.”

“These two are my only children.”

“Who gave birth to Thabiso?”

“I’m through with you, Jake, get out of my way.”

“You can never be done with me. We were joined in marriage before God.”

“Did you forget that when you sent me away? I got over you, and I’m with someone else.”

“I’ll kill you before I let you go off with another man.”

“No one kills my Mama!” shouted Bongi. She was standing before Jake in a karate pose.

“Bongi? What’s wrong?” asked Kgomotso.

“Papa! Papa, this man wants to kill Mama,” said Themba, running to Kgomotso. He took him by the hand and led him to stand beside Bongi.

“Who the hell are you? This is a domestic discussion, between me and my wife. Get out of here,” said Jake.

“I am not your wife!” said Linda.

“You have no right to upset the mother of my children. Do I need to phone the police to get you away from her?” asked Kgomotso. He looked and sounded menacing, as he frowned ferociously. Jake looked from him to Linda.

“The only children you have are with me,” he said. Linda suddenly felt very tired.

“Let’s go,” she said to her children. She turned the trolley round to avoid Jake, and walked off. Bongi and Themba were on either side of her.

“Stay away from her,” Kgomotso said. Linda left the trolley, full as it was, at the end of the aisle, and led her children out of the shop. People were staring. Linda was more concerned about the effect of that terrible scene on her children.

Outside the shop, Bongi started crying. Linda made to put her arms round her, and Bongi pushed her off. Kgomotso put his arms round Bongi, and she clung to him, crying in earnest. Linda watched as Themba went to stand beside Bongi and Kgomotso. He was looking at her malevolently. Linda felt as if the children were ganging up on her. She took several deep breaths to calm herself. Bongi stopped crying, and drew away from Kgomotso.

“Who’s that man?” she asked.

“I was married to him,” said Linda.

“You didn’t tell us,” said Themba. Linda looked at him helplessly.

“Let’s go home,” said Kgomotso.

“I want to go with Papa,” said Bongi.

“Me too,” said Themba. They all walked to Kgomotso’s car. Linda watched the children climb into it. Her heart felt heavy. This cannot be happening again,

she kept saying to herself. She was having trouble breathing. She knew that she would not survive another round of losing her children.

Kgomotso looked at Linda. She was devastated. She was more shaken than the children. She approached the car, and opened a door. The children turned away from her, then Themba closed the door on her. The look of despair on her face broke Kgomotso's heart. He put an arm round her waist.

“Not again, please, not again,” she whispered, as tears ran down her cheeks.

“I’ll take you home,” said Kgomotso. Linda came out of her reverie, and looked at him. She straightened, gave the children a last look, and walked back to the shop. Once she was out of sight, Kgomotso looked at the children. They had been watching her, they turned to look at him. He climbed into the car, and drove off.

“Who was that man, Papa?” asked Themba. Kgomotso looked at him in the rear view mirror.

“He used to be married to Mama,” he said.

“Are they divorced?” asked Bongi.

“I don’t know.”

“Have you ever met him?”

“No.” They were all quiet the rest of the way home.

The house was a mess. Kgomotso had been spring cleaning, then he had run out of cleaning liquids. He had gone to buy them. He had just entered the shop, when he had heard Linda’s raised voice. He had reached her just as Bongi had stood in front of the man threatening Linda. He had been furious with the man for speaking to Linda that way, and forcing Bongi to put herself in danger, to protect her mother.

He had almost punched that man, but the young man beside him, who looked just like Linda, had led the man away. Kgomotso had followed Linda and the children thoughtfully. He was worried about Linda, but the children needed him more now. He sighed, realising that he had not bought the fluids that he needed.

He gave the children instructions about cleaning, and everyone set to work. Usually, Bongi would complain about cleaning, she did not even want to clean

up after herself, but today, she cleaned up quietly. Kgomotso ordered a pizza delivery and joined in the cleaning.

When they were done several hours later, they sat down to eat.

“I want to see Mama,” said Themba. Kgomotso looked from him to Bongi. At fourteen years of age, she was harsher on her mother. Themba, who was nine years old, had a very soft spot for Linda.

“Papa, can you take us home now, please? Mama must be lonely. She looked so sad,” said Themba.

“She had not right to keep a secret,” said Bongi.

“I want to see Mama.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m not leaving you alone here, we’re all going,” said Kgomotso.

“But...” said Bongi.

“Let’s go.”

Bongi sulked all the way to Linda’s home. Themba kept telling Kgomotso to drive faster. At Linda’s home, all the lights were on.

“Something’s wrong,” said Themba, running towards the house.

“Wait!” said Kgomotso, but Themba did not seem to hear him. Kgomotso hurried after him. He managed to get to the front door first. He opened it, then he went in, with Themba on his heels.

There was loud music coming from the lounge. Linda was in there, on her hands and knees, washing the carpet. Kgomotso could not understand why she would do it manually, when she had two hoovers. He turned off the music. Linda raised her head in his direction. She had tears running down her cheeks, and she was making sobbing sounds. Kgomotso was hurt by her pain.

He watched as Themba knelt beside her and put his arms round her. Linda held him tight. He made a pained sound, and she released him. She stood quickly, and hurried out of the room, sobbing. Themba watched her with concern, then he stood, and looked at Kgomotso. Kgomotso noticed then, that Bongi was following Linda.

“Why’s Mama crying?” asked Themba. Kgomotso did not know what to say. Themba followed Bongi out of the room. Kgomotso followed him. He found the children standing outside a bathroom door, listening to Linda sobbing. Occasionally, the sobs stopped, and Linda could be heard giving herself a pep talk, but then the sobs would start again.

The sobs were hurting Kgomotso, and the pep talks were so valiant, and yet so ineffective, that he had to do something. He opened the door, and entered the bathroom. He closed the door, and approached Linda. She was seated in the empty bath tub, telling herself that she was fine, then the sobs started again.

“Linda. Linda,” said Kgomotso. Linda started, and looked at him in surprise. Quickly, she wiped away the tears on her cheeks and chin.

“Stand up,” said Kgomotso, and she complied. He held a hand out to her. She looked at it, then she put her hand in it. Kgomotso helped her out of the tub.

“Wash your face,” he said. She washed her face. He handed her a towel when she was done. She dried her face. He took the towel and returned it to the towel rack. He put his hands on her shoulders.

“Look at me,” he said. She looked at him.

“You’re a strong person, and a fabulous mother. Our children need answers, and you’re going to give them what they need. You’ll talk to them calmly, and make them understand,” he said. She nodded.

“I’ll be by your side. You’re not alone,” he said. She nodded. She took several deep breaths, then she opened the bathroom door.

The children drew back, it was clear that they had had their ears on the door.

“Hi,” said Linda. The children did not respond. Themba put his hand in Linda’s. She squeezed it gratefully.

“I’ll make tea,” she said, then she and Themba led the way to the kitchen. She released Themba’s hand, and put water in the kettle.

“I’ll do it. Sit down,” said Kgomotso. Linda looked at him malevolently. She needed the minutes it took to make tea, to compose herself. She joined the children, who were seated at the kitchen table. Themba was looking at her, Bongi was texting on her phone. Linda looked at Themba.

“I got married a long time ago, and had six children,” she said. Themba gasped.

“Six?” said Themba, clearly very shocked.

“The man I was married to tired of being married to me, so he told me to go away. I said I’d take the children, and he said they weren’t mine to take. I refused to leave without them. He brought his mother, sister, and other relatives to send me away,” she said.

“Oh, come on! You expect us to believe you meekly agreed to be sent away?” asked Bongi. Linda looked at her, wondering how to explain to her that she had fought with everything at her disposal, and lost. She looked at Themba.

“I was lonely a long time, then Baba and I ...” she said.

“You decided to adopt me, then Themba. We all know that. Why didn’t you tell us you’d been married?” asked Bongi.

“It all happened a long time ago,” said Linda.

“When did the marriage end?”

“Twenty-one years ago.”

“Are you divorced?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“At first, I hoped we’d get back together again. Later, other things became more important.”

“He wants you back.”

“I don’t want him.” Bongi gave Linda a long look, then she looked at Kgomotso.

“What are you going to do about this?” she asked. Linda was as shocked as Kgomotso looked.

“What do you mean?” he returned.

“That man wants to take Mama away, are you going to let him?”

“No!” said Themba. Kgomotso looked from the children to Linda.

“I’ll be getting divorced soon. I’m not going anywhere,” she said, looking from Themba to Bongi. Themba gave her a long look.

“You need a bodyguard,” he said.

“Whatever for?” asked a surprised Linda.

“That man said he’d kill you.”

“He won’t!”

“You need a bodyguard! You can’t die, Mama, you can’t! Andrew’s Mama died, and he got a nasty new Mama. Luis’ Mama died, and he lives on the street with no food or clothes. Peter’s Mama died, and he has to look after himself, and three other children. You can’t die, Mama, you can’t die!” shouted Themba as he banged a fist on the table. Linda started in surprise. She could not believe how upset he was.

“No one is dying! Mama’s safe now, and she’ll always be safe,” said Kgomotso. Linda was glad that he was capable of speech, because her throat seemed to have dried. Themba left the room in tears. Bongi ran after him, calling his name.

Linda watched Kgomotso as he sat beside her.

“I didn’t think my former marriage would ever come up,” she said. Kgomotso watched her in silence.

“Thank you for bringing the children back, I didn’t think they’d ever speak to me again,” continued Linda.

“Would he kill you?” asked Kgomotso.

“No!”

“How do you know?”

“He doesn’t have it in him. He’s mean, but he wouldn’t kill.”

“I’m hiring you a bodyguard.”

“No!”

“This isn’t a discussion. I don’t want my children worrying that something will happen to you. What have you done about the divorce?”

“Jake will be served with the papers on Monday.”

“Good. If you have problems, tell me, I know someone who knows great divorce lawyers.”

“I can manage.”

“This isn’t just about you. There are the children and...and I don’t want them worrying.” Linda gave Kgomoṡso a long look, wondering what he had meant to say. He hired a bodyguard by phone.

“It’s an unnecessary expense,” said Linda.

“Is taking care of your family an unnecessary expense?” Linda could not reply. Kgomoṡso spent that night, and the next two nights, in the bedroom that he had not used in years.

## CHAPTER TWO

The bodyguard started working next morning. Linda found having a shadow with rights annoying. Themba was back to his old self, Bongi was even more offhand and disrespectful of Linda than usual. Kgomotso had to call her to order on several occasions.

On the third night of his stay, Kgomotso announced that he would be leaving the following morning. Linda could not understand why that saddened her. The children took his departure in their stride.

Several times over the following weeks, Jake came to Linda's office. Her bodyguard was easily able to get him to leave. Linda's divorce lawyer phoned her to say that Jake was demanding child maintenance. Linda laughed incredulously. Jake would get child maintenance, when Tugela dried up and became a mountain.

At home, Bongi's campaign of disrespect was becoming unbearable. Linda wanted to give her a good hiding, but she refrained. One morning, she asked Bongi to help her to make breakfast. Bongi refused. Linda made herself tolerate that. During breakfast, Bongi talked endlessly on the phone. Linda told her to put the phone away, she ignored her.

Linda slapped her hard, and the phone fell out of her hand. Linda heard Themba gasp, as Bongi held her cheek in shock. She had tears in her eyes. Linda had never struck either of her children.

"The man I married sent me away because he wanted another woman. I went to sleep one evening, and when I woke later, expecting to give the baby his two o'clock feed, he and the other children were gone. That man, his mother, sister, and several other people, threw me, kicking and screaming, out of the home that I'd been paying for, because the man spent his money on clothes for himself.

"I asked my family to plead for me, and they did, but that man would not listen. I asked to see the children, and was told to go and jump in a lake. I was more parent to those children than their father ever was, but with a change of mood, they were no longer mine. That man took my children to the USA, I followed, and I was not allowed to see them.

"When I decided to adopt you, Sibongile, I vowed that no one would take my children from me. You use my surname so that no one can ever say you're not

my children. I love you both very much, but I won't put up with bad behaviour. Behave yourself, Sibongile, or face the consequences," Linda shouted.

"I'll leave," said Bongi tearfully.

"You know where the door is," said Linda. She could not believe that she had said that. Bongi was clearly shocked too.

"I'm sorry for not telling you that I was married. I didn't think it would ever matter. I can't go back in time and be unmarried. We all have to live with it," said Linda. Bongi stormed out of the room. Linda and Themba shared a long look, then Themba looked away. Everyone was silent as Linda drove the children to school. She was certain that when she returned home from work, only Themba would be home.

She returned home from work, to find both children home. She had been certain that Bongi would ask Kgomoitso if she could move in with him. Linda and the children sat down for dinner. After dinner, Bongi refused to do the dishes.

"I'm not taking instructions from a wimp. You left your children. A real woman would've done whatever it took to..." said Bongi.

"That is enough! How dare you speak to your Mama that way!" thundered Kgomoitso. Linda was surprised to see him. She assumed that he had used the key that she had given him. They had keys to each other's homes in case the children needed something when the home owner was away.

"But..." said Bongi.

"Quiet! No child of mine disrespects, or judges her mother, when she doesn't have all the facts. Were you there when your mother's marriage ended? Were you?"

"No, but..."

"Do you know the circumstances she was subjected to?"

"No, but..."

"Then shut up about things you know nothing about!" Everyone stared in shock at Kgomoitso. He never said shut up, he was clearly furious. Bongi started

doing the dishes. She was crying. Linda could not decide whether to comfort her, or thank Kgomotso for intervening, or both.

“We need to talk,” he said to her, then he left the room. Linda gave the children a last look, and followed him.

She found him standing by his car.

“What’s happening with the divorce?” he asked curtly. Linda was surprised by the question.

“Nothing. Jake was served with the papers, he demanded child maintenance, and since then, nothing.”

“Tell your lawyer to follow up, or you'll get a new one. I can recommend several great divorce lawyers,” he instructed. Linda nodded. She had never seen Kgomotso so passionate. He was emanating a furious energy that made her want to watch him to see what he would do next.

“How’s the bodyguard working out?” he asked.

“Alright. I still think it’s a waste of money.”

“Do you need me to take the children?” Linda paused.

“Maybe you can stay with us again,” she said.

“Out of the question,” Kgomotso said with finality. Linda was very disappointed. She looked away from him so that he would not see her facial expression.

“Yes, please take them, for a week or so,” she said.

“Alright. You have a week to tell me what’s going on with the divorce,” said Kgomotso as he walked into the house.

Linda wondered why he was so interested in the divorce. She stayed a few minutes outside, telling herself to stop being disappointed because he was not staying, and wondering what to do about Bongzi. She walked towards the house. Themba was coming towards her, carrying his school bag.

“We’re going with Papa,” he said. Linda nodded.

“Will you be alright?” he asked. She smiled and hugged him.

“I’ll be fine. Bye,” she said.

“Bye,” said Themba as he went to the car. Bongi and Kgomotso approached Linda. Bongi was also carrying her school bag.

“Well?” said Kgomotso.

“Sorry, Mama,” said Bongi.

“Apology accepted,” said Linda. Bongi walked past her. Linda looked at Kgomotso. He was watching her intently. He had never looked at her that intently. He nodded, and left.

Over the next few days, Linda tried and failed to get in touch with her divorce lawyer. She left a message with the lawyer's PA, that she was finding a new divorce lawyer, and in minutes, the lawyer phoned her personally. Linda asked for an itemised bill to be sent to her, and told the man that if he ripped her off, her new lawyer would sort him out.

Neither of them was happy with the call. When it ended, Linda phoned Kgomotso, and asked him for the contact details of a great divorce lawyer. He told her that he would bring the lawyer to her home that evening.

Linda prepared dinner for three. Kgomotso arrived with Leo Myers, who was going to be Linda’s new divorce lawyer. He left after making the introductions, saying that he had to get back to the children. Linda and Leo dined, then Leo asked several questions. They made an appointment for the next day.

During the appointment, Linda found herself on the verge of tears on several occasions. The questions that Leo was asking were bringing back some very unpleasant memories. She had three other appointments with him, and each one was worse than the previous one. She phoned Kgomotso after the fourth appointment, telling him that seeing Leo was terrible.

“Do it for you and the children. Once the divorce is granted, you’ll never have to remember those terrible times again,” he said. They were quiet as Linda took several deep breaths to prevent herself from crying.

“How are the children?” she asked.

“Fine. Themba misses you. Bongi’s being a teenager.”

“I know. It irritates me sometimes, then I remind myself that at least I get to see her as a teenager, I didn’t have that chance with the other six.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I want to stop your pain.”

“That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“If I can’t stop it, then I want to share it.” Linda’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

“I don’t know what to say to that,” she said.

“Say you’ll share your pain with me.” Linda paused.

“I’ll share my pain with you, if you’ll share your pain with me,” she said. There was a silence.

“Deal,” said Kgomotso.

He returned the children to Linda several days later. Bongi kept to herself for the most part. The rest of the time, she followed Linda with her eyes in silence.

One morning, Linda was shocked to find her former mother-in-law in her office. The sneering look that had been the last expression that Linda had seen on her face was gone.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“A wife belongs with her husband,” said the woman.

“I don’t understand.”

“You belong with Jacob.” Linda laughed in disbelief.

“You sent me away,” she said.

“The children need you.”

“I mean less than nothing to them.”

“Who will look after your husband if you won’t?”

“The woman who replaced me.”

“She left years ago. You need to go back to Jacob. He paid amalobolo for you.”

“I want nothing to do with him.”

“Hi,” said Kgomotso. Linda looked at him, wondering where he had come from. He kissed her cheek, and put an arm round her waist. She looked at him in shock. He had never kissed her, or touched her affectionately.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

“Who is this? Young man, what are you doing touching my son’s wife that way?” asked Linda’s former mother-in-law. Kgomotso looked at her.

“I’m the father of her children, and only she can tell me to stop touching her,” he said.

“Her children are with Jacob.”

“Her children are with me. Who are you, and what do you want from us?”

“I’m the mother of MaMthembu’s husband.”

“We’re divorcing your son.”

“You can’t...”

“Didn’t he send MaMthembu away?”

“That’s not the point!”

“You have to go now,” said Kgomotso, as he approached her. The woman left hastily. Linda did not blame her. Kgomotso was not to be messed with when he was taking a firm stand about something. He turned to look at her.

“Don’t entertain that man, or anyone to do with him. Tell Leo about this visit,” he said.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I was worried about you. You were close to tears when we talked last night.”

“I’m fine. Thanks for coming. I don’t need the bodyguard. Stop wasting money on him,” she said.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Nothing will happen. Please, pay him off.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I'll tell them to stop the service on Friday.”

“Thank you.” They shared a long look. Linda felt as if she was drowning in his eyes.

“I have to go,” he said. She nodded. They continued to watch each other. His phone rang, startling them both. He patted himself down, and brought it out of his pocket. He pointed at it, she nodded. He answered it as he left.

He spoke to his PA, the call ended just as he reached his car. He was thankful that the call had come through just then. He had been about to kiss Linda. He would have to talk to her soon, before he yielded to the instincts that he had been fighting for years.

He felt good knowing that taking the children had made things a little easier for her. He wanted the divorce out of the way. He had hired Linda the best lawyer in town. He returned to work. He picked up the children from school at lunch time, and took them to work with him.

In the evening, he took them back to Linda. Themba was happy to be back, Bongi was wary. Kgomotso thought that was a better attitude, than the blatant disrespect that she had been displaying previously. He had talked to her, and made her understand that everything that he and Linda did, they did out of love.

Sometimes, he had said, they did things wrong, but they were doing their best. Linda looked more relaxed than she had been when he had taken the children. They all had supper, then she walked Kgomotso to his car. They stood watching each other.

“You'll all be fine,” he said. She nodded.

“Do you want me to come to court with you?” he asked. Linda looked away from him.

“Linda?” he said.

“I don't know.”

“Leo’s the best.”

“So I’ve heard. Thanks for recommending him.”

“Let me know if you want me to come with you.”

“Thank you, Kgomotso, for everything.” He nodded, climbed into his car, and drove off.

Linda returned to the house. Themba hugged her, then he went to sleep. Bongi was watching her. She sat down.

“Did you love him?” asked Bongi.

“Who?” asked Linda.

“The man you were married to.” Linda looked at Bongi in surprise.

“Yes, I did. I loved him long after we separated,” she said.

“Do you love him now?”

“No.”

“Do you love Papa?” Linda was surprised by the question.

“He’s my best friend in the world.”

“I want you to marry him, then we can be a family.” Linda looked at Bongi in shock.

“We’re already a family,” she said.

“Families live together.”

“Not always. How are you?”

“Fine. And you?”

“Alright. I missed you.”

“Goodnight,” said Bongi, then she left the room. Linda sighed.

Next day was Saturday. She left the children with her housekeeper, while she went to work. When she returned home, her housekeeper, MaNzima, threatened to quit, unless Bongi started respecting her elders. She left in a huff. Linda looked at Bongi.

“It’s her job to clean, not mine. I don’t get paid for it,” said Bongi.

“You still need to learn to clean after yourself. She’s here to help, not to do everything.”

“She’s the maid, not me.”

“Sit down, Bongi,” said Linda. Bongi rolled her eyes, and sat down.

“MaNzima is not a maid, she’s a helper. She’s here to help, not wait on you as if you’re one of the queens of King Goodwill Zwelithini. We don’t need her here,” said Linda.

“No, we don’t, she should go home to her *respectful* children, and leave us alone.”

“If she doesn’t come in, you’ll have to do your own laundry, your own ironing, cook your own meals, and sweep the house yourself.”

“What?” said Bongi in shock.

“MaNzima comes to do all that, but you still have to clean up after yourself. And the fact that she works for me doesn’t give you the right to be disrespectful.”

“I wasn’t disrespecting her!”

“You need to remember what I taught you, that we respect everyone, regardless of their age, or the work they do, or the amount of money they have.”

“Mama...”

“What we need to agree on, is what chores you do when MaNzima’s here.”

“Why should I do any chores if she’s here?”

“You won’t always have someone working for you. You need to learn survival skills for that time.”

“I don’t want to.”

“That’s immaterial.”

“I don’t have to do chores at Papa’s house.”

“This is not Papa’s house.”

“If you married him, it would be.”

“That won’t happen. Now, will you do some chores, or should I fire MaNzima so you can do all the chores?”

“That’s not fair!”

“Do you want time to think about it?”

“No! I’ll wash the cups and plates I use.”

“And?”

“And nothing!”

“And you’ll make your bed, wash your own underwear, and sweep your own bedroom.”

“What will she do?”

“Clean the rest of the house, wash and iron your clothes, and cook lunch. She’ll be gone by supper, so I’ll cook it.”

“MaNzima is getting off scot free. My friends say their maids do everything for them.”

“You don’t live in their homes, you live in this one. Now, do I fire MaNzima?”

“No!”

“Then you must do all that you said you would. I’ll tell her what your chores are.”

“Mama!”

“Will you work with me?”

“Do I have a choice?” asked Bongi as she left the room.

Next day, Linda took the children to church. She wanted her children to have spiritual guidance. She looked round the church during the service.

She left with the children before the service ended. She could not stomach the teaching about women submitting to men. That had been the reason that Jake

had used to get his way all the time while she had been married. She was not going to teach Bongi or Themba to subscribe to such destructive philosophies.

“Mama, why did we leave church early?” asked Themba.

“It was time,” said Linda.

“Why?” asked Bongi.

“Because I said so!” snapped Linda. She was furious with herself for snapping.

“Sorry. I have things to do,” she said.

“Things that are more important than being with God?” asked Themba.

“No,” said Linda. She did not know how to explain her stand to the children. She wanted them to have a relationship with God, but she did not want them to be puppets of other people’s interpretations of God, and how to relate with God, and other people.

“We need to go back. The service is still on, I think,” said Bongi.

“We can’t,” said Linda firmly. She drove to Kgomotso’s home. She had not meant to, but she knew that the children would forgive her anything, once they saw him.

She was relieved that he was home. She had not phoned ahead.

“Is everything alright?” he asked. The children had greeted him, and run into the house. He was looking at Linda as she stood beside her car.

“Sorry to come unannounced. We came from church. They were saying things I don’t want the children believing.”

“Things like what?”

“Women submitting to men, and people needing priests to get to God, as if uNkulunkulu won’t hear you unless you go through someone else. Why do we even pray to the God of the foreigners who brought us nothing but pain?”

“Praying to that God, means we accept the apartheid, and pain, and nonsense, that those people brought us. We need to rediscover our own God and define

how we relate with him or it. You know, I don't think I'm cut out to be a parent."

"What?"

"I'm useless! Jake was right, I am an unfit mother."

"Don't talk like that."

"I can't control Bongi, and I favour Themba. What parent does that? And now, I'm failing to give them spiritual guidance. I know what I don't want them to subscribe to, but what am I going to replace that with?"

"You're a great mother." Linda kicked the car wheel in frustration.

"Linda!" gasped Kgomotso. He drew her away from the car and into the house. He gave her some water to drink in the kitchen. She sat at the table, then she noticed his mother. She was cooking.

### CHAPTER THREE

“Hello, Mme” said Linda.

“Hello, MaMthembu. How are you?”

“Fine, thank you, how are you?”

“I’m wondering when you and Kgomotso will get married.”

“Mme!” gasped Linda.

“Why do you think a man agrees to have children with a woman?”

“I...”

“A man does that, because he loves a woman.”

“Mme...” said Kgomotso.

“This boy loves you, and the sooner the two of you marry and make a family for those children, the better things will be for all of us,” said Mme. She turned back to the vegetables that she was cutting.

Linda looked from her, to Kgomotso. He was watching her. She became uncomfortable, he was looking at her so very intently. She looked back at his mother.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Marry Kgomotso,” said Mme. Linda looked at Kgomotso again.

“Why don’t you leave the children? Mme and I are going to Tshepo’s birthday, we’ll take the children, and bring them back to you later,” he said.

“She may as well come, too,” said Mme.

“She’s got plans.”

“The only plans she should be making, are wedding plans.”

“Mme!”

“Why don’t the two of you just do the right thing? Neither of you is getting any younger. What example are you setting your children? Marriage is the only

option for you. I've been waiting all my life for your wedding day, Kgomotso. Don't let me go to my grave disappointed."

"You're not dying."

"MaMthembu, get the children to the car, we're all going. The family may as well get used to you again. I don't know why you stopped attending family functions with Kgomotso. Everyone was worried you'd divorced him for his womanising ways.

"You can't imagine what a hard time I had, explaining that you couldn't divorce him, when you hadn't married him. Let's go. We're late as it is." Mme took pots out to the car. Linda looked at Kgomotso. He was very unhappy.

"I've got work to do," she said.

"You heard Mme, we're all going together."

"I..."

"Bongi, Themba, let's go," called Kgomotso as he also left the kitchen.

Linda followed him out to the car. He closed the boot and approached the house.

"I'll take my car," she said.

"We're all going together," he said curtly, then he locked the house. Linda approached the car. Mme was sitting in the back with the children. They were listening to her avidly. Linda climbed into the front of the car. Kgomotso climbed in beside her, and drove off.

At Tshepo's, there were several cars outside the house. Linda, Bongi and Kgomotso took pots to the kitchen. Kgomotso's sister, sisters-in-law, and the rest of his family, welcomed Linda as if she was the lost sheep that had been found. They wanted to know why she had stopped attending family functions with the rest of her family. She smiled sheepishly.

The party went well, then it was time to leave. Mme decided to stay at Tshepo's. Kgomotso drove fast. At his home, he hugged the children and looked at Linda as if he could not wait for her to leave. She nodded at him, and left.

She could not get to sleep. She kept remembering her conversation with Nina, Kgomotso's sister.

"Why do you think Kgomotso has children with you?" Nina had asked.

"Because he wants to be a father."

"Most men who want to be fathers, marry the women they want mothering their children."

"Kgomotso's different."

"What happens when he wants to marry?"

"He wants to get married?"

"What if he does?" Linda had never thought that far ahead.

"Am I standing in the way of his marriage?" she had asked.

"What do you think?" Linda had not answered.

After that, she had kept a close eye on Kgomotso. He had been watching her too. In the car, he had ignored her completely. She needed to talk to him about his relationship with the children, now that he was getting married. She hoped that his wife would treat them well. She turned over.

His mother's words came back to her. Why would his mother tell her to marry him, when he already had someone else lined up for marriage? She wondered who it was. The children had not spoken of someone new in his life. Maybe it was someone that she already knew.

Several days later, Linda and Leo met Jake and his lawyer. The meeting was horrible for Linda. Jake was trying all sorts of ways to get her to go back to him. He quoted the Bible, used culture, and the children, to try and get her to live with him. Linda stood firm. She ended up asking herself what she had ever seen in him.

She was busy at work over the next few weeks. Kgomotso took the children every Friday evening, and returned them every Sunday evening.

The court date arrived. Several people took great pleasure in telling the court that Jake had instigated the separation, recruited them into sending Linda away, and then refused to pay them as he had promised. Jake was painted as an

unreliable person. The divorce was granted. Linda left court in an excellent mood. She phoned Kgomotso.

“I’m divorced,” she said.

“Congratulations,” he said.

“Do you want to come and celebrate with me? Kgomotso? Are you there?”

“I can’t come with you.”

“We can make it a day when you’re free.”

“Congratulations again. I have to go now.”

“Kgomotso?” The call had been cut. Linda could not believe that Kgomotso had put the phone down on her. Whatever his problem is, he has no right to take his frustrations out on me, she thought.

She went home to cook a special meal.

“What are we celebrating, Mama?” asked Bongi.

“I got divorced today,” said Linda.

“Oh. Do you want to cry, or something?”

“I want to celebrate.”

“I didn’t know people celebrated divorces. I thought all divorces made people sad,” said Themba.

“Sometimes, divorce is the best thing for everyone,” said Linda.

“Are your children happy about the divorce?”

“You mean you two?”

“I mean the ones you had before you had us.” Linda had not thought about that.

“I don’t know. I don’t think it matters to them. I’ve been gone so long, they probably don’t remember me,” she said.

“Do you remember them?”

“I haven’t thought about them in a long time. It hurt too much to think about people I could never see.” They were all quiet, thinking.

“Let’s eat before the food gets cold,” said Linda. They all picked up their eating utensils, but they did not eat.

“So, I have more than one sister?” asked Themba. Linda looked at him in surprise.

“What do you mean?” she returned.

“You have other daughters, beside Bongi.” Linda sat back in her seat. Her heart was pounding.

“Yes,” she said cautiously. She was not sure that she liked the direction of Themba’s line of questioning.

“How many?” he asked.

“Must we talk about this now?”

“Yes. How many other sisters do I have?”

“Three.”

“And how many brothers?”

“Three.”

“Can I meet them?”

“No!” said Linda in shock.

“I want to meet them.”

“Why?”

“They’re my family.”

“Bongi, Papa, and me, we’re your family.”

“You’re their Mama, and my Mama, that makes us family.” Linda could not believe what she was hearing.

She looked from Themba to Bongi.

“We can meet them together. Papa will come with us as well,” said Themba.

“No!” said Linda.

“What can it hurt, Mama?” asked Bongi. Linda looked at her in shock.

“Let’s call Papa, and tell him about it,” said Bongi.

“No! No, I’ll do it,” said Linda.

“Are you sure you’ll do it?” asked Themba.

“Of course I’ll do it. I said I would, didn’t I?” said Linda ferociously.

“Let’s eat, this food looks great,” said Bongi. She and Themba ate, then they cleared up.

“Remember to talk to Papa,” said Themba, as he and Bongi went to sleep.

Linda sat on her bed, wondering if she had the stomach to see Jake’s children. Her phone rang.

“Are you going to talk to your ex-husband about seeing your other children?” asked Kgomotso.

“What are you talking about?”

“Themba phoned to say you’re taking us all to meet your other children.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Then what was he talking about?”

“He wants to meet Jake’s children.”

“Who’s Jake?”

“The man I was married to.”

“Oh. So, are you arranging it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to?”

“No! I shut them out of my mind years ago, and I don’t want to go through that pain again.”

“What will you tell Themba?”

“I don’t know...What did I do to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t stand to see me, you refuse all my invitations, and you didn’t want me to go to Tshepo’s party. And why didn’t you tell me you’re getting married?”

“Married?”

“What will we do about the children? Will your wife be good to them? Please don’t reject them. They’ll never recover if you dump them.”

“I’m not dumping them! And who says I’m getting married?”

“Nina said...”

“Who am I supposed to be marrying?”

“She didn’t say. Are you getting married?” Kgomotso was silent.

“I think you should satisfy Themba’s curiosity,” he said.

“I want nothing to do with that man. Ever.”

“I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Kgomotso...”

“Leo has the details of his relatives, I’ll get in touch with them. You’re the mother of those children, you’re entitled to see them.”

“I...”

“I’ll bet they’re curious about you, and about Themba and Bongi.”

“But...”

“I’ll be in touch. Goodnight.” Linda looked at the phone in disbelief. She opened her mouth to shout for Themba, then she realised that he was probably asleep. He had been, for several hours.

She was woken by the sound of voices. She opened her eyes. The children were in the room, with a tray of food.

“What’s going on?” asked Linda, as she sat up.

“Hi, Mama,” said Kgomotso as he joined the children.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“We brought you breakfast in bed.”

“Why?”

“Eat up, Mama, we have a big day ahead of us,” said Themba. He was very excited.

“What’s going on?” asked Linda.

“Eat, Mama,” said Bongi, putting the tray on her lap. Linda looked at the food, then at the excited faces around her bed.

“Let’s go and finish packing,” said Kgomotso, then he and the children rushed out of the room.

Linda looked at the time. It was close on eleven. She was not aware that she had slept for that long. She could not eat. She had to find out what everyone was up to. She freshened up, then, as she was dressing, there was a knock on her bedroom door.

“Mama, can I come in?” asked Bongi.

“Okay,” said Linda. Bongi entered the room.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” she asked. Linda looked at her.

“Yes,” she said.

“No, you need something better than that.”

“Why? What’s going on, Bongi?”

“You should wear this,” said Bongi. Linda looked at the dress that she was holding. It was a white, knee length dress that looked fabulous on her. Kgomotso had bought it for her several years before, in the period before he had started drawing away from her. Linda looked from the dress to Bongi.

“Tell me what’s going on.” she said.

“The others are waiting for us, we need to go.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll be late if we don’t leave now,” said Bongi. She helped Linda into the dress, put her handbag into her hands, and ushered her out of the bedroom.

She led her quickly to the kitchen. Kgomotso looked up, then he did a double take.

“You look great Mama,” said Themba.

“Thank you. Will you tell me what’s going on?”

“Let’s get those things to the car,” said Kgomotso.

“Mama, did you know that Papa has another car now? It’s the one we’re using today,” said Themba.

“Where are we going?” asked Linda.

“Take this, and follow me,” said Kgomotso, putting a box in her arms. She staggered under the weight, then she balanced herself, and followed him.

“Wow! This is a big car,” she said of the Pajero that he was putting a box into. He took the box from her and put it beside two others in the boot.

“Let’s go,” said Themba, as he and Bongi climbed into the car. Kgomotso climbed into the car.

“Come, Mama,” said Bongi. Linda climbed into the car. Kgomotso started singing the children’s favourite travel song, and they joined in. They would not listen to Linda’s questions, or answer them. Kgomotso stopped the car at a house at the opposite end of town.

“Where are we?” asked Linda.

“Come,” said Kgomotso. He helped Linda out of the car, and kept an arm on her elbow, as he led her to the front door.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It opened before they reached it.

“Why are we here?” asked Linda.

“Hello, Mama,” said the young woman standing at the door. Linda stopped. Her heart was pounding furiously.

“Who is she calling Mama?” she asked.

“Come,” said Kgomotso, as he forced her to walk with him. They reached the door, and the young woman hugged Linda. Linda stood stiffly in the embrace. The young woman released her.

“Come in,” she said. She stepped back into the house, and led the way to a lounge.

“Why are we here?” asked Linda.

“Linda!” gasped Jake. He stood hastily when she entered the room.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“The children invited me,” he replied.

“The children?”

“Ntombi and the others. You remember your children?” Linda looked from Jake to Kgomotso.

“Why?” she asked. Her knees gave way, and she was grateful that Kgomotso was there to help her into a seat.

“Mama, are you going to show me my brothers and sisters?” asked Themba. Linda looked at him in a daze.

“Who are you?” asked the young woman that had opened the door.

“This is my Mama, who are you?” asked Themba.

“That’s my Mama!” said the young woman belligerently.

“You’re my big sister?”

“What are you talking about?”

“If this is your Mama, then you’re my sister.”

“Mama, what’s he talking about?” asked the young woman. Linda looked from Themba to her.

“Themba’s my child, and his sister, Bongi, is the elder of the two,” she said. The young woman looked from Linda to Themba, to Bongi, and back to Linda.

“No one told us there were other children!” she said indignantly. Linda looked round the room. There were several young men and women, all looking at her.

“You look just like Mama. My name’s Themba, what’s your name?” Themba asked one of the young men.

“I’m Tumelo,” said the young man. Linda’s heart pounded as she looked at him. The last time that she had seen him, he had been eight months old. Now, he was a strapping young man.

She felt the old pain coming back. It felt as if something heavy was on her chest. She could not breathe. She opened her eyes, the carpet was very close to her eyes. She sat up. She did not remember putting her head between her knees.

“It’s okay, Mama,” said Themba. He was kneeling beside her, with a hand on her arm. She nodded.

“She’s alright, Papa. Buti Tumelo, can you help me? We brought you all some stuff,” said Themba. He led the way out of the house, followed by two young men.

There was a silence as everyone looked at each other. Themba and the others returned.

“This is for you, from all of us,” he said.

“Who is this child who dares speak among adults? Jacob, is your wife coming back into the family?” asked an elderly man.

“I didn’t invite you here, uncle. As I’ve already said, the children invited me. Ask Ntombi what this is about,” said Jake.

“Ntombi, what’s going on here?” asked the man.

“We invited Baba here because Mama was coming, and we hoped they’d get back together,” said the young woman who had met Linda at the front door.

“No one is getting back with anyone,” said Kgomotso.

“And who are you?” demanded the old man.

“I’m the father of MaMthembu’s children, and she’s not getting back together with a man she’s just divorced.”

“MaMthembu only has children with Jacob. What are you talking about?”

“After she was sent away, she met me, and we have two children.”

“How could she marry you? She was already married to Jacob!”

“He had sent her away. She wasn’t his wife anymore.”

“Has she lost the use of her tongue? MaMthembu, have you come here to reconcile with the father of your children?” asked the old man.

“This is the father of my children,” said Linda, as she nodded at Kgomotso, who was sitting beside her.

“You have six children with Jacob! How can you walk away from that?”

“As you recall, I was sent away.”

“How could you leave your children behind?”

“You told me they belonged to Jake, and that I was just a vessel for bringing them into the world.”

“How did you sleep at night, MaMthembu, when you were not there to raise the children you had brought into the world?” asked Jake’s Mama.

“You told me I was an unfit mother.”

“You were fit enough to bring six children into the world, you were fit enough to raise them.”

“Then why did you support Jake in sending me away?”

“We’d all been taken in by that witch, MaShabangu. All she wanted was Jacob’s money. She’s not here anymore, your place beside Jacob is secure.”

“I don’t want it anymore.”

“Hawu!” exclaimed Jake’s mother, clapping her hands on hearing an abominable utterance.

“A wife belongs with her husband, Baba taught us that,” said Ntombi.

“When did you learn that?” Linda asked Jake.

“We invited you here to sort out your differences and...”

“It’s much, much too late for that. Themba, you got what you wanted, we can leave now,” said Linda.

“I don’t know the names of the others,” said Themba.

“I’ll introduce you,” said Tumelo. He started off with the eldest, and named his siblings by order of birth.

Ntombi was the eldest, followed by Mzwandile, Thabiso, Gugulethu, Cebile, and Tumelo was the youngest.

“This is my sister, Sibongile, and I’m Themba,” said Themba.

“I’m not sharing my inheritance with that little boy,” said Mzwandile.

“Why would you share your inheritance with him? You have different fathers,” said Linda.

“I mean the inheritance *you*’ll leave.”

“The only people who’ll inherit anything from me...”

“We haven’t come here to talk about inheritance,” said Kgomotso.

“Then what did you come to talk about?” asked the old man.

“The children wanted to meet their siblings, that’s been done, we’re off now. Ntombi, thank you for organising this.”

“This isn’t what we agreed on. You agreed that our parents need to get back together,” said Ntombi.

“I agreed that you should meet your mother, I didn’t say your parents would get back together. That’s between them.”

“Mama...”

“Let’s go,” said Linda as she stood.

“We need you,” said Ntombi. Linda looked at the young men and women who had been her children.

“Goodbye,” she said, then she led the way out of the house.

She heard the car unlock before she reached it. She climbed into it, closed her eyes, and took several deep breaths.

“Mama?” said a young man. She opened her eyes. Tumelo was standing by her open door.

“Can I see you?” he asked. She was taken aback.

“See me?” she said.

“Please.” He turned to the house. The rest of the family was coming out of the house. He moved closer to her.

“Please, Mama,” he pleaded. She gave him her phone number. He moved away from the car, storing it in his phone.

Kgomotso and the children joined Linda in the car, and Kgomotso drove off.

“I...” said Linda.

“Later,” Kgomotso said in an uncompromising tone. Linda looked out of the window.

“Children, Mama and I need to talk. I’ll take you to aunt Nina’s for a while,” said Kgomotso. The children made approving noises. They were dropped off at Nina’s, then Kgomotso drove to his home.

“Come in,” he said to Linda. She followed him into the kitchen.

“Sit down,” he said, as he switched on the kettle. Linda sat down.

Kgomotso made tea, and brought Linda’s favourite muffins from the fridge. He warmed them, and put them, and the tea cups, on the table. He sat down, and sugared her tea, before sugaring his own. He stirred both cups of tea, and put Linda’s cup before her. He took a sip of his own cup of tea, then he put it on the table, and looked at Linda. She was caressing her cup. He wished that she

would caress him that tenderly. He frowned, to bring his thoughts back to the issue at hand.

“You were shocked to see those young men and women,” he said.

“How could you set that whole thing up and not inform me? You should have told me what was going on! I thought I was going to faint when I realised where I was.”

“I’m sorry about that, but I did what I thought was necessary. I didn’t think you’d agree to go and see them, that’s why I organised it without telling you. Bongi and Themba won’t trouble you about meeting those young people any time soon.”

“I didn’t like it.”

“I know, and I’m sorry to have blind-sided you, but I didn’t see any other way.”

“Did you know that Jake would be there?”

“No, I thought only Ntombi and her siblings would be there.” Kgomotso returned Linda’s long look, then she looked away.

“I’m never going there again,” she said.

“Whatever you want.”

“If the children want to go...”

“I’ll take them.”

“Good.”

“Tumelo followed you out of the house.”

“Oh, yes. He wants to see me.”

“Do you want to see him?”

“I don’t know. I gave him my number.” Kgomotso nodded.

“The last time I saw him, he was eight months old. I’d breast fed him, burped him, and fallen asleep with him on the bed. When I followed Jake to the USA, Tumelo was two years old. I wasn’t allowed to see him, or any of the others. I

was outside Jake's gate. I was there, Kgomotso, and I was denied a glance at my children!" said Linda. She banged a fist on the table. Tears were running down her cheeks. Kgomotso watched as she wiped them away angrily.

"I shouldn't have gone there," she said. Kgomotso put his arms round her and held her tight.

"I'm so sorry," he said. He wanted to absorb her pain. If he had known that it would hurt her so much, he would not have taken her to meet those young people. She was sobbing on his chest.

"I loved them, I loved them so much! They were my reason for living. I wanted to see them into adulthood. I wanted to teach them good manners. I wanted to work as many jobs as necessary, to get them the best education, and I'd have done it too, but I didn't get the chance," she sobbed. He kissed her forehead.

"I swore to myself never to cry about them again. I can't believe I'm crying again! What will that get me? I know tears solve nothing, so why am I crying?" Linda demanded. She withdrew from Kgomotso, and ran out of the room.

Kgomotso closed his eyes, wishing that he could turn back time. He would not have arranged for that meeting had he known the pain that it would bring Linda.

Minutes later, he watched as she returned to the room, and sat down.

"I've warmed your tea," he said.

"Thank you," said Linda, and she took several sips from her teacup.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," said Kgomotso.

"I know." He watched as she sipped her tea, until it was finished.

"I want to get married," he said. She looked at him in shock.

"I know you were worried about how my wife would treat the children, but you don't have to worry about that. She'll treat them very well, she knows how important they are to me," he said.

"I see."

“You don’t have to worry that their inheritance will be threatened. I consider them the eldest, regardless of how many other children I may have.” Linda nodded.

“I’ll keep you informed about my marriage plans,” said Kgomotso. Linda was looking at him as if she was seeing a new side to him.

“Who is she?” she asked. Kgomotso was surprised by the question.

“Does it matter? You’ll meet her as soon as she agrees to marry me,” he replied.

“All I ask is that she treat my children well.”

“They’re our children.”

“I want our children treated well.”

“They will be.” Kgomotso wondered when Linda would open her eyes, and see him as a man.

“Can we go for dinner?” he asked. He watched as she looked at him closely.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ve refused all invitations that I’ve issued, and you made sure to exclude me from so many events in your life.”

“I know.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Can we talk about this over dinner?”

“You’ll change your mind about talking about it.”

“I won’t. We can’t talk about it now, because I have some business to attend to. Can I leave you here? I’ll fetch you later, and we’ll go to dinner.”

“I need clothes.”

“You have clothes here.”

“I haven’t used them in years.”

“They’re in your room. Go and nap if you want to. I’ll see you later,” he said. He stood, gave her a last look, and left.

Kgomotso was very pleased with the result of his business meeting. On his way home, he bought Linda’s favourite biscuits. He found her in the lounge. She looked up from the book that she was reading. He greeted her, and presented her with the biscuits. He was pleased to have surprised her.

He went to freshen up. When he returned to the lounge, Linda had changed. She was wearing a lilac evening gown. Kgomotso was proud that he had bought it for her. He had taken the children clothes shopping some weeks back, and Bongi had said that the gown was made for her mother. Kgomotso had not hesitated to buy it, trusting that Bongi knew her mother’s dress size. The dress fit like a second skin. Kgomotso felt his manhood rising in admiration of Linda. She looked him over.

“You look nice,” she said.

“You are ravishing,” he returned. He feared that he was making her uncomfortable by staring at her, but his eyes refused to leave her.

“Where are we going?” she asked. He could not speak. He brought out his cell phone, and showed her the name of the restaurant on his list of calls made.

“I know where that is. Can I drive your new car?” she asked. He handed her the keys in silence. She put music on as she drove. He sat savouring her company, and her perfume. Themba had said that it was her favourite, and Kgomotso had bought it.

He felt proud to be in his new car, driven by his woman, who was wearing the clothes that he had provided for her. He was going to provide her with the sexiest making foods. He frowned. That was a bad idea. He did not need to be feeling any sexier than he was already feeling, especially as the chances of satisfaction were one in ten billion.

Dinner went well. Linda was relaxed, and enjoyed the meal. After dinner, Nina phoned Kgomotso asking if his children could spend the night with her

children. Kgomoṡo consulted with Linda, and they granted Nina's request. Kgomoṡo was annoyed with himself for yawning.

"I'll take you home," said Linda. She drove him to his home. He could hardly walk. She supported him as she led him into the house with an arm round his waist. He regretted the fact that he was that tired. He would have wanted to put his arms round Linda, and spend all night making love to her, but he could not even unbutton his jacket. He watched sleepily as Linda undressed him.

In the morning, he was surprised to hear noises in the house. He sat up, frowning. He did not have the children or guests, some thief was in the house. He pushed the blankets off the bed, then he heard singing. The voice was unmistakably Linda's. Kgomoṡo relaxed.

After his shower, he found her in the kitchen. She had made breakfast, and she was listening to the news on the radio. He could never understand why she listened to it as if her life depended on it. He stood watching her. The bulletin finished, she stood to switch off the radio.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"What is it about the news that captures your attention that way?" he asked.

"I need to know who to pray for."

"Who to pray for?"

"Everywhere, there are people suffering and hurting. I have a prayer for all people, but I also like to pray for specific people in specific places. I don't know how many times I've prayed for the people in eastern DRC. Things just don't seem to improve there."

"Why keep praying for them?"

"We Africans have to believe in ourselves, and each other, before anyone else can. I pray for Africans, because when you hear what goes on, it makes you think we have no one on our side. We do, we have ourselves."

Kgomoṡo sat down.

“You have a problem with the God of the colonisers, which God do you pray to?” he asked. She looked at him, thinking.

“You know, I don’t know who I pray to. I use the name God, but I know I’m not referring to a white man. I guess I’m praying to whatever great power exists, that can look kindly on us, and bring us good things.”

“Does it work?”

“Sometimes.”

“What happens when it doesn’t?”

“I keep at it. I have to believe that it’ll work out, otherwise, I may as well kill myself, if I believe in the worst case scenario. Breakfast is ready.”

“Are you taking the kids to church?”

“No. Will Nina take them?”

“Her only god, is work.”

“Who’s your god?”

“Jesus, but thinking about what you say, maybe I also need a new one. We should maybe come up with one.”

“You can, I’m too lazy to come up with a new doctrine.”

“What will you do with the children?”

“That’s something we have to decide together. I guess your wife will be in on it too. Who is she?”

“You already asked me that.”

“Tell me, then I can pray for her. Please.”

“No.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“She hasn’t said she’ll marry me.”

“Then let me pray for the two of you.”

“You don’t need a name. Just refer to her as my beloved.”

“I’ll ask the children.”

“They don’t know about my plans.”

“Who does?”

“You.”

“Does Nina know too? Is that why she said I was standing in the way of your happiness?”

“She doesn’t know. Let’s eat, then we’ll fetch the children. I’ll take you all to lunch at a restaurant.”

“It will be just like old times. Hey, you didn’t tell me why you stopped seeing me.”

“It was time.”

“Why?”

“I had things going on.”

“What things?”

“Never mind.”

“I guess I have to get used to being excluded.”

“Why?”

“I don’t imagine your wife will want me around. I know I wouldn’t want another woman hanging around my husband. It’s not as if I’ll ever have one. Here’s your food, eat.” They were silent as they ate.

“I’m sorry you felt excluded,” said Kgomotso. Linda shrugged. She cleared the table, then they went to fetch the children.

After lunch, they all returned to Linda’s home. Kgomotso did not stay long. Linda started making supper. Bongi helped her.

“Is everything alright?” asked Linda.

“Aunt Nina says you were depressed when your marriage ended. She says you stayed with her.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry I said you were a wimp. Aunty told me your in-laws ganged up on you, and removed you by force from your home.”

“It happened a long time ago.”

“She thinks it’s good that we went to see our brothers and sisters.” Linda decided that she would have to talk Nina out of talking about the past with Bongi.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Her phone rang after midnight. She answered it groggily, then she sat up as she listened to Nina talking. The call ended. She felt as if the world was spinning out of control. She lay down, closed her eyes, and took several deep breaths. She felt calmer afterwards. She could not go back to sleep. The children found her in the kitchen in the morning. She had made breakfast.

“Sit down,” she said.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” asked Bongi. Linda did not know how to tell them the news without frightening them. She looked from Bongi to Themba and back. Bongi was closer to Kgomo, she was likely to be more upset than Themba.

“Papa was in a car accident last night,” said Linda.

“What?” said Bongi and Themba.

“Aunt Nina phoned to say that he was in hospital. He’ll be fine.”

“I want to see him,” said Bongi.

“We’ll go there at visiting time.”

“I want to go now!”

“We have to wait for visiting time. It won’t be long now.”

“He could be dying!”

“He isn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I phoned the hospital ten minutes ago, they said he’s stable.”

“You’re hiding the truth from us.”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“You hid your other family from us, what stops you hiding that Papa’s died?”

“He hasn’t died!”

“You’re lying!” Linda felt her blood boil. She threw her teacup across the room, then she threw Bongi’s and Themba’s. She had picked up a plate, when she felt someone hugging her.

“Mama, stop, stop, please!” begged Themba. Linda put down the plate and embraced him. She was breathing hard. She released him, and looked at Bongi out of eyes that were spitting fire.

“Don’t call me a liar, ever! I’ve never lied to you, and I never will. If you ever disrespect me by calling me a liar again...” Linda stopped her words. Bongi was crying. Linda put her arms round her. Bongi shrugged her off half-heartedly, then she subsided.

I can’t believe I was about to disown a child I wanted so badly, and at a time when she fears she’s losing her father, thought Linda. Bongi quieted. Linda released her. She picked up the pieces of broken ceramics, swept, and mopped the floor. She looked at her children when she was done. They were watching her.

“Do you want to go to school, or should I book you off?” she asked.

“Book us off,” said Themba. Linda nodded, then she went to phone the children’s schools in her bedroom.

After the calls, she told herself to calm down, and to be careful not to say anything that she would regret. She returned to the kitchen. The children were looking glum. She packed their breakfast, and told them that she would take them to work with her for a short while, then they would go and see Papa.

The children insisted on staying in the car at Linda’s place of work. She made some phone calls, delegated her work, then she took the children to see their father.

He was asleep.

“Is he dead?” asked a fearful Bongi.

“No,” croaked Kgomotso.

“Papa!” said Bongi. She put her arms round him. Linda stopped herself from telling her to be careful. Bongi wept as she asked Kgomotso how he was feeling.

“I’m fine. You might have broken my rib,” he said. His voice was stronger.

“Sorry,” said Bongi, as she released him.

“Are you alright, Papa?” asked Themba.

“I’m fine.”

“Bongi thought you were dead. She called Mama a liar for not telling us.”

“What?”

“Mama threw cups and...”

“You called your mother a liar?” Kgomotso demanded of Bongi.

“I...” said Bongi.

“Didn’t we talk about respecting parents?”

“I was worried about you.”

“So you called your mother a liar? Where did you learn to do such a despicable thing? I don’t know what culture accepts such behaviour, but where your mother and I come from, you don’t ever call your parents liars. Apologise to your mother this instant!”

“Sorry, Mama.”

“Apology accepted,” said Linda. She did not want Kgomotso getting more upset.

“Which of your friends calls their mother a liar? I’m talking to you!” said Kgomotso.

“None of them do that,” said Bongi.

“Did you ever hear me or your mother call our parents, or each other’s parents, liars?”

“No.”

“Then where did you get the idea that it’s okay to do it?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Themba, if you take after your sister in this respect, I’ll beat you to death.”

“I’d never do that,” said Themba. Kgomoṡo nodded, then he closed his eyes.

“Please don’t die, Papa, please! I’ll never be disrespectful again. Papa, please!” begged Bongi, as she wept.

“I’m not dying! Stop that crying now,” said Kgomoṡo. Bongi calmed down. Kgomoṡo opened his eyes and looked at her.

“I’m fine,” he said. She nodded. He looked at Themba, and held a hand out to him. Themba hugged him briefly, then he withdrew from the embrace.

“What happened last night, Papa? Did someone go through a red robot, or did a drunk driver hit you?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you now. I just need to greet Mama,” said Kgomoṡo, then he looked at Linda.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.”

“I was worried about you, we all were.”

“I’m fine.” Linda nodded, looking him over. She noticed a lump in his bedding. Her eyes opened wider in alarm.

“It’s nothing,” he said.

“But...” she said. He shifted in the bed, and Linda gasped. The lump had been an erection. She looked into his eyes. Kgomoṡo was watching her, with desire. The erection was for her! She sat down. Seeing him in hospital had been shock enough, realising that he desired her was another shock.

“I was driving home. I took the long route, I needed to think. I must have dozed off or something. Next thing I knew, I was in an ambulance. The paramedics said I drove into a pole,” said Kgomoṡo.

“You can never do that again, Papa. You scared us. Next time you’re too tired to drive, sleep at home. You have a bedroom, and if you don’t want to sleep in it, you can share our bedrooms. We’d rather share a bedroom with you, than have you hurt,” Themba said earnestly.

“I’ll do that,” said Kgomoṡo.

“What happened to you?” demanded his mother as she entered the private room.

“I fell asleep at the wheel.”

“MaMthembu, why weren’t you looking after him?” demanded Mme. Linda gasped in shock.

“He was driving from our house,” said Themba.

“If your parents were married and living in the same house, none of this would have happened.”

“Mme...” said Kgomotso.

“Didn’t I tell you to marry the mother of your children?”

“I...”

“Now, you have to spend money on an unnecessary expense.” Linda stood, and Mme sat down, sighing.

“I almost died from fright when your sister told me you’d been in an accident. Are you trying to kill me?” she demanded.

“No, Mme,” said Kgomotso.

“I forbid you to ever be involved in another accident.”

“Yes, Mme.” Nina and Tshepo greeted Kgomotso and his family. Tshepo took a chair to Linda and told her to sit down. She did not do much talking. She sat listening to the family talking.

She realised that Kgomotso would be marrying soon. She felt a very deep, and intense loneliness suddenly, thinking about how she would not be allowed near him were he to be hospitalised again, which she hoped he never would be.

“Are you alright? Linda?” asked Kgomotso.

“I’m fine,” said Linda. She realised that she and Kgomotso were alone in the room.

“Where’s everyone else?” she asked.

“Will you marry me?” Linda looked at him in disbelief.

“I love you, you love me, we’re each other’s best friends. I want to marry you, for you, for me, for our children,” he continued.

His heart was thundering in his chest. The look on her face was not encouraging. She opened and closed her mouth several times, clearly shocked by his proposal.

“What...what about the other woman?” she asked. He frowned.

“What other woman?” he returned.

“The one you said you were going to marry.”

“You’re the only woman I want to marry.”

“No, no,” she said, shaking her head.

“Before you arrived, I was dreaming about you. You were driving me insane with your hands all over my body. I opened my eyes, and there you were. You saw how my body reacted to you,” he said. She continued to shake her head.

“I realised six years ago that I was in love with you. The past four years, I’ve been avoiding proximity to you because I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to resist kissing you, and doing all the things one does to, and with their beloved,” he said. She stared at him in shock.

“Last night, I lost consciousness when the car hit the pole. When I woke up in the ambulance, I prayed, Linda. I prayed that all the powers would spare my life, so I’d tell you my feelings, and at least try to have a relationship with you. I’ve wanted to marry you for a long time, but I held back. I remembered you saying how you’d never have another relationship with a man.

“I’m asking you to take a chance with me. I’m not perfect, I know. I have all the usual faults that make women irritated with men, but what I’m not, is your ex-husband. I will never take the children from you, or belittle you, or do anything else to hurt you. Marry me, Linda, and let’s spend the rest of our lives together.” Linda continued to gape at him wordlessly.

The door opened, and the rest of the family returned.

“Tshepo, will you drive Linda to wherever she’s going? I don’t think she should be driving,” said Kgomotso. He looked from his brother to Linda. She was still in shock.

“What did you say to her?” asked Mme.

“I asked her to marry me.”

“It’s about time. MaMthembu, do the right thing, and marry my son. Kgomotso, we’ll leave you to rest. Get well, and get out of here. This girl would be a fool to marry you if you don’t recover.”

“I’ll be out soon.”

“Good. Now, rest,” said Mme. She kissed his cheek, and left the room. Tshepo and Nina made their goodbyes and left. Kgomotso looked at his children.

“Thanks for coming to see me. I expect you to go to school tomorrow. Mama will bring you to see me in the evening,” he said. The children nodded. He spread his arms wide, and they each gave him a hug.

“Take Mama with you,” he said.

“Did you really ask her to marry you?” asked Themba.

“Yes.”

“I’d like us to be a family.”

“We’re already a family. “

“I want us to live together. Will we take your surname?”

“We’ll see.” The children gave him a last look, then they helped Linda to her feet. She came out of shock.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Visiting time is over, it’s time to go,” said Themba. Linda looked from him to Kgomotso.

“Thanks for coming. I’ve told the children to go to school tomorrow, and that you’ll bring them to see me in the evening,” he said. She nodded.

“I’ve asked Tshepo to drive you.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re in shock.”

“I’m fine now. We’ll see you later. Get well.”

“I will.”

Kgomotso lay looking at the ceiling after they left. He had to get himself discharged, then he could get Linda to agree to marry him, then they would move in together. His children would use his surname, even if it was attached to their mother’s.

They would move into his home. He shook his head, Linda would sooner die than live in someone else’s home. They would have to live in a home that belonged to them both. Themba would welcome the change, would Bongi feel the same way? Kgomotso was not so sure.

He frowned, thinking about Bongi. She needed firm handling, and when they lived together, he would be home to provide the guidance that she so clearly needed. The nurse brought him lunch. He ate, took his medicine, and slept.

Linda took the children home. Her housekeeper was there. She said for Linda to give Kgomotso her best wishes when next she saw him. Linda thanked her, and went to work. She was not very productive. She kept thinking about Kgomotso’s proposal. It had come out of the blue, and taken her completely by surprise.

In the late afternoon, she went to fetch the children at home, and they all went to see Kgomotso. He looked more healthy and energetic. Tshepo, Nina and her husband, and Mme and Ntate were there. Linda and the children were welcomed warmly. Linda felt self-conscious. She had never been self-conscious in the presence of Kgomotso’s family. She felt as if they were all watching her with more interest than usual.

“So, MaMthembu, are you going to marry our son?” asked Ntate. Linda gasped in shock. She had not expected anyone to ask her that blatantly.

“She needs time to think, let’s give it to her,” said Nina. Tshepo started talking about soccer, and Linda relaxed.

“Bongi, Themba, you have school tomorrow. Mama will take you home, now,” said Kgomotso. Linda and the children made their goodbyes, and left. Kgomotso phoned Linda two days later.

“You don’t have to bring the children to the hospital,” he said.

“You don’t want to see them?” asked Linda.

“I was discharged, I’m at home.”

“That’s great news!”

“Come and sleep over, all of you. Please, I don’t want to be alone.”

“Okay.”

At Kgomotso’s, Linda and her children were glad to see that Kgomotso was fine. His housekeeper had cooked. Linda dished up the food, and everyone ate in the kitchen. The children went to do their homework in the dining room. Linda cleared away the dishes.

“Come and talk to me,” said Kgomotso. Linda left the dishes at the sink, and sat at the table. She watched Kgomotso as he watched her.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Fine, and you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you over the shock of my proposal?”

“I’ve decided to let you off the hook.”

“Off the hook?”

“You were in shock after the accident, then you were probably given strong medicines. That proposal was the shock and the drugs talking, I’m not giving it another thought.”

“It was not the drugs and shock, it was me! I want to marry you.”

“Let’s talk when you’re fully recovered.”

“I can’t believe you’re brushing me off.”

“I’m giving you a chance to reconsider.”

“I don’t need a chance to reconsider!”

“Don’t get upset, it can’t be good for you.”

“Linda...”

“Let’s change the subject, please.” Kgomotso was not happy, but he agreed.

Later, he lay awake in his bed, resisting the effect of the sleep-inducing medicines that he had taken. Linda’s letting me of the hook, is she, we’ll see about that, he thought. He decided to look on the bright side. He would use the time on his hands to arrange things to ensure that Linda’s only answer would be yes.

First thing after business hours began, he phoned his lawyer and told him that he was getting married.

“Finally, it happens. I have only one word for you, man. Prenup,” said the lawyer.

“Prenup?”

“Prenuptial contract. It’s the only way to ensure that she doesn’t rip you off.”

“She’d never do that.”

“You say that now, but when you want Leo’s services, you’ll be wondering why you didn’t have a prenup.”

“Is the prenup only about property?”

“It can be about anything you want, the kids, the pets, who sleeps on which side of the bed...what it contains is up to you, within certain parameters.”

Kgomotso was thoughtful after the call. He started to draft a prenup, then he fell asleep. Over the next two days, Linda and the children stayed with him, then they returned to Linda's home.

She phoned him over the following days, to find out how he was.

“I asked Leo for a bill for his services, and he said it had been taken care of. Do you know anything about it?” she asked.

“I sorted things out with him.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“You don't owe me anything.”

“Kgomotso...”

“I wanted to do this, Linda. Let's not argue about it.” They were both quiet.

“Thank you,” said Linda. Kgomoiso relaxed, and smiled.

“You're welcome,” he said.

He spent most of the time that he had been booked off work, working on the prenup. He emailed it to his lawyer, who then phoned to say that he thought it would be acceptable. He wanted to know which lawyer to send it to, and the name of the lawyer's client.

“I'm not finished. This time next week, I'll answer both your questions,” said Kgomoiso.

The following week, he returned to work. He spent the hours after work, polishing the prenup. He then sent it to his lawyer, with details of Linda's lawyer, and Linda's name. The afternoon after he sent the prenup, his lawyer came to his office.

“Has someone died? You never make house calls,” said Kgomoiso.

“I came to see how you're doing.”

“I'm fine.”

“Are you sure about this marriage?”

“Absolutely.”

“I guess it makes sense to marry the mother of your children. Why didn't you do it before?”

“I wasn't attracted to her in that way when we first met.”

“Did the accident show you the way?”

“No, I've wanted Linda for many years.”

“What took you so long?”

“I didn't think she was ready.”

“Is she ready now?”

“I doubt it, but I'm not letting that stop me anymore.”

“Good luck. I just dropped the document off with your fiancée’s lawyer.”

“Thanks.”

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Linda. She was in Kgomoṡo’s office the following afternoon, waving an envelope in her hand.

“The meaning of what? Come and sit down,” said Kgomoṡo. He was on his feet, watching her. She was livid.

“You sent my lawyer a prenuptial contract! What did you do that for? Who said I’m going to marry you?” she demanded. Kgomoṡo went to close the door behind her. She was letting everyone in the building know what she was angry about.

“People who are going to marry each other...” he said.

“We are not getting married!”

“How do you know?”

“Because I vowed never to marry again. I’m not having a repeat of that terrible experience.”

“I’m not your ex-husband.”

“I know! I wouldn’t have asked you to be the father of my children if you were Jake.”

“Then give me a chance. Give us a chance. I know you were hurt, but hurting you isn’t on my to-do list.”

“Kgomoṡo...”

“Let’s not waste time, Linda. Let’s get married, and live what time we have, together.”

“No. I suggest you send that to someone who’ll appreciate it,” she said putting the prenup on his desk, before leaving.

After work, Kgomoṡo phoned Tshepo and asked him to ask Linda for the children. He was happy to oblige. He said that he would talk to Linda immediately. Kgomoṡo asked him to phone him when he had fetched Bongi and Themba.

Towards eight that evening, Tshepo phoned to say that he had fetched Bongi and Themba. Kgomoitso drove to Linda's home. He hoped that she had not decided to go out.

She looked at him in surprise when she opened the door.

"We need to talk," he said, entering her home uninvited. She followed him to the lounge. He sat down, and looked at her. She sat down, frowning.

"Did you even look at this document?" he asked.

"No! What's the point of looking at something that leads nowhere?"

"Read it."

"No!"

"I'm not leaving until you read it."

"Then you'll be here forever."

"I look forward to living with you forever." Linda made a frustrated sound.

"I'm not asking you to sign anything, I'm just asking you to read it," said Kgomoitso.

"Not tonight."

"Okay, I'll spend the night, then you can start on it tomorrow." He watched Linda going into a reverie.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She looked at him.

"Tumelo came to see me at work," she said.

"Tumelo?"

"One of the children..."

"Oh, yes. How did it go?"

"It was horrible."

"What did he do to you? I'll..."

“He told me about his life. It was terrible, Kgomotso. I didn’t bring him, or any other child into the world, to suffer. He was sexually assaulted at the boarding school he was sent to. He goes for therapy, and needs me there.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t know what to do. I want to help him, but I was less than irrelevant in his life, I was non-existent. It’s too late for me to say I’ll help him.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said I’d think about it. What I meant, was that I’d consult you and the children.”

“Have you told the children?”

“They both think I should go.”

“I don’t want him and his siblings taking you away from us.”

“No one is taking me away.”

“If you can help him, help him, but remember that *we* are your family. Your first loyalty is to us. If push comes to shove, and you have to choose between them and us, you choose us, Linda,” he said passionately.

Linda watched him, surprised by his passion.

“I’ll choose Bongi and Themba over everyone, any day, any time,” she said.

“You choose them, and me, we’re a package deal.”

“The children are my family.”

“And so am I. You made us family the day you convinced me to sign that co-parenting agreement.”

“Look...”

“You look. I’m serious about us getting married. I’m as much your family as the children are. Who did you call first when you wanted to celebrate after your divorce?”

“You.”

“Who did you ask to accompany you to functions?”

“You, but you refused.”

“The refusals are irrelevant. You asked me, because you love and trust me, and you know I feel the same way about you. Let’s take the next step, and get married. After reading the prenup, you’ll see how very different this marriage will be, from your first one.”

“Why would you even think of marrying me? Marry a young woman, who can give you children.”

“You already gave me children.”

“They don’t have your blood in their veins.”

“No one in my family knows that, they all think Bongi and Themba are my biological children.”

“You didn’t tell them we adopted them?”

“I didn’t think they’d understand.”

“How did you explain my not being pregnant before either of them arrived?”

“I kept you away from them in the months before we got them.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“I was relieved when you didn’t ask why I was keeping you from them. That takes care of your concern about giving me children. Is there anything else worrying you?”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“Only because of the experiences in your last marriage. Read the prenup, and see how very different this marriage will be. Do you have any other reason for refusing to marry me? Answer that when you’ve read the document. I’m sorry, I’m too tired to drive. Can I go and sleep?”

“Yes,” said Linda. She frowned as she watched him leaving the room. He was not supposed to have come to her home. He was supposed to have understood that she wanted him to stay away from her. She looked at the envelop that he had put on the table, then she looked away. She was too tired to look at it.

## CHAPTER SIX

In the morning, she found a note, saying that Kgomotso had gone out on an errand, and that he would return in time for lunch. She ate, cooked lunch, then she went to read the prenup. When she was done, she put the document down in disbelief. She re-read it, then she sat back, thinking.

“Hi,” said Kgomotso. Linda looked up at him. There was so much that she wanted to say, but words would not leave her mouth. Kgomotso sat down.

“Did you look at the prenup?” he asked. She nodded.

“What did you think of it?” he asked. Linda could not speak.

“Will you marry me?” asked Kgomotso. Linda nodded. She watched him stand and approach her. He helped her to her feet, looked deep into her eyes, then he kissed her. It was a deep and thorough kiss, that left her weak in the knees, panting, as she looked into his very aroused eyes.

She broke eye contact, as she tried to deal with the fact that she was aroused. She had thrown sex completely out of her mind. With just one kiss, Kgomotso had reminded her that she was more than a mother and business person, she was also a woman.

She sat down. Kgomotso sat down too.

“I think we should tell the children, then register to get married. I’ll talk to your brother about magadi, then we’ll get married. Do you want a big ceremony? I do. I’ve never married, and now that I’m doing it, I want to do it properly. Can we have a big wedding?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You really want to marry me, and you want the marriage to work,” marvelled Linda.

“Yes, I do.” Linda looked deep into Kgomotso’s eyes.

“I’ll keep my home, you don’t have to make me co-owner of your home,” she said.

“I want to. If anything happens to me, I want to be sure you and the children will have a home.”

“I’ll keep this one.”

“I want to do this.”

“You expect me to give this one up?”

“Only if you want to.”

“Thank you for allowing the children to keep my surname.”

“I’ll never take them from you.”

“I’ll appreciate that.”

Over the next three months, Linda attended several therapy sessions with Tumelo. Sometimes, after therapy, they would have coffee together. Linda found him to be sensitive and very clever. She marvelled that he wanted contact with her. She told Kgomotso that in Tumelo’s shoes, she would want nothing to do with a mother that had abandoned her.

She and the children moved their property into Kgomotso’s home. Everyone helped to rearrange furniture, to add the furniture from Linda’s home, and with decisions of what furniture to sell, what to keep, what to replace, and how to decorate the home. Kgomotso was happy with the new look of his home.

He arranged for Nina to take the children to her home after the wedding. His housekeeper and Linda’s housekeeper agreed to work together. Linda suggested that they control certain areas separately, to avoid stepping on each other’s toes. She had them work together several times a week, in order for things to flow smoothly when she and the children moved to Kgomotso’s home.

The wedding day arrived. Linda was a nervous wreck. Bongi had to help her several times to breathe deeply, and calm down. She was relieved when everything was over. She was in the bedroom of the hotel suite that she and Kgomotso had booked into for their honeymoon. She was in a negligee, having just bathed.

“Hi,” said Kgomotso. Linda turned to look at him. He had just freshened up. He was wearing a towel round his waist. Linda had seen him that way many times, but today, it felt different. Today, he was her husband.

“You look great,” he said. She watched as he approached her. He looked deep into her eyes, then he put his hands, one on either side of her head. He kissed her deeply. When the kiss ended, he sat on the bed.

“If you don’t want to be intimate with me tonight, I suggest you say so now. Once I get my hands on you, you’ll be lucky to get out of bed before we have to check out,” he panted. Linda could feel her heart pounding with excitement.

“Do you want me to leave?” asked Kgomotso.

“No,” said Linda. Kgomotso gave her a long look, then he looked down her body.

“Take that off, you’re over dressed,” he said.

Linda suddenly felt shy. She took several deep breaths to calm herself, but it did not work. She ran into the bathroom. She closed the door and leaned on it, breathing deeply.

“Linda? Linda, what’s wrong?” asked Kgomotso. Linda could not reply. She took several more breaths, then she opened the door. Kgomotso was standing outside the door, a hand on either side of the door jamb. He looked big, and very sexy.

“Sorry, I got nervous,” said Linda.

“I’m nervous too.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you either.” Kgomotso held a hand out to her. She put her hand in his, and he led her to the bed. They sat down, watching each other. Linda looked at her negligee, then she took it off. She looked up when Kgomotso gasped.

He was running his eyes over her body with admiration. That gave her confidence a big boost. She stood, and removed her sexy lingerie. All the time, she was aware of Kgomotso watching her. She put a hand on his towel, and loosened it. He stood, it remained on the bed. Linda looked his body over. He looked fantastic. He was toned from the gyming that he did.

“You are gorgeous,” he said. She looked into his eyes.

“So are you,” she said. She ran a hand on his chest, her second hand joined the first one. She could not believe how good it felt to touch him. He leaned down and kissed her.

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him back. She broke the kiss, and looked into his eyes. She gasped, feeling his hand on her left breast. He fondled and caressed her, and her knees weakened. She closed her eyes as he kissed his way down her throat to her breast. He kissed her breast all over, then he sucked on her nipple. Her knees refused to hold her up. She sagged, gasping with pleasure. Kgomotso took his mouth off her, and she opened her eyes, disappointed.

Kgomotso was looking into her eyes. He wanted her, and that made her heart beat faster.

“Come,” he said, helping her onto the bed. She lay back and watched as he leaned over her and kissed her gently.

He joined her on the bed, kissing her. She kissed him, and caressed his back. She lowered her hands to his buttocks. She ran her hand up his back, to his shoulders, and over them, onto his chest. Her heart was pounding as she felt his hand caress her breast. He sucked on her, and his hand caressed down her stomach, to the place between her legs. She stiffened.

Kgomotso caressed her mound, and thighs, but she seemed to become even more uncomfortable, instead of relaxing. He raised his head from kissing her breasts, and looked at her.

“What's the matter?” he asked. Linda's head was turned away from him, her eyes were closed, and there were tears on her cheeks.

“Linda? What is it?” he asked, starting to worry. She shook her head.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked. She shook her head.

“Won't you at least look at me?” he said. She shook her head. Kgomotso moved off her, and sat up. Linda sat up, and turned her back on him.

“Was it something I did, or something I didn't do?” asked Kgomotso.

“It's not you, it's me,” said Linda, in a low voice.

“What are you talking about?”

“I don't have it in me to please a man.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jake said...”

“I'm not Jake!”

Linda turned to look at Kgomotso.

“You don't understand! He went to another woman, because I'm defective,” she said earnestly.

“You are not defective!”

“My touch, my kiss, the way I look and dress, all that, just makes a man want to throw up.”

“It does not! When I see you, when you touch and kiss me, my heart beats so fast, it feels as if it'll burst out of my chest. I feel like a teenager, being driven over the edge by excitement and enthusiasm,” Kgomotso said. His hands were on Linda's upper arms. She stared at him in shock.

“I want you touching me all day, every day. You bring me more pleasure than I knew it was possible to have,” said Kgomotso.

“Oh!” said Linda.

Kgomotso watched as she digested his words.

“So I'm not defective and useless?” she said.

“You're the most fantastic lover I've ever had. You know I've had many lovers.” Linda nodded slowly. Her look of concern became a little smile, then it became a big smile.

“Am I truly the best lover you've ever had?” she said.

“Why talk about it, instead of showing me?” Linda looked deep into his eyes, then she leaned towards him, and kissed him. The kiss heated quickly. Linda broke it, to look at Kgomotso. He was on his back on the bed, they were chest to chest, and she was caressing between his legs. His eyes were closed, he had a look of pleasure pain. She became more confident. She kissed down his chest, towards his belly.

“No,” said Kgomotso. Linda continued to kiss her way down his belly. She frowned when he took her hand from his manhood. She raised her head, and looked at him enquiringly.

“If you carry on that way, it will all be over before it's even started,” he panted. She looked at him, puzzled, then she realised what he meant. Her heart filled with joy, because she was pleasing him.

“I need you to keep your hands to yourself for a few minutes,” he said, rolling over, so that she was on her back.

He kissed her throat, and down to her breasts. Her heart pounded with excitement. He kissed and sucked her nipples as he caressed his way down her stomach. When she felt his hand between her legs, she gasped, and helped to facilitate his caresses.

“Kgomotso!” she gasped, feeling her body going into pleasure overdrive. She put a hand on his wrist to stop his caresses before she went over the edge, then she closed her eyes as her body flew over the edge of pleasure.

She opened her eyes, panting. Kgomotso was looking at her.

“I'm sorry, I should have waited for you,” she said. He shook his head, smiling.

“There's nothing to be sorry about,” he said, leaning down to kiss her. She caressed him as he caressed her. She was amazed that her body was preparing for more pleasure. Kgomotso gave her a long kiss. She gasped, as she felt him joining his body to hers.

They stilled, then they started moving together slowly. Linda gasped and panted, feeling more pleasure in her body. They moved faster, and she threw her head back as the pleasure took over. She shuddered and shook beneath its waves.

When she opened her eyes, Kgomotso was also shuddering with pleasure. He collapsed on her. She put her arms round him as they both caught their breaths.

He lay beside her, and held her close. She felt cherished. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Linda? What is it? What's wrong?” asked Kgomoṡo. Linda could not respond. The tears eventually stopped. She raised her head and looked at Kgomoṡo.

“Sorry,” she said.

“What is it?”

“It's been so long since I felt cherished, and valued. When you put your arms around me, it just made me realise how lonely I've been.”

“Do you want me to not hold you?”

“I want you to *never* stop holding me.” The frown of concern left Kgomoṡo's face. He smiled, and kissed Linda tenderly. They lay still a while, then Linda went to bath while Kgomoṡo showered. They ordered room service, ate, and slept.

Three days later, they checked out of the hotel. Linda drove them home.

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” asked Kgomoṡo.

“A fabulous honeymoon, and a beautiful wedding day. Your family behave as if they want us to be married to each other.”

“They do.”

“I'll do my best to keep them feeling that way.”

“The only one I want you focusing on, is me. I want to be married to you, and how my family feels about it, is their business. I'm sorry, I have to leave tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“I'll be back.”

“We'll be here.”

At home, the children were back from Nina's home. They hugged and congratulated their parents.

“Did you enjoy your honeymoon?” asked Themba. Linda felt her blood heat with embarrassment.

“Yes,” replied Kgomotso.

“What did you do?” asked Themba.

“Themba!” gasped Bongi.

“We talked, and exercised,” said Kgomotso. Linda almost laughed. They had exercised alright!

“I’m going away tomorrow,” said Kgomotso.

“You’re leaving us? Already? You just got married!” said Bongi.

“I’m going on business, I’ll be back in ten days.”

“Oh,” said Bongi. The look of distress on her face subsided.

“Our family’s complete now, and nothing, and no one, will separate us,” said Kgomotso. Bongi nodded.

Four evenings after Kgomotso left on his business trip, Linda and the children were dining.

“I miss Papa,” said Bongi.

“He’s coming back,” said Linda.

“He shouldn’t travel so much anymore, he has a family now.” Linda quietly agreed with that. She was amazed at herself for missing Kgomotso so much. She had spent the three days of their honeymoon in his company, almost exclusively. They had come home, and she had felt a little jealous of the attention that he had given the children.

She had never been jealous of attention going to her children. She felt a little guilty about her feelings. She missed Kgomotso in bed beside her. She missed hearing him breathing beside her, or holding her. She admitted to herself that she was addicted to his touch. She was short tempered, and attributed it not receiving kisses and touches from her husband.

She returned home the following day, to find him in their bedroom. He looked up at her as she opened the door.

“I thought you were in...” she said. He stood, approached her, closed the door, and kissed her deeply and thoroughly. When the kiss ended, she was lying on her back on the bed, panting as Kgomotso undressed her. She kissed him as he took her top off, and fondled her breasts. A knock on the door startled them.

“Mama, can I come in?” asked Themba. Linda could not reply.

“Mama? Mama,” called Themba.

“Just...just a minute,” said Linda. She and Kgomotso hastily rose from the bed, and fixed their clothes. Linda smiled, noticing Kgomotso’s erection.

“It’s your fault,” he said, as he kissed her. He sat on the bed.

“Keep him from me,” he said. Linda went to open the door with the intention of heading Themba away from the bedroom. He slipped past her into the room, followed by Bongi.

“We want to hear all about your trip, Papa,” said Themba, as he went to sit beside Kgomotso. Linda looked at him. He was very uncomfortable. Bongi sat on the other side of him.

“Papa’s going to shower, then he’ll talk to us,” said Linda.

“I want to hear about his trip now,” said Themba.

“If he doesn’t shower, he’ll fall asleep, then he won’t tell us anything.” Themba looked from Linda to Kgomotso, then he left the room, followed by Bongi.

“Thanks,” said Kgomotso as he stood. Linda kissed him.

“You shouldn’t have done that. There’s no chance I’m letting you go now,” he panted, as he ran his hands down her back. Reluctantly, she drew away from him.

“The children are waiting for you,” she said. He nodded, then he went to the bathroom.

“You have a very sexy bottom,” she said. He turned to look at her, as surprised as she was by her statement. He smiled and her heart started pounding again.

“If you look at me like that, the children will have to come looking for us,” he said. She went to the kitchen.

The housekeepers were quarrelling, again. Linda had to referee, but it did not help. She sent them both home, and finished cooking. She would have to fire one of them, but which one, she asked herself. She looked up as Kgomotso and the children joined her. They all sat down.

“Papa’s going to tell us about his trip,” said Themba. Linda dished up the food, put it on the table, and sat down. Themba asked questions about the things that his father had done and seen in Australia. Kgomotso was an entertaining and exciting speaker. He had the family in stitches at times, and at others, they could almost see and feel the places that he was describing.

“When I grow up, I want a fun job just like yours, Papa,” said Themba. Kgomotso smiled at him, then he looked at Linda.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“The housekeepers are not working out. We have to get rid of one of them, or both, and get someone new,” said Linda.

“I’ve never liked Papa’s housekeeper. Fire her, Mama,” said Bongi. Linda was surprised that Bongi preferred MaNzima, when they had had several disagreements.

“We can’t just fire her, she has a family to feed. I’ll see if she can join the staff of my cleaning company. I’ll speak to her tomorrow,” said Kgomotso. Linda was relieved that he would do it, she had never taken to the woman. The children went to watch TV.

“It’s good to have you back. We’ve all missed you,” said Linda.

“I missed you all, too,” said Kgomotso as he stood. He helped Linda to her feet, then he kissed her.

”I love you,” he panted.

“I love you, too,” she panted back. He released her, she fell back into her chair, dazed.

“It’s Themba’s bedtime, I’ll see him to sleep,” said Kgomotso. He kissed Linda’s forehead, and left the room. Linda eventually calmed down, and cleared up. Bongi came to help her. Linda looked at her in surprise.

Bongi would rather be skinned alive, than do the dishes. Linda stopped herself from asking her why she was helping. She was going to appreciate the help as long as it lasted.

Afterwards, Bongi said goodnight curtly, and left. Linda stared after her. Kgomotso came into the room.

“She’s not speaking to me,” he said.

“Why not?”

“I told her to help you with the dishes, tonight, and every night, otherwise, I’ll take both housekeepers to my cleaning company.” Linda nodded.

“We weren’t expecting you back yet,” she said.

“I missed you all, so I delegated, and came home. I’ll be doing less travelling from now on. Bongi told me to behave like a father and husband, not like a bachelor.”

“Sounds like you had an interesting talk.”

“We had an honest talk, and now, you and I are going to have one. Sit down.” Linda sat down, Kgomotso joined her.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Spoiling the children isn’t a loving thing to do,” he said.

“Spoiling them?”

“You let Bongi walk all over you, and you back down if she bristles.”

“I...”

“That stops now. We are not raising brats. Themba’s fine for now, but only because he’s got more ubuntu naturally, than because you haven’t spoilt him. I’m not taking the children from you. You have no reason to treat them as if they’ll break.

“Now, they have a live-in father, you have no excuse to feel guilty about having them out of wedlock. You will not spoil them anymore. They need to learn to live with other people. Bongi will be expected to help in the kitchen, Themba will be expected to help in other ways. We will raise these children to have ubuntu, and to be respectful, of themselves, and others. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes.”

“Be their mother, Linda, not their friend.”

“I can be both.”

“Sometimes, yes, but there are times when you have to be a mother. Did you ever overlook bad behaviour in your other children?” Linda drew back in shock, and pain.

“How can you ask me that?” she gasped.

“Did you let Ntombi get away with bad behaviour? Did you?”

“No.”

“Then why do it with Bongi? You know I won’t take her from you.” Linda had no response.

“It’s more loving to be her mother than to overlook bad behaviour in exchange for her friendship,” said Kgomotso. They shared a long look, then he kissed her cheek, and left the room.

Linda sat back in her chair, and closed her eyes. Kgomoitso was right, she did need to be a parent, and not try to be Bongi's age-mate and friend. She was afraid that she had left it too late to start disciplining her. Would it work?

She opened her eyes. When she had first opened her business, she had bluffed her way through, feigning knowledge and confidence. She would bluff her way through being Bongi's parent. She would do her best, and hope that it would work.

Next morning, Tumelo came to see her in her office.

"Can I come and see you at home?" he asked. She almost dropped her teacup.

"What for?" she demanded. He looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"You're my mother!" he said, as if that explained everything. Linda put down her teacup.

"I...I..." she said. She could not formulate an answer in her head, let alone out loud.

"Surprise!" said Kgomoitso as he came into the office.

"Oh, I didn't know you were busy," he continued.

"Hello, Papa," said Tumelo.

"Hello. Have we met?" asked Kgomoitso.

"I'm Tumelo, we met some months back."

"Oh, Ntombi's brother."

"Yes."

"I'll leave."

"No, I have to go. When can I come see you, Mama? Or would you rather come to my place? You can bring Themba and our sister. I'd like to get to know them better." Linda looked at him in shock, then she looked at Kgomoitso.

"You want to visit us?" he asked.

"Yes," said Tumelo. Kgomoitso looked from him to Linda and back.

"Does your mother have your number?" he asked.

“Yes.”

“She’ll let you know when you can come.” Tumelo looked at Linda doubtfully.

“She’ll call, Tumelo. You have a right to see her, and she knows that,” said Kgomotso. Tumelo made his goodbyes, and left.

Kgomotso looked at Linda. She was still in shock. He kissed her cheek, she looked at him, then she started, and looked round the office.

“Where’s Tumelo?” she asked.

“He just left. I told him you’d arrange with him for him to visit us.” Linda looked at him uncertainly.

“It will be fine, Linda. Relax, and see what happens,” said Kgomotso.

“What does he want? I’m already doing therapy, what more can I do for him?”

“It sounds like he wants his mother, and accepts her other children.”

“Why?”

“You can ask him that. I missed you, so I thought I’d drop by. Are you busy? Can we have some coffee together?”

“Yes, we can.” Kgomotso left after they had eaten their breakfast.

He had been worried about Linda after the talk that they had had the night before. He did not know how things would work out, but he was sure that he did not want Bongi being the talk at gatherings, because she refused to do what all girls were expected to do.

He was also certain that he would not have her insulting her mother. He had never been as shocked as he had been, when Themba had told him that she had called their mother a liar. Bongi needed firm handling, and she was going to get it.

Linda returned home after work. Bongi was having another fight with the housekeepers.

“Enough, Bongi!” said Linda. Bongi and the housekeepers looked at her.

“Apologise to these ladies, now,” thundered Linda. Bongi apologised, then Linda asked the housekeepers to leave.

“You should fire them both,” said Bongi.

“Sit down, Sibongile,” said Linda.

“I have to...”

“Sit down!” Bongi sat down. Linda put down her handbag, and looked at her.

“What was that?” she demanded.

“They...”

“You don’t ever, ever raise your voice to someone who’s older than you.”

“But they...”

“Ever, Sibongile! It shows ill-breeding, lack of ubuntu, and lack of self-respect. Don’t do it again.”

“Or what?” asked Bongi snidely. Linda could not believe that her own child had spoken to her that way. She stared at her in shock. Bongi returned the look.

“Just as I thought, all words, and nothing to back it up,” she said, then she left the room.

Linda saw a red curtain before her eyes. Then next thing she knew, she was storming into Bongi’s room. Bongi was on a call. She looked at Linda in surprise. Linda grabbed the phone from her and cut the call, then she took the laptop off her desk.

“These will be returned to you when you learn to talk to your elders with respect. Next time I see, or hear, that you shouted at someone older than you, I’ll cut your credit card, take you out of the school you’re in, so you can stay home, and do the cooking, cleaning, and ironing that the women you disrespect are doing for you,” she said.

“That’s not fair!” said Bongi. Linda left the room. Bongi followed her, trying to get her phone and computer back. They struggled, being the same height. Bongi was stronger. Linda pushed her away hard. She fell, and Linda’s heart almost stopped, until Bongi cursed. Linda walked away.

“You have no right to take my things away from me,” yelled Bongi. Linda looked at her.

“I gave them to you, I can take them if I think you don’t appreciate them. Being rude and disrespectful strikes me as unappreciative of the good things that make your life so much easier than that of most girls your age in this country. You’ll have to earn them back.”

“Never! I’ll tell Papa.”

“You’ll tell me what?” asked Kgomotso.

“Mama’s taking my things away from me,” Bongi said sulkily.

“Did you tell Papa why I’m doing it?” asked Linda.

“Because you’re mean!” said Bongi.

“I don’t need to know why. If Mama took them away from you, she must have a good reason, and I support her decision,” said Kgomotso.

Linda looked at him in surprise. Jake had always opposed all her disciplinary measures.

“Is dinner on the table? We’re all starving,” said Kgomotso. Bongi looked at him in shock.

“Do you want me to hire both housekeepers as cleaners?” asked Kgomotso. Bongi stood angrily, and made her way to the kitchen.

“Hi, Themba. Help your sister. Hi,” Kgomotso said, looking from Themba to Linda.

“Hi. Hi, Themba,” she said.

“Hi, Papa, hi, Mama,” Themba said, as he went to the kitchen. Linda looked at Kgomotso.

“You look like you need a hug,” he said.

“Now that you mention it, I would appreciate a hug,” said Linda. Kgomotso approached her, then he looked at the things that she was carrying.

“She...” said Linda.

“I don’t want to know. If you put those down, I can give you a very good hug.” They went to their bedroom, Linda put Bongi’s things under lock and key, then she turned to Kgomotso. He put his arms round her and held her close.

She sighed, returning the embrace. Kgomotso kissed her gently, then he looked at the place containing Bongi’s things.

“That’s not a secure place. She’ll break into that cupboard when she comes from school, and return everything before you come home,” he said. Linda looked at the cupboard helplessly.

“I’ll take care of this. Give me the key,” said Kgomotso. Linda gave it to him, then she went to freshen up.

She found everyone seated round the kitchen table.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said.

“Let’s eat,” said Kgomotso. Bongi did not eat, and she left the table with Themba, who had finished eating first. They both washed their dishes, and left.

“They’ll be putting dinner on the table, and cleaning up after themselves from now on,” said Kgomotso. Linda nodded, surprised.

“I’m thinking we all go away this weekend. It will do the children good to have an outing that excludes extended family,” he continued.

“I can’t make it this weekend. My brother asked me to talk to his daughter. She’s getting married soon.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“He came to see me today, just before close of business.”

“Can we do it next weekend?”

“Yes.”

“When does Bongi get her things back?”

“When she’s been polite for at least a month.”

“Alright.”

“Will you be home for the weekend, or should I arrange for the children to go somewhere?”

“I’ll be home. How long will you be gone?”

“I’ll leave on Friday evening, and be back on Saturday evening.”

Over the next few days, Bongi was monosyllabic and miserable. Linda knew that if Kgomoṡo had not been living with them, she would have given in, and returned Bongi’s belongings. Kgomoṡo pretended that he did not notice Bongi’s sulks. He would hug her and talk to her as if everything was fine.

On Friday evening, he drove Linda to her brother’s home, then he took a cab home after dinner. Linda missed him as she shared her niece’s bedroom with several other women, who had all been invited to come and teach Helen about being a wife and mother.

The following day, she could not wait for the day to end. She drove home fast.

“Is everything alright?” asked Kgomoṡo when she arrived home.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Then why were you driving as if there’s an emergency?”

“There is, I was missing my husband.” The look of concern left Kgomoṡo’s face.

“Is that right?” he said.

“I thought I might give him...” said Linda, then she noticed Themba joining her and Kgomoṡo at the car.

“Hi, Mama. Welcome back,” he said.

“Hi,” said Linda.

“What’s taking so long? Papa and I are in the middle of something.”

“I was just telling him what I was doing. He’ll be with you just now.”

“I’m waiting, Papa,” said Themba, then he returned to the house.

Linda focused on Kgomoṡo.

“I was thinking of giving my husband a big kiss when I met him, before taking him to the bedroom for...” she said. Kgomotso kissed her. They panted, leaning against each other.

“Too much talk, not enough action,” said Kgomotso.

“Papa,” called Themba.

“I expect you to deliver on that unfinished promise,” said Kgomotso, as he led Linda into the house. He went to join Themba in the lounge, as Linda went to the kitchen. She had left her brother’s home before dinner had been served.

“Hi, Bongi,” she said.

“Hi,” said Bongi.

“Have you had supper?”

“Yes.”

“Is there any left for me?”

“No.” Linda thought she detected glee in Bongi’s answer.

“Never mind,” she said, as she opened the fridge. It was empty, as was the pantry. She picked up her handbag, and went to the lounge.

“We need food, I’m going to the shops,” she said.

“I’ll come with you,” said Kgomotso.

“Papa...” said Themba.

“We’ll finish later,” said Kgomotso, as he hurried to Linda’s side.

“Bongi,” he called. Bongi joined them in the lounge.

“Mama and I are going to get some food. We won’t be long. Look after your brother, and the house. Come,” said Kgomotso, taking Linda’s hand. She was amazed by how fast he rushed her to the car. He took the keys from her, and helped her into the passenger seat. He drove off quickly.

“What’s the rush?” she asked.

“I want time with my wife. I love our children dearly, but I don’t get time to be intimate with you when they’re around. I never thought I’d ever be jealous of

children, especially mine, but I am. We need to send them somewhere so we can be alone, just the two of us,” he said. They shopped, then they sat in the car.

“Are we leaving?” asked Linda.

“You’re very quiet. Are you alright?”

“I’m relieved that I’m not the only one jealous of the children.”

“Is that all that’s worrying you?”

“Tumelo’s coming for lunch tomorrow.”

“What’s the problem? You’re used to him now, and the children know about him and the others. It’ll be fine. I don’t think he’d come to cause problems.” Linda nodded. Kgomotso drove home.

Linda started cooking.

“Your son’s coming to lunch?” asked Bongi. Linda looked at her in surprise.

“Papa just told us. What does he want?” asked Bongi.

“That question is for me to ask, not you. He’s older than you, and you will respect him.” Bongi looked away from Linda. Linda tried to continue with her cooking, but instead, she started crying.

“Mama? What’s wrong?” asked Bongi. Linda tried to pull herself together, but it did not work.

“Mama?” said Bongi.

“I’m...fine,” said Linda, between tears. She was startled to feel hands turning her. Bongi put her arms round her, and she clung to her, weeping.

“What is it?” asked Kgomotso.

“I asked about Tumelo, and she started crying,” said Bongi. Kgomotso took Linda into his arms and held her.

“Mama?” said Themba. Linda pulled herself together, and drew away from Kgomotso.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I just remembered Tumelo’s favourite song. Sorry. I’m alright now,” Linda said. Bongi and Themba left.

“Talk to me,” said Kgomotso.

“I heard the song in my head, then and I remembered rocking him to sleep as I sang it. After leaving the children, I’d cry myself to sleep every night, wondering if he was crying himself to sleep, being handled by people he didn’t know.” They were quiet for a while.

“I’m sorry. I vowed a long time ago not to cry about things I can’t change. This just caught me off guard. Do you want some of this soup?” she asked.

“No, thanks. I don’t think you should mention Tumelo’s favourite song when he comes. I doubt he remembers anything from that long ago.”

“They all remember feeling abandoned.”

“You didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I know, but it doesn’t make me feel better.”

“What can I do?”

“About what?”

“To make the pain go away?” She looked at him in surprise.

“I hate to see you in pain, and it doesn’t feel good to do nothing to stop it,” he said.

“I don’t know what you can do.”

“Can I hire caterers for tomorrow’s lunch, then you won’t have to worry about anything. Bongi promised to be on her best behaviour, and you know Themba’s keen to cement relations with his other siblings. I think you can trust him to behave himself. Will that make things better for you?” Linda kissed him deeply.

“Oh!” said a voice. Linda and Kgomotso stopped kissing. Linda realised that she was on Kgomotso’s lap. She stood hastily, and sat in the chair beside him. Her knees would not hold her up. She looked at a stunned Bongi.

“Is everything alright?” asked Kgomotso.

“I...I...” said Bongi, with her eyes on Linda.

“Have you come to help with the cooking?” asked Linda.

“No! I came to get some water,” said Bongi, then she left the room.

“She forgot her water,” said Linda. She looked at Kgomotso.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Has she ever seen you with a lover?”

“Why do you ask?”

“She was shocked, by you. She’s seen me with women, has she seen you with men?”

“The only man she ever saw me with, was you, and we weren’t involved.”

“That’s why she’s so shocked. She’ll have to get used to it. I’m going to be all over you, lady, and those aren’t just words. Eat, you need to rest for tomorrow. I’ll be in the bedroom when you’re done,” he said, then he left the room.

“Are you alright?” asked Bongi a few minutes later. Linda looked up from her meal.

“I’m fine, shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“I was worried about you.”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” said Linda. In the bedroom, she found Kgomotso in bed. She freshened up, and approached him. He was watching her. He removed the blankets that were covering him.

“Get into the correct attire,” he said. She smiled, he was stark naked. She took off her negligee, and joined him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Next day, everyone helped to clean the house, then they freshened up. When Linda was dressed, she found the caterers in the kitchen.

“We have everything under control, Mrs Mokoena. Please, go and sit down, and don’t worry about a thing,” said Dina, the head caterer. Linda went to the dining room. Everything was in place. She went to the lounge.

“Tumelo!” she gasped. He stood, kissed her cheek, and helped her into a seat.

“Hello, Mama,” he said.

“Hello,” she said. She could not believe that he was already in her home.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m...I’m fine, how are you?”

“I’m happy to be here. I hope you don’t mind, I brought Ntombi and Mzwandile.”

“Oh!” said Linda. Only then did she notice Ntombi and Mzwandile.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello, Mama,” they said together. She looked from Ntombi to Mzwandile.

“Let’s have some drinks,” said Kgomotso. Linda looked at him. He winked at her, she smiled. She looked at Bongsi and Themba, who were serving the drinks.

“How are our other brothers and sisters doing?” Themba asked Tumelo.

“They’re fine.”

“Are you bringing them with you next time you come?” Themba went to sit beside Tumelo.

“We’ll have to ask Mama, then I’d have to see if they’re free.”

“Can they all come, please, Mama?” asked Themba.

“We’ll talk about that another time,” said Kgomotso.

“Are you married, Ntombi?” asked Linda. Ntombi smiled, and raised her left hand.

“That’s a big rock,” said Bongi. She went to sit beside Ntombi, and studied her ring.

“I’ve been married for four years,” said Ntombi.

“Do you have children?” asked Linda.

“Yes, I have three.” Linda drew back in surprise.

“I had two of them before I got married,” said Ntombi.

“Oh!” said Linda.

“She was lucky enough to find a man willing to raise her bastards for her,” said Mzwandile.

“What are bastards?” asked Themba.

“Children born when their parents are not married, because the parents are badly behaved,” said Mzwandile.

“Don’t ever call anyone that. It’s hurtful, and uncalled for,” said Linda.

“Mama had us before she and Papa got married,” said Themba.

“Oh!” said a shocked Mzwandile, then he looked at Linda as if he had heard that she had done something wicked.

“But they’re married now, so we’re not bastards anymore,” said Themba.

“You were never bastards! No child is a bastard,” said Linda.

“All children born out of wedlock...” said Mzwandile.

“You were born out of wedlock,” said Linda.

“I was not!”

“Your father married me when you were six months old.” Mzwandile stuttered and stammered.

“Am I an uncle, Mama?” asked Themba. Linda looked at him, then she nodded slowly.

“Yes, you’re an uncle to Ntombi’s children,” she said.

“I’m so glad there’s someone who has to respect me, whether or not they want to. How old are your children?” Themba asked Ntombi.

“Sixteen, ten, and three,” said Ntombi. Linda gasped in shock. Ntombi did not look old enough to have a sixteen year old child.

“When can I meet them?” asked Themba.

“Another time. Are any of the others married?” asked Linda.

“Wandi and I are the only married ones. You’ve got five grandchildren in total,” said Ntombi.

“Why are you here?” Everyone looked at Linda in surprise. She had not meant to ask the question that blatantly, but she was glad that she had.

“I asked the others to come with me because I was nervous. I came because I’ve never had a Mama, and now that I’ve met you, Mama, I’d like to develop a relationship with you,” said Tumelo. Linda looked at him as if she was seeking clarification of his words. He leaned forward in his seat, his eyes on her.

“Mama, I...” he said, then he smiled.

“You have no idea how good it feels to say Mama to my own Mama, and not just as a term of respect. The only reason I’m here, is to develop a loving and life-long relationship with you. I’m sorry if you have a problem with that, but I’m not going away,” said Tumelo. His tone was uncompromising. Linda was stunned by his passion. He seemed to mean what he was saying. She gave him a long look, then she looked at Ntombi.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I’m curious about the kindest Mama I’ve ever had. I missed you after you left. Baba brought several people to be our mamas, but they weren’t you. They didn’t kiss us when we got hurt, and they didn’t sing us our favourite songs when we had nightmares. I look after my children the way you looked after us, because everyone who came after you made a mess of being our mama. I’m here for the same reason as Tumelo. I want my Mama,” she said. Linda gave her a long look, and nodded. She looked at Mzwandile.

“You owe me, and you’re going to give me everything I want, because you bailed out on the job of looking after me. What kind of mother walks out on her children?” he demanded.

“I don’t know. I didn’t walk out on you, your father sent me away,” said Linda.

“And you agreed to that?”

“He didn’t consult me.”

“How could you...”

“Gogo told me that she, aunty, and Baba hounded Mama out of the home. She followed us to the USA, and Baba wouldn’t let her see us. If anyone is to blame for our not having Mama in our lives, it’s Baba,” said Ntombi.

“You’re just covering for her. She left us, helpless and vulnerable to those people who neglected us, and sent Tumelo to be abused. I’ll never forgive you,” Mzwandile said to Linda. He had tears in his eyes. Linda was hurt by his unjust accusations. She breathed deeply, then she left the room.

In her bedroom, she unlocked a drawer, then she opened its secret compartment. From there, she took out the letter that had made her cry countless tears. It had yellowed with age, and some places had been smudged by the tears that she had shed on it. She took it to Mzwandile.

“What’s this?” he demanded.

“Read it aloud,” said Linda.

“No.”

“I’ll read it,” said Ntombi. Mzwandile grabbed the letter from Linda, and opened it. Linda went to sit beside Kgomotso. She took his hand in hers, then she looked at Mzwandile. He was running his eyes over the letter.

“We also want to know what’s in that letter,” said Tumelo.

“Shut up, wena,” said Mzwandile.

“Don’t talk to him like that,” said Linda.

“You are not my mother,” said Mzwandile.

“Yes, I am, and I won't let you disrespect my child.” Mzwandile glared at her, then he looked back at the letter. He read it aloud.

*‘Linda Mthembu. You are the worst mother that ever lived.’* Ntombi gasped. Linda looked at her, she was horrified.

*“I don’t want to be married to you. You’re boring, ugly, and ignorant. I don’t want you around my children any more. You fill their heads with nonsense when you do pay them attention, otherwise, you neglect them, pretending to work. Who would hire someone as ignorant as you? I regret the day I married you. I worry about the traits, habits and genes my children inherited from you. Were it possible, I’d return them to your belly, and have them birthed by someone worthy of being their mother.”*

*“I’ve found a suitable mother, who’ll teach them things I’m proud to be associated with. You’ll leave my home, and never return. I never want to see you, hear from you, or about you. I’m going to have all your things burned, as well as pictures with you in them. I’ll annihilate you from the memories of my children, who were unfortunate enough to have been brought into the world by you. Disappear into the wilderness from which you came. You’re unfit to speak my name, or those of my children. Jake Zwane.”*

Mzwandile finished the letter, then he turned it over, it was blank. He looked at the written page again.

“Your aunt and Gogo pushed and shoved me out of my home as I kicked and screamed, then your father came behind them, as they locked the gate on me. He threw the letter at me, spat, and returned to my house,” said Linda. She had a little smile on her face. She shook her head.

“Well, it’s all in the past,” she said.

“That’s the most horrible thing I’ve ever heard,” said Ntombi.

“Don’t cry, Ntombi. It’s over,” said Linda.

“How could he write those things after marrying you, and after you gave him six children?” wept Ntombi. Bongi handed her the box of tissues that was kept for movies. She thanked Bongi and cleaned her face.

“He didn’t write it,” said Mzwandile. Ntombi took the letter, and ran her eyes over it.

“It’s his writing,” she said.

“It was forged.”

“Oh, Mzwandile, open your eyes!” Ntombi said in exasperation.

“Hello, Baba, how are you? ... I’m fine, I need you to tell me something,” said Tumelo on his phone.

“I’m going to put you on loudspeaker,” he said, then he fiddled with his phone.

“I’ve got Ntombi, Mzwandile and Mama here,” he said.

“You’re with your mother?” asked Jake over the phone.

“Yes.”

“Well done. She’ll be home soon.”

“That’s not what this is about. Mama gave us a letter...” said Tumelo.

“I shouldn’t have written it,” said Jake.

“You didn’t write it!” said Mzwandile.

“I was very angry with her for refusing to leave our home, so I wrote it to hurt her. After she left, I had someone spy on her and report to me how she was. She was miserable, and that made me happy, but I regret all that now.

“When she followed us to the USA, I denied her the right to see you. I felt fabulous when she threw herself on the pavement in tears. I called the police, and they took her away. I told them she’d been trying to break into my home.”

“Baba!” gasped Tumelo. He looked as if he wanted to cry.

“Why would you do that? What could Mama possibly have done to make you treat her so badly, and deny your children the love and guidance they needed?” asked Ntombi.

“MaMthembu, are you there?” asked Jake. Linda was surprised to be addressed. She looked at Kgomotso.

“Yes, I’m here,” she said.

“I’m sorry for all the pain I caused you.” Again, Linda was surprised.

“It’s all in the past,” she said.

“Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?” Linda closed her eyes. She felt Kgomotso squeezing her hand, and looked at him.

“I forgive you,” she said to Jake.

“Thank you, MaMthembu, you’re a good woman. The children need you, come home, Mama, we all need you. You’ve been gone too long.” Linda could not believe what she was hearing. Kgomotso had clearly heard the same thing. He looked as stunned as she felt.

“Tumelo cried for months on end after you left. All the children missed you, but he missed you the most. Ntombi would ask me all the time when you’d come back. Come and give them, and all the others, the mothering you denied them,” said Jake.

“That’s enough!” said Kgomotso.

“Who said that? Tumelo, Mzwandile, was that you?”

“I’m MaMthembu’s husband, and I won’t have her subjected to any more pain.”

“When did you have time to get a husband, Linda? We just got divorced! What do I tell the children now? I’d promised them that you’d be home for Christmas.”

“I’m not coming back. This call is over. Tumelo, cut the call, or turn off the loudspeaker. I don’t want to hear any more,” said Linda. Tumelo turned off the loudspeaker, and made his goodbyes to Jake.

“Dinner’s ready,” said the caterer.

Everyone went to the dining room. No one ate much, most people played with their food, Mzwandile sat staring at the table.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” he said.

“No, it was a great idea. At least now, we know why Mama left,” said Tumelo.

“I’m not going to give you anything, Mzwandile,” Linda said. Mzwandile kept his eyes on the table.

“Do you still want to be my brother?” Themba asked Tumelo. He smiled.

“Of course I want to be your brother. I *am* your brother, and no one can change that,” he said. Themba smiled.

“It looks like we’re all done here, I think we should return to the lounge,” said Kgomotso.

Once everyone was seated, Kgomotso took Linda’s hand in his.

“MaMthembu’s your mother, but she’s also my wife. I won’t have her harassed, blackmailed or made to feel guilty.

“Tumelo, next time you come with other people, let us know beforehand. You can never bring your father here. If you do...” said Kgomotso. He looked murderous. Linda squeezed his hand.

“I’ll never bring him here. I doubt I’ll ever speak to him again. Thank you for welcoming us to your home. I think it’s best that we leave now,” said Tumelo.

Everyone went outside. Tumelo and his siblings had come in two cars. Goodbyes were made. Tumelo and Ntombi hugged Linda. Themba insisted on hugging them, and Mzwandile. Mzwandile was clearly unhappy to have a hug forced on him. He left in one car, Ntombi and Tumelo left in another one.

“I like buti Tumelo. I hope he comes again soon,” said Themba, then he followed Bongi into the house. Linda looked at Kgomotso.

“Thank you for being okay with this,” she said.

“They’re your children, they have a right to see you, and vice versa. I’m hungry, let’s go eat.”

Linda returned Bongi’s phone and computer some weeks later.

“If there’s a next time, I’m selling them,” she said.

“There won’t be a next time,” said Bongi.

The following weekend, the whole family went to Durban, and took in several sites.

“I can’t get used to you kissing Mama,” said Bongi.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be doing it so much, that in a short while, you’ll be used to it,” said Kgomotso.

“Yuk,” said Themba.

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## CHAPTER NINE

Linda's phone rang at the end of a busy day.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello, Mama."

"Who is this?" The female voice was too mature to be Bongi's.

"It's Ntombi," said the voice.

"Ntombi? Is everything alright?"

"Everything's fine."

"How can I help you?"

"Can you meet me, for tea, or coffee, or whatever you want to drink?" Linda looked at her phone in surprise, then she put it back to her ear.

"Why?" she asked.

"I need to talk to you."

"I thought you said everything was fine."

"I just want to talk, Mama, please. I'm thinking we meet in an hour."

"Ntombi!"

"I'm afraid if we don't do it now, you'll find a reason not to meet me. Please meet me."

"I can't make it now, Bongi has a school function."

"My youngest sister." They were both quiet.

"I have to go now," said Linda.

"I'll call again, bye," said Ntombi.

Linda went to Bongi's play in an absentminded state.

"Are you alright?" asked Kgomotso.

"Yes."

“What’s bothering you?”

“Ntombi wants to meet me.”

“Go.”

“I don’t want to.”

“She needs you.”

“I...” The play started.

Afterwards, Linda and Kgomotso were inundated by other parents congratulating them on Bongi’s great performance. When she joined them at the school entrance, they both hugged her, and told her how proud they were of her. She asked Kgomotso for his opinion on some of her scenes, and was satisfied by his approval. At home, she went straight to sleep.

Linda tossed and turned in bed. Kgomotso sat up in the dark.

“What’s the matter?” asked Linda.

“You tell me. Ntombi wants to meet you. Why’s that keeping you awake?”

“I don’t want to see her.”

“Why not? Linda?” Linda switched on her bedside lamp, and climbed out of bed. She stood looking down at Kgomotso.

“Do you know how long it took me to shut her out of my mind and heart? Years, years, Kgomotso. When I managed it, I promised myself never to care about her or the others, ever again. I can’t start caring, only for her, Tumelo and the others to be taken away from me a second time,” she said.

“You’re taking a chance with Tumelo.”

“That’s different.”

“He’s as much your child, as Ntombi. You can’t take a chance with one, and exclude the others.”

“But...”

“No buts.”

“It hurts too much. I won’t have the will or the energy to pick myself up again if I lose them again.”

“You will. You’ll do it for me, Bongi and Themba. We all need you.”

“I’m not meeting that girl.”

“Go, Linda, and tell her your pain. She’s a mother, she’ll understand where you’re coming from.”

“But...” Kgomotso climbed out of bed, and put his arms round Linda. She leaned into him.

“Let’s get some sleep,” he said. He helped her into bed, climbed in beside her, and held her close. She fell asleep soon afterwards.

Kgomotso lay awake, wondering if doing the right thing was best for his family. He worried that Linda would try to overcompensate with her older children and forget their children, but he knew that he would not be able to live with himself if he supported her in steering clear of Ntombi and the others.

They had already missed out on having her in their lives, it was better for them to experience her mothering now, than to live their whole lives deprived of the best mother anyone could have. Kgomotso told himself that he would have to help Linda to find a healthy balance between their family, and her older children.

Linda received another call from Ntombi three days later. She agreed to a lunch meeting later that day. She was nervous when she arrived at their chosen venue. Ntombi was already seated. She stood as Linda approached their table.

“Hello,” said Linda.

“Hello, Mama,” said Ntombi. Linda drew her chair back from the table.

“Can I hug you?” asked Ntombi. Linda looked at her in surprise, then she opened her arms slightly. Ntombi held her tight, then she started crying. Linda froze. Ntombi pulled herself together quickly, and sat down. Linda looked round, wondering who she could ask to take care of the situation. She did not want to start caring again. She sat down slowly, watching Ntombi. She gave her some tissue. Ntombi cleaned her face.

“What’s the matter?” asked Linda.

“Baba’s dying,” said Ntombi.

“Oh!”

“Cirrhosis of the liver.”

“Oh!” said a shocked Linda.

“He drinks as if the fate of every living thing is dependent on it.”

“I don’t remember him drinking, ever.”

“The mama who replaced you was a drinker. He drank with her, but he’s never been able to handle it. It goes straight to his head, and makes him someone we spent hours hiding under beds to avoid.”

Linda’s heart squeezed, and she looked away, feeling a lump in her throat. She should have been there to protect her children.

“It’s okay, Mama,” said Ntombi. Linda looked at her.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel bad,” Ntombi said. Linda nodded. They were both silent until the waiter came to take their orders. Linda ordered for herself, then she looked at Ntombi.

Her head was bowed, and tears were running down her cheeks. Linda ordered for her. Ntombi cleaned her face, and they drank their water quietly. Linda wished she knew how to comfort the young woman before her.

“You’re beautiful,” she said. Ntombi started and looked at her. Linda had not meant to say the words aloud.

“I hope you’re using skin products that won’t have bad effects on you in the long run. I wouldn’t wear makeup if I were you, your skin is so soft and smooth, the makeup may be doing more damage than good,” said Linda. Ntombi was watching her.

Linda started to feel self-conscious. She did not know the person before her, and she had started preaching at her, as Bongi would say. She opened her mouth to apologise.

“Bheki also says I shouldn’t wear makeup,” said Ntombi.

“Bheki?”

“My husband.”

“He’s right. Why mess with perfection?”

“Bheki says the same thing,” marvelled Ntombi.

“You should listen to him.”

“Baba always said...”

“He never had anything good to say about my looks. He said I was ugly.”

“You’re not!”

“I know. You’re not ugly either, you don’t need to enhance your looks, there’s no part of you that needs enhancing.”

“That’s what Bheki said when I said I wanted to have my breasts enlarged.”

“For what? Do you really want a foreign object in your body, an object your body might reject? You have a beautiful body, and your breasts are perfect.”

“Oh, sorry,” said the waiter, as he brought their food. He was looking very uncomfortable.

“This is my Mama,” said Ntombi.

“If you say so,” said the waiter, as he left quickly.

“He thinks you’re my girlfriend,” said Ntombi.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“He heard you talk about my breasts, so he thinks we’re lovers.”

“Oh,” said Linda. She had never thought of that. She looked at the young woman before her, and they smiled at each other, then they laughed until tears were rolling down their cheeks.

“What’s so funny?” asked Tumelo. Both women looked at him in surprise.

“You’re both laughing so hard and loud, everyone’s looking at you,” he said.

“Hi,” Linda and Ntombi said together. He leaned down and kissed Linda’s cheek. She smiled at him as he straightened.

“Our waiter thinks we’re lovers,” said Ntombi. Tumelo looked between the women.

“It’s understandable, two beautiful women, eating together, anyone would draw that conclusion.”

“You’re such a charmer! Where did you get that?” asked Linda.

“He’s always been that way. The waiter heard Mama telling me I have beautiful breasts,” said Ntombi.

“Did I really need to hear that?” asked Tumelo.

“Sit down, join us.”

“I’d love to.”

Linda was in a great mood as she drove back to work. She was glad that she had agreed to meet Ntombi.

“Tell me what you did today,” she said to Themba as the family dined.

“I found out I like running long distances.”

“When did you learn that?”

“I went to the cross country training, and liked it. I want to do more of it.”

“Good. Bongi, what did you do?” Bongi started crying.

“What’s the matter?” asked Linda.

“I hate school,” said Bongi.

“Why?”

“The other children laugh at me.”

“Why?”

“They say I have old parents.” Linda looked from her to Kgomotso.

“There’s nothing we can do about our ages, Bongi,” said Kgomotso.

“Mama could dye her hair, and wear makeup.”

“I won’t do that,” said Linda.

“You like knowing that people are laughing at me.”

“No, Bongi, I don’t, but I refuse to be ashamed of my looks. It’s not right to laugh at someone because of their looks.”

“It’s also not right to shame your family.”

“Shame my family?”

“If you don’t want to wear makeup, then at least have a facelift.”

“Sibongile!” said Kgomotso.

“Mama’s beautiful,” said Themba. Linda looked at him, feeling the shock and hurt of Bongi’s words being soothed by his words.

“Thank you,” she said, feeling a lump in her throat.

“You’re old,” said Bongi.

“Excuse me?” said Linda.

“I have the oldest parents in the school! Do you know how that feels? Everyone laughs at me. Other people your age are grandparents.”

“What do you want us to do about that?”

“Wear makeup, lose some weight, do something to make yourself look younger.”

“I’m not younger, Bongi, and I never will be, and I refuse to be ashamed of that.”

“You won’t even try with your clothes! If you’d...”

“Drop it, Sibongile. I won’t be told how to look, by anyone. Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

“Aren’t you ashamed of the way you look?”

“No, I’m not, I never have been. It’s very hurtful to tell someone to be ashamed to their looks.”

“I’m trying to help you!”

“Don’t!” They glared at each other, then Bongi looked away.

“I love you Sibongile, but altering my looks is something I won’t do, even for you,” said Linda.

“Bongi, there’s nothing wrong with Mama’s looks. The people saying things that make you feel bad are expressing their own opinions. They may act as if their parents have perfect looks, but perhaps they're not as kind, or as loving as Mama, or they may...” said Kgomotso.

“Everything about them is better than everything I have,” said Bongi. Kgomotso looked at her a long moment, failing to understand how anyone could say such terrible things about their own mother.

He was also shocked by Bongi’s reaction to the words of her school mates. Why didn’t she just punch the people saying those things? He supposed that was the difference between boys and girls, a boy would punch, a girl brought the issue home, and attacked the person that the others were attacking.

“You have enough money Mama, you can sell your house if you need more, or Papa can give you more, and you can have a facelift, and maybe some liposuction so you can look slimmer, and do something with your hair,” said Bongi.

“Sibongile, that is enough! Mama is not going to do those things. If you can’t stand what those bad-mannered children say, either tell them to keep their mouths shut, or we’ll take you out of that school, and you can go to a rural school. No one cares how anyone else’s parents look there. Would you like to live with Nkgono and go to the school I went to?” demanded Kgomotso.

“No!”

“Then stop this nonsense!” coMmended Kgomotso. He and Bongi shared a long look, then she looked away from him before leaving the room. Kgomotso looked at Linda. She was clearing the table.

“Leave that, it’s the children’s job,” he said.

“But...”

“Leave it! Bongi. Sibongile!,” called Kgomotso. Bongi returned to the kitchen.

“You haven’t cleared up,” said Kgomotso. Bongi started clearing up. Themba helped her. She banged dishes as she washed up, then she stomped out of the room. Kgomotso felt his blood boil. He stood and followed her to her bedroom.

He opened the door and entered.

“Don’t you knock? Oh, Papa,” said Bongi.

“What is your problem?” demanded Kgomotso.

“I...”

“Your days of behaving like a spoilt brat are over! How dare you stamp around and storm about as if you need a smack! Is that what you want, for Mama and I to smack the sulks out of you? Is it what you want?” demanded Kgomotso.

“No.”

“Then what do you want? What will make you behave like a decent person?”

Kgomotso realised how very afraid Bongi was of him. He looked away from her, telling himself to calm down.

“Sulking is for two year olds, Sibongile. Are you two years old?” he asked more quietly.

“No.”

“Then stop behaving like you are, otherwise, we’ll treat you as if you are. Do you know what that entails?”

“No.”

“A two year old doesn’t need a cell phone, a computer, her own bedroom, or a credit card, nor does she need to join all the clubs that you’re part of. A two year old has her clothes chosen for her, she makes no choices about anything. A two year old needs constant supervision, so MaNzima would have to take you to and from school, and supervise your every move. Do you want to be treated like a two year old?” he demanded.

“No.”

“Then act your age,” said Kgomotso, then he left.

He met Linda as he went to their bedroom.

“I’m going for a drive, I’ll be back later,” he said, then he left. He drove to Nina’s home.

“What makes you look so murderous?” she asked.

“Can we talk, in my car?” he said. Nina looked at her husband, then she followed Kgomotso to his car.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’ve never hit a woman before, but I was tempted today,” he said.

“You wanted to hit Linda? I swear, if you do it, I will take her to the police station to report you myself.”

“I’d never even think to do something like that to Linda!”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“Bongi. She is such a brat! I don’t understand how Linda’s managed to create such a...a...brat! I love that child dearly, but she’s really testing me.”

“You knew what she was like before you married Linda.”

“The dynamics were different then. Bongi’s bad behaviour is pronounced when her mother’s around. It’s as if she’s trying to wind her up, or get a reaction out of her.”

“Maybe she is.”

“What am I supposed to do when she carries on that way?”

“Linda’s making up for the children she didn’t raise.”

“It’s costing these ones their good reputations. Very soon, no one will want to invite them to their homes because they’ll be ungovernable. Themba’s alright for now, but if things continue this way...”

“Have you talked to Linda?”

“I told her not to spoil them.”

“Give it time.”

“It’s easy to say when you don’t have to look at a sulky face.”

“It gets better as they grow older. Tina was a sulker too.”

“How did you fix it?”

“I ignored her, and eventually, she stopped. A sulker needs someone who reacts to their sulks by giving them what they want. If the people around that person ignore the sulking, the person has to stop sulking, and find other ways of asking for what they want.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can live with Bongi.”

“Go home.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Linda had watched Kgomotso tensing more and more as Bongi had banged dishes. She had tried to get him out of the kitchen, but he had ignored her. He had sat at the kitchen table, watching Bongi as if he was an eagle waiting to pounce on its prey.

She had been concerned when he had followed Bongi out of the kitchen. She had wanted to ask him if she could drive with him when he had left, but he had left before she could say anything. She sat in the bedroom, waiting for him.

She heard Bongi crying, and closed her eyes. She felt pain on her behalf, but she also understood Kgomotso's point of view. She knew that if she did not take care of the situation, her child's life would be miserable, and her marriage could be very short lived. She went to knock on Bongi's bedroom door. Hearing no response, she entered the room.

Bongi was lying face down on her bed, muffling her cries. Linda put her arms round her.

"Why does Papa hate me?" asked Bongi.

"He doesn't hate you, he's worried about you."

"He hates me."

"You and I need to talk. We'll go away this weekend," said Linda. Bongi stopped crying, and looked at her.

"Why?" she asked.

"We need to talk."

"I don't think I want to go."

"We need to do this." Bongi withdrew from Linda and sat on the dressing table chair.

"I have sports and other things," she said.

"This is important, Bongi, and it has to be done. I'll write notes to your teachers so they'll excuse you."

"I..."

“This is non-negotiable.” Bongi looked away from Linda. Linda left the room. The idea to go away had been a brain wave. She hoped that there was a place she could book them into at such short notice.

She went to sit in the lounge, waiting for Kgomotso. She was woken by a kiss. She opened her eyes, and smiled at Kgomotso. He was watching her as she lay prone on a couch.

“You should be in bed,” he said.

“I was waiting for you. The last time you drove when you were tired, you had an accident. I was praying Nina wouldn’t call me again with scary news.”

“That won’t happen again.”

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Let’s get to sleep.”

The next evening after supper, Kgomotso went to watch soccer in the lounge. Bongi joined him. She obviously wanted to say something.

“What is it?” asked Kgomotso.

“Mama wants us to go on a retreat,” said Bongi. She obviously had a problem with her mother’s idea.

“That sounds like fun,” he said.

“It’s going to be horrible.”

“Retreats are meant to help you clear your mind.”

“My mind doesn’t need clearing.”

“It’ll be good for all of us.”

“You and Themba aren’t invited. It’s for her and me.”

“That’ll give you time to talk about makeup and other things.”

“She doesn’t wear makeup, she knows nothing about it.”

“You’d be surprised by what Mama knows. Go, if nothing else, it’ll be a new experience, for both of you.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have to want to. If Mama thinks it’s a good idea, it probably is.”

“You always take her side.”

“That’s what parents do.”

“Mpho’s parents...”

“We are not Mpho’s parents, we’re yours, and we want the best for you.”

“I’d rather go with you.”

“Another time.”

“It’s not fair!”

“Life’s not fair.”

“Please don’t make me go,” she said.

“You’re going, Bongi, and that’s final,” said Kgomotso. He watched as Bongi left the room, clearly displeased with him.

He went to the bedroom. Linda was listening to the news. She looked up at him, waved, and focused on the news. The bulletin ended, and she switched off the TV.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi. Bongi tells me the two of you are going on a retreat?”

“Yes. We need to talk.”

“She doesn’t want to go.”

“Neither do I. I’d rather stay here with you, but she and I need to sort out some things. I no longer have the stomach for her nonsense. If she toned it down, I might tolerate it, but more and more, I find myself wanting to give her a good hiding. I should have set proper boundaries long ago.”

“Better late than never.”

“You might find yourself having to choose between us.”

“I won’t do that. I want you both, and I expect you to sort yourselves out, and come home all hugs and kisses.”

“That expectation is way too high. If we come back on talking terms, I’ll be happy.”

“You’ll be fine. I think it’s a great idea.”

“Thank you. Wish me luck, I’ll need it.” Kgomotso held her close.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.”

The following evening, Linda and Bongi left for the retreat. They were silent a long while, then Linda put on some music. Bongi put her headphones on, and listened to music on her phone.

They arrived at their destination, and checked in. They showered, then Bongi went to sleep. Linda lay awake, wondering how she had turned Bongi from a loving and laughing girl, easy with her hugs and kisses, to a withdrawn, rude, and sulky teenager.

She prayed that the weekend would bring better relations between them. After that prayer, she prayed for the people affected by droughts, floods, and other misery. Why do you let all this happen, Nkulunkulu, she asked. She eventually fell asleep.

When she woke up, she was alone. Bongi had made her bed, and left. Linda made her bed, freshened up, and went to look for Bongi. She found her a few paces from their chalet, talking on her phone. She cut the call quickly, and turned guiltily from Linda.

“This weekend is for you and me, uninterrupted,” said Linda.

“I know! I’ve switched it off,” Bongi said, waving her phone at Linda. Linda took several deep breaths to stop herself from reacting angrily, then she sat beside Bongi.

“I feel like I did something to you that I didn’t apologise for, and you’re mad at me for it,” she said.

“It’s nothing.”

“There you go again, snapping, when I’d like us to be talking.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“That’s too bad, Sibongile. You’re going to tell me what the problem is, or we’re not going back home.” Bongi laughed in disbelief.

“You have a business to run, I have school,” she said.

“I can get another business, and you can repeat your grade.”

“No!”

“If we don’t return home, you’ll be repeating this grade.”

“I’m not repeating any grade.”

“Then talk to me.” They glared at each other, then Bongi looked away.

Linda took several deep breaths, remonstrating with herself for losing her temper. She had meant to be a cool, calm and collected adult, but she had sunk to blackmail. She closed her eyes. She was going to admit defeat, and tell Bongi that they were going back home. She opened her eyes.

“You don’t love me,” said Bongi. Linda looked at her in shock. Words stuck in her throat. Bongi’s head was bowed.

“You love Themba, but you don’t love me,” she said.

“Why would you think something like that?” gasped Linda.

“You smile at him, you hug him, you laugh with him, you even hold his hand,” said Bongi. Linda opened her mouth to speak.

“You’re proud of him, and you’re ashamed of me. You hate me so much, you’ve even got Papa on your side,” said Bongi.

“What are you talking about? Papa and I love you.”

“People who love you don’t make you wash dishes!”

“They do, if they want you to grow into a responsible person.”

“Anna doesn’t have to wash dishes.”

“Anna has different parents. How can you think I don’t love you? I fell in love with you the second I laid eyes on you. I looked into your eyes, and that was it. I’ve loved you since then, and I’ll always love you.

“I don’t hold your hand because you throw mine off. And when I try to kiss you, you behave as if I’m doing something ridiculous. I’d like nothing better than for us to buy clothes together, watch movies together, and go to the children’s shelter together.

“You never want to go with me. At first, I thought you were just being a teenager, but lately, I think you’re ashamed of me. Are you ashamed of me?” Bongi did not reply.

“What is it that I’ve done to hurt you? I love you,” said Linda.

“You don’t show it.”

“I let you live in my home, I feed you, clothe you, send you to school.”

“You have to.”

“No, I don’t. I could choose to stop paying your fees so I can grow my business.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“No, but I could, if I didn’t love you.”

“That’s obligation, not love.”

“What is your idea of love?”

“You do anything for someone you love.”

“Do you love Papa?”

“Of course.”

“Would you kill someone for him?”

“No!”

“You just said...”

“Alright, you do most things for them.”

“What should I do for you to believe I love you?”

“Let me go out when I want, to where I want, and not make a big deal about me and boys.” Linda stopped herself from laughing out loud.

“Hire someone to work after MaNzima leaves, so I don’t have to do a thing. And buy me what I want. And let me have a TV in my room, I’m tired of fighting with Themba for the remote. Take me on nice holidays, to Switzerland, Egypt, and other exciting places,” continued Bongi.

“I’d need a lot of money for that.” Bongi shrugged.

“What would you do for me?” asked Linda. Bongi looked at her in surprise.

“Why should I do anything for you?” she asked.

“Nobody will give you all that and expect nothing in return.”

“I don’t have to do anything. You’re the one who loves me.”

“What you’re saying is that love is about things. This person who loves you doesn’t need to hug you, talk to you, or do other things with you that don’t need money?”

“With all those things, I won’t need hugs or other worthless things.” Linda looked at Bongi as if she was a stranger.

“Where did you get that idea of love?” she asked.

“It’s so obvious, Mama.”

“Not to me. Do you think respect is important in love?”

“Respect and all that other stuff is nonsense. I can’t hold respect, I can’t show other people respect, but I can show a new dress.”

“Things are not love, Bongi.”

“When someone gives me things, I find it easier to love them.”

“So you love me lots? I gave you that phone, the laptop, I pay your fees....”

“That’s not what I mean! I like it when people give me the things I want.”

“Love is about actions, not things. Let’s make breakfast,” said Linda.

“Why did you choose self-catering? We should have gone to catered chalets. I’m not doing anything. I didn’t come all this way to be a maid,” said Bongi.

Linda returned to the chalet. She prayed again for a solution that would help Bongi, herself, and the rest of the family. Her stomach growled. She looked at the fridge, then she decided to wait for Bongi. Over an hour later, Bongi joined her in the lounge.

“I thought you came to cook. I don’t smell any food,” she said.

“Sibongile! Sibongile, don’t ever speak to me as if I’m your slave,” barked Linda. Bongi looked at her in surprise.

“There’s no need to overreact,” she said.

“And there’ll never ever be a need for you to tell me how much to react to a situation. You addressed me with disrespect, and I won’t have it,” said Linda. She stood.

“What will it take for you to respect me? You don’t have to like me or love me, but you do need to respect me, because I’m your mother, and because I’m older than you. Do we need to have a physical fight before you’ll respect me? Is that what it’ll take? I’m talking to you,” shouted Linda, as Bongi turned away from her.

“Sibongile, look at me when I talk to you!” shouted Linda. Bongi continued to walk away. Linda caught her up by the elbow, and turned her round. She slapped her once, then again, and again. When Linda stopped, Bongi was screaming, and people were pulling her from Bongi, who was kneeling, with her arms protecting her head.

“Leave me alone!” bellowed Linda. The people holding her released her. Bongi looked up at her fearfully.

“If you ever disrespect me again, Sibongile, you’ll leave my house and you’ll never be allowed back, under any circumstances. Do I make myself clear?” shouted Linda. Bongi nodded.

“What are you all looking at? Get out, get out!” Linda shouted to the strangers surrounding her and Bongi. They started dispersing.

“There was no need to try to kill her,” a man said. Linda looked at him.

“When I want parenting advice, I’ll ask for it. Sibongile, get cleaned up, we’re leaving,” said Linda. The strangers all left, and Bongi went to the bathroom. Linda could hear her making sobbing sounds. She closed her eyes and tried deep breathing, but she was too angry. She phoned Kgomotso.

“I almost killed your child. Do you want a divorce?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” asked Kgomotso.

“She was being disrespectful, one slap led to another, and I had to be pulled off her.”

“Are you alright?”

“Of course I’m alright. I’m taking her to the doctor. The hospital might call the police on me.”

“Which hospital are you going to?” Linda told him, he said he would meet her there, then he cut the call. Bongi returned to the lounge with her bag. Linda fetched hers, and they went to check out.

They were silent as they drove off. Bongi did not even listen to her phone radio. At the hospital, Bongi was asked what had happened to her and she would not say. Linda was asked. She opened her mouth to speak.

“I was in a fight,” said Bongi, her eyes on Linda. Linda shook her head.

“Do you want to press charges against the person who hurt you?” asked the doctor.

“No,” said Bongi.

“Was it your boyfriend?”

“No. Please help me, it really hurts.” The doctor and nurses led Bongi to another part of the hospital. Linda was left at reception, filling in forms, and making payments.

“Where is she?” asked Kgomotso.

“The doctor’s attending to her. She told them she’d been in a fight.”

“That was smart.”

“I...”

“Bongi?” said Kgomotso, as he walked past Linda. She watched as he held Bongi, who was crying. Linda approached them. The doctor was advising Kgomotso to get his daughter to press charges against whoever had hurt her. He was given a script for medication, and told that Bongi would be fine. She could go to school on Monday. Linda followed Kgomotso and Bongi to her car.

“I want to go with you,” Bongi said to Kgomotso.

“Go with Mama. I’ll get your medicine, then I’ll come home.”

“I want to go with you.”

“No.” Bongi looked at him out of hurt eyes, then she climbed into the car. Kgomotso nodded at Linda, and left. She climbed into the car, and drove home.

“What happened to you?” asked Themba.

“Nothing,” said Bongi as she walked past him into the house. Themba watched her, then he looked at Linda.

“You hit her,” he said. She did not respond. He followed Bongi into the house. Linda unloaded her bag, and took it into the house. She freshened up, then she went to the kitchen. Kgomotso was seated at the kitchen table.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.” They watched each other.

“I made a snack. Bongi said neither of you had eaten,” said Kgomotso.

“Where is she?”

“She went to sleep. She ate, took her medicines, then Themba saw her to bed. He’s not very happy with you.”

“Neither am I. I’m surprised you’re talking to me.”

“Eat, then we’ll talk.”

“Let’s get it over with,” said Linda, as she sat down.

“I don’t want you killing my children,” said Kgomotso. Linda nodded.

“Don’t let things fester, Linda. Talk about things that annoy you immediately. You almost went to jail, because you waited until you were at breaking point before addressing the problem.”

“I know. It might be best if I move out and...”

“Never! Why would you even think that?”

“The children would appreciate a break from me, and you might want to find a better wife.”

“I want you, you’re the best wife and mother.”

“I just...”

“You know why now, and you’ll address issues as they arise. Isn’t that what you do at work?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it at home as well.” Linda nodded tiredly.

“I need to rest,” she said, then she left the room.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kgomotso followed her with his eyes. She had really surprised him. He had not known that she could snap that violently. Themba was worried about Bongi, but in a few hours, he would be fine.

Bongi would never be the same again. That beating was a few years late, but it was better late than never. It would sort her out for good, or send her packing. Either way, he would not let it destroy his marriage.

Kgomotso put away Linda's snack, and started making supper. He and Themba had been lunching when Linda had phoned. Themba joined him.

"Where's Mama?" he asked.

"She went to sleep," replied Kgomotso.

"Is Bongi going to be okay?"

"Yes, the doctor said she can go to school on Monday." Themba nodded. When they were done, they sat in silence in the lounge. It became dark, and they sat in the dark. The light came on, blinding them. They closed their eyes, then they opened them. Bongi was seated, turning on the TV.

"How are you?" asked Kgomotso.

"Fine," said Bongi.

"Do you want something to eat?" asked Themba.

"No, I'm fine," said Bongi, as she settled to watch a program on TV.

Linda joined them some minutes later. She greeted everyone, then she said she was going to cook. She gasped, when she realised that dinner had been cooked.

"Is that alright?" asked Kgomotso.

"It's fabulous. Thanks for cooking."

"Themba and I did it together."

"I'll dish up." They family ate in silence.

“I didn’t mean to be disrespectful,” said Bongi. Everyone looked at her. She was looking at her plate of food. Linda opened her mouth to apologise. Kgomotso put a hand on hers. She looked at him, he shook his head slightly.

“I don’t understand why you don’t like me,” said Bongi, then she looked at Linda.

“I like you, Bongi, I just dislike your attitude of disrespect. You know how to behave well, but you seem to have forgotten your manners.

“I’d just like you to remember what Papa and I taught you, that you talk nicely to yourself, and you talk nicely to others. And remember that when we send you on errands, we want you to learn to do things for yourself, so you can be independent, and never ever be dependent on anyone to cook for you, clean for you, or do other things for you. You’ll call the tune in your own life, and not be forced to do things that make you feel terrible just because someone does a few things for you.”

“So you want me to speak to you respectfully?”

“Yes!”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I did! I’ve been telling you that most of this year.”

“I didn’t tell the doctor that you hit me. You have to be nice to me, otherwise, I’ll tell him.” Linda looked at Bongi in shock, then she stood.

“Let’s go to the police station, and you can lay charges right now. I’ll change into something warmer. Papa, please drive, then you can bring Bongi back home,” she said, then she left the kitchen.

Kgomotso watched her, then he turned to Bongi. She had clearly expected to get away with cheap blackmail. She was looking so stunned, it was almost comical. Linda returned in a very warm tracksuit. She had a coat over one arm.

“I’m ready, let’s go,” she said, as she walked away.

“Mama, Mama,” called Bongi, as she ran after her. Kgomotso followed. Linda was looking at Bongi quizzically.

“I didn’t mean it, I’m not pressing charges,” said Bongi.

“Yes, you are, because I’m not living here one second, with you looking at me as if I owe you, and having to put up with that filthy attitude you’ve adopted. I’d rather spend the rest of my life in jail, than live in a home where I’m disrespected and punished when I don’t even know what I did! If you’re mad at me, ntombazana, tell me what you’re mad about, and let’s just fix it. What did I do? How did I let you down?”

“One night, I spent the night at Beth’s home, and I heard her parents say if you loved me, you’d beat sense into me. I asked Beth about it next day, and she said she got hidings if she misbehaved, so did several other people. I felt sad that you didn’t love me.” Linda looked at Bongi in shock, then she sat down on the floor of the entrance hall.

“Beth’s parents were right. It wasn’t loving of me to let you get away with the nonsense that you did. After losing Ntombi and the others, I wanted to do everything in a completely different way, because I thought the way I’d operated before had made me lose my children. I didn’t hit you because I didn’t want to lose you. I don’t like hitting you, but from now on, if you disregard what I’ve said, I *will* give you a hiding.”

“I know,” said Bongi, sitting opposite Linda.

“I don’t want you confusing a hiding from me or Papa with a hiding from a boyfriend or husband. You never ever put up with that, and if it happens, you report whoever’s hurting you.”

“I know, Mama.”

“Papa and I love you, and what we do, we do to ensure that you can survive on your own in the world. At some stage, we’ll die...”

“Don’t say that!” Linda stopped her next words when she realised how upset Bongi was.

“Papa and I want you to be able to survive in any part of the world, with or without us,” she said. Bongi nodded. They shared a long look.

“Why didn’t you talk to me about this?” asked Linda.

“I didn’t know how.”

“I want you to be free to talk to me about everything. Even things that hurt or make you feel bad. We need to talk to each other, so we can fix things. When we don’t talk, things grow out of proportion, and relationships get damaged beyond repair. You are my precious child, and I want to have a great relationship with you. We have to respect each other, and talk.” Bongi nodded. There was a small silence.

“Let’s eat,” said Kgomotso. Linda and Bongi stood, and followed him and Themba to the kitchen.

After dinner, Themba and Bongi washed up the dishes. Linda and Kgomotso went to their bedroom. Linda lay on her back on the bed, taking deep breaths.

“Are you alright?” asked Kgomotso.

“I am now. We should have talked a long time ago.”

“Yes, you should.” Linda sat up.

“How did you and Themba make out?” she asked.

“We played some games, and he taught me how to play on a borrowed playstation. Who’d have thought at fifty five, I’d be learning to play on such a machine? These children are opening up worlds I didn’t even know existed.”

Starting the following morning, Linda made an effort to be the parent that she was comfortable being. She did not put up with nonsense from Bongi or Themba, and meted out punishment where she thought it was appropriate. The children did not break, or threaten to run away, and Kgomotso did not threaten to take them away.

She hardened her heart to Bongi’s sulks and arm twisting, and parented her, instead of sucking up to her. Several times, she heard Bongi telling her friends on the phone that she hated her Mama, but it did not bother Linda. She knew that having your loved ones hate you sometimes, was part of every relationship.

“I thought we could go buy some clothes. Beth’s party’s coming up, and I thought you might want something new to wear,” said Linda, some weeks later. Bongi looked up from the TV.

“Really?” she said.

“It won’t be an expensive label, but it will be new,” said Linda.

“That’s great! Thanks, Mama,” said Bongi. She hugged Linda briefly, then she started dialling on her cell phone as she left the room. Linda smiled. It had been too long since Bongi had hugged her of her own will. She frowned, wondering if Bongi would still want to hug her when she heard the size of the budget.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Linda and her family went to visit Kgomotso's parents. Linda had often visited them with Kgomotso, Bongi and Themba, until just after Themba's sixth birthday. That was when Kgomotso had stopped inviting her to join him and the children when it was his turn to have them. In the years since her last visit, the homestead had been vastly improved. The driveway had been paved, and solar panels had been installed. Linda followed Kgomotso into his parents' living room. She sat down, and greeted her in-laws.

"What are you doing behaving like a stranger? Come here," said Mme. Linda approached, and Mme hugged her warmly. She returned the embrace, then she sat down.

"How are you, MaMthembu?" asked Ntate.

"I'm fine, thank you, Ntate," she replied.

"It's good to see you here again. You've been gone too long."

"She'll be here more often from now on," said Kgomotso.

"Why did you stop coming, MaMthembu?" asked Mme.

"I stopped inviting her," said Kgomotso.

"Why? Did you two fight?"

"No."

"Then what happened?"

"I'll go and help in the kitchen," said Linda, and she left the hut.

She found several women in the kitchen. She introduced herself, and they all said that they were neighbours of the Mokoena's, and that they had been at her wedding. They had already finished cooking. Linda helped by taking the food to the Mokoenas, then she joined them for lunch.

Bongi and Themba ate with the children of the women who had cooked. After lunch, Linda was pleased to see Bongi helping the other girls washing the dishes. Throughout the day and the early evening, she watched her in-laws, and worried about them. She expressed her concerns to Kgomotso that night, when they were alone.

“MaMthembu says you should come and live with us, so we can look after you,” Kgomotso said at breakfast the next morning. Mme choked on her tea.

“Never!” she panted. Linda patted her on the back. Mme pushed her hand off.

“Never bring this up again, MaMthembu. You’re the best wife for my son, and I want you to stay married to him. If I come to your home, you and I will start finding fault with each other, we’ll fight, and this boy will be homeless again. I won’t do that to him,” she said.

“I was never homeless, Mme,” said Kgomotso.

“A home has people you love. When you lived alone, you were homeless. MaMthembu, thank you for your concern, but we’re fine. Kgomotso, his sister, and brother, all make sure that we’re well taken care of. If you want to do something, you can come and see us more often, but you’re not allowed to stay more than three days. I don’t want you getting tired of me, and I don’t want to get tired of you. This is a very good meal.”

“Thank you,” said Linda.

She and her family returned home two days later.

After the children had gone to sleep, Kgomotso watched Linda as she washed up.

“Mme likes you,” he said.

“I like her too.”

“From the moment she met you, she liked you.”

“I felt so stupid for crying when she hugged me.”

“I wanted to hug you too. You looked like you needed it.”

“I was very lucky that Nina took me in, otherwise, I’d have lived on the street. You’re very lucky to have her in your family.”

“Our family.”

“Our family.”

Linda’s phone rang, and she answered it.

“Linda, what’s this I hear from the Zwanes?” asked her buti John.

“There’s nothing they should be saying to you.”

“They came to complain to me that you’ve taken their children.” Linda gasped in disbelief.

“What are you talking about?” she said.

“Ntombi and Tumelo refuse to talk to their father, and the Zwanes blame you.”

“Tell them to go to hell. Those children are adults, whom I have no influence over. What they do has nothing to do with me. Why did you give the Zwanes an audience? After the way they treated me, you should have called everyone in the neighbourhood to help you to send them back to wherever they came from.”

“They were difficult to ignore. They came dressed as mourners, in two car loads.”

“That is harassment. Can’t you lay charges against them?”

“I don’t know, but they plan to lay charges against you.”

“For what?”

“Kidnapping.”

“I haven’t kidnapped anyone!”

“Be aware that they want you to get those children to talk to their father.”

Linda put the phone down, and told Kgomotso what John had told her. She could see that the news angered him. He was on the phone for several minutes, then he left. Linda wondered what he was up to. He had not told her where he was going. He returned later.

“Where did you go?” she asked.

“I got Tshepo, John, and several other men, and we went to see Zwane.”

“It’s late. Why did you go and see him?”

“To tell him that if he or his people harass you, they harass us, and we won’t sit and let him do what he pleases. He got a big shock, and a big fright. He

won't be bothering you or John again. I can't believe he still had the audacity to come after you. You've moved on, he should too." Linda hugged him, he held her and sighed.

That Friday, Linda left work early. She fetched the children from school, then she took them to the bus that was taking them camping. She returned home to freshen up, and dress.

She loved the way she looked. She was in a black evening gown. She had bought it when she and Bongi had gone shopping. The trip had gone better than Linda had feared. Bongi had not worried about labels, or cost. She had been happy to get several new outfits, and she had advised Linda about clothes for herself. Linda had complimented her on her great taste, and Bongi had glowed. It had been a long time since Bongi had glowed as a result of anything that Linda had said.

Linda focused on her clothes. Her shoes were new, also picked out by Bongi. She turned to see herself from every angle, then she smiled. She looked fabulous, and she felt fabulous. She knew Kgomotso would appreciate her, he always did. He always knew how to say and do what made her feel fabulous as a woman. She picked up her handbag, and left.

Kgomotso was running late. He was stuck in traffic. He cursed, and phoned Linda to apologise. He had wanted everything to go well, but everything had gone wrong. The only thing that had worked, was the restaurant booking.

He was glad that he had made time to shower and change before leaving the office. He sighed with relief as he parked the car outside the restaurant. He was led to his table.

Linda looked up from her drink. He felt weak in the knees. She was beautiful, and she was smiling at him. He helped her to her feet, and kissed her. He helped her into her seat, then he sat down. He looked at her, she was dazed.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"You look stunning."

"Thank you, and you look very handsome." He took her hand in his, and kissed it. A waiter came to take their orders, then he left.

“This is a great place,” she said.

“Under normal circumstances, I like it, but not tonight.”

“What’s wrong with it tonight?”

“Too many people. I can’t touch my wife the way I want to in front of them.” He watched as Linda smiled shyly. He wanted her, on the spot. He stood, and helped her to her feet.

“Where are we going?” she asked. He did not respond. He went into the owner’s private office.

“What...?” asked Linda. Kgomo tso closed the door, and kissed her. In a short while, he was caressing between her legs. She caressed him and kissed him as keenly as he was kissing and caressing her.

They gasped as they joined their bodies together. They moved together frantically, as people walked just outside the door. Kgomo tso kissed Linda to stop her scream as she succumbed to pleasure. He panted as he succumbed to the pleasure too.

They stilled, then they disconnected. Kgomo tso fixed Linda’s clothes, then he fixed his. He looked at her, she was watching him. She looked round the office, then back at him.

“I can’t believe...” she said. He kissed her.

“Let’s use the bathroom mirror, then we’ll go and enjoy our meal,” he said. Linda looked at him, then she went to the bathroom.

He watched her as she came out of the bathroom. The shocked look had left her face.

“You look great. Do you mind waiting for me while I...” he said. He walked past Linda to the bathroom. When he was done, they returned to their table. The meal was superb, then they left. Kgomo tso walked Linda to her car, kissed her, then he watched her driving off. He climbed into his car and hurried home.

He heard Linda in the shower. He stripped, and joined her. He kissed and caressed her, then she succumbed to pleasure. She touched him, but he could not rise to the occasion. He kissed her, and told her not to worry. They lay in bed with their arms round each other.

Linda woke first. She lay listening to Kgomoṡso breathing. After a while, she freshened up, then she went to make breakfast. Kgomoṡso joined her after his shower. They ate, then they went to buy Christmas presents. It had been Linda's idea that they buy them in September, before the last minute rush. They were exhausted when they returned home in the early evening. They ate leftovers from two nights before, then they went to sleep.

Next morning, Kgomoṡso found Linda in the dining room.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Hi. I'm writing my thoughts about God. I want to have something to replace church with, for me and the children."

"How's it going?"

"I've taken many things from the Bible, then I've included things we're taught in our homes about relating with ourselves and others. I want our children to believe in themselves."

"They do."

"There's a long way to go. I might have to write my version of the Bible. Not that I use it much, but having a manual to hand when you face problems is very attractive. Do you want to help me?"

"I'm not religious, Linda, you know that. You'd be better at writing such a manual. I'll look it over when you're done if you like."

"I want contributions. Let's write about things that helped us in our moments of need. That's got to be better than listening to stories about people you'll never meet, and who don't give two hoots about you. I never understood why the Jews are chosen, and if they are, why do we worship the God that doesn't care about us?"

"We're told He cares."

"Then we should all be the chosen people." Kgomoṡso had no response to that.

"You should open a church of your own," he said.

“I don’t want to lead a church, I want to be part of a church that has a God my skin colour, who speaks my language, or at least, one of the indigenous languages.”

“You’re racist about God.”

“I’m realistic. What are the chances of a white god taking me into his heaven as one of his beloved? I have a better chance with a black god, even if he’s likely to be a tribalist.”

“God is supposed to be universal.”

“Yes, but he isn’t, because we create him to be what we need.”

“It’s too early for this discussion.”

“You’re right. Sorry to preach at you.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

“I haven’t cooked yet.”

“I’ll go get something at the deli,” said Kgomotso, then he left.

“I brought food for all the meals today. We should enjoy being together, and not have to worry about cooking,” he said when he returned home. They ate, then Kgomotso watched TV while Linda did more work on the spiritual guidance that she wanted to give to their children.

After lunch, they talked about what the family was doing for Christmas, then they went to fetch the children.

“It was too short, I wanted to stay longer,” said Themba.

“It was too long. I’m glad to be home,” said Bongi.

“What did you do while we were gone, Mama?” asked Themba.

“We ate and talked,” said Linda.

“It’s good to have you back,” said Kgomotso.

“I was thinking. Let’s have sis Ntombi and her brothers and sisters over for lunch,” said Themba. Linda looked at him in the back seat. He was looking out of the window as he continued to talk.

“Families are meant to spend time together and get to know each other. We’ll play games and...I know, they can come watch me playing at...”

“Themba!” said Linda. He looked at her.

“I really want to know them better, please, Mama. You gave me more than one sister, and you gave me brothers. You always say we must be thankful for the good things you give us.”

“Yes...”

“I’m being thankful for my big sisters and brothers by getting to know them. I’ll make dessert when they come, and Bongi can...”

“Leave me out of it,” said Bongi.

“They’re your brothers and sisters too.”

“They have their own lives, Themba,” said Linda.

“They like you, Mama, and they like us. We have to...”

“We’ll talk about it later.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Next afternoon, Linda was surprised when Ntombi visited her. She was accompanied by three other young people. She introduced them as her siblings, Thabiso, Gugulethu, and Cebile. Linda greeted them all and offered them refreshments. They declined.

“What’s the matter?” asked Linda as Cebile started shedding tears.

“Baba’s dead,” said Ntombi.

“I’m so sorry!” said a shocked Linda.

“We need your help.”

“I don’t see how I can help you.”

“Baba’s family wants to take all his property.”

“You should take that up with lawyers.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Why not?”

“You have to do it.”

“Me? How do I come into this?”

“You’re his beneficiary.”

“You are joking, aren’t you?”

“The will reading is tomorrow, you have to be there.”

“I won’t.”

“You have to, Mama. Baba’s family must be made to realise...”

“It’s none of my business, Ntombi.”

“But...”

“No!”

At home, Linda told Kgomotso about the visit from Ntombi. Kgomotso listened in silence.

“You should go to the will reading,” he said.

“I’m not going.”

“You need to protect the interests of the children.”

“Kgomotso...”

“Would you let people take away Bongi and Themba’s inheritance?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why do you want Ntombi and the others disinherited? They’re your children too.”

“They are adults.”

“They are young adults. They’ve just lost the only parent they had. You need to step up, and ease them into being fatherless.”

“But...”

“I’ll come with you, and help with a lawyer and anything else you might need.” Linda opened her mouth to argue, then she noticed the resolve on Kgomotso’s face. She looked away from him.

Kgomotso phoned Ntombi, asking for the time and place of the will reading. She was relieved to hear that Linda would be attending it. Kgomotso went to sleep. In the morning, he found Linda in the dining room.

“Why didn’t you sleep?” he asked. She looked at him out of tired eyes.

“It’ll be alright, Linda. You’re not alone. I’ll be with you every step of the way,” said Kgomotso.

“But...” Kgomotso put his arms round her, and held her.

“It will be fine,” he insisted. She nodded, then she left the room.

At midmorning, he picked her up from her office, and they went to the will reading.

“MaMthembu, what are you doing here?” asked Jake’s mama. Linda greeted her, and walked past her. The room was called to order, then the will was read. Everyone gasped and looked at Linda.

“What did you do to my son? How could he leave you everything?” demanded Jake’s mama.

“I...I...” replied an equally shocked Linda.

“That property belongs to the Zwanes,” said Jake’s brother, Amos.

“Everything has been left to Ms Mthembu, and any deviation from that without her consent is prosecutable,” said the lawyer. The Zwanes and the lawyer left.

Linda looked at the young people sitting in the office with her and Kgomotso.

“I...I...” she said.

“Your mother will phone you when she’s looked at everything,” said Kgomotso, then he led her to the car. She was silent all the way to the office. She sat in the car, unmoving, in her office car park.

“How could he leave everything to me? He made that will twelve years ago. We hadn’t seen each other in years. I don’t understand,” she said, turning to Kgomotso.

“Neither do I. What I do know, is that you want to do right by the children. Look everything over, and then distribute it among them. That’s the best thing to do, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have your lawyer look into everything, then make a decision. Ntombi told me that one of her sisters is still in school, and Thabiso runs the business left to you. You need to make decisions soon, so they’ll know where they stand.” Linda looked away from him, then she climbed out of the car.

She met her lawyer, Rita, to talk about her inheritance the following day.

“All these properties make you a very wealthy woman, Linda,” said Rita.

“I want to give them to the children of the deceased.”

“But...”

“They need them more than I do.” Rita gave Linda a long look, then she leaned back in her seat.

“Did you read this document?” she asked.

“No.”

“It has one non-negotiable clause. The grocery shop is yours until you die, then it goes to Thabiso, or one of his children. Everything else you can do with as you like. What do you want to give away?”

“Everything.”

“The bulk of the estate is in the grocery store.”

“Then give the rest equally to the children.”

“Why would you give the children of a stranger so much property? Zwane was a very wealthy man, and giving away any of what you have, gives away a lot of money.”

“Just divide it equally among the six of them.”

“I won’t do that.”

“Rita...”

“I’m your lawyer, it’s my job to protect your interests. Giving away your wealth is not in your interests.”

“I don’t want these things.”

“That’s too bad, they’re already yours.”

“I want to give them...”

“Tell that to someone who’ll listen. I suggest you take a look at the books for the grocery store, and look at the investments, and other businesses.”

“The children deserve this.”

“They are strangers who have no claim on you.”

“They’re young people who need help.”

“They should ask their family for help.”

“I *am* their family.”

“You are not! Tell them to...”

“I’m their mother.”

“Linda...”

“Their father sent me away from home twenty one years ago. I’m their mother. I hadn’t seen them until about six months ago. I want to give them this property. They need the money for their studies, and to help them raise their children.” Linda watched Rita, who was watching her in a stunned silence.

“Are they really your children?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Rita!”

“You’ve never talked about them, ever. In the fourteen years I’ve known you, you’ve never mentioned children other than the two you adopted.” Linda shrugged.

“Show me their birth certificates, then we’ll talk,” said Rita.

“It’s my property to distribute as I please!”

“I’m not helping you unless I have a good reason to.”

“But...”

“I’m off to court.”

Linda left in a fury. Rita was supposed to follow her instructions, instead of making her prove her maternal relationship to the people that she wanted to give property to. When she told Kgomotso, he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” she demanded.

“Fathers are normally the ones who need to prove paternity. This is the first time I’m hearing of a woman having to prove maternity. Take a birth certificate of one of them, or take one with you. Tumelo’s the spitting image of you, no one can deny what relationship you have with him.”

“I don’t think this is funny.”

“You’re right, it’s not funny. Do whatever you need to, to get Rita to do what you want her to do.”

Next day, Linda went to see Ntombi at her place of work.

“Is everything alright?” asked Ntombi.

“Nothing’s wrong, don’t be frightened.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I need your help.”

“With what?”

“I need birth certificates proving I’m related to all six of you. Can I have your birth certificates, please, or copies?”

“When do you need them?”

“This afternoon.”

“Give me the time and place, and I’ll send the proof you need.” Linda gave her the details, then she left.

When she arrived at her lawyer’s, she was led to the boardroom.

“Ntombi? What are you doing here?” she asked.

“You said you needed proof, I’ve brought it,” said Ntombi. She was accompanied by three of her five siblings.

“Sit down, Linda. Thanks for taking me seriously. Your sons are the spitting image of you. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. I need time with my client now,” said Rita.

Ntombi and her siblings left, then Rita and Linda started talking about Linda’s distribution of Jake’s estate to his children, and payment of his debts.

When Linda left, she felt as if a big load had been lifted off her shoulders. She went home to cook, then she freshened up. Kgomo announced at dinner that he had to go out of town the following day. Bongi was not impressed, she had a soccer game that afternoon. Kgomo apologised, and promised to make it up to her.

Next morning, Linda took the children to school, then she took Kgomotso to the airport. He kissed her, then he climbed out of the car. She would have wanted to go and check in with him, but she had an appointment with Thabiso, the manager of the grocery shop that Jake had left her.

When she arrived at the shop, Rita was waiting for her. They went to see Thabiso together. He was not pleased to see Linda. She and Rita talked about business with him, then they left.

Kgomotso returned home.

“You didn’t bring me anything. You said you’d make it up to me for not coming to my game,” said Bongi.

“I booked us a trip out of town, just the two of us,” said Kgomotso.

“Oh, alright. When do we go?”

“In two weeks.”

“Good.”

“What about Mama and me?” said Themba.

“You two will have a great time here, watching a movie, or doing whatever you want to do.”

The doorbell rang a few evenings later. Kgomotso went to open the door.

“Ntombi? What is it? What’s happened?” asked Linda, who was behind Kgomotso.

“Nothing, Mama, we just need to talk to you.” Linda looked at Ntombi and her siblings, then she led them all to the lounge. Greetings were exchanged, then Linda asked Bongi and Themba to bring refreshments.

Ntombi closed the lounge door after they left the room. Linda looked at her in surprise. She sat beside Linda.

“We don’t know how much Bongi and Themba know, so we thought to handle this delicately. We’ve come to thank you for giving us what you gave us. It’s made a very big difference in all our lives,” she said in a low voice.

“It’s nothing,” said Linda.

“It’s a big deal to us. You could have chosen to give us nothing, but you gave us everything that was not given to you for life. That was very big of you.”

“Thank you, Mama,” said Mzwandile.

“You’re welcome, all of you,” said Linda. The door opened.

“Why’s the door closed?” asked Themba as he came in with a tray of drinks. Bongi followed him with a tray of snacks. There was a silence as everyone was served.

“Buti Tumelo, can I come and visit you? I want to see how you do things at university,” said Themba. Tumelo looked at him in surprise, then he looked at Linda.

“We’ll see,” she said.

“Oh, Mama, you always say that when you mean no,” said Themba.

“We’ll see,” said Linda firmly. Themba looked from her to Ntombi.

“Can I come and see my niece and nephews this weekend?” he asked.

“Not this weekend, but maybe next weekend, Malume, if Mama says it’s okay,” said Ntombi.

“Mama...” said Themba.

“Ntombi and I will talk,” said Linda.

“Why’s everyone so quiet? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” said Ntombi.

“You all look sad.” Ntombi looked from Themba to Linda and back.

“Our Baba died,” she said. Bongi gasped, and Themba looked horrified.

“Sorry, Sisi,” said Bongi.

“Thank you,” said Ntombi.

“What happened?”

“He drank too much, and his liver was damaged.”

“Oh.”

“I’m glad I don’t drink,” said Themba.

“You try drinking, and I’ll...” said Linda.

“I won’t, Mama, I promise.”

“Has he been buried?” asked Bongi.

“Yes,” said Ntombi.

“Why didn’t you tell us? We’re your family, you tell family when someone dies,” said Themba. Everyone looked at him in surprise.

“Didn’t you need us to support you?” he asked Tumelo. Tumelo looked very uncomfortable.

“Be kind, Themba, they’re still in mourning,” said Linda.

“*We’re* still in mourning.”

“Themba...”

“We’re family, family should be there for each other. We have to do things together, and support each other.” Linda looked from him to Kgomotso.

“I hope your Gogo’s alright,” he said. Everyone looked at him.

“She’s fine. We all knew Baba was dying,” said Ntombi.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” asked Themba.

“We didn’t know that you cared,” said Tumelo.

“Well, I do!” shouted Themba.

“Sorry, little brother.” Themba’s face lost its ferocity.

“How is the rest of your family doing?” asked Kgomotso.

“Fine, thank you, Papa. It’s late, we all need to go now,” said Ntombi.

Linda and Kgomotso looked at each other after Bongi and Themba had gone to sleep.

“I didn’t know Themba felt so strongly about family,” said Linda.

“He’s your child, you feel very strongly about family too,” said Kgomotso.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Over the following week, Linda often returned home late. She was taking care of her business, and overlooking the business that Jake had left to her. Thabiso had taken leave. Linda suspected that he was looking for other employment. He had not been with Ntombi and the others when they had come to thank her for giving them what Jake had left to her.

One evening, she was at the new business when a woman was led into her office. She stood in shock. Her heart was pounding.

“Hello, MaMthembu,” said the woman. Linda looked at her in silence. The last time that she had seen her, the woman had been standing beside Jake as the police had dragged Linda, kicking and screaming, into a police car, in the USA.

“Hawu, MaMthembu, don’t you know me anymore?” asked the woman.

“I never did know you, Jake never introduced us,” said Linda.

“I’m Portia Shabangu.”

“Were you and Jake married?”

“No, he was still married to you. He paid amalobolo.” Linda pulled herself together.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I need your help.”

“My help?”

“I started this business with Jake, but he was too clever for me. He put everything in his name. When he tired of me, he sent me away without a cent. “

“What has that got to do with me?”

“You’re a mother, you know how important it is to give your children what they need.”

“So what?”

“I need your help. I need to send my children to school. Give me the money, MaMthembu. You have this whole big business, you can afford to pay for two children.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this to me,” gasped Linda.

“You owe me, it’s my sweat that built this business up from the ground.”

“I don’t owe you a thing. It’s time for you to leave.”

“I’m not leaving unless you pay for my children.”

“I’ll have you forcibly removed if necessary.”

“MaMthembu...”

“I was sent out of my home because of you, I was denied the right to see my children, by you. It’ll be a cold day in hell before I help you with anything.”

“MaMthembu...”

“Get out!”

“I didn’t send you from your home, Jake did. He wanted you out, and he sent you away. If he’d wanted you home, there’s nothing I, or anyone else, could have done to make him send you away. Don’t blame me for your husband’s folly,” said the woman, then she left. Linda sat down, furious with the woman for approaching her, and for refusing to take responsibility for what she had done.

She told Kgomotso about the woman’s visit after dinner. He listened quietly. Afterwards, he followed her to the lounge.

“That woman was right,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“No woman can send a man’s wife from his home, only he is responsible for that.”

“If she hadn’t been around...”

“Then it would have been another woman, but the responsibility still belongs to the man.”

“But...”

“*He* was married to you, *he’s* the one who broke a contract to stay with you. That woman did not vow to stay with you.”

“Yes but...”

“But nothing. Don’t blame her. Help her if you can.”

“You have to be joking!” gasped Linda.

“If only to thank her for looking after your children.”

“How can you say that?”

“She lived with them for some time, she must have taken care of them in some small way. Help her for that, if nothing else.”

“Never!”

MaShabangu would not leave Linda alone. Every other day, she was there to ask Linda for money. Linda started dreading going to her shop.

One afternoon, a young woman walked into the office, and Linda stood hastily.

“Jake?” she gasped, certain that Jake had returned in female form.

“He was my father,” said the woman.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Celia Zwane.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to ask you to pay my fees, please Mama. We have no one else to help us.”

“Whose your mother?”

“Portia Shabangu.”

“Did she send you?”

“No, she doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Why would you come to me?”

“Sis Ntombi used to talk about you all the time, and tell us how kind you were. I thought you might...”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Please, Mama,” said Celia. She was kneeling before Linda, pleading and begging piteously.

“Get up, get up, child,” said Linda.

“Please!” begged Celia.

“I won’t help you unless you get up, and sit on that chair.”

Celia sat on a chair. Linda sat down, and gave her all the personal cash that she had on hand, then she asked for details about her schooling, and details of her sibling’s schooling. She insisted on seeing letters of acceptance from the schools, and bank details for the schools so that she could pay them directly. Celia left happy.

When Linda told Kgomoiso about meeting Celia, he commended her for doing the right thing. Next day, Celia visited Linda, with her brother Saul. They had the necessary paperwork, and Linda paid the schools via internet.

“Thank you,” said the children.

“The only thanks I want is to see you both graduate,” she said.

Next day, Portia came to thank Linda, and to ask her to pay for the children until they finished their tertiary education.

“If they do well, they can get bursaries to help them,” said Linda.

“This is their father’s wealth, they have a right to enjoy the fruits of his labour,” said Portia.

“Why wasn’t he paying their expenses?”

“We parted twelve years ago, it was ugly. He swore then that he’d write a new will, taking me and my children out, and putting his true wife and widow, as his beneficiary. He was true to his word.” The women were silent a while.

“I never meant to hurt you, Linda, I just wanted Jake, that’s all I was thinking about,” said Portia.

“The important thing, is that the children get their education. My husband said I should help them, because you looked after my children. Did you?”

“Did I have a choice? Thanks again,” said Portia, then she left.

Thabiso returned from leave. He and Linda looked the books over, then they looked at his expansion plans. He showed her where he wanted to expand, and told her why it made good business sense, then they returned to his office.

“Have you come to fire me?” he asked

“No! I’d be a fool to fire you. You’re doing a great job.” Thabiso looked at her suspiciously, then he offered her tea. They drank it in silence.

“I’m hoping we can work together. Will that be a problem for you?” Linda asked. Thabiso stared at her in silence. She left not long afterwards.

Over the following weeks, she and Thabiso were forced to work closely. The business was funding a children’s sporting event. Linda found him dedicated and keen on detail. The event arrived, and it was a great success, due to his planning and attention to detail.

“That went very well, you did a great job,” she said to him after the event.

“It’s what I’m here for,” he said, making it clear that he wished her to leave. She helped him to clear up, then she went home. She could not sleep. All she could think about was how she could help him to relax with her.

She told Kgomotso about her concern, and he told her to let him relax in his own time, if he chose to. Linda did not like those words, but she could not make Thabiso like her if he chose not to.

She met Ntombi a few days later.

“Do you know anyone called Celia Zwane?” she asked. Ntombi stopped eating, and looked at her.

“What do you know about her?” she asked.

“She came to see me,” said Linda.

“She’s the child of a mamba.”

“Ntombi!”

“That woman was cruel to Tumelo. He needed love and care, and all she gave him were harsh words and spankings. I’ll spit in her face if I ever see her.”

“Don’t cry, Ntombi.”

“He’d stand and watch while she caressed her children’s cheeks, but all she ever put on his cheeks were slaps.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“You must.”

“I can’t do anything about it, Ntombi. I don’t want to hear it and feel bad when I can’t fix it. Stop talking!” shouted Linda. She and Ntombi looked at each other, both breathing fast.

“Don’t entertain her, or anyone to do with her,” said Ntombi.

“Did she hurt you? Did Celia hurt you personally?”

“No, but...”

“I’m paying her school fees.”

“Mama!”

“I’m doing it, and that’s final.” Ntombi left immediately. Linda closed her eyes, breathing deeply. If Jake had behaved himself, none of them would be going through the trying times that were a result of his bad behaviour.

Kgomotso and Bongi left one Friday evening, on their weekend outing. Linda and Themba had supper, then they watched a movie. On Saturday morning, they were woken by urgent doorbell ringing. Linda opened the front door.

“Mama, is it true? Are you paying for Celia to go to school?” demanded Tumelo.

“What is the matter?”

“Please, Mama, tell me you’re not paying for her.”

“I won’t do that.”

“So it’s true?”

“What if it is?”

“I beg you, Mama, please don’t do this.”

“Tumelo...”

“Please! I’ll never ask you for anything ever again.”

“I’ve already paid, and if she and her brother do well, I’ll pay until they finish.”

“Why?”

“Because they are your father’s children.”

“They have a mother!”

“She can’t help them.” Tumelo looked at her as if she was mad, then he sat on the doorstep.

“Come inside,” said Linda.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this.”

“Are you coming in? It’s cold out here.” Tumelo entered the house, Linda closed the door.

“Make yourself at home, I’ll get cleaned up.”

After her shower, Linda found Tumelo and Themba making breakfast in the kitchen.

“Wouldn’t you want Celia’s mother to pay for your fees if you had no money?” asked Themba.

“She would die before helping anyone who is not her child,” said Tumelo.

“But if she could help you, would you say no to her?”

“No.”

“Then why are you angry with Mama? She’s helping someone who needs help, that’s all. Do you want Celia to live on the street? That’s where she’ll end up if she doesn’t go to school.” Tumelo did not respond.

“Hi,” said Linda.

“Hi, Mama. Buti Tumelo’s here,” said Themba.

“Yes.” They sat down to breakfast. After the meal, Tumelo left. Linda and Themba went to Themba’s ball game.

After the match, they dropped off Nico, Nina’s son, who was at the same school as Themba, then they went home. They freshened up, then they went to eat at a Macdonald’s restaurant. Themba met friends there, and joined them at their table. Linda sat with their parents, then it was time to go home.

Next day, they spent most of their time at Linda’s shop. Thabiso watched them with suspicion. Themba was curious about everything and asked many questions. Thabiso was disarmed by him, and seemed to relax. He sent Themba on errands, and Themba ran them happily.

When Linda and Themba arrived home, Kgomotso and Bongi had returned. Linda found Kgomotso in the bedroom, he was fresh out of a shower. She kissed him deeply.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she panted.

“And I you. I love you, Linda.”

“I love you, too. How was your trip?”

“Different. I don’t know that I have the energy to be the parent of a teenage girl. They have so much energy!”

“Wait till Themba’s a teenager.”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts, it won’t last forever.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m always right. Haven’t you heard? Wives are always right.”

“It’s husbands who’re always right. Where are you going?”

“To shower.”

“I’ll scrub your back.”

“No thanks, we’ll take a long time if we go in there together.”

“I can make it quick if you prefer.”

“I like the long version just fine, but it has to be under the right circumstances. We need to get supper out of the way, then the children can rest for school tomorrow. They’re both unbearable if they don’t get enough sleep.”

“They take after their mother,” Kgomotso said, then he kissed her, and started dressing.

He was glad to be home. Bongi had exhausted him with her questions and all the activities that she had insisted on doing with him. Every night out there, he had wished that Linda had been with him. Every night, he had regretted leaving his phone at home.

He had needed to talk to Linda, and have her tell him that she was home, waiting for him. He helped the children to set up supper, then Linda joined them in the kitchen. After supper, the children went to bed.

“They look as tired as I feel. Your child really took it out of me,” said Kgomotso.

“I can make you feel better,” said Linda.

“I’d like that.” Linda led Kgomotso to their bedroom. She helped him into his pyjama shorts, then she massaged him to sleep. She felt very pleased with herself when he was asleep. She had only ever done that with the children when they were unwell. She was glad to have helped Kgomotso to sleep.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was Themba's birthday party. Linda was very happy with how well everything had worked out. Themba had insisted on inviting Ntombi, her siblings, and their families. Linda had worried that Thabiso would not come, but Themba had charmed him into coming. Mzwandile was the absent one.

Linda's brother John and his family were there, as was Kgomotso's family, and Themba's friends. The party had begun with lunch. Afterwards, Themba had cut his cake, and opened his presents. Linda was standing on her front door step, watching the party on her front lawn. The sun was shining, the day was warm, and everything had fallen into place perfectly.

A car screeched to a halt on the lawn, scattering the guests. Linda gasped, then she ran to help Mme to her feet. She had fallen in the scramble.

"What's going on here?" demanded Kgomotso. Linda looked up from dusting off Mme. Mzwandile was swaying on his feet, closing the car door.

Ntombi tried to help him back into the cab. He shrugged her off.

"Our little brother's not really our brother," he slurred.

"Of course..." said Ntombi.

"He's not Mama's child."

"Of course he is."

"Mama found him in a hospital, and took him home."

"Wandi..."

"He was abandoned by his mother, so our mother took him home. He and his sister are both adopted."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mama left us, because she wanted to take in children from the street."

"How dare you say that about my children!" shouted Linda.

"They are not your children, they're bastards, just like Ntombi's brats. I wondered where she'd learned to be a whore, she learned it from you."

Linda clapped him hard, then she clapped him again. She was preparing to attack again, when Kgomotso drew her away from Mzwandile. She struggled to get out of Kgomotso's arms, then she stilled, hearing Bongi shouting. She located her. She was beside Mzwandile and Ntombi, screaming for Ntombi to stop hitting Mzwandile.

“Get her off him, she’ll kill him,” Linda shouted. Kgomotso released her, then he, Tshepo and Tumelo had to work hard to get Ntombi off Mzwandile.

He was groaning on the ground. Linda went to kneel beside him. She was relieved that he was breathing. She could smell the alcohol on him. Nina, who was a doctor, started resuscitating him. He opened his eyes and groaned.

“Should I call an ambulance?” asked Tumelo.

“No, he’ll be fine,” said Nina. Tumelo helped Mzwandile to sit up, then he helped him to his feet. Mzwandile looked at the people watching him. His eyes landed on Linda.

“Why didn’t you just come back to us instead of picking up street kids?” he asked.

“If you refer to my children that way again, I’ll finish what your sister started,” said Linda.

“How could you take the love you owed us, and throw it away on...”

“What is this boy talking about?” asked Mme. Linda looked from her, to Kgomotso.

“Let’s go and sit down,” he said to Mme.

“Tell me this boy is lying.”

“He’s lying in calling my children street children, they’ve never lived on the street, and they never will.”

“Stop avoiding the issue. Are these children from your loins or not?” There was a silence, as everyone looked from Mme to Kgomotso.

“Where they come from is immaterial. They are my children,” he said.

“So this drunk is telling the truth?”

“Linda and I adopted the children. That doesn’t make them any less my children.” Mme looked from him to Bongi, who was standing beside her father, to Themba, who was standing beside Linda, then she looked at Linda.

“You lied to us. You told my son he was the father of children that you picked up from...” she said.

“Don’t blame her, Mme. I should have told you what was going on, but I didn’t want you getting upset. If you remember, Bongi came when we all thought you were on your death bed.”

“Aren’t you man enough to make babies for yourself?”

“Mme!”

“I’ve invested years of love on these strangers who...”

“Don’t talk that way about my children.”

“They aren’t your children. Do you even know whose children they are? Are you going to leave this house and all you’ve worked so hard for, to strangers who...”

Linda took Themba and Bongi by the hand, and led them into the house.

“Why’s Nkgono calling us strangers?” asked Themba. Bongi had tears in her eyes.

“She’s upset because she didn’t know you were adopted,” said Linda.

“What’s the difference? We’re still Papa’s children,” said Bongi.

“Yes, you are, and you always will be.”

Everyone else started coming into the house. The festive mood had gone, and everyone was looking at Linda and her children as if they had learned something terrible about them. They fetched their belongings, and left.

Linda stood on her front door step, looking at her front lawn. It was devoid of people, and full of uncleared party debris. She started clearing up. In minutes, Kgomo, Bongi and Themba joined her. They all worked quietly. There was so much to be done, that they had to switch on lights as they continued to work after dark. They were exhausted when they were done. They ate cold left overs, then they went to their bedrooms.

Linda showered and changed into her sleepwear while Kgomotso showered after her. She sat on the bed, wondering if the children were sleeping. Bongi had been upset, Themba had not understood why everyone's attitude had changed all of a sudden. Kgomotso came out of the bathroom in his bathrobe.

"Let's go talk to the children," he said. Linda followed him out of the bedroom. They found the children on Bongi's bed. They were sitting cross-legged, facing each other. Linda and Kgomotso looked at each other, then they faced the children.

"Hi, can we come in?" asked Kgomotso. The children did not respond. Linda and Kgomotso joined them on the bed.

"I'm sorry about the way the party ended. You are my children, and you always will be. I love you both very much. I don't care where you came from, I never have. All I care about is being the best father to you.

"I should have told Nkgono long ago that Mama and I adopted you, but I didn't. She said some terrible things because she was upset, and it's my fault, not yours. I want you both to focus on how much we love you, and forget the way the party ended," said Kgomotso.

"Why didn't you tell people that we're adopted?" asked Bongi.

"Where I come from, the only children you raise are those with your blood on their veins. I knew Nkgono would be mad if I told her you were adopted. I told her that Mama and I were having children, and she assumed I was your birth father."

"What happens now?"

"I give her a little time, then I go and talk to her."

"Can I come with you?" asked Themba.

"No. I'll go alone." There was a long silence.

"I'm glad you adopted me. I go to the children's home with Mama, and those children don't have homes, or parents, or their own bedrooms," said Themba.

"Are you going to send us away?" asked Bongi.

"No!" said Linda and Kgomotso.

“Why would you ask such a question? We’re family, families stay together, no matter what,” said Kgomotso.

“Nkgono was very angry. She might tell you to send us away,” said Bongi.

“No one will be sending you away.” Bongi held Kgomotso tight.

“It’s late, we all need to get to sleep,” said Linda.

She woke sweating, she had dreamt that Ntombi had killed Mzwandile, and been jailed. She showered, then she went to prepare breakfast. The family joined her later.

“Are we going to church today?” asked Bongi. Linda and Kgomotso looked at each other.

“No,” said Linda.

“We need to pray about Papa talking to Nkgono. We want her to like him, and us.” Linda felt tears in her eyes. She blinked them away quickly before they became visible.

“We can pray here. Nkulunkulu is everywhere, not just in church,” she said.

“Can we pray? I think we need to get on our knees. Nkulunkulu really has to come through for us.” Linda and Kgomotso looked at each other.

“Alright, let’s go to the lounge, the carpet will be easier on our knees,” said Kgomotso. They all went to kneel in the lounge. Bongi started praying.

“Nkulunkulu, thank you for our family. If Mama and Papa hadn’t adopted us, we’d be unloved children. Thank you for parents who love us. Nkulunkulu, Papa needs to talk to Nkgono, who doesn’t like us anymore. We still like her, and we want her to like us again. Please help Papa to say things that she wants to hear, and make her miss us, and like us again,” she said. There was a silence as she sniffed.

“Amen,” she said.

“Amen,” said everyone else.

They opened their eyes to look at her. She wiped away her tears and sat on the couch. Everyone else sat on couches too. Shortly afterwards the children went to their bedrooms. Linda and Kgomotso looked at each other.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two days later, Kgomotso was in Nina's home, talking to Mme about his children. Mme was adamant that she did not want bastards whose ancestry could not be traced, in her family. Kgomotso had tried to persuade her in several ways, and she had refused to budge.

Kgomotso had given up talking. He was visualising how he would tell the children that their Nkgono never wanted to lay eyes on them again. He could easily foresee the rest of the family ostracising his children because Mme had ostracised them. The children would be distraught. They idolised their Nkgono.

"Nkgono, do you like us now?" asked Themba.

"Themba? What are you doing here?" asked Kgomotso.

"I want to talk to Nkgono."

"I need to do this alone."

"Nkgono, we love you, and you love us. Don't hate us, please," said Themba. Mme was looking at him in shock as he knelt at her feet, and looked at her appealingly.

"If Papa hadn't adopted us, we'd be in an orphanage. We wouldn't have people who love us, we wouldn't have people to hug us, or take us to nice places. We have parents, and a home, because Mama and Papa decided to adopt us. Please don't be mad at Papa or at us. We did nothing wrong, and neither did he," he continued.

"You're a child, you don't know the implications of this," said Mme dismissively.

"If Mama and Papa send us away, we'll live on the street. Do you want us to live on the street, Nkgono?"

"Themba..." said Kgomotso.

"I don't want to live on the street, Nkgono. I know someone who's Mama died, and he lives on the street, Nkgono, on the street! He has to steal food, or get it from a dustbin. The other day, he was chasing a stray cat, trying to get food from it. Nkgono, please, don't make me go live on the street. Bongi would

get into fights, or people would sell her, and I'd start to do drugs," wept Themba.

"How dare you put this child up to this!" Mme said to Kgomotso.

"I didn't make him do this. Who told you about drugs, and people selling children?" asked Kgomotso.

"Nkgono, do you hate us because you don't know our birth parents? Will you like us again if you know who they are?" asked Themba.

"No," said Mme. Themba looked at her in horror. Nina took him out of the room.

Kgomotso looked at Mme as if he had never seen her before.

"Mme, hate me if you want to, but don't break that boy's heart. It's not his fault that his parents didn't want him. He and Bongi had a bad start to life, through no fault of their own. Don't remind them of that, just because you're obsessed with blood lines.

"We're doing the best we can for them, and if you dissociate with them, they'll forever remember that they're not good enough. They weren't good enough for their parents to want to keep them, and now, you're saying they're not good enough to love, because they don't have your blood in their veins.

"Did you see Themba's face? He looked like his heart had been torn out of his chest. I love you, Mme, and I hoped we could sort this out, but it looks like I have to choose between you and my children.

"You have other people to love if you stop loving me and my family. My family has no one else, and I'm staying with them. I love them, and I want to be with them, regardless of how other people see me, and them. Thank you for seeing me," he said, then he left the room.

He found Nina in the kitchen, talking to Themba, who was silent.

"Let's go home," he said. He took Themba's hand, and led him out of the house. They drove off in silence.

"I wanted her to like us again," said Themba.

"How did you get there?"

“I took a cab, and aunt Nina paid for it when I arrived.”

“Themba! Don’t ever do that again!”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Where’s your sister?”

“At school. She has some sports on.”

“How did you know where I was?”

“I heard you talking to Aunty last night.”

“That was very disrespectful, and dangerous. It was disrespectful to barge into a meeting uninvited. It was unsafe to catch a cab alone. If your aunt hadn’t had the money to pay, what would you have done?” Themba did not respond.

Kgomotso stopped himself from rebuking him further. His heart was breaking for his son. He did not know how to make him feel better.

“Let’s go to my office,” he said.

“I don’t want to.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want Nkgono to like me.” Kgomotso’s mouth opened and closed wordlessly. His phone rang.

“Mme wants to talk to Themba,” said Nina.

“I’ll give him the phone.”

“She wants to see him.”

“I’ll bring him after work.”

“Bring him now, while she's still remorseful.”

“I can’t fetch him later.”

“I’ll bring him home.” Kgomotso made a u-turn.

“Where are we going?” asked Themba.

“Nkgono wants to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to her.”

“You have to go. When someone older than you wants to see you, you have to go.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I know.” Kgomotso dropped Themba off, and left.

When he returned home in the evening, Nina was climbing into her car.

“I’ve just brought Themba back,” she said.

“How did you get Mme to see him? When I left, she’d just come short of telling me she never wanted to see me again.”

“I told her the children would lose out on a Nkgono because she’s the only Nkgono they have. I also played the guilt card about Sam and his children. You know she feels bad about disowning him and never seeing his children. She couldn’t believe Themba didn’t want to speak to her.”

“He told her that?”

“He said you forced him to go, because she’s older than you both.”

“That must have been fun to see.”

“I can’t remember the last time I saw Mme having to beg someone to listen to her. I have to go.”

“Thank you.” Kgomotso went into the house. He looked into the lounge as he was walking past.

“Mme!” he said in surprise.

“Come and sit down. I want to talk to you,” said Mme. Kgomotso sat down, and exchanged greetings with Mme.

“Why didn’t you tell us the truth from the beginning?” she asked.

“I knew you’d be upset about not knowing their ancestry.”

“I’m still upset about that. What if they get sick, or attract bad things into their lives, because of where they come from?”

“We’ll handle whatever comes. Being a parent is about handling situations you never knew existed. Even with children with your blood in their veins, the unexpected happens.”

“That Themba of yours will make a good lawyer.”

“That’s what he wants to do when he grows up.”

“I’ve no doubt he’ll succeed.”

“Nkgono... Papa, you’re back. Dinner’s ready, in the kitchen,” said Themba.

Kgomotso asked him to cover his food while he took a quick shower. When he went to the kitchen, he found Mme and Linda talking.

“Hi. The children have already gone to sleep. Sit down, I’ll get your food,” said Linda. Kgomotso sat down and followed Linda with his eyes. She was wearing a red tracksuit that was begging to be peeled off her.

He looked away from her. Mme was watching him. He was embarrassed to have been caught ogling his wife. Linda put a plate of food before him. She smelt great.

He put a hand on hers because he could not resist touching her. She smiled at him, and sat down.

“Join me,” he said. Linda picked up a fork, and ate with him off his plate.

“I don’t understand what would prompt a person to take strangers into her home. You could have taken one of your sibling’s children, or a child from your cousins, if you wanted children that badly,” said Mme.

“I wanted children that’d never be taken from me again, Mme. You met Ntombi and her siblings at the party? All those six children were taken from me. If I’d taken a child from a relative, at some point, that relative would have come to take the child away,” said Linda.

“Are you still in touch with your real children?”

“Bongi and Themba are more my real children than the others. I’ve spent more years with these two, than I did with the others. I was happy to see you talking to them. The last time you left, they were as miserable as if you’d died. They adore you.”

“I was shocked and disappointed MaMthembu. I couldn’t believe Kgomotso had lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie, Mme, I left out a detail about how I became a parent,” said Kgomotso.

“Was it your idea to take those children in?”

“I wanted children, but my body couldn’t make them anymore, so I decided to adopt. I wanted them to have a father, so I asked Kgomotso to be their father,” said Linda.

“Is buying children legal?”

“I didn’t buy them! I did it legally, they are not stolen, they weren’t sold to me. Adoption is legal, but buying children is not.”

“Looking at you altogether, no one would know that they don’t have your blood in their veins. I know I’d never have done that.”

“I need to be a mother. I was dying without children.”

“Why didn’t you try to get your own children back?”

“I didn’t have any more strength to fight with their father and his family.”

“Well, it’s working out, I guess that’s the important thing.” Kgomotso took Mme back to Nina’s home after dinner.

When he returned home, he found Linda baking in the kitchen.

“I’m glad things are almost back to normal with Mme,” she said.

“So am I. It’s all thanks to Themba.”

“What did he do?”

“He persuaded Mme that she really wants to be with us. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Giving our son such immense powers of persuasion. He must get it from you. I’ve never wanted to be a father. I thought it was too much trouble, and that it’d interfere with my freedom. I never married precisely because I wanted to be free.

“You sat me down and sold me this fantasy that I'd never want to be part of in my worst nightmares, but coming from you, I couldn't wait to experience it. The way you sold it to me, I'd be a weekend father, if and when I was in town, and you'd be there in case things got difficult.

“And it would have worked, if I hadn't started loving the children and wanting more time with them, and if I hadn't fallen in love with their mother.

“You took me completely off guard. We were at my parents' home, and you were holding Nina's Mpumi, she was crying. The love hit me hard. I couldn't breathe. Once I could breathe again, I decided to ignore the feeling, but it didn't help. The more I saw you, the deeper the love grew.

“I started excluding you when I took the children because I wanted to hold you forever. It was about that time that Nina celebrated an anniversary, and you told me you were glad not to have to put up with nonsense from a man. I'd been on the verge of telling you how I felt, but that persuaded me otherwise.

“The accident helped me to realise that I'll never get over you. What are you making?”

“Brownies. I haven't made those for you in years.”

“You remember that I like them?”

“Of course I remember what you like. You and I were friends before we had children. And you're the best father my children could ever have.”

“Now, yes, when we first had them, I was very negligent.”

“You played with them, talked to them, held their hands, and told them stories whenever you were present. That's more than my other children ever got from their father. These brownies will be ready in half an hour. Is there something else you want me to bake for you?”

“No, thanks.”

“I want to do something to thank you for giving our children their Nkgono back, and the rest of the family. If she had gone permanently, she'd have taken them with her,” said Linda. She sat in his lap, and kissed him deeply.

“Thank you for giving our children a family. You know my brother's the only family I have. If anything happens to us, your family's all they have,” she said.

Over the following week, Kgomotso worked late every night. On one such evening, Linda arranged for the children to spend the night at Tshepo's, then she went home to freshen up, and pack the food that she had bought in a picnic basket. She took the basket to Kgomotso's office. He was in the board room, with several of his staff members. He stood when she entered the room.

"Is everything alright? Has something happened to the children?" he asked.

"Everything's fine. I brought you supper."

"Oh," said Kgomotso, as the concerned look left his face.

"Hello, everyone. I'm sorry to disturb you. I brought you all supper," said Linda. She put the picnic basket on the chair closest to her.

"Everyone, this is my wife, Linda Mthembu. Linda, this is Tom Mbedzi, Mpho Molefe, Anita Govender, and this is Anna Petronius," said Kgomotso. Linda and everyone else exchanged greetings.

"I'll be off now, bye," said Linda. She looked at Kgomotso. He was walking towards her.

"Carry on. I'll be back in two minutes," he said to his staff, then he opened the door for Linda. She walked through it, and he followed her.

"Are the children alone?" he asked.

"They're at Tshepo's. I miss you. I hardly see you," said Linda. Kgomotso looked at her closely, then he bent towards her and kissed her.

"Oh," said a voice. Linda and Kgomotso broke the kiss. Linda was in Kgomotso's arms. A security staff member was walking past, looking uncomfortable. Linda watched Kgomotso glance at him, then he focused on her.

"Thanks for bringing supper," he said.

"You're welcome. I love you."

"I love you, too."

"When will you be home?"

"When I'm done. I can't give you a more specific time."

“Wake me when you come.” Kgomotso kissed her lightly, and released her. She kissed his cheek, and left.

At home, she did not know what to do with herself. She regretted not fetching the children home. At least if they had been home, she would have had a reason to stay home. As it was, she wanted to go out. She wanted to go to a movie, but not alone. She invited Nina out, and Nina complained that it was short notice. On impulse, Linda phoned Tumelo.

“Is everything alright?” he asked.

“Everything’s fine. I wonder if you want to go to a movie with me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind,” said Linda, suddenly feeling ridiculous.

“I’d love to go to a movie with you.”

“Now. I know it’s short notice...”

“Now’s fine.”

“Where should I pick you up?” They decided on a venue for the movie, then they arranged where Linda could pick Tumelo up.

She picked him up, they greeted each other, then they were silent a while, as Linda drove to their destination.

“I’m glad you’re joining me. I thought you’d never speak to me again, because of Celia,” said Linda.

“That was the plan, then I decided not to deny myself access to my Mama. I’ve been without you too long to waste the chance to be with you.”

“I...”

“Let’s not talk about it. Themba’s party was great.”

“Thank you.”

They arrived at the mall. They selected a movie, and bought refreshments, then they watched the movie. It was one of the latest local productions. They found it hilarious. Linda suddenly felt exhausted.

“I’m sorry, I won’t be able to take you home tonight,” she said, after the movie.

“Okay, I’ll make a plan.”

“You can spend the night at my home, if that’s fine with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Can we go?”

“Yes.”

Kgomotso rushed home. He stood still after closing the front door. He was hearing a male voice, coming from the bedroom area. It was too mature to be Themba’s. He frowned. It wasn’t Tshepo’s voice either. It did not sound like Linda’s brother’s voice. He walked towards the sounds.

“Tumelo?” he said. He had found him with Linda in one of the guest bedrooms.

“Hello, Papa,” said Tumelo.

“Hello,” said Kgomotso, as he looked from Tumelo to Linda.

“Do you have anyone waiting at home for you? Let them know where you are,” said Linda to Tumelo. He smiled, then he hugged her.

“It’s so wonderful to have you say and do Mama things with me and for me. I don’t have anyone waiting for me at home,” he said.

“Will you be comfortable here?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you want to eat? I can warm something up for you.”

“I’m fine thanks.”

“There’s a TV in the lounge and...”

“I’ll be fine, Mama. Goodnight,” said Tumelo.

“Goodnight,” said Linda.

“Goodnight, Papa,” said Tumelo.

“Goodnight,” said Kgomoṡo. He and Linda left the room, and went to their own bedroom.

“How are you?” asked Linda.

“Fine. What brings Tumelo here?”

“I invited him to watch a movie with me. We must take the children to see it. It’s hilarious. How did it go?”

“So-so. We’ll see whether or not the client likes it. I’m so tired.”

“That’s too bad. I asked you to wake me because I want to ...” said Linda. She undid Kgomoṡo’s shirt, and took it off him. She undressed him completely, then she kissed and caressed him to satiation.

He kissed her weakly, and fell asleep. Linda watched him. She was frustrated, but also pleased to have given him pleasure. She could not sleep. She showered, then she went to make sandwiches in the kitchen. She looked up when she heard footsteps.

“Tumelo? Can’t you sleep?” she asked.

“No, I’m excited to be here, in my Mama’s house. It’s a dream come true. Those sandwiches look good.”

“Wash your hands and sit down.” Tumelo smiled.

“What is it?” asked Linda.

“You’re being my Mama, giving me instructions, and feeding me. I used to spend hours dreaming about my Mama doing these very things for me.” They started eating.

“How old was I when you left?” he asked. Linda looked at him in surprise.

“Why do you ask?”

“Ntombi used to talk about you a lot. I have no memory of you.”

“You were eight months old.”

“Was I a good baby? All the mamas we had after you called me a bad boy.”

“You were very clever. I was sure you’d walk earlier than the others, and I was sure you’d be a doctor.”

“I’ll be a psychologist when I’m done.”

“It’s all in the field of medicine. When I grew up, doctors were considered some of the cleverest people around.”

“Why are you afraid of being with us?” Linda looked up from her plate.

“What do you mean?” she asked cautiously.

“You keep a distance between us, and between you and Ntombi. Considering that you didn’t want to leave us, I’d have thought you’d be glad to have us back in your life.” Linda looked away from him, then she stood, and washed the dishes.

“People talk of hell. I’ve been there. I arrived the night I was sent from my home, and I was there for many years. I was in pain all hours of every day, missing my children, worrying about them, wondering what I’d done to deserve such pain.

“After a while, I told myself to stop crying and wishing for what could never be mine. When I made that decision, I decided never to get involved with any of you again, because I’d die if I cared for you and lost you again.

“I keep a distance, because I’m afraid to lose you again. As I said, I won’t survive a second round,” she said.

“You won’t have to. You won’t lose us again, certainly, you won’t lose me or Ntombi. I can’t speak for the others.” Linda looked up from the cup that she was drying. Tumelo was on his feet, standing beside her, looking at her earnestly. They shared a long look, then she put the cup away. Tumelo returned to his seat.

“I used to spend hours dreaming about my beautiful Mama coming to take me away from the people who called me a bad boy, and shouted at me all the time. She’d appear as if by magic, put her arms round me, and tell everyone to leave her child alone. Then she’d take me to her house, ask me what my favourite foods were, and cook them for me,” he said. Linda sat down, watching him. He was in a deep reverie. He smiled sadly.

“Wandi would tell me time and time again to stop wasting time on things that could never be, but I wouldn’t stop the fantasy,” said Tumelo.

“Wandi. I used to call him that. He was so adventurous. There was nothing he wouldn’t try. Often, I was afraid he’d hurt himself, but he didn’t seem to have that fear. He taught me to go for what I wanted.

“I have my own business because I decided to go for what I want, regardless of the fact that I knew nothing when I started. Is he still going for what he wants?”

“He stopped dreaming. Now, he settles, and hates it. He’s miserable, and wants everyone else to be miserable with him. He’s brilliant, but he’s in too much pain to be any good to himself, or anyone else.”

“I should never have left.”

“You couldn’t help it.”

“It’s late.”

“You won’t lose us again, Mama.”

“Good night,” said Linda.

Next morning, she woke up late. She heard Tumelo and Kgomotso out in the garden. She freshened up, then she went to make breakfast. The men entered the kitchen, carrying the peaches that they had harvested. Everyone sat down to breakfast.

“Do you have to go home, Tumelo? If not, you could come with us to fetch Bongsi and Themba,” said Linda.

“I’d love to.” Linda continued to eat. She looked up. Tumelo was looking at her strangely.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Are they adopted? Are Themba and his sister adopted?” he asked.

“Yes, they are.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t have children of my own, so I adopted them.”

“Why didn’t you look for us?”

“I wanted a fresh start, and I wanted to raise the children from start to finish. And I was too tired to fight with your father.”

“So you adopted them to replace us?” Linda gasped in shock

“I adopted them because I’m a born mother, who was dying without children,” she said.

“You had us!” shouted Tumelo.

“I didn’t have you, and I was not replacing any of you!” shouted Linda.

“You’re my Mama!” said Tumelo.

“I know!”

“Then why am I having to earn your love, when these people you have no blood ties with, get it free?”

“They’re my children!”

“So am I!” shouted Tumelo. They glared at each other.

“We should leave now,” said Kgomotso.

In the car, he listened to the heavy silence that Tumelo and Linda were observing. He wondered if taking Tumelo to fetch Bongi and Themba was such a good idea. He looked at Linda, who was sitting beside him. She was furious. He thought it best not to suggest taking Tumelo to his home there and then.

“Do you want us to take you home first?” Linda asked curtly.

“No,” Tumelo said just as curtly. Kgomotso sighed silently.

They arrived at Nina’s. Everyone was surprised to see Tumelo. Kgomotso made his family’s goodbyes quickly, then they all climbed into the car. Themba’s attempts to talk to Tumelo were met with curt responses, then Linda told him to leave Tumelo alone.

Kgomotso asked Tumelo for directions to his home, and he said he would make his own way home. Linda turned in her seat to look at him. He was sitting in the back seat, behind Kgomotso.

“I said I’d take you back home, Tumelo Zwane, and that’s what I’m going to do. Give me the directions to your home this instant,” she commanded. Tumelo gave her the directions.

Kgomotso did not blame him. Linda had sounded as if she would leap into the back seat, and wreak havoc if she was denied. He had never seen her so fierce. He wanted to take her to a private place, rip her clothes off, and love her till she stopped being mad. The chances of that fantasy being fulfilled were not many.

Tumelo was staying at a university residence. Themba climbed out of the car with him, and insisted on being given a tour of the place. Tumelo looked at him with a mixture of disbelief and hatred, then he invited everyone into his room. Kgomotso looked round at the room, and remembered his own university days.

“Thanks, Tumelo, we’ll be off now,” he said.

“Can’t we stay a while longer?” asked Themba.

“It’s time to go home,” said Linda curtly. In the car, everyone was quiet. Linda’s silence was forbidding.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” asked Themba. Kgomotso heard Bongi draw in a fearful breath.

“Nothing,” said Linda.

“Then why are you so angry?”

“Because!” said Linda. Kgomotso smiled slightly. He had never thought to hear such a child-like response from her lips.

“Mama didn’t sleep well. She’ll feel better when she’s rested,” he said. She looked at him malevolently, and he winked at her. He wanted to kiss her senseless.

At home, the children went to their bedrooms. Kgomotso followed Linda to their bedroom. She was going to the bathroom. He moved quickly to take her into his arms. She looked at him in surprise.

He kissed her as he caressed her back. She stilled in surprise, then she made to withdraw from him. He manoeuvred her onto her back on the bed. She

looked at him, surprised to be on her back on the bed. Kgomotso worked quickly to take her top off, as he kissed her throat, and down to her bosom.

“Kgomotso! I’m not in the mood,” she said. He caressed the places guaranteed to drive her wild, and her protests turned to moans. She tried to withdraw from his arms, and he kissed her, caressing her with more effort. He sucked on her breasts, caressing between her legs, then he kissed her screams of pleasure back into her throat.

She lay still afterwards, as he lowered his trousers and underwear. He kissed and caressed her, and she caressed him too. He joined his body to hers, and they both gasped. In seconds, they were moving together. Kgomotso could feel the pleasure increasing in every part of his body. He stilled and let Linda feel how much he appreciated her. He collapsed beside her, exhausted. She looked at him in surprise.

“You are so sexy when you’re mad,” he said. She made a disbelieving sound as she went to the bathroom.

Linda could not believe that Tumelo had dared to say that she had tried to replace him with Bongi and Themba. After all the tears she had shed, he thought she could do that? She shook her head in disbelief as she showered.

She winced as she washed a spot on her breast. She looked at the spot. Kgomotso had bitten her. She gasped, then she remembered that he had been wild for her. She smiled smugly, remembering his eagerness to get at her body. No one had ever wanted her as badly as he had. It was very flattering to be wanted that badly, by such a wonderful man.

Next day, Linda was surprised when Ntombi arrived in her office just before close of business.

“What’s the matter?” asked Linda.

“What did you say to Tumelo?”

“Tumelo?”

“He says he spent a night in your home, then you had words.”

“We had words alright. He accused me to trying to replace all of you with Bongi and Themba.”

“Were you?”

“How can you ask me that? If you lost a child, would it be replaced by another one?”

“We’re not talking about me.”

“I wasn’t trying to replace you. I was dying without children, so I got those two, but I knew they’d never replace any of you. They can’t, you all have such different characters, your voices sound different, your likes and dislikes are different, there’s no way they can replace you, any more than you can replace Tumelo or be replaced by him. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Could you make that clear to your brother?”

“I heard you,” said Tumelo as he came into the office.

Linda looked at him, he was standing behind his sister.

“I was not trying to replace you,” she said.

“I know that now. I was jealous, Mama. They’ve always had you, and you were taken from me. I can never get those years back.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” Tumelo sat down.

“I’m sorry I said you tried to replace us. Now, I know it wasn’t like that,” he said. There was a small silence.

“Hi, Mama. Sisi, Buti, hi,” said Themba as he came into the office.

“Hi, Themba,” said Linda, Ntombi and Tumelo.

“Are you coming home for supper with us?” asked Themba.

“Not today. I’ll make an arrangement with Mama, and my family and I will come another time,” said Ntombi.

“I’d like to see my niece and nephews again. I liked that present you and your family gave me, Sisi.” Ntombi smiled.

“Fred suggested it,” she said.

“You must teach him to call me Malume, he kept calling me Themba. I'm still his Malume, even if he's older than me.”

“I'll talk to him. I have to go,” said Ntombi. She kissed Linda's cheek, hugged Themba, and left.

“What about you, Buti, are you coming home for supper?” asked Themba.

“Not tonight,” said Tumelo. He looked at Linda.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“Apology accepted,” said Linda.

“Can we meet some time?”

“Yes.” He kissed her cheek, shook hands with Themba in a special handshake, and left.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Linda watched the DVD of Themba's birthday. The end saddened her. She had not thought much about Mzwandile, but the sight of him, swaying on his feet, more drunk than a village drunkard, broke her heart.

That was not her son. She remembered Tumelo saying that he was miserable, and worried even more. She asked Tumelo for Mzwandile's contact details, but every time she thought to phone him, she chickened out.

Themba and Bongi went on another camping trip. Bongi had been reluctant at first, but when the time came, she was as excited as Themba. Kgomotso had to go out of town unexpectedly. He and Linda took the children to the bus that would take them camping, then Linda drove Kgomotso to the airport. They had planned to spend the time alone, but the business trip had come up suddenly.

Linda decided to go and see Mzwandile. He lived close to the airport.

Her heart was pounding as she climbed out of her car, and walked towards the front door. She rang the doorbell, and a woman opened the door. She looked at Linda enquiringly, then she drew back, a shocked expression on her face.

"Hello. Can I see Mzwandile Zwane?" said Linda. The woman led her to a lounge, looking at her often. Mzwandile was sitting with two children, one on either side of him. One of the children looked exactly like Linda, and Linda gasped. Mzwandile and the children looked up at her.

"Hello," she said. They did not respond. Uninvited, she sank into a couch, her eyes on Mzwandile, who was also watching her.

"Why is my child the spitting image of this lady?" asked the young woman who had led Linda into the house. Linda looked at her, then at Mzwandile.

"Who is she?" demanded the woman. Mzwandile seemed to be speechless.

"I'm the woman who gave birth to him," said Linda.

"Oh. You're the woman who..."

"This lady and I are leaving, I'll be back later," said Mzwandile, getting to his feet. Linda stood too.

"Where are you going?"

“I’ll be back,” said Mzwandile, putting a hand on Linda’s elbow and ushering her out of the house.

He led her to her car, took the keys from her hand, and drove off. They were silent, then he stopped at a park. He climbed out of the car, she followed him. He sat on a bench, she sat beside him.

“That drunk man who came to my home was not my Wandi,” she said.

“I was never your Wandi.”

“You’re my eldest son, the one who taught me to go for what I want. I’m in business today, because I decided to be like my Wandi, and go for it, even if I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to know what I can do to help you to be you.”

“You don’t know me, lady.”

“I know you better than you know yourself.”

“I know what this is. You’re feeling guilty, and you’re hoping I’ll help you feel better, well, I won’t.”

“I don’t feel guilty. What do I have to be guilty about? I didn’t leave willingly.”

“You should have tried to come back.”

“I did! I used lawyers, I used my family, I followed you to the USA, Mzwandile, and your father would not budge. I did everything I could, so don’t you sit in judgement of me, when you don’t know what I’ve been through.” They glared at each other, then they looked away from each other.

“Are you a drunk?” asked Linda.

“What the hell do you care?”

“I care that you not waste your life the way my father did. He drank himself into a stupor every night, and lost all his jobs as soon as he started them. He was a brilliant man, just like you, and he wasted his life, because he was afraid of

being himself. He wanted to be doctor, he trained as a doctor, but he was afraid of being disappointed.

“He knew that he could find the cures for several diseases, but he was afraid that he would be denied the funding he needed because of his skin colour, so he didn’t try. He held onto the pain that had led to him being denied funding when he finished matric.

“He had to wait five years before he was funded. Once he trained, he messed up all his jobs, and sat at home, telling us how terrible life was, and how we should all just save ourselves from disappointment by not dreaming, and by accepting that nothing would ever change.

“But things changed, Wandi. We got independence, and many other good things have happened. All he needed was to be true to himself, but he wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t do that for himself, or for us.

“Do you know how terrible it is to watch a man you idolise let himself go? To watch him destroy himself? It is the most terrible thing to feel your respect for your father disappear into nothing because he’s afraid of being himself, because he’ll be different from those whose opinion he values.

“We adored, loved, admired, and respected him as he was. But he spoilt that, for himself, and for all of us. Ma was a miserable woman because Baba stopped being the ambitious and exciting man that she had married.

“He became a bitter and scared man that she tolerated because she did not know what to do with herself if she left him. Don’t be like your Mkhulu, Wandi. Don’t destroy yourself and your family by drinking to hide the pain of trying to be something you’re not. Those who love you, love you for the real you, not the not-you that you’re trying to be.”

“You know nothing about me. How dare you preach to me.”

“I know you’re not a drunk, Mzwandile, and if you are, I command you to put a stop to it.”

“You have no right to command or forbid me anything!” They glared at each other.

“You’re right, I don’t have that power, but I do have the power to wish you well, and that’s what I do, I wish you well, and I pray for you. You can’t take

that away from me, even if you don't want me to wish you well," said Linda, then she stood.

"You have beautiful children," she said, then she walked to the car.

Mzwandile followed her, and she drove them to his home. He climbed out of the car, then he looked back at her.

"Well, aren't you coming in to meet your grandchildren?" he asked

"I think we've said enough for today."

"Don't you dare bail out on me again!" Linda looked at him, surprised. She had thought that he would be glad that she was leaving. She followed him into the house.

He introduced her to his wife Nancy, and their children, Zanele and Zandile. Zanele was the spitting image of Linda. She shook Linda's hand, then she hugged her tight. Linda wiped away tears at such a warm reception.

Nancy brought food to the lounge, and Zanele sat beside Linda, hogging her attention with questions and stories. Linda looked up from her. Zandile was feeling left out. Linda held a hand out to her, and sat her on her lap. She told them both a story, then she said it was time to go. The girls did not want her to go. They walked her to her car with Wandi and Nancy.

"Don't do to them, what you did to me," said Wandi. Linda looked at him enquiringly.

"You made me love you, then you left. Don't do that to them," he said. The children insisted on hugging Linda. She crouched to hug them, then she nodded at their parents, and left.

She could not believe what had happened, and she was not sure how relations stood with Mzwandile. She decided not to worry about it. Things would work out, as Kgomo was fond of saying.

She was glad to fetch Bongi and Themba home three days later. Themba was full of stories about the things he had seen and done. Bongi was more reserved. Linda wondered if she had acquired a boyfriend while she had been out there.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kgomotso returned home, and Linda had to leave town on business. He had missed her, and was unhappy that she was leaving as he arrived.

The children told him what they had been up to at camp, then Bongi told him about a boy she liked. He sat watching her as she talked, wishing that Linda was there. Bongi looked at him expectantly.

“What did Mama say when you told her about this boy?” he asked.

“I didn’t tell her. She’d get mad and tell me about diseases and pregnancy. There’s no way I’ll tell her this. Can I go and meet Paul?” she asked. Kgomotso did not have a reply.

“I’ll let you know,” he said.

“Oh, Papa!”

“Have you set the table for supper?” He watched as Bongi left the lounge, completely unimpressed with him.

He phoned Nina, seeking advice, but she was at work. He phoned Tshepo, and Tshepo told him to invite the boy over to his home, and beat sense into him.

“That’s too extreme,” said Kgomotso.

“Do you want that boy doing to your child what you did to girls when you were her age?” asked Tshepo. Kgomotso could not reply.

“What does Linda say?” continued Tshepo.

“She’s in China. I don’t want to phone her, she’ll think I’m incompetent. I know I am, but I don’t want her finding out just yet.”

“You’re not incompetent.”

“I don’t have answers for some of the questions these children come up with.”

“No one has all the answers. Have you spoken to Nina?”

“She’s in surgery.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I know, ask Mme.”

“Are you mad?”

“Do you have any other ideas?” Kgomotso closed his eyes after the call. This was not what he had signed on for, when he had agreed to be a parent.

He was surprised by the ringing of the doorbell. He opened the door.

“Ntombi? Is everything alright?” he asked. Ntombi was with two of her three children.

“Everything’s fine. I came for supper. Mama and I arranged for me to bring the children to see their Malume.”

“She’s not here.”

“Oh.”

“Can we see Malume?” asked Sipho, the girl. She and her younger brother were looking behind Kgomotso.

“Hi, Sisi. You brought me my niece and nephew, thank you. Come in, everyone,” said Themba, who had appeared beside Kgomotso. The children followed him hastily. Kgomotso watched them, then he looked at Ntombi.

“Sisi, hi. Come in,” said Bongi, taking Ntombi by the hand and leading her to the lounge. Kgomotso closed the front door and followed them slowly. They were seated, and Bongi was talking animatedly.

“Is he cute?” asked Ntombi.

“To die for.”

“That’s great. It’s exciting to be with a boy you like,” said Ntombi. Kgomotso was not liking what he was hearing.

“I was fifteen when I had my eldest child,” continued Ntombi.

“That’s a year older than I am!” gasped Bongi.

“I wouldn’t advise anyone to do that. Baba disowned me, I had to live with the family of my baby’s father. They called me a whore, saying I was lying that he was the father of the baby.”

“That’s terrible!”

“I shouldn’t have slept with him. I thought he’d like me better, but once we had sex, he wouldn’t talk to me. When I went to live with his family, he told me many times that he wished I was dead.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“I wanted someone to love me, because no one else did. Mama had gone, Baba was always busy with his girlfriends.” Ntombi shook her head.

“Have a good time with Paul, but don’t sleep with him. Wait until you’re working,” she said.

“You didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t, and because of that, I had to live on the street, because I had no home. If I’d not gotten pregnant, I’d have finished school, and had money to look after myself and a baby. If you sleep with him, you risk pregnancy and diseases.”

“Boring! You sound just like Mama. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“I wish Mama had been around to tell me that. If she had, I’d have waited. You’re very lucky to have her, and that she tells you these things. I’d give ten years of my life to have had her in my life then. Listen to her, Bongi. You don’t want to end up homeless, just because you spread your legs once.”

“Don’t be disgusting!”

“Sleeping with a boy involves...”

“Alright! I won’t sleep with him. But I’ll be the only virgin in the school.”

“That’s not true. Most of the people in your school are virgins, and if they’re not, that’s not your problem. There’s no need to rush sex.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I didn’t, till I got pregnant. Now, I understand perfectly. You know what, Bongi? No matter what I say, what Mama says, or what anyone else says, the bottom line is that it’s your body. If you want boys talking about how easy you are, and having them take turns having sex with you, that’s your business.”

“They wouldn’t do that.”

“They’re teenagers, Bongi. All they think about all day is how to put their penises in...” said Kgomotso.

“Papa!” said Bongi.

“I was a teenager once, and for many years after I stopped being a teenager, all I thought about was having an orgasm, inside the body of a female person.”

“I don’t want to hear this!”

“I listened to men and boys talking about who it was easy to sleep with, and that’s who I went to talk to, all I wanted was sex, and I got it. You can bet your fortune that I’d never look at any of those girls and women now, because we all considered them good for sex, and nothing else.”

“That’s disgusting!”

“We’re all ashamed to be seen talking to any of them, or for it to be known that we slept with them or had anything to do with them. Several of them came to me looking for jobs, and I wouldn’t hire them. In my mind, they’re sluts, and they always will be,”

“That’s prejudice,” said Ntombi.

“Yes, it is, but that’s the way men think and operate. We respect those who don’t sleep with us. We call them names, but we respect them. Sleep with Paul if you want to, Bongi, but don’t tell me, because I’ll kill him.”

“Use condoms, unless you want to be pregnant, or if you want to die,” said Ntombi.

“You guys are spoiling this,” said Bongi.

“We’re telling you the facts of life.”

“They’re horrible,” said Bongi, then she left the room.

Kgomotso looked at Ntombi.

“I don’t know if we scared her or made her more determined to have sex. Where do I get a manual for this kind of situation?” he asked.

“You take it as it comes, and do your best,” said Ntombi.

“Did you really live on the street?”

“For a few hours,” Ntombi said, smiling sheepishly.

“You made it sound like you’d been there for several years.”

“I don’t want Bongi, or any of my other sisters making the mistakes I made, so I exaggerate where necessary.”

“What happened?”

“The baby’s father’s family sent me away a few days after I arrived in their home. I went to a church, and the mfundisi went to speak to Baba. He only took me back because the mfundisi had been Mama’s favourite. I didn’t know that, but Baba told me that he was taking me in for her sake. He didn’t want her blaming him when she came back home.”

“He expected her to come home?”

“He said she organised us and the house without troubling him about it. The women who came after Mama asked him for money for food and other things for us, and he didn’t like it.

“By the time we went to the USA, he was constantly saying that she should never have left. I was shocked when he said he sent her away in the USA. I’d have thought he’d have begged her to come back. I’ll help Bongi with supper.”

Kgomotso sat back in his seat, wondering what Linda would have done. He was going to let Bongi go and meet the boy, in the afternoon, in a public place.

In a short while, Bongi invited him to dinner. She was still annoyed by what he and Ntombi had said. Kgomotso followed her to the kitchen. Ntombi, her children and Themba were in the kitchen.

“Hi, Mamncane,” the children said. Bongi looked about the room, and realised that the children were talking to her.

“Oh, hi,” she said.

“Mama says you cooked for us. Thank you,” said Sipho. Bongi was touched.

“Let’s eat,” she said. Everyone sat down to eat the omelettes that she had come up with. The children ate quickly, then the little boy left with Themba.

Sipho moved to sit closer to Bongi, asking her questions and making it clear that Bongi was her hero. Bongi's bad mood was melted by being adored, and she took Sipho to her bedroom. Kgomotso looked at Ntombi.

"I'll do the dishes, then we'll go," she said. Kgomotso went to open the door as someone was ringing the doorbell.

"Tshepo, hi," he said.

"Get me something to eat," Tshepo said, making his way to the kitchen.

"Oh, hello," he said to Ntombi.

"Hello," said Ntombi. Kgomotso introduced them to each other as he prepared sandwiches for Tshepo.

"Is something wrong, Tshepo?" he asked.

"I hate women," said Tshepo.

"What's the matter?"

"They never stop fighting! If it's not one thing, then it's another. They fight about which of their kids I buy toys for, which of them I take to a function, which of them I have in my home. Those women will be the death of me."

"Ntate did tell you not to marry more than one woman."

"What does he know about my needs? So, Ntombi, are you married? A beautiful woman like you should be with a man who appreciates her. I know I appreciate you, and I could show you how much, if you'd let me."

"Tshepo, are you flirting with my married child?" demanded Kgomotso.

"She's not a child, and she certainly isn't your anything," said Tshepo.

"She's my wife's child, and I consider her mine too, and I won't have her..."

"Alright, alright, father of the year! There's no need to get your bow and arrow."

"You're her uncle!"

"Don't be disgusting."

"You're disgusting, saying..."

“I’m sorry, okay? I’ll never make a pass at another woman in your presence.”

“Why did you get married? It's clear that it's not your cup of tea. Why didn't you behave like me? I didn't marry till I was good and ready to be faithful.”

“Are you?”

“Of course I am.”

“You’re just saying that because your wife’s child is here.”

“I’m faithful!”

“You don’t wonder if some other woman would...”

“No!”

“I do, all the time.”

“Why? You already have three wives.”

“After three months with the same woman, I get bored.”

“Why did you marry your wives?”

“It was the only way to get them to take their clothes off.”

“I should go,” said Ntombi.

“Thank you for coming. I’ll tell your mother you dropped by,” said Kgomotso.

“I’ll see myself out,” said Ntombi, and she left.

“That is one beautiful woman. Do you ever think about...?” said Tshepo.

“No!”

“I’m thinking about...”

“I don’t want to know! Shouldn’t you be going home now?”

“I’m never going home. I’m going to divorce those bitches and...”

“Those are the mothers of my nieces and nephews.”

“I should never have married them. Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I tried, with all three brides, and you accused me of jealousy.”

“I’d been blinded by lack of sex. I’ll tell you something for free. You get less and less sex from a woman the longer you’re married to her. I blame children. As soon as they appear, you may as well retire your penis.”

“Tshepo!”

“Malume, when did you get here?” asked Themba as he entered the kitchen. Kgomotso wondered if he had heard Tshepo’s words.

“Hi, Themba. I’m spending the night, can you show me to a guest room?” asked Tshepo. Themba looked at Kgomotso, Kgomotso nodded. He watched Tshepo and Themba leaving the room.

“Sipho’s an interesting little girl,” said Bongi, as she joined Kgomotso in the lounge.

“You looked surprised when she called you mamncane.”

“I’ve never been called that before.”

“You must be responsible around her. Mamncane means younger mother. If we lived in the old days, and something happened to Ntombi, you, as her younger and unmarried sister, would be expected to go and mother Sipho and the others, and marry their father.”

“Am I glad we don’t live in those days.”

“You’re still her mother.”

“I’m not old enough to be anyone’s mother.”

“I’m glad you realise that. You can meet Paul.”

“Thanks, Papa.”

“In the afternoon.”

“Papa!”

“In a public place. I expect you home by five, I’ll pick you up from wherever you’ll be.”

“Papa!”

“Would you rather wait to hear what Mama says?”

“She’ll say no.”

“It’s my way, or Mama’s way.”

“He’ll think I’m a baby if I see him during the day.”

“That’s the only time you’ll get to see him. In the evening, I want you home. Will you meet him during the day, or will you stay home?”

“I’ll meet him.”

“Good. I want to know where you’ll be meeting, and when.”

“I’m not a baby.”

“I know, you’re a young woman. Young women behave themselves by keeping their clothes on.”

“Papa!”

“If I hear that you’re a slut, Bongi...”

“Papa! I won’t do anything.”

“Good.” Bongi left the room.

“What’s this about a slut?” asked Tshepo.

“I’m letting Bongi go on a date.”

“Are you crazy? She’ll bring you a baby in nine months, mark my words.”

“Do you remember how Nina was raised? She was not allowed to socialise, so what did she do?”

“She snuck out at night and got into dangerous situations. There aren’t enough fingers and toes to count the number of times we had to get her out of sticky situations.”

“She had three elder brothers, Bongi has none. She has to learn to take care of herself. I’d sooner she do it in broad daylight, than have her do what Nina used to do.”

“If she’s into sneaking out, there’s nothing you can do to stop her.”

“I know, I’m hoping she’s not into that.”

“She could be, after all, her mother had her out of wedlock. She was clearly a slut, and her child could take after her.”

“Don’t ever refer to my children, or their biological parents in that fashion,” Kgomotso said coldly.

“Sorry, man. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“If you try any of your womanising tricks on Bongi, or any of my other children, I *will* kill you,” Kgomotso said menacingly. Tshepo nodded.

“Goodnight,” said Kgomotso, as he left the room.

He lay on the bed, missing Linda. He wondered why he had never noticed how shady Tshepo was towards women. He turned onto his side, realising that every trick that Tshepo knew, he had learned from him.

He groaned, realising that he had been a more efficient, and more wicked playboy than Tshepo would ever be. Thinking of himself treating women like Ntombi as objects for his pleasure made him feel sick. All those women that he had toyed with, had mothers like Linda, and fathers just like him.

He had disrespected those women, their parents, and everyone, when he had toyed with them for his sexual pleasure. He had prided himself on being a great lover, and he had been that, physically, but in all other ways, he had abused those women.

He felt a deep sorrow, and vowed to help whichever one of them came to him for help. He owed them that at least. He felt better after making that decision, and slept.

Tshepo returned to his home the following day.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Linda returned home exhausted. She had missed her family more than she would ever have guessed. She felt tears in her eyes when she saw them at the airport. Kgomotso, Bongi, Themba, Tumelo and Wandi were there to meet her. She hugged them all, then they all went home. Bongi and Themba chose to join Tumelo and Wandi in Wandi's car, while Kgomotso drove Linda home.

"How are you?" asked Linda.

"I missed you, so much. I think we all did. Bongi wore one of your scarves most of the past three days, and Themba sat in your chair the whole time you were gone. I tossed and turned in bed most nights."

"So did I. Where did you get Tumelo and Wandi?"

"They came to see you just before we came to pick you up. Themba invited them to join us. Ntombi came to visit two weeks ago. She said you'd arranged for her to come."

"Yes, we did, I forgot to tell her I'd be going away."

"It's a good thing you did, she helped me with something."

"What?"

"Bongi met a boy at camp."

"I suspected as much. She was dreamy, and a little secretive."

"She asked if she could go on a date with him."

"No!"

"She's been on two dates."

"How could you let her do that?"

"Ntombi and I talked to her about pregnancy and diseases."

"I'll bet she hated that."

"Yes, she did."

"Do you think letting her go on dates is a good idea?"

“No, but I think it's better to let her go, than to have her sneak out, and get into trouble the way Nina did.”

“I want to meet this boy and his parents.”

“Good. They’re having dinner with us tomorrow night.”

Linda lay savouring being in her own bed, in her own home. Bongi had made a mess of a stew, but Linda had eaten it as if it had been cooked by the best chef in the world.

She had been the only one who had eaten the stew of half cooked vegetables and over cooked meat. Everyone else had taken a few bites, and opted for sandwiches. Bongi had been touched that Linda had eaten her food.

After dinner, Tumelo and Wandi had left. Kgomotso had privately expressed concerns for Linda’s stomach, but she had assured him that she would be fine. If she had problems, she was determined to hide them from Bongi.

The following evening, Linda alternated between being furious with the Paul that she had never met, and being nervous about meeting him and his parents. They arrived, Bongi made the introductions, then the parents and teens sat in the lounge.

“I’ll go and get drinks,” said Bongi.

“I’ll help you,” said Paul, as he followed her out, clearly eager to escape the tension in the lounge.

Linda had thought that she was furious, but Kgomotso was on another level of fury. He had looked at Paul as if he would annihilate him from the face of the earth with the fire in his eyes. Paul’s father became defensive with his body language, and Linda wanted to groan. Paul’s mother looked at Linda as if she had falsely accused her son of treating Bongi badly. The silence in the lounge stretched.

“Look, Banda. Neither of us wants problems. I’ll talk my daughter out of seeing your son, if you’ll talk him out of seeing my girl,” said Kgomotso. Linda looked at him in shock.

“I agree. next thing we know, that girl will be saying Paul's the father of her baby. Who knows who she’s sleeping with,” said Mrs Banda.

“Watch how you talk about my child, Madam,” growled Kgomotso.

“It’s clear she’s a...”

“Enough! I’d like you to take your son and leave, now.”

“With pleasure!” said Mrs Banda, getting to her feet. Banda did not move.

“Forbidding teenagers is the best way to get them to do something,” he said. Mrs Banda looked at him, then she sat down.

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one who’ll be left with a baby,” said Kgomotso.

“Let them get it out of their systems. It won’t be long now. I give this, whatever it is, until the end of the month. By then, they’ll each have found someone new.”

“You obviously have no daughters, if you did...”

“Paul has two older sisters. Both of them started dating around this age.”

“So you have grandchildren?”

“No!”

“How did you manage that?”

“We put them on birth control injections,” said Mrs Banda.

“No!” gasped Linda.

“If you don’t want to be a grandmother in nine months, I suggest you put that girl on injections, or on the pill.”

“She’s a baby!”

“Since she’s old enough to be making eyes at my boy, she’s old enough to...”

Bongi and Paul brought the drinks, then they left. Linda was trying and failing to accept Mrs Banda’s suggestion. She would have Bongi home schooled if necessary, but she was not having her child on birth control tablets. She was a child! Birth control was for adults! Married adults!

“Our eldest girl is getting married next month, and she has no child yet. She’ll have children after she marries. I vowed long ago never to have

illegitimate grandchildren, and my children know I'll disown them without a backward glance if they try that with me," said Mrs Banda. Linda looked at Kgomotso. He and Banda were watching each other.

"Let's take a walk," said Kgomotso, then he and Banda left the room.

"I'll check on supper," said Linda, then she left the room. She gasped when she arrived in the kitchen. Bongi and Paul were kissing, the way Linda and Kgomotso kissed. They broke the kiss when they heard her gasp, then they left the room quickly. Linda sat down, breathing hard. She opened her eyes, and decided to deal with that later.

She heard the men return to the house, and sent Themba to announce the meal. She insisted that the children dine with the adults, she was not giving Bongi and Paul a chance to do any more...Linda stopped the thought there.

Supper was silent, the men seemed to have something on their minds. Mrs Banda was watching Bongi malevolently. Bongi and Paul were sharing surreptitious looks and smiling at each other like obsessed fools. Themba ate quickly, and excused himself. Linda was able to clear up with Bongi's help, then the Bandas left.

"Where's that girl? I'm going to..." said Linda, and Kgomotso kissed her. She withdrew from him and walked away, he caught up with her before she could shout Bongi's name. He kissed her again. She broke the kiss.

"Kgomotso! I need to..." she said. He put a finger on her mouth.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Yes, we need to tell Bongi..."

"Alone, you and me, we're the ones who need to talk."

"But..."

"We...need...to...talk," he enunciated clearly. She looked into his eyes, and realised that he meant business.

"Let's go to our room," he said, leading her by the hand.

She sat on the bed, watching him as he walked up and down in front of her. He sat down beside her.

“Bongi’s no longer a child,” he said. Linda opened her mouth to speak.

“Banda and I talked. We can’t stop them if they want to ...” said Kgomotso.

“I don’t want to think about that!”

“But we can ensure that whatever happens, causes the least amount of damage in the long run.”

“Do you hear the words that are coming out of your mouth? You sound as if...”

“I’m saying let them date, in broad daylight, in public, as they’ve done before. Banda agrees, because he doesn’t want another charge of statutory rape in the family.”

“Statutory rape?”

“His elder son was accused of that some years back.”

“What should we do?”

“We should tell Bongi her options should she want to...”

“No!”

“Linda...”

“I caught them kissing in the kitchen.”

Kgomotso felt his blood boil, then he decided to calm down. Linda was mad enough for both of them.

“Kissing won’t make a baby,” he said.

“It leads to what makes babies.”

“Linda, let’s be realistic about this. We don’t want Bongi doing anything, but we can’t control her every movement, so let’s minimise the damage. We’ll tell her about condoms...” Linda groaned.

“...injections, tablets, and other methods of birth control, and insist that she choose one, unless she wants to be a mother.

“To discourage her and Paul, Banda and I have arranged for them to go and help with newborn babies at a home. It will be their next date, they can’t go on

any other dates, unless they go on that one. They'll spend the day changing nappies, washing them, and doing the things that parents do."

"I like that last part. When do they go?" asked Linda.

"In a few days."

"Alright."

"No shouting, or telling of dire stories, Linda. At some point, when you hear enough horror stories, you become blasé, and things don't seem so bad. If she does something you don't like, or asks you something that gets your blood pumping, stall, and say you need to talk to me.

"I mean it Linda, stall. We can't return a pregnancy to its source, and we certainly can't cure the incurable disease. We have to handle this for the long-term good of the family." Linda nodded.

"She's expecting you to give her hell about that kiss, so let's go see her. I'll do the talking," said Kgomotso. Linda nodded, then she followed him to Bongi's bedroom.

Bongi stood as they entered, looking at Linda fearfully. Kgomotso told her to sit down, then he and Linda sat down. Bongi's eyes were glued to Linda.

"Thank you for getting Paul and his parents to accept our invitation," said Kgomotso. Bongi looked from Linda to him, and back.

"Mama says she saw you kissing him," said Kgomotso. Bongi's eyes shifted to him, a more fearful look coming onto her face. She seemed to be holding her breath.

"We can't control what you do, only you can. The important thing is to think. Think of your future. It can be bright, or it can be painful and full of regrets. Who you kiss, and how far you take the kisses will decide the course of your life," said Kgomotso.

"I won't do anything stupid, Papa. I don't want to be a mother, there's so much fun to be had that a baby would stand in the way of. I won't be sleeping with him, or anyone else."

"We're going to talk about birth control options."

“Papa!”

“We want to give you correct information. We won’t have you dying, or having a baby you don’t want, just because we kept information to ourselves, and you were misinformed by people who have no knowledge of what they’re talking about.”

Linda excused herself, and left the room. Kgomotso was relieved. The tension from her was making them all very uncomfortable.

He talked to Bongi about condoms, injections, the diaphragm, implants, and the pill. She was very uncomfortable, and so was he, but it had to be done. He asked if she had questions, and she said no.

He left the room, and sighed once he was standing a few paces from her door. He was glad that he did not have another daughter.

He found Linda coming out of their ensuite bathroom.

“Sorry I left, I could feel my mouth preparing to scare her out of ever looking at another boy. How did it go?” she asked.

“It was awful, for both of us, but I think it’d have been worse if you’d stayed.” Linda put her arms round him.

“Thank you for doing it. The only thing I know how to say is what my parents said. Don’t. Ever. Thanks for taking care of this.”

“I’ve only made a start, Linda. The rest is up to Bongi. We have to hope that she’ll do the right thing, otherwise...” Linda closed her eyes, then she opened them.

“We’ll handle whatever happens. I know, because my parents handled me being an unwed mother. They didn’t disown me as they’d always threatened to. If Bongi makes choices we don’t like, we’ll adjust, and find a way of coping.”

“That’s a very mature attitude. I’m proud of you for thinking that way,” said Kgomotso as he gave Linda a kiss.

“I won’t be responsible for my actions if I see them kissing again,” she said.

“I know, and I don’t think Bongi wants to find out what you’ll do to her if it happens again.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Linda and Ntombi met for drinks during lunch.

“I’m sorry I forgot to tell you that I was going out of town,” said Linda.

“It’s okay. I think I was able to help Papa talk to Bongi. She didn’t like what I said.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That I was a teenage mother, and that it was the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

“I did wonder how you’d managed to have a child older than Bongi. You can’t be more than thirty years old.”

“I’m turning thirty-one in three months. I had Kabelo when I was fifteen.”

“Ntombi!”

“I wanted someone to love me, and I thought if I slept with Kabelo’s father, he’d love me enough never to leave me.” Linda felt a pain pierce her heart.

“I am so sorry. I never wanted to leave you, or make you feel unloved,” she said.

“I know, Mama.”

“I wanted to be there for all of you, through everything.”

“Please don’t cry, Mama.”

“It’s my fault.”

“It’s Baba’s fault.”

“If I’d been there, I’d have taught you something about sex, and you wouldn’t have felt unloved.”

“Mama, please don’t cry. You’ll make me cry too.”

Linda wiped away her tears.

“Your father was right, I’m a lousy mother,” she said.

“You are not! You’re a fabulous mother.”

“I left you to look after the others when you could hardly look after yourself, then I let Bongi get out of hand, and now, I’m letting Themba down by not supporting his passion for ballet. I’m afraid it’s going to make him gay. I don’t want a gay son.”

“Mama, calm down. Calm down, please.” Linda drew in several deep breaths.

“You didn’t leave voluntarily, we all know that now, and we don’t blame you. What I’ve seen of Bongi, she didn’t strike me as out of hand. She struck me as a typical teenager. Themba’s sweet, and he’s a great uncle to my children, they adore him.

“If he’s serious about ballet, support him. The rest is immaterial. Whether or not he’s gay is immaterial. He’s ten, Mama, I doubt he’s thinking about being gay or not being gay.” Linda gave her a long look, then she nodded.

“Thank you, Ntombi,” she said.

“I told you, you’re the best Mama in the world, and I know, because I’ve had several mamas to compare with. Don’t ever doubt yourself as a mother, you’re fabulous.” Linda kissed her cheek.

“How did you meet your husband?” asked Ntombi. Linda looked at her in surprise.

“After your father sent me away, I went to live with a friend. She propped me up, wiped my tears, and nursed me as if I was her child. Kgomotso’s her brother. Whenever she had to work out of town, she’d ask him to look after me. She travelled a lot, so he and I spent a lot of time together. We became friends, and then, when Ma died, I decided to have more children, but I felt guilty about denying them a father, so I asked him to be their father.”

“Gogo died?”

“About sixteen years ago.”

“No one told me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She was nice.”

“Yes, she was.”

“Your husband’s a fabulous father.”

“He’s fabulous all round.”

“When did you get married?”

“Soon after I divorced your father.”

“Why did you take so long to marry him?”

“I didn’t want another husband. I wanted children, who had a father figure, so we adopted them together, but we lived separate lives.”

“You look happy.”

“So do you.”

A few days later, Kgomotso returned home with a furious Bongi. She locked herself in her bedroom. Linda and Kgomotso looked at each other.

“I take it the date did not go well?” asked Linda.

“She says she was treated like a slave. Paul was in an equally bad mood.”

“I hope going to that home helps them to make the right choices. Dinner’s almost ready. I’ll call the children.”

“I’ll call them when I come out of the shower,” said Kgomotso, then he left the lounge.

Linda went to finish cooking, then the family joined her for dinner.

“It will be Christmas soon, can we have a Christmas party, Mama?” asked Themba. Linda looked at him in surprise. In the past, they had always gone to Kgomotso’s parents’ home for Christmas. In the years when Kgomotso had excluded Linda, she had spent Christmas with her brother John, and his family and friends.

“We need to invite our brothers and sisters, they have no family but us, now,” he continued. Linda looked from him to Kgomotso. He was also surprised.

“Please think about it,” said Themba.

“We’ll think about it,” said Kgomotso. After cleaning up, the children went to sleep.

“Themba’s right. Your children do need to be with family, and you are their family,” said Kgomotso to Linda.

“They probably have plans.”

“Invite them, and hear what they say.”

“But...”

“It will be fine,” said Kgomotso, as he kissed Linda.

Next afternoon, Linda fetched the children from school. She went to drop Themba off at Tshepo’s home, as he had requested, then she drove Bongi home.

“I never knew babies were such hard work,” said Bongi. Linda looked at her in surprise.

“They cry all the time, and they never let you rest. And you don’t even know why they’re crying. They should never have been invented,” said Bongi. Linda smiled.

“I think I’ll go for birth control injections,” said Bongi. Linda swerved the car in shock.

“Mama!” said Bongi, looking at Linda in fright.

“Sorry,” said Linda. Her heart was pounding. She wanted to tell Bongi to keep her clothes on, and never look at a man, but words stuck in her throat. She focused on driving.

After dropping Bongi at home, she cancelled all her appointments, then she drove to Kgomotso’s office.

“What’s the matter? Why did you call me out of an important meeting?” he asked.

“Bongi wants to go for birth control injections.”

“Oh! Oh. What did you say?”

“Nothing. I almost swerved off the road, but I didn’t say anything.”

“Good. They need me at the meeting, we’ll talk later.”

“But...” Kgomotso kissed her and returned to his meeting.

Linda walked slowly to her car. She did not know how she was going to get through the day, or what she could say to Bongi to stop her from engaging in sexual activities. She drove to her office, but she could not focus. She was startled by the ringing of her phone.

“Where are you?” asked Kgomotso. Linda looked about.

“In my office.”

“You should have been home hours ago.”

“I couldn’t focus on anything, all I could think about was Bongi...”

“Don’t think about it! Get in the car and come home.”

“But...”

“We’re waiting for you.” Linda drove home, but everywhere she looked, teenage girls seemed to be kissing boys and men, or walking about half naked.

“How are you?” asked Kgomotso when she arrived home.

“Have you talked to her?”

“I left my meeting early, and took her to a doctor.” Linda gasped in horror.

“He wasn’t very helpful, he got all moralistic, she became defensive, and I took her away before she started arguing with him. She was furious. Maybe you can take her to another doctor,” said Kgomotso.

“The only doctor I know is Nina.”

“Is it wise to get family members involved?”

“She had two teenage daughters, she could have some advice.”

“Okay, do what you think best, as long as it excludes trying to scare her.”

“I’ve never factored birth control into the life of my children. I’ve never used it myself, so I really have no words of advice.”

“You’ve never used birth control?”

“No, Jake and I never used it, he didn’t believe in it, and there was no one after him. Until you, and we don’t use it either.”

“We agreed on that.”

“Yes, we did.”

“Will you take her to a doctor?”

“Yes.”

“It will be fine,” said Kgomotso, as he put his arms round her. She nodded.

At dinner, Themba talked about how great Christmas would be if it was held in their own home, and Ntombi and the others were introduced to the rest of their family, so that they too would have an extended family. Linda and Kgomotso shared a look.

“We’ll think about it,” said Kgomotso.

“Okay. Can I go and see buti Thabiso? I haven’t seen him in ages,” said Themba.

“We’ll see,” said Linda.

“I really want to see him.”

“I’ll talk to him, I’m having a meeting with him tomorrow.” Themba nodded.

After dinner, Linda phoned Thabiso about Themba’s request. He listened in silence, then he said he would get back to her. Linda closed her eyes after the call, wishing that Thabiso would realise that she meant him no harm. There was a knock on the bedroom door. She invited whoever was knocking to come in.

“Bongi, is everything alright?” she asked. Bongi sat beside her, then she lay her head on her lap. Linda’s heart started pounding. Something was clearly very wrong.

“Bongi?” she said, caressing the head on her lap.

“Papa took me to a doctor to get birth control injections,” she said.

“I see.”

“It was horrible. That man had no right to tell me what to do with my body.”

“Hmm,” said Linda, not knowing what to say.

“I spoke to aunt Nina, she said she can help with that. Will you take me to her surgery?”

“Okay,” said Linda, with a pounding heart. Her eyes were closed as she prayed that her child would not get herself into trouble. Bongi sat up suddenly. Linda opened her eyes.

“Will you really take me?” asked Bongi. Linda nodded. Bongi smiled, kissed Linda’s cheek, and left.

Linda phoned Nina.

“Did you put your daughters on birth control when they were teenagers?” she demanded.

“Yes,” said Nina.

“Why?”

“I didn’t want problems. I was very into boys when I was a teen, mainly because they were forbidden. I had several very unsafe abortions, because I wasn’t on birth control.”

“I didn’t know,” gasped Linda.

“I was amazed I could have children after those abortions, in unsafe and unhygienic conditions. The pain was excruciating, but I didn’t want trouble from my parents.”

“Do your brothers know?”

“No! That would have been worse than the parents knowing.”

“What did you put your girls on?”

“The injection. Unlike condoms it can’t be forgotten in the heat of the moment, or the pill, that can be forgotten on some days. I put them on injections to prevent pregnancy, and I told them to use condoms to prevent diseases.”

“Did it work?”

“They didn’t have children till they could look after them, and as far as I know, they don’t have diseases.”

“You don’t think Bongi’s too young?”

“I first had sex when I was younger than her...”

“Nina!”

“...so I don’t think she’s too young.”

“Did your girls tell you that they were having sex?”

“I didn’t want to know, they talked to Mme. She was surprisingly mature about it, but if I had talked to her about it when I was a teen, she’d have murdered me.”

“Your child and your grandchild are different.”

“I know. When are you bringing Bongi?”

“Is tomorrow afternoon okay? We’ll come after I pick her up from school.”

“Don’t worry, Linda. I know how unhappy you are about this, but you have to trust that you taught Bongi to make the right decisions.”

The following afternoon, Linda took Bongi to Nina’s surgery. Bongi and Nina talked in private, then Nina invited Linda into her office.

“I’ve spoken to her. She says Kgomotso talked to her about birth control,” said Nina. Linda nodded.

“I spoke to her about her choices, and she says she’s not into being a mother right now. She talked about some home you sent her to?”

“Kgomotso had her and her boyfriend spend the day helping at a home for abandoned newborn babies.”

“She says she hadn’t known until then, how much work and time babies need. I think she’ll make the right choices. She has a good head on her shoulders. Trust her, and she’ll trust herself.”

“I trust her, it’s the boys she’ll be with, that I don’t trust.”

“There’s nothing you can do about them, but you can build her confidence in herself, and let her know that she’ll always have your support.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Linda went to meet Thabiso.

“What does your son want from me?” he asked, when they were done with business.

“You’ll have to ask him that.” Thabiso gave her a long look. She picked up her handbag and stood to leave.

“Wandi says he visits you, with his children,” said Thabiso.

“Yes, he does.”

“He says he trusts you.” Linda smiled, pleasantly surprised.

“I’ll come and see your son in your home, if that’s alright,” said Thabiso.

“Is Saturday good?”

“I’ll come in the late afternoon, after closing the shop.”

“Themba will be happy to hear that.”

“What’s the name of your other child?”

“Bongi.” Thabiso nodded slowly, then he stood.

“I’ll see you on Saturday,” he said. Linda left, wondering what was on Thabiso’s mind.

Themba was so excited to hear about Thabiso’s impending visit, that Linda had to threaten him with a hiding if he did not go to sleep.

“Did you take Bongi to a doctor?” asked Kgomotso.

“Yes, we went to Nina, Bongi arranged it last night.”

“How did it go?”

“Nina said to trust Bongi to make the right choices.”

“She was right. How are you?”

“Fine, and you?”

“Good. You know I love you, don’t you?” Linda smiled.

On Saturday afternoon, Linda rushed home to cook a meal worthy of their guest. She rushed into the kitchen.

“Thabiso! What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Hi, Mama. Buti came early, so we started cooking, he’s hungry,” said Themba.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Thabiso. I meant to cook you a special meal,” said Linda.

“You can do it another time. We’re almost done here. Go sit down, Buti and I have things covered here.” Linda looked from Themba to Thabiso. He was focusing on cutting the vegetables for the salad.

“Hi, Thabiso,” she said.

“Hi,” he said, without looking at her. Disappointed, she left the room.

She freshened up, then she went to the dining room, with the intention of setting the table.

“Mama, come and eat,” said Themba.

“Aren’t we eating in here?”

“We’ll eat in the kitchen, Bongi and I have organised everything.”

“Is she back?”

“She and Papa came back while you were bathing. Come,” said Themba, taking Linda’s hand. They found Kgomotso sitting at the kitchen table, watching Thabiso and Bongi, who were teasing each other as they put food on the table.

“Hi,” said Linda.

“Hi, Mama,” said Bongi and Kgomotso. Linda washed her hands and sat down. Themba helped to bring the food to the table, and then everyone sat down to eat.

After the meal, Themba and Thabiso insisted on washing up, while Bongi prepared a light supper. Linda and Kgomotso went to watch TV.

“That went well,” said Kgomotso.

“Yes.”

“No more worrying about him.”

“I worry about all of them, and I worry about you.”

“Me?”

“You work too hard.”

“It’s a phase, Linda, it won’t last forever.”

“Ma died from overwork.”

“That won’t happen to me.”

“See to it that it doesn’t, because I don’t have the stamina to parent eight children alone.”

“You won’t have to. What are you doing about the other two girls? The ones that aren’t Ntombi? Have you been in touch with them?”

“No.”

“Find out where they are, and get in touch with them. They’re not much older than Tumelo, they must need some guidance.”

“I’ll see.”

“How was your day?”

“Hectic, and yours?”

“Busy, I was late fetching Bongi from her dance lesson, she was very unhappy with me, but she’s cheered up. Thabiso teased the bad mood away.”

After dinner, Thabiso made his goodbyes, and Themba invited him to spend the night. Thabiso was surprised by the offer. He looked from Themba to Linda. She shrugged. Themba cheered, and led Thabiso out of the kitchen, to show him his bedroom.

Next morning, Linda woke early and cooked a special breakfast for Thabiso. Everyone was impressed by the meal, including Thabiso. Linda felt that it had been worth all the effort that she had put into it.

Thabiso left after breakfast, saying that he was meeting his siblings at their uncle's home for some family discussion. Themba wanted to go with him, and Kgomo told him that it was a meeting for Zwanes, not Mthembu-Mokoenas.

"They are my family! Surnames don't matter," said Themba in consternation. Thabiso offered to take him to work in the future, and Themba melted.

The following day, Linda went to meet Ntombi. She asked her for the contact details of her sisters. Ntombi was surprised, then she gave Linda the details. During lunch, Linda phoned Gugu.

"Who is this?" asked Gugulethu.

"I'm Linda Mthembu," said Linda.

"Oh. Is everything alright?"

"I'd like to see you. Hello? Gugu? Are you still there?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to see me?"

"I want to be sure that you're alright."

"I'm fine, there's no need to see me."

"I want to. Please."

"I'll call you." Linda was unhappy with the call, and she was convinced that Gugu would never phone her.

When she arrived home, Bongani was in the lounge with a boy. Linda's heart started pounding. Bongani was pregnant, and had brought the father of her baby to meet the family. Linda stood at the lounge door, a hand on the door jamb as her heart tried to leap out of her chest.

"Hi, Mama, this is Derek, we're dance partners. He's here so we can practise," said Bongani. Linda felt weak with relief.

"Hi, Mama," said the boy.

"Hi," said Linda, as she sat down.

“Do you want to see what we’ve been working on?” asked Bongi. Before Linda could reply, Bongi put some music on, and she and Derek started moving across the floor.

Linda was unsure that she wanted to see the dance, but by the time Bongi and her partner finished, she was clapping enthusiastically.

“That was beautiful,” she said. Bongi and her partner bowed to her, pleased with her response.

“I have to go now,” said the boy, then he left.

Linda went to see about dinner. MaNzima had cooked. Linda was able to freshen up, then she found her family round the kitchen table. They all sat down to eat.

“Mama liked the dance Derek and I did for her. Derek’s my dance partner, he came over so we could practise,” said Bongi.

“Your dance partner? What happened to Paul?” asked Kgomotso.

“He and I broke up.”

“Oh. So is Derek your new boyfriend?”

“No! We dance together, that’s all.”

“Who’s your new boyfriend?”

“I don’t have one yet.”

“When you do, let us know. We want to know all your boyfriends.”

“Will you want to know my girlfriends?” asked Themba.

“Of course,” said Kgomotso. Themba nodded, satisfied.

Linda’s phone rang. The number reflecting was unfamiliar to her.

“Ms Mthembu?” said a voice.

“Yes,” said Linda.

“This is Gugu Zwane, I can meet you for lunch tomorrow, if you’re free.”

“I’ll be free.”

“You look surprised,” Kgomotso said after the call.

“Gugu has agreed to meet me,” said Linda.

“Gugu?”

“Tumelo’s second sister.”

“Good.”

Linda went to meet Gugu the following day. After exchanging greetings, they sat watching each other. They ordered drinks, and the silence stretched.

“Do you work?” asked Linda.

“I’m in public relations.”

“Oh. Do you like it?”

“It’s the only job for me. What work do you do?”

“Public relations.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

“I thought...” said Gugu, then she stopped, looking behind Linda. Linda turned, Cebile joined them at the table. She greeted Linda, then she greeted her sister.

Linda looked from one to the other. They had not changed much. Even as children, they had looked as they did, and they had been very close to each other. She drew in a deep breath to stem the tears that wanted to flow. They had been toddlers when she had left, and now, they were grown women.

“Ms Mthembu is in public relations,” said Gugu.

“Oh,” said Cebile, looking from her sister to Linda.

“What do you do?” asked Linda.

“I’m finishing my training as a doctor.”

“What type of doctor?”

“I’ll be a paediatrician.” Linda nodded.

“Your father would have been proud of you both,” she said.

“Are you proud?” asked Cebile.

“Of course. I wish...” Linda frowned, holding back tears.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there to see you grow,” she said.

“Ntombi told us you didn’t leave willingly.”

“I didn’t.”

“We don’t hold it against you.”

“Ntombi says you’re paying MaShabangu’s children’s school fees,” said Gugu.

“Yes, I am,” said Linda.

“I think you should stop. That woman never did anything good for us.”

“She kept you fed, didn’t she?”

“We wanted more than food. We wanted to be held, and told we were loved.”

“I know,” frowned Linda, as she remembered how guilty she had felt after having each baby. The child before each baby had felt left out. Cebile had not understood why Tumelo was getting more attention than her, and it had been the same with all the other children.

She had tried to make time for each child, but there had been so many of them, and her in-laws had expectations of her, and Jake had expected to be waited on as if he was a king.

The food arrived. Linda could not eat. She watched her daughters eating as they talked about their siblings, and their nieces and nephews.

“You sound close,” she said.

“We are. We had to be. We had to take care of ourselves and each other,” said Gugu. Linda nodded, telling herself not to cry about things that she could not change.

“Aren’t you eating?” asked Cebile.

“I’m not hungry.”

“I think you’re pretty.”

“Thank you,” said Linda, feeling tears in her eyes.

“You’re even more beautiful in real life than in my imagination. When Baba did talk about you, he always said you were ugly.”

“He told me that many times.”

“Then why did you stay with him?”

“I didn’t want to leave you.”

“But he made you leave anyway.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve never had a younger sister, can I come and meet your daughter some time? I think I’d make a great big sister,” said Cebile. Linda smiled.

“Does Tumelo think that too?” she asked.

“No, we were too close in age. I want another chance. What’s your daughter’s name?”

“Bongi.”

“How old is she?”

“Fourteen.”

“And how old is your son?”

“Ten.”

“Can I come and see them?”

“I’ll call you, maybe you can come in two weeks, this weekend, we’re going away,” said Linda, and she picked at her food. She looked up at the young women before her.

“Why do you look so sad, Cebile?” she asked.

“I was hoping to meet them sooner. Please, Mama. I really want to feel like I belong somewhere.”

“Next weekend is the best I can do.” Cebile looked close to tears.

“Don’t worry, Cebile, you still have us, we’ll always be there for you,” said Gugu. She stood, helped Cebile to her feet, and led her away. Linda stared after them. She paid for the meal, then she went back to work.

“What’s the matter? You’ve been preoccupied all evening,” said Kgomotso after dinner.

“I saw Gugu and her sister, Cebile. Cebile wants to come see us this weekend.”

“We’re going away.”

“I told her that, and she said something about wanting to belong. I feel really bad about her feeling that need.”

“What does she want?”

“To be a big sister to Bongi and Themba, she thinks she’ll do a great job.”

“Tell her where we’re going, and she’ll decide whether or not to come.”

“Do you mind if she comes?”

“No, I don’t mind. Ask the kids if they mind, and if they don’t, tell...what is her name?”

“Cebile.”

“Tell her, and see what happens.”

At breakfast, Linda asked her children if they minded having Cebile on the family outing.

“She’s family, she should be with us. Can the others come too?” asked Themba.

“Our chalet only has three bedrooms,” said Kgomotso.

“I want one of my brothers, Thabiso or Tumelo to come too.”

“Themba...”

“If Bongi gets a room-mate, I want one too.” Linda and Kgomotso looked at each other.

“Talk to Cebile and Tumelo,” said Kgomotso.

“Won’t the others feel left out?”

“They can come another time.”

“Bongi, will you mind sharing your chalet with Cebile?” asked Linda. Bongi shrugged.

The following evening, Linda and her family packed a few bags into the car, then they picked Tumelo up from his university residence, then they picked Cebile up from Gugu’s home, where she lived.

Themba did most of the talking, asking Cebile questions about her life and work. Bongi sat gaping at her, amazed by how hard she had had to work to secure funding for her studies, as her father would not finance her. He had felt that daughters would marry, and were not worth giving a tertiary education.

“Papa would never say something like that about me getting an education,” gasped Bongi.

“Then you’re very lucky,” said Cebile.

“Do you like your studies?”

“I love what I do. What do you want to do when you grow up?”

“I want to go into construction.”

“Construction?” said Linda and Kgomotso.

“I want to be on construction sites, making sure things are built correctly.”

“You mean you want to be an architect,” said Linda.

“No, I want to be an engineer.”

“Oh.”

“Do you like sciences?” asked Cebile.

“I like everything, and I can do it all well, but I want to be an engineer, for now. I might change my mind later.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks, Sisi.”

The family returned home on Sunday evening. Linda invited Cebile and Tumelo to spend the night, and they accepted gladly. They were all tired. Themba and Bongi had insisted the family do several very physically taxing activities.

“That went well,” said Kgomotso.

“If Cebile and Tumelo had not been there, you and I would have been under more pressure to do those very physical activities.”

“Let’s go with Themba’s suggestion.”

“Which one?”

“Let’s have Christmas here, and have Ntombi and her siblings join us.”

Kgomotso spoke to his parents about having Christmas at his home, and Mme was happy with the arrangement. He had feared that she would resent the idea, but she said it would let her rest from playing hostess.

Bongi brought a boy home, Kgomotso knew his parents, and felt better about him as his daughter’s boyfriend, than he had about Paul.

Schools closed, and the children insisted on going to visit their grandparents. Kgomotso was happy to drive them to his parents’ home. Tshepo’s children were also there.

Kgomotso returned home the following day. He found Linda in the kitchen, cooking.

“Hi,” he said, kissing her cheek.

“Hi, how did it go?”

“Tshepo’s getting divorced.”

“From who?”

“Cathy.”

“Why?”

“He says she’s disrespectful.”

“I don’t believe that. How are the parents?”

“Fine, they send greetings. What are we eating?”

“Pap and beef stew. It’ll be ready in half an hour.”

“What shall we do with this time we have to be alone?”

“I thought we could go to movies, and do other date activities that we never got round to doing.”

The children were returned home by Tshepo a few days before Christmas. Themba was very excited about the Christmas party. He was very helpful and full of ideas. Bongi was not as enthusiastic.

Christmas day dawned. Everyone started arriving to help. Introductions were made before lunch, as Linda’s children from her first marriage were introduced to Kgomotso’s family. Everyone responded warmly to them, then lunch was served.

It went very well, and so did the little sermon that Ntate gave. It was his ritual to give a sermon before the gifts were opened.

Everyone was happy with the gifts they received, then it was time for the guests to leave.

“That was great,” said Themba.

“Yes, it was nice to have everyone gathered together. I don’t like buti Thabiso’s girlfriend. Mama, you should tell him to get rid of her,” said Bongi.

“He’s more likely to take you more seriously about that. When a sister tells you to get rid of your girlfriend, you listen, when your mother tells you to, you get mad, and decide never to get rid of her,” said Linda.

“That’s true, I suppose. I guess I can talk to him about it.”

“I wouldn’t rush it. You’re still getting to know each other. You don’t want to say something to him that will make him decide never to talk to you again,” said Kgomotso.

“Papa!”

“Think about it.”

“Don’t say anything, Bongi, I want him to be my brother, and if you send him away, I’ll never forgive you,” said Themba.

“Families forgive each other, they have to, you can’t stay a family if you refuse to forgive each other,” said Kgomotso.

“But...”

“You have to forgive each other. Bongi, don’t spoil things.”

“Yes, Papa.”

## EPILOGUE

Ntombi hosted a new year party, and invited Linda and her family to join her, her siblings, some of her father's family members, and her in-laws.

Linda was introduced to Bheki's parents, they were very surprised to meet her, saying that they had thought that she was dead.

Gugu and Cebile visited Linda and her family for a weekend. The visit cemented relations, and Linda was glad to have a better relationship with both girls. She was also glad that they were able to get Bongi to go easy on the boyfriend front.

She dumped her latest boyfriend, and decided to focus on her favourite hobbies, dancing and sports. Having Cebile and Gugu watch her in her activities seemed to revitalise her performances. She and Thabiso had a close connection, she spoke to him about things that she could not talk to her parents about, and he talked to Linda about concerns that he had about Bongi.

Themba and Tumelo were very close and saw each other often. Themba also visited Ntombi's family regularly, to see his niece and nephews. Wandi stopped working, and studied full time while his wife worked, it seemed to be working out for all of them. His wife, Nancy, told Linda that she was glad that he was studying, he was happier, there was less tension at home, and he was more relaxed about everything.

Themba had begged and pleaded with Linda and Kgomotso to let him have a get-together with his siblings. Worn out, Linda finally agreed.

The Saturday of the get-together arrived. Linda was glad her housekeeper was working. She had also hired caterers. She did not have the energy to run two businesses, and cook a gourmet meal for more than her immediate family. She went to the shop in the morning, then she returned home just before midday. The house was full of people, some cleaning, and others cooking. She freshened up and dressed, then she went to see what had been done.

The guests started arriving, and she watched Themba welcoming them, and being a wonderful host, for adults and children alike. In a short while, he took the children outside to play in his new playhouse.

Linda sat with the young women and men that she had brought into the world. They were making jokes and teasing each other. She smiled, watching them. They were clearly close to each other.

Bongi was seated between Gugu and Ntombi, and they had her in stitches. Kgomotso arrived, and the young people talked to him as if they had always known him. Linda watched as he ran his eyes over the people in the room, then he looked at her. He smiled, and she felt her heart filling with love.

The meal was announced, and everyone went to get food in the dining room. Everything had been set up for a buffet. Everyone chatted as they picked up plates, and dished up food. Ntombi talked to Tumelo, who was first in line, and Linda saw them both looking about the room.

“Mama, Papa, you should go first. We can stand in line, you shouldn’t have to,” said Tumelo.

“Oh, thank you,” said Linda. She and Kgomotso went to the front of the line, got food, then they went to sit down outside the dining room. It had been decorated like an outdoor restaurant, and it was looking onto the lawn and the children’s playground, and Themba’s playhouse.

Everyone else joined them, and sat down to eat. The meal went well, and afterwards, the men took a walk over the outside of the house. Later, they announced that they were going to make fire for a braai.

Some of the young women made tea, which was had with cake, then the men brought the meat that they had roasted. Dinner was eaten indoors, between the dining room, kitchen and the lounge. After dinner, the guests left.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” said Themba.

“Yes, it was,” said Linda.

“Can we do it again?”

“Yes, but it won’t be any time soon. You two have school, and Papa and I have a lot going on.”

“That was a great idea, Themba,” said Bongi.

Kgomotso and Linda decided to make a big deal of their six month anniversary. Schools would be closed, and Kgomotso would have entered another business venture.

They invited Kgomotso's family, John and his family, and Ntombi and her siblings, and their spouses and children. The celebration was held in the early evening.

Dinner was eaten, gifts were given, then dessert was served. After that, everyone left. Bongi and Themba went with Nina to her home.

"Thank you," said Kgomotso.

"For what?" asked Linda.

"Being a wonderful friend, wife and mother. I never believed the men who said they were happy being married, and now, I'm one of them, because of you."

"I bought you something," said Linda, giving him a gift. He unwrapped it and found a gold watch.

"It symbolises the good time I have with you," she said as she kissed him

"This is for you," he said, giving her a gift. It was a beautiful ruby necklace, in the shape a heart. She gasped when she saw it, then she looked at Kgomotso. He took it out of the box, and put it round her neck.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"It's a symbol of my love for you," he said as he kissed her gently.

THE END

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Best wishes

Thabi



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