

The Crack in the Mountain

Ayesha Abrahams

ABRAYE003

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
award of the degree of
Master's in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2020

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Signed by candidate

Date: 1 February 2020

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

The Crack in the Mountain

A Novel

For Shaheema, Ismail, Ilyas, Alicia, and Ron.

Content Page

Prologue.....	5
Chapter 1: The Last Supper.....	21
Chapter 2: Acceptance.....	30
Chapter 3: Into the Light.....	58
Chapter 4: Looking Back.....	69
Chapter 5: Room 804.....	87
Chapter 6: The Crack in the Teacup.....	101
Chapter 7: Books and Brownies.....	105
Chapter 8: Carlisle Curiosity.....	129
Chapter 9: The Detour.....	153
Chapter 10: Beautiful Things.....	160
Chapter 11: The Longest Month.....	197
Chapter 12: Wedding Jitters.....	208
Chapter 13: What Happens When a Mountain Cracks?.....	231
Chapter 14: Not Tonight.....	241
Chapter 15: Movie Night.....	273
Chapter 16: The Crack in the Mountain.....	282
Chapter 17: Carlisle Compassion.....	314

Prologue

I call my mother by her first name because we look nothing alike. Sure, we could have lied and told everyone I was adopted, but things like that didn't happen when Tasleem was growing up. A child with blue eyes and a nose pointed enough to puncture a balloon was only left with a brown woman if she worked for the parents. I couldn't have called my mother 'mom' if I'd wanted to – she simply didn't teach me that word. For everyone's safety I called her 'Tee', and later, when I could get my mouth around the word, I referred to her as *Tannie* (Afrikaans, meaning 'Aunty'). Much as Tasleem hates it, the name stuck. Twenty years later and she's still my aunt sometimes.

Tasleem blocks the doorway, casting a shadow over the pharmacology textbooks spread across my desk. There's an exam in the morning and I can't decipher any labels.

"T, do you mind?" I ask, gesturing to the desk that's so covered in books, notepads, graphs and coloured highlighters that you can't even see the wood beneath. "Exam tomorrow morning. OSCE in the afternoon."

I rip an earphone out and wheel my chair round when Tasleem doesn't move.

"*Tannie*," I snap.

Tasleem barely flinches at the name; I don't think she's heard me at all.

"Do you know who Saskia is?" my mother asks.

I notice the phone in her hand. She's clutching it so hard her knuckles whiten. I can't remember the last time my mother was afraid. Last year she became Head of Neurosurgery at the finest public hospital in South Africa. Tasleem's got the steadiest hands and calmest demeanour I've seen on anyone. I don't know who Saskia is, but if she could scare my mother beyond recognition, I already don't like her.

"Who is she?" I ask.

Tasleem stares at the wall behind me, then turns on her heel, bounding for the kitchen. I hear the cordless phone crash into its charging dock.

"Mommy?" a voice asks.

My younger brother's blonde head pops out from behind a laptop screen as I cross the lounge to our open-plan kitchen. Tariq lowers the volume of his cartoons, and the high-pitched Japanese voices fade away.

"What's going on?" he mouths.

I shrug. Tasleem grabs the phone, starts dialing, but throws it down before its even started to ring. Indecision: another thing my mother's unfamiliar with.

"Tasleem, what's up?"

I want to touch her, only she turns away, clutching her stomach like she's just chugged a glass of curdled milk. I fight the instinct to run around and hug her - that's my little brother's department. Right on cue Tariq appears at her side and I watch my mother crumble into him. Her eyes are red with repressed tears when she lifts her head. I can't remember if we've ever seen Tasleem cry; I was beginning to doubt whether she could.

"Saskia is your cousin. That was her on the phone right now," Tasleem says.

"*We have a... cousin!?*" Tariq squeals.

No relative has made contact during the twenty years I've been alive. When I was kid I'd often wonder what it would be like to have a house overflowing with family on Eid, birthdays and New Year's, but I've learnt to be content with just Tasleem and Tariq. My 15-year-old brother seems taken by the idea that someone who shares our bloodline has bothered to call. He stares at the phone, as if daring it to ring again. It doesn't seem to bother him that Saskia has put the strongest woman we know in tears.

"What'd she want?" I ask.

"You know my father disowned me when I fell pregnant with you, right?"

I almost roll my eyes. We've only heard this story half a million times.

Tasleem was in her third year at medical school when she met this civil engineer. An older, white man. Andrew Carlisle. She swears he was the best person she'd ever known, but her family would never accept him. Falling pregnant out of wedlock, with a man who was not Muslim – with a white man who'd never marry her – brought shame to her entire family. So at twenty-one my mother was given an ultimatum that changed her life forever: *Have an abortion, or lose your family*. Tasleem chose me. And her father, true to his word, never spoke to her again.

"Yes, *Tannie*. And I owe you my life. But what's got you so upset?" I ask.

I could be more be sensitive, but I'm not my brother and I wish she'd just spit it out.

"Your grandfather, Hoosain, my dad... died this morning."

Tariq chews the side of his cheek; when he was younger, he would do this instead of crying. He winds two skinny arms round Tasleem's waist, resting his cheek on her shoulder. But for the curly hair, my brother closely resembles Tasleem. He looks like a teenager who'd simply been trigger happy with hydrogen peroxide one day. Though I've never met Andrew, I'm supposed to

look exactly like my dad. This could be why Tasleem loves Tariq more than me. He doesn't serve as a reminder of a man she'd loved and lost. Tariq is my half-brother. He's never met his father either, but seems even less bothered by it than I am. Although his dad's not dead, just living in another country.

"Ten years he's been suffering. Cancer... nobody thought to tell me. Until today." Tasleem whispers, as if speaking softly somehow cushioned the blow.

I wish I had the right words, but I'm at a loss. We are both fatherless women, my mother and I, but we couldn't be more different if we tried. I'm standing opposite someone who got to know her dad better than most daughters ever will. Tasleem knew the really good parts – the cheap ice-creams on Sundays, the mail delivery bike rides, the lavish gifts at the end of each school term, the hugs at the end of each day – and she also knew the really bad parts. My father died before I was born, and I don't know how to mourn him. We only mourn if we have loved, and you can't love someone you've never known.

"So, what now?" I ask.

My question sucks the warmth from the kitchen. I know I've hurt Tasleem, but I can't help it. I can't love or pity someone who threw his daughter away because she'd done something that made her less than perfect. A young girl, without a cent, alone and pregnant. If she had been weaker, if there'd been complications. If Tasleem hadn't had a friend who was kind enough to give us her living room for a few months...anything could've happened. I've heard the horror stories. And I won't pretend to bleed for a man who nearly killed me.

Tasleem tucks a blond lock behind Tariq's ear. She frowns into the marble countertop.

"We get dressed," she says. "The *janaazah* leaves at eleven."

According to Tasleem, Dureshni is the person who saved her life. She fetched my mother the night her father learnt of the pregnancy. Dureshni let Tasleem stay with her until well after I was born. It was a rent-free arrangement until she found herself a job on campus. They were both medical students, so Tasleem had to bust her ass to afford a babysitter who could be trusted to care for me in their absence. In between studies, my mother worked three jobs – research assistant, librarian, and occasional tutor – to make rent, buy baby essentials, and keep us both fed. When I think of all I need to study for tomorrow, I don't know how she didn't put me up for adoption. Doctors and

mothers have two of the most demanding jobs in the world. That Tasleem managed to raise two half-decent kids while rising to the top in her field, is beyond me. I used to think she'd made a Faustian bargain, but I know it was sacrifice and discipline that bought us the life we have. Tasleem risked everything for me. The least I can do is hold her hand as she bids farewell to her dead father.

The rain makes the Mitchell's Plain roads twice as difficult to navigate. There are at least three potholes down every avenue and of course Tasleem insisted we take my tiny car instead of her SUV. The 4x4 could easily have tackled this muddy, uneven neighbourhood, but I wasn't going to get into a stupid argument with her. Not today.

Tariq's head smashes into the ceiling as we hit another bump. He swears before asking where I bought my license. I would give him the finger, then change my mind when I see my mother's frown.

"Hey," I touch her knee, "It's going to be okay."

Tariq leans between the seats and rests his head on Tasleem's shoulder. My GPS says we're five minutes away. I wrack my brain for something to distract her.

"T, do you remember the first time I saw a dead body?"

I'd been waiting in the reception area for my mother to come off her shift. Patricia, the babysitter for that week, was helping me build a double-storey from Lego. We were just deciding what colour the chimney should be, when a patient was pushed through on a trolley. I didn't see the face, but I saw the blackened forearm with its twisted fingers. An argument broke out between the doctor and the nursing staff. A few calls were made, but they couldn't admit the patient.

"She died right there, with people still arguing around her," I say.

I was sure that memory would always send a chill down my spine, but today I've lost count of all the corpses I've seen. One of the cardinal rules medical school has taught me is that you can get used to anything. The first time we unveiled the cadavers, at least three students threw up in the dissection room, but by the end of the year some people were having lunch right beside those same bodies. If you see a thing enough, you stop fearing it. And death is no exception.

"You had a really bad nightmare that evening," Tasleem says.

"Do you remember what you told me when you found me?"

Tariq, who has been listening attentively, shakes his head. Tasleem also shrugs.

"You told me, 'Adara, the dead can't hurt us. We don't need to fear them.' "

I see the ghost of a smile on my mother's lips. The kind of smile that emphasizes her sadness instead of hiding it.

Your destination is on the left.

I kill the engine and pull the handbrake up without depressing the ratchet. The sound is grating in the sudden stillness.

Tasleem turns from me to look out at her childhood home for the first time in more than twenty years. Several faces I don't know are huddled outside, clutching steaming cups.

"The dead can't hurt us," she says. "It's the living I fear."

My mother's what I call a *Part-time* or *Selective Muslim*. It's a term she hates even more than tannie, but it's more observation than criticism. Tasleem prays, fasts, and also lounges poolside in a bikini. She once told me about her tattoo, but this must've been a joke as I've yet to see it. Tasleem insisted we both wear headscarves today. *As a sign of respect*, she said. Why I need to respect a man who's never done anything to earn it is beyond me.

"Everyone's looking at us," Tariq says.

He has my mother's high cheekbones and dark, almond eyes, but Tariq's curls cannot be caged by his fez – the blond locks draw every eye in the room. I greet the group of women blocking the doorway as politely as I can, and they merely smile in return. Maybe they have a problem with my accent? Or my mother. The crowd parts wordlessly as we cross the threshold. The aromas of rich, spicy food make me salivate, but I lose my appetite when the ladies carrying plates slow down and whisper.

"Salaam everyone," Tasleem says. "Can you please tell me where my mother is?"

Tasleem's voice rises above the background chanting. Two older women clad in black robes and long, bedazzled scarves approach her. The shorter one grabs Tasleem roughly as tears smudge her kohl-lined eyes. Tariq and I hang back like two appendages that probably should've stayed home. My brother's in a foul mood.

"Why did we even come?" he grumbles.

I jab his ribs as they lead us down a passageway, rapid firing the kind of Afrikaans I was not taught at private school. I catch a word or two, but not enough for me to discern whether they're happy or upset with my mother after all these years.

“*Het jy dan twee kinnars? Ek het gedink is net die een meisie.*” The shorter of the two keeps turning around to glance at us. *Do you have two kids? I thought it was only the girl.* That’s about all I make out before the conversation speeds up and I’m lost again.

It’s no surprise they don’t know about Tariq. I just hope there’ll be no questions about who the father is, or why he’s absent. They’ll be too busy mourning Hoosain to pay any attention to his daughter’s bastards.

We’re ushered to a room where the smell of incense and camphor hangs thick enough to choke on. The cloying stench waters my eyes; it better not look like I’ve been crying. An old woman offers me a handkerchief. Then she sees my mother and drops the piece of fabric.

“Mammie,” Tasleem croaks.

The small woman stoops to pick up her handkerchief, but Tasleem scoops it up and hands it to her. They share a tearful embrace, then I watch my mother place half a crumpled envelope into the old woman’s hand before introducing us to our grandmother.

I can’t tell if it’s her voice, her smile, or the way her arms tremble when she holds them out, but I’m powerless to her charm. When she draws me in, my arms wrap around her, pliant as clay. Even Tariq, who’s allergic to affection from anyone besides Tasleem, offers his cheek. The old woman sets her metal cane aside and leans on us instead. I blush when she offers me the handkerchief again, and tells me, between sobs of her own, to please not cry.

My mother shoots me a warning look when I try to tell her I’m allergic to the incense. Tasleem pulls up a plastic chair and helps our grandmother into hers again. They sit together, hands clasped, lips moving in solemn prayer. The longer I stare at Tasleem, the sadder I grow. Who is this person who has mastered Cape Flats Afrikaans and can pray in haunting Arabic? I’m slowly beginning to understand just what it cost Tasleem to leave home, when there’s a not-so-gentle tug on my sleeve.

“The smell is making me *naar*,” Tariq says.

The room is drenched in the sickly scent. It must be coming from the adjoining room, where a body is shrouded in white atop a metal table. My brother’s eyes are fixed on the figure of our grandfather. For all my desensitization to death, I feel ready to vomit too.

“Getting a bit crowded in here,” Tasleem says.

She presses her lips to the old woman’s face before we leave.

On our way out, my mother bumps into several people who try to kiss and touch her. Tariq and I take this opportunity to slip out the back and hang with the smokers. I'd rather go home reeking of tobacco than death.

From the few stories we've heard, I know my mother grew up poor, but I've never been in a backyard so littered with junk before. The heel of my boot catches in a broken concrete slab, and I lean on my brother as I yank it free. We struggle to find one inch of the tiny space not covered in scrap metal, splintered wood, paint cans or discarded tyres, and eventually lean ourselves against a wall where the lilac paint has been stripped away to reveal an ugly burnt orange beneath.

"*Joh*, mom actually grew up here?"

Tariq's words echo my thoughts. We try to draw as little attention to ourselves as possible. The air feels clearer outside, and the men are too caught up in their cigarettes and coffee to spare us a glance.

"Adara!"

It takes me a minute to realise I've been called, because the petite woman smiling at me has completely butchered my name. She says it again, with so much zeal I don't have the heart to correct her. *Er-dah-rah*. She makes me sound like an exotic fruit.

"I'm so glad you could make it!" she says. The excitement in her voice feels obscene against the backdrop. She hugs me with more strength than I expected. "You must be Tariq?" She gets my brother's name just right, and she hugs him as well.

"You're Saskia," I say. I smile because she's so friendly and responding any other way would make me feel like a bitch. Whether it was kindness, curiosity, or outright pity that prompted her to track down my mother after twenty years, I'm grateful she did.

"Yes! You say my name so cool!" Saskia covers her mouth as two spots of colour appear on her cheeks. "I love your accent!"

Tariq is the first to laugh. An aunty walking past clicks her tongue at us. Saskia says something to her in Afrikaans.

"Come, let me introduce you," Saskia says.

She grabs my hand; I see a flash of brilliant red as sleek hair sneaks out from beneath her scarf and trails down her back. Saskia's ringed her eyes with the same khol everyone else favours, but her features require no frills. An inability to keep her eyes open when she smiles reminds me of one Tariq's anime characters. She leaves us standing in front of a closed door.

“Just wait here,” Saskia says. “I’ll go find my mom.”

No sooner has she left, than I see Tasleem striding towards us. She pushes us out in front of her.

“We need to leave. *Now*,” she says.

Tariq makes for the door, but I hang back, searching Tasleem’s face for what brought on this sudden change of heart. I was the one who couldn’t care less about the man who abandoned us both, but why are we leaving now, just when I meet one person I actually like?

“I can’t leave without saying goodbye to Saskia,” I say.

Tasleem’s voice is breathless with panic.

“I’ve got her number,” she says.

Then I’m pulled along again. Moving against the crowd is difficult, but once Tasleem’s made up her mind, not even a horde of angry aunties can stop her.

“Taz,” a man’s voice calls.

My mother’s hand slips from mine, and I pull Tariq back by his collar before he reaches the door.

“Hey—” he splutters.

“Ssh. Who the hell’s that man with mom?” I ask.

Tariq shrugs.

The unfolding scene brings the whole world to a halt.

The man talking to Tasleem places a hand on her cheek and my mother shoves him so hard he goes flying into two women carrying the biggest silver pot I’ve ever seen. About sixty liters of hot rice, potatoes and spiced meat spill onto the floor. People hurry to right the pot before two cats set upon it; they’re shoed, but the damage is done.

“Not even half an hour and you’re already the center of attention. It’s your *father’s janaazah*, but you still manage to hog the spotlight!” These are the first words I hear my aunt say.

At least two heads taller than my mother, and four times the girth, Tasleem’s older sister cuts an imposing figure. Her sleeves are rolled past the elbow with her scarf piled onto her head, turban-style. She looks ready for combat, and the man who’d fallen wisely slips out the back door, leaving a rice trail behind.

“Naathierah, can we talk about this in private?” my mother whispers.

Everyone is staring. The chanting continues in the background.

“Why?” Naathierah asks. “We don’t keep secrets in this family.”

A woman lays a hand on Naathierah's shoulder, but she doesn't budge.

All I know about Tasleem's older sister is that she was the one who found the pregnancy test and blurted her sister's secret out during dinner one night. I can't fathom how anyone could be spiteful enough to betray their only sister this way, but here she stands, just a few feet from me.

"If you want to ask for forgiveness, you can't. Hoosain is *dead*. You had twenty years," Naathierah points directly at me, "as old as that girl there. You had enough time to make right, but you didn't. He can't forgive you now." Naathierah's voice cracks. She gets dangerously close to my mother; if she says another word, I'm sure the spittle will hit Tasleem.

I strain my ears for my mother's reply.

"After all this time, you really think I'm here for forgiveness?"

Naathierah scoffs.

"I don't know. Maybe not. I mean it took you all of five minutes to get your claws into Rafiq. Is he the reason you came?"

Tasleem straightens her back. It's a small, almost imperceptible gesture, but I know what it means. The ice is about to break beneath my aunt.

"You always were so quick to open your legs," Naathierah says.

"Fuck you,"

Tasleem's steady voice increases the power behind her words.

"I thought things might've changed. That twenty years would have softened your heart, but time has made you bitter. Why do I need forgiveness when this family turned their back on *me*? Get your facts straight. And you can be a bit more civil when you voice your opinions."

Naathierah's laugh is ugly.

"Excuse me if I'm not as educated as you. I didn't get to attend medical school."

Tasleem shakes her head. She glosses over the staring eyes to locate Tariq and me. Then she turns back to her sister.

"They don't teach you manners at med school," Tasleem says. She makes for the door, then turns on her heel. "I didn't come here to fight. I just wanted to ask if there was anything I could do."

Naathierah's eyes redden; she blinks away the tears.

"*Jy't sy hart gebriek*," she says, so slowly and so deliberately that even I can understand. *You broke his heart*. I notice the crumpled envelope clutched in her fist; she throws it down at my mother's feet. "*Os willie jou geld hê nie!*" she spits. *We don't want your money*.

My mother looks at the envelope, then turns around and starts towards the door.

The last face I see before I leave belongs to my beautiful cousin whom I barely had a conversation with. I take the car keys from Tasleem's trembling fingers and get us home before the storm breaks.

We order pizza that grows cold before anyone remembers we need to eat. Tariq hardly sits with us, but today his laptop is stowed away, and he fills the seat beside my mother, casting furtive glances at her every few bites.

"What was he like?" he suddenly asks.

Tasleem and I look up.

"Your grandfather?" Tasleem asks, setting her slice down and taking a nervous sip of Coke. My mother never drinks soda, but she makes an exception today.

"He was a good man, Tar. But he loved his family the wrong way. When I fell pregnant, he cared too much about what people would say. But I think he was a good man."

I drain the rest of my glass. The carbonated drink stings the back of my throat.

"You're standing up for him after what he did?" I whistle through my teeth. "He threw you out. Gave you that scar on your face. Please explain how the hell does that makes him a good man?"

"Addy, you won't understand."

I push my chair back and start clearing the table even though they're still eating. I'm so agitated that I shove the pizza box into the bin, punching it down with my fists before I remember there are still two slices of tandoori chicken inside.

"Hey!" Tariq screams, throwing his hands up. Tasleem grips his shoulder.

My younger brother grew up in a very different house than I did. Until I was seven, my mother and I moved through a number of very poor, rough neighbourhoods. We had drug addicts living next door to us, and drug lords living directly opposite. We shared a mattress, lived on two-minute noodles, and travelled in overcrowded taxis that often broke down. I grew up tough, devoid of all the luxuries and comforts my brother enjoyed. Though raised by the same mother,

we grew into two entirely different people. For him, today was a lovely little excursion to Tasleem's childhood home. For me, it was a chance to meet the family I had cursed.

Past midnight without a wink of sleep. I settle down in the lounge, turn on the lamp, and sit there until my mother pads into the room.

"What you still doing up?" she asks, closing her satin nightgown and taking a seat opposite me.

Only Tasleem, with her waist-length hair, dark eyes, and delicate figure, could look criminally glamorous after a restless night. The lone imperfection – a fine scar running through her left brow where the hair no longer grows – makes her even more beautiful. This was where Hoosain's ring nicked her; his parting gift to the favourite daughter.

"Couldn't sleep," I say. It's the simplest answer I can dredge up.

Tasleem fixes us something warm to drink. I hear her moving around the kitchen, boiling water, opening and closing the microwave, taking care not to slam anything, lest she wake my brother.

"Did you pop a Lindt ball in this?" I ask, fishing for the piece of chocolate.

"We're all out, sorry."

"That's okay."

The heat from the oversized red polka dot mug seeps into my fingers. It livens me up, making me bold enough to ask the questions I have.

"How are you feeling?"

Tasleem dunks the teabag in and out of her mug with practised grace. The smell of ginger irritates my nose.

"It's a lot," she says.

Over the years I'd sometimes make up this dialogue in my head, fabricating whole scenarios, planning all the things I'd say to Hoosain if I ever got the chance. I wanted tell him what I thought of him and what he did to us, and I wanted to look into his eyes while I said it. In my mind, his reaction varied all the time. Sometimes he was angry, sometimes he was pitiful, sometimes he was nonchalant and just told me to leave. On occasion, he was even remorseful. I didn't think I'd see him at his funeral for the first time, where over a hundred people had gathered to pay their respects and I was forced to listen to my own mother defend him. Has it been so long

that she's forgotten? Attending the funeral of someone you hate is one of the worst things you can do to yourself.

"I'm trying to understand why you think Hoosain was a good man."

Tasleem's response brings me no closure.

"It's complicated."

"Why? Is it because you shouldn't speak ill of the dead?"

Hesitantly, she nods.

"So all those criminals, those rapists who walk into the hospital with their gang tattoos... if they die I should feel sorry for them?" My voice rises in anger. "Being *dead* does not absolve you from guilt. Being dead does not make you *good*."

Tasleem's chest rises as she inhales.

"My father wasn't a criminal."

I slam my cup onto the coffee table beside the pizza box. I lean forward.

"*Are we really having this conversation?*"

"Adara, you need sleep. You have an exam in a few hours."

"So I just imagined my whole childhood? That we were so poor you sometimes skipped meals to keep me fed?"

"You don't know what it is to lose a father."

Tasleem regrets the words the moment they're out. It's insensitive, but it's true. I bat her apology away.

"No, you're right. I never knew Andrew. It doesn't bother me—"

"Adara,"

"Forget it."

We listen to the clock ticking away on the wall. Somewhere in the distance there's a faint police siren. Or maybe it's an ambulance. I'm too tired to tell the difference.

"Why do you hate your sister so much?" I ask.

The question throws her.

"You know why," Tasleem says.

"There's something else. It's not just that."

When Tasleem doesn't answer, I change tack.

"Your mother is lovely. I didn't expect to like her, but I do. Why did you keep her from us for all those years?"

Tasleem clutches the cup long after the tea has been drained.

“The family didn’t want me. They cut off all contact.”

It’s a rehearsed answer I’m no longer satisfied with.

“Still. *You* could have reached out. Not to Hoosain, but to them.”

I already know the answer to this question, but I want to hear my mother say it. I want her to admit it. When she doesn’t, I put her out of her misery.

“You were too busy, hey. That’s it. Between the jobs and the med school and me. There was no space for your family anymore. It was easier to just forget them.”

Tasleem’s silence is all the confirmation I need. She rose to the top of her field at the expense of her family. Her success has come at too great a cost. I always smile when people tell me I’m my mother’s daughter. Tasleem’s quite the celebrity at Health Science campus – being compared to her used to be a compliment. But I think one thing sets us apart at last: I will never choose my career over Tariq and Taz. If I want to follow in my mother’s footsteps, I’d have to give up the two most important people in my life for the next ten to fifteen years. And I have seen what separation does to a family. I can’t – won’t pay that price.

“I don’t want to be a doctor,” I say.

Tasleem looks up.

“I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to study medicine. It just seemed the obvious choice. The easiest path for me. But I can’t.”

Tasleem scrunches up her face. There’s no sign of alarm in her eyes yet.

“It’s the Carlisle thing. I told them not to make a big deal of that.”

Tasleem’s referring to the fact that everyone knows I’m her daughter. Carlisle is an uncommon surname, and everyone knew I was related to one of our professors. The day my mom stepped out in front of that class of first years, my fate was sealed. Everyone knew I had big shoes to fill, but that’s not why I’m leaving.

“My heart is not in it, Tasleem. You’re my mother. I’m sure you must’ve known. It’s not the pressure, and it’s not the tests tomorrow. This isn’t some fleeting whim. I didn’t think meeting your family would make me gain clarity on my life, but it has.”

Tasleem gets up and sits down beside me. I feel like she’s finally listening.

“So, what... Art school? Film school?”

My eyes widen.

“How did you know?”

Tasleem laughs. It feels like years since I've seen her smile.

"I'm your mother. I tried to buy you skeletons instead of dolls. Science kits and kiddie stethoscopes, but I could never *ever* keep you from the paint cans or the camera. Or even the pens. You used to write a lot in that journal of yours."

My grandfather died yesterday, but I feel so happy I could cry. Before I can hug my mother, she beats me to it.

"I'm sorry, *my kind*."

Another thing my mother never does, it use her mother tongue. Perhaps this janaazah has been good for her too.

"It's my fault. I should have listened more. Not pushed so hard," she holds me at arm's length and cups my cheeks. "If I'd known taking you to Mitchell's Plain would make you realise you don't want a career a medicine, I'd have done it *a lot* sooner. Adara, I'll have to pay back three years of medical school now. We are *so fucked*." She sighs. "I wonder if Dicky still has that *pandok* in his backyard."

For a second I think she's serious. It is the longest second of my life. Then Tasleem winks and we both start laughing.

"Don't you dare! Tariq could never live like that!"

I don't know what my professors will say when I tell them I'm quitting and I'm even more terrified of my friends' reactions, but that's tomorrow's problems.

Tasleem gets up from the couch, but pauses beside the table. She points to the box.

"Didn't you throw the rest of the pizza away?"

I scratch the back of my neck.

"I was desperate. Don't judge me."

Tasleem picks up the box to peer inside – it's empty.

"That confirms it. A doctor would never eat slices from a bin. You're going to flourish at art school."

Tasleem fetches a blanket and we stretch out on the couch, squeezed tightly together for warmth like we used to in the wooden shed in Sedick's backyard. Lying against my mother like this makes me feel like a child again. My eyelids grow heavy as her fingers stroke my hair.

"My sister wasn't always a bitch," Tasleem whispers. "Jealousy does strange things to people." Her chest rises as she breathes in.

They'd been poor. I know this. When they were younger, my mother and her family slept on the floor of an old garage. They had to line the cement with black bags so the motor oil wouldn't seep through the layers of cardboard they used as mattresses.

"Some days we didn't even have bread, and we'd take Weet-Bix... you know, those little wholegrain cereal biscuits?"

"Mom, I know what Weet-Bix looks like."

Tasleem plants a kiss to my temple. I've slipped up, called her mom.

"Tell about the Weet-Bix," I say, before she makes a fuss over my mistake.

"When there was no money for bread, we'd put margarine and jam on the Weet-Bix. Sometimes we'd take two and put them together in a sandwich thing."

I make a gagging noise. Tasleem laughs.

"Please tell me you didn't get creative with Cornflakes..." I try to imagine a bowl of yellow cereal covered in jam and cheese.

"Cornflakes? My girl, if you had cornflakes in the cupboard you had made it in life. As soon as you had more than one cereal, you were rich."

"So that's why we have Rice Crispies, Tastee Wheat, Oats, Coco-pops, Pronutro *and* Weet-Bix in our cupboard? Oh, and that decadent toasted muesli you love."

"Pretty much a childhood dream come true."

We have a good laugh before Tasleem gets serious again. She tells me the story about her sister.

"My dad really tried, Addy. Even though we were poor, he tried to give us all the things other kids had. Pets, for example. We had pigeons. One in particular was my favourite. A beautiful fantail – red and brown."

It's bizarre, the idea of my mother in a friendship with a bird. It seems there's a lot I don't know about her, despite our twenty years together.

"What was its name?"

Tasleem hesitates.

"*Pielie*."

"You mean like—"

"I don't know why we called it that, okay!" Tasleem shakes with laughter. Directly translated from the Afrikaans, her bird was called 'small penis'. I let it go so she can finish her story. It's 2am already, but I plan on sleeping in.

“It was really bad one time. We hadn’t eaten meat all week... but I get home and I smell freshly baked pie. Now pie was special, we only ever had it on Eid.”

I want to ask why we’ve never had pie on Eid, but I don’t.

“We sit down. Enjoy our meal. Then my dad turns to Naathierah – she was about fifteen at the time. He asks, ‘Watter ene het jy geslag’? She says, ‘Die witte, Derre.’ The white one, dad.”

It was only later that evening, when my mom went out to the pigeons to play with her fantail that she realised it was gone.

“I didn’t speak to Naathierah for a month,” she says. “She knew that bird was mine. I walked everywhere with him. We’d clipped the wings so he wouldn’t fly off.”

Again, I’m floored by my mother’s sister’s cruelty. It’s hard for me to imagine anyone being jealous enough to feed their sibling’s pet to them.

“Worst part? That the pie was delicious. Couldn’t even make myself throw it up.”

“You were only a kid...”

“Seven, yes.”

“You’ve set a really good example for me,” I say, turning on my side so we face each other.

“Seven... when you ate *pielie*.”

We laugh. So loudly I’m sure our neighbours must think we’re drunk.

Chapter 1

The Last Supper

When I turned eighteen the Western Cape Health Department gave me a full scholarship. Dropping out not only means repaying that scholarship, it also signals a fat smudge next to my name. Changing my mind two years before graduation makes for an expensive detour. Dr Schroeder, Faculty Head and my trusted mentor since first year, threw his head back and laughed when I told him my plans. He initially thought I was joking, then he assumed it was a mental breakdown. *You're nothing like your mother*, he'd said. I think that hurt even more than my friends writing me off. "You'd better hold on to your trust fund money," one had told me. Tasleem never took out a trust fund for me. My mother had to work for everything she has, and she's instilled those same values in us. Which is why it surprises me that all it took was two conversations for her to agree to pay for my Humanities degree. A more sensible parent would have asked me to take out a loan.

"People have been kind to me, Adara. Just paying it forward," she'd told me.

I'd like to think this is true, that Tasleem's an absolute saint, but I suspect the real reason she's agreed to this madness is guilt. While I was growing up, she did everything humanly possible to groom me for a life in medicine. My friends were all getting Snow White colouring books, but I was given anatomical textbooks to colour in. Instead of dolls, I was gifted mini skeletons that still adorn my shelves today. All of this gave me a massive head start in a career I did not want. Going into Health Science was a mistake that's going to set us back at least half a million, but was a mistake encouraged by my mother. Maybe it soothes her conscience to pay the money? Whatever the reason, I let her.

Preparing my application for art school wasn't easy. Four years of studying medicine left me so little time to draw or paint or write, I wasn't sure I still knew how. For a solid month I took every adult art class and seminar on film and writing I could find and we converted the lounge into a studio. In the months leading up to the application deadline, I'd often fell asleep on the floor with my sketches beside me.

My two assistants help me choose the best ones and my mother's eyes glisten when I read out my cover letter. They didn't care about anything besides my marks or extra-curriculars when I applied to med school, but this application needs to have a more personal touch. In my letter I make special mention of the skills I developed as a med student. How I drew the best sketches out

of all my classmates, and how I would make up stories to tell the children on my ward rounds in paediatrics.

“I like this part,” Tasleem slips her spectacles on to read. “Let them know that you couldn’t deny your true calling even while you were prowling the hospital corridors.”

“Please, Taz, she’s got this. Have you seen her sketches? Have you read the story she’s submitting?” Tariq asks, slipping the sealed paintings into their display files.

Tasleem glares at my brother. “What did you just call me?”

“Sorry, Mom.”

Tariq rolls his eyes.

“Looks good, Ads. Sorry I haven’t been here all week. My interns are struggling,”

I wave away the excuse. Having a mother who’s one of the top neurosurgeons in the country has naturally made Tariq and I independent. Her work often takes Tasleem away from us for weeks at a time. If we didn’t learn how to restock the fridge and use the stove, we’d have starved to death by now. When Tariq was eleven, she was gone for a whole month. They’d invited her to speak at a few conferences in the States, and then she flew to London to present her research. I’m sure it wasn’t strictly business, but I couldn’t begrudge her a holiday. By the time she returned, I’d taught myself how to cook. After four weeks of dining on science experiments, Tariq jumped into Tasleem’s arms at the airport and wept.

“What’s on your mind?” Tasleem asks, handing back my letter.

“Just thinking about your trip to New York and how I fed Tariq for a month,” I say.

My brother pretends to retch.

“That month scarred me so badly I decided to develop my own culinary skills.”

“Shit!” Tasleem jumps up from the couch so fast that Tariq, who’s been crouching at her feet, falls over. She helps him up. “I completely forgot that the dinner is tonight.”

One of my mother’s worst ideas was a family dinner with Saskia, Naathierah, and our grandmother. I reached out to Saskia a week after the janaazah. We met for lunch at a local pizza place and have been inseparable since. I can’t get over the fact that my mother’s sister could have birthed anything as sweet as Saskia. We’ve had her over for supper a few times now, but it was my mother’s idea to have them all together.

“I’ve already bought the ingredients for a simple fish and chips. Made the batter and cut the wedges already.” Tariq’s announcement earns him a kiss on the head.

My mother looks at me.

“You know how to behave?” she asks.

“Do we still keep Benzos in the house?” I ask, quickly adding, “I’ll behave. Relax.”

I have a few choicest words to describe my mother’s older sister, but I could be good for one dinner. Provided it didn’t run over an hour.

Saskia arrives half an hour earlier. Her hair has been chopped into a pixie-cut, and she’s ditched the red for her natural black. With her dark eyes and petite frame, she looks more Tasleem’s daughter than I do. She plants her pink lips on my cheek.

“Hey babes,” she says.

The lipstick stain is sticky and smells of strawberries, but I don’t wipe it off. Perhaps it’s a calculated move, but I’d like Naathierah to see it.

“*Maaf*, man, you’ve got lipstick on your cheek now,” Saskia says, licking her thumb and trying to get at the stain.

I take the glass container from her hands. I don’t have to lift the lid to recognize the spicy doughnuts inside. “*Koeksisters?*”

Saskia laughs at my accent.

“KoeSIESters,” she smiles. “They still need to be syruped, so I came earlier.”

We walk through to the kitchen where Tasleem is helping Tariq put the finishing touches on the meal. He lied about the *simple fish and chips*. My brother’s prepared a prawn cocktail starter, grilled, buttered sole, crumbed calamari, and crispy potato wedges with rosemary garnish. He stands in front of a sizzling pot, lifting thin pieces of fried hake onto a bed of paper towels.

“Kia!” he says. “Welcome, Cousin!”

“Hey, love.” Tasleem greets from the counter where she’s bent over, rolling cucumber rosettes that won’t be eaten.

Saskia rubs her cheek against Tasleem’s, smacking her lips to mimic a kiss.

“Salaam, Aunty,” she says.

I’m accustomed to Tasleem being called doctor or professor, but I’m still getting used to aunty, which Saskia pronounces ‘unty’.

“It smells lekker in here!” The hint of worry behind Saskia’s smile is clear. “Brought koesiesters for everyone.”

“Homemade?” Tariq asks, pulling up a small pot and waving her over.

“Of course.”

The two of them start talking at the stove while I sit down beside my mother.

“You’re worried about tonight,” I say.

Tasleem fumbles with a cucumber rose.

“It’s not easy…”

“Sure it is. We’ll eat. We’ll talk. We’ll eat koeksisters.”

“The last dinner I had with my sister didn’t go so well.”

I run my hand down Tasleem’s black ponytail, then gently draw it over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Tariq and I would never disown you.”

Tasleem gives me one of her rare laughs, the kind that crinkles the corners of her eyes.

When I see her like this, looking so young and laughing from the belly, I believe it’s possible. We might get through this evening without killing anyone.

My brother prepared a small dish of fried squid and lemon zest for Naathierah. The rest of us wolf down our prawn cocktails, but she’s allergic to shellfish. Tariq’s glowing with all the praise he’s received for the meal. My grandmother, who insists we call her *Oumie*, keeps asking about recipes and methods of preparation.

“We’re not used to gourmet food.” Saskia leans in and whispers, “It’s *white* food.”

Oumie pushes the cucumber around on her plate until the whole thing unravels. Tasleem looks crestfallen, but Tariq continues uninterrupted. He starts telling them about the first time he made a hot soufflé. Oumie crinkles her pointed nose.

“*Watse goete is daai?*” she asks.

Tariq goes to the trouble of pulling up a photo and even shows her a video on his phone.

“I brought some of your favourite biscuits, Tasleem,” Naathierah says.

I noticed the tin she put on the table when she first entered, but I wasn’t going to get close enough to peer inside. She lifts the lid and tilts it until the contents are visible. There is an assortment of cookies inside. Chocolate chip, almond, shortbread, and interesting red-brown biscuits with half a peanut in the middle. I take one of those; they’re faintly scented of cardamom. I’ve never tasted anything so unusually delicious.

“These are lovely,” I say, and help myself to another.

Naathierah, Saskia and my mom have a good laugh. They tell me these cookies are called ‘ou mens’ biscuits, and that I am far too young to be enjoying them so much. Apparently they’re a treasured confection amongst the grandparents. I grab one of the round shortbread cookies and learn they’re not shortbread at all, but buttery nuggets that melt on the tongue and leave your mouth tasting faintly of cardamom and nutmeg. Good God, I could finish the whole tin.

“They used to be your mother’s favourite. It’s called Nankhatai.” Naathierah says. Tasleem takes one, but Tariq snatches it from her.

“You can’t, Mom!” he shrieks. He’s got two Nankhatai in his hand and a third in his mouth. Everyone stares at him. “This thing is laced with sugar and you’re banting.”

It’s times like these that I remember how young Tariq is. Naathierah stares at Tasleem for a while before shutting the tin again.

“Mom doesn’t eat sugar. It’s like a thing. I had to make special fish for her. She can’t do bread or potatoes either. Nothing starchy.” Tariq explains.

Naathierah forces a smile.

“Wow. Tassy used to love these biscuits. Was *lekker vetjies* back then.” Naathierah shakes her head, tapping the tin with a meaty finger. “But she soon realized the boys wouldn’t want to sample her cookies if she kept eating cookies.”

Oumie pinches Naathierah’s forearm. “*Moenie*,” she warns.

I can’t look at Tasleem right now.

“I’ll go and get the main course,” Saskia offers.

“I’ll bring the plates,” I say, thankful for the loud scraping noise my chair makes as I get up.

We head to the kitchen to grab some new plates, serviettes, and refill the water. Saskia carries the food out while I get some ice from the fridge. By the time I return, Tariq’s changed the subject. To my horror, he’s talking about me.

“She’s going to art school. You should see her drawings. She’s also a bomb ass writer.”

My mother slaps him under the table.

“Sorry, she’s very good.”

Tariq takes Oumie’s hand and leads her over to my newly-assembled portfolio. I see them linger over the anatomical sketch I’d done in black and florescent ink – I’d wanted it to resemble an MRI scan with neon contrasts. I think I hear the word *pragtig* – beautiful. When my grandmother comes back, her eyes are shining.

“You do det?” she asks.

“Yes. I did that.” I reply.

“You have telent. Jis like Tasleem here.” She gestures shakily towards my mom. From the corner of my eye, I see Naathierah’s face change.

“She was top of her class, AP Med,” Tariq says. I swear this child’s unable to control himself. “But then she decided to follow her passion. She’s going to be an artist. Or a filmmaker? Which one do you like more?”

“I’m not sure, Tariq. But no one wants to spend the night talking about me—”

“Oh, no, it’s very interesting.” Naathierah says, setting her fork down. I notice she’s crushed a serviette in her left hand. “So you dropped out of medical school? Now you’re starting all over with university?”

The change in the atmosphere is electric. Halfway through our meal the Naathierah I remember from the janaazah makes an appearance. She throws her crumpled serviette into Tasleem’s half-empty drinking glass; I watch the red Appletiser climb up the white serviette.

“The disowned child... look at the house she has! The car she drives. And the kids can waste thousands of Rands doing degrees they don’t want? I had to take out a loan to pay for Saskia’s college.” Her elbows knock on the table. “There were so many lekker Muslim boys after you. *Eenie, meenie, mynie*, mo... you could of picked anyone, but now I see the real reason you didn’t. If I’d of known life would be so easy, I would mos of found myself a white *berk*.”

I spit the rest of the biscuit into a serviette. I want Naathierah to see, but her eyes are fixed on my mother, who stares unblinkingly at her. Oumie says something low in Afrikaans, but her stubborn daughter cuts right across her.

“And this child here? *Waar kry hy die blonde hare?*” Naathierah glares at my brother’s hair as though it might catch fire. “Where’s the father? Why isn’t he at this table? Hmm? What did we tell you? A white man is just after the thing between your legs and he will leave you just like that, my darling.” Naathierah snaps her fingers for effect.

We’re nearing the hour mark and I’m not sure I can hold back any longer.

“Where’s the father?” Naathierah insists.

Tariq lowers his head. A single tear drops into his lap.

“My father’s dead,” I snap. “And Tasleem worked for everything we have.”

Naathierah’s eye twitches.

“I see you haven’t taught your children how to respect her elders,” she says.

“Mommy, stop it. You’re ruining everything. *Kanallah* just stop it.” Saskia says, standing up and getting Oumie’s walking stick.

“Sit down and shut up,” Naathierah says. Saskia sits down obediently. “Talking back to your mother? You’ve been spending too much time with this cousin of yours. *Raak net so hond onbeskof.*”

My Afrikaans is not so good, but I know enough to understand my aunt just called me rude – as rude as a dog to be exact.

“You’re invited to your sister’s house and you insult her entire family. But *I’m* being disrespectful? Tasleem raised me to respect people who have earned it. You haven’t.”

Naathierah’s brow is shiny with sweat. She takes a few seconds to calm down enough to speak.

“So, if your father’s dead, why are there condoms in your bathroom?” she asks.

Every head snaps in my mother’s direction.

“You went through my medicine cabinet?” Tasleem asks, an edge in her voice.

Naathierah’s smile twists her features in a most displeasing way.

“You have this beautiful house, and these two children to care for. Nice career. And you’re still sleeping around. Same old Taz. Still chasing that *wit piel.*”

Saskia gasps and Oumie knocks her walking stick hard against the floor.

“*Dis genoeg!*”

A few pieces of cutlery fall from the table, then there’s silence.

Tasleem’s breathing is ragged beside me.

“Mammie—” Naathierah’s silenced when Oumie raises her palm. It seems the old woman is the only person capable of scaring her.

“*Shukran, my kind, vir die supper.*” Oumie thanks my mother for the meal. “*Dit raak laat. Ons moet ry.*” Then she says it’s time to leave.

I start to panic when they get up. My blood boils until I hear it thumping in my ears. I pick up the tin of cookies; it takes every ounce of self-control not to throw them at Naathierah. My mother and Tariq start clearing the table as I show our guests out. Once we’re at the door, I shove the container into Naathierah’s hands.

“Never ever come into my mother’s house and disrespect her again. You have no right to sneer at the life she has – she’s earned every cent.”

Naathierah stares.

“You have *no* idea what we went through. All you see is the glitter, but Tasleem waded through shit to get where she is. All on her own. Without any family to help her. You were nowhere to be found when she needed you most. To be granted a seat at our table after all you’ve done, *you* are the privileged one.”

I am shaking when Saskia squeezes past her mother to hug me.

“I’m so sorry. Call you later,” she sniffs.

Oumie plants a wet kiss to my cheek before hobbling out. Naathierah seems rooted to the spot.

From the doorway I hear the clang of metal and glass as dishes are placed into the sink.

“You leaving, or what?” I tilt my head towards the passageway.

Naathierah’s piercing eyes suddenly soften. Now that it’s just us, the corners of her mouth droop downward, and she looks almost sad.

“I don’t understand the relationship you have with your mother,” Naathierah says. “You call her on her first name. We would of gotten a fat *klap* if we tried that in our house.”

“You were clearly raised differently to me.”

Naathierah shakes her head.

“And you call me ‘you’. That’s also wrong. Any older lady is called ‘aunty’.” Naathierah sighs so deep that her shoulders lift. “It seems your mother left her values behind the day she left home. But it’s *nogal* something, to watch you stand up for her. She must of done something right, raising you.”

“She’s done plenty right.”

Naathierah smiles.

“*Die Jannah lê onder jou ma se voete, my kind.*” Naathierah says heaven lies beneath a mother’s feet. “It warms my heart to see how much you love her.”

“Not to be *onbeskof*, but I couldn’t care less about your opinion.”

Our neighbour down the hallway has started practising his violin. The faraway song acts as a mild sedative.

“I don’t think you know the whole story, about what happened to your mother.” Naathierah whispers.

I’m caught off guard.

“You were the one who told her parents about the pregnancy, yes? And she was thrown out that very evening?”

Naathierah gives a solemn nod, then adds, “Yes, but it was more complicated than that.”

“How?” I demand.

Naathierah glances down the hallway. I think she can hear the mournful tune as well.

“Maybe you should ask your mother yourself,” she says. “I’ve spoken out of turn too many times when it comes to Tasleem.”

My aunt leaves and I’m left standing there, wondering whether to trust the woman who raised me, or the one who abandoned her.

Chapter 2

Acceptance

Tasleem's the only person who doesn't openly rejoice when my acceptance letter arrives. After scrutinizing every inch of my application, I expected her to be prouder – or at the very least, to smile. She doesn't.

Inside the envelope I find, not a generic we-are-pleased-to-inform-you spiel, but a personal letter from Professor Bateman, the head of art school. The last paragraph reads:

Instead of being a full-time student at the Reclove Art School, I suggest taking some other courses up at the Main Campus. You've got a good voice for writing and, if your portfolio is anything to go by, a wealth of stories too. A perfect track record at med school suggests you're no stranger to hard work, and a triple major seems a good fit. Perhaps Fine Art, Literature, and Film Studies. Much as we'd love to have you wandering the corridors at Reclove full-time, it would be selfish not to share you.

Tariq and Saskia take me out for a celebratory dinner after, but Tasleem declines our invitation and goes straight to bed. She's just pulled a double shift, so her lack of energy's probably just that.

I'm not the first student to drop out of medical school. The proper way to do it, is to email the faculty head and fill out a simple form, but the easier, more favoured method of quitting, is to just stop coming to classes. I would never disgrace Tasleem by leaving without written notice, and I filed all the relevant documents months ago, but everything felt unreal until I opened my acceptance letter tonight.

After finishing a whole pizza and eating two desserts, I collapse on my bed, ready to fall asleep and dream of next year. I can almost smell the fresh start, when a silhouette appears in my doorway. I sit upright. I don't need to turn on the lamp to read Tasleem's expression.

"Something's wrong," I say.

Tasleem leans against the doorframe.

"Adara, we're in trouble."

"Is it about my bursary?"

Tasleem shakes her head. She comes to sit at the foot of my bed.

"They want to cut the funding for AP Med," she explains.

“What?!”

I turn on the bedside lamp. Tasleem’s eyes are puffy, like she hasn’t had a decent night’s rest in days.

“It’s bad.” She pulls her robe tighter even though it’s quite balmy in my room.

“What’s going to happen to those fifty students?” I ask.

“Forty-nine now,” she grimaces. “They’ll have to go mainstream.”

“But the mainstream kids hate us – hate *them*.”

Tasleem bares her teeth.

“We know that, but there’s no other choice.”

“Why are they cutting the funding?”

“Believe it or not,” she says, “it looks really bad when the top student drops out of a pilot program. They think you guys are under too much strain.”

I press my palms to my temples.

“But that’s not why I quit!”

Tasleem removes my hands from my face.

“Well, you’ll have to tell them that yourself.”

I frown.

“You won’t like this, but I need you to consider it at least.” Tasleem inhales. She chafes my hand in hers. “The Council and the Health Science Department Heads want to meet with you. Hear your side of the story.”

My mouth opens.

“Think of your friends who need this, Addy.” Tasleem squeezes my hand. “We cannot lose the funding. And you *know* how well the students are doing.”

I grab a cushion and whisper into it.

“What do they want from me?”

“We’ll prepare a statement prior to the meeting.” She pats my leg, then adds, “They’ve also invited Professor Bateman.”

I throw the pillow down and jump out of bed, fully awake now.

“What?!” A stabbing pain in my head makes it hard to think. “Why are they dragging him into this mess?”

“Adara, calm down. We’ll work it out.”

She tries to sound reassuring, but I know things are bad when she gives me a hug on the way out. Tasleem doesn't casually dispense affection. When she's at the door, she turns on her heel.

"They'll try to trip you up," she says. "Many people are searching for any reason to cut funding. But don't worry, we'll be ready for them."

Long after she's left, I'm still awake, thinking.

I should've known something was wrong when my mother didn't cheer after I tore open my acceptance letter. I was foolish to think they'd let me leave without a fight. When you're Tasleem Carlisle's daughter, you don't get to just quit med school.

With three months left before I start my Arts Degree, I've enrolled in two full-time arts courses. Thrice a week we meet in Kirstenbosch Gardens where we cover theory, head and hand studies, landscape modelling, portrait painting, and sketching techniques. It doesn't bother me at all that I'm the youngest student in every class. Retired grandparents are less competitive than any of my peers at med school; it's a pleasure spending lunch with them.

Today's practical runs longer than expected. After rushing home for a fresh change of clothes, I'm late for the Health Council Meeting – only by four minutes, but that's enough. And of course the meeting's on the sixth floor of a building with a broken elevator. By the time I'm standing in front of room 601, I've sweated through my pink satin shirt and my thighs stick together in a most uncomfortable way. I rap my knuckles on the door before pushing it open. The aircon cools my sweat so fast I begin to shiver.

Late as I am, I brace myself for some bad-tempered quip, but no one says a word. The carpet muffles my footsteps as I take the only remaining seat.

I count four faculty members, including Tasleem and the Department Head, Dr Schroeder, and five Health Council officials I've never seen before, sitting on the opposite side of the wooden table. I set my bag on the floor beside me, feeling tiny with half of the table to myself. I should apologise for my tardiness, but my mouth is too dry for the words to slide out. I feel like I've just eaten a spoonful of cornflour. There are pitchers of water all along the table, but I don't trust my sweaty palms to pour a glass.

"Maybe we should begin?" Dr Lakoff, a woman in her late fifties, says. She opens a folder and skims it quickly before looking at me.

Tasleem answers her.

“Yes, I think—”

“I’m sorry for being late,” I blurt.

Dr Lakoff removes her glasses, attempts a smile.

“That’s quite alright, Miss Carlisle. These things happen.”

Dr Schroeder looks up from his notebook. His face is pinched.

“It’s not alright,” he says. “I rescheduled a surgery for this.”

A Council official leans over and whispers to her colleague, who types something on the laptop in front of her. I mark one official sitting slightly apart from the other three; he keeps readjusting his spectacles and wringing his hands.

“We appreciate that, Dr Schroeder,” Dr Lakoff twists her chair towards him, “and I think we can agree, we’d all rather be someplace else right now. So let’s proceed.”

Someone clears their throat. I hear the clicking of pens, the rustle of paper, and the near-silent hum of laptops waking up.

“Thank you for giving us your time today.” Dr Lakoff slides her specs onto the bridge of her nose; I see the computer screen reflected in the rectangular glass. “We have just a few questions for you. We want to understand what’s happened. Why you’ve decided to leave us more than halfway through your medical degree.”

A few opening remarks are made before I’m asked to confirm some facts.

When did you start medical school?

Are these the courses you’ve taken since then?

Are these the grades for those courses?

Do you remember ever feeling overwhelmed during your time at Health campus?

Were these feelings ever discussed with your friends? Professors? The faculty psychologist?

Your mother?

I feel like I’m being interrogated, but I try my best to keep my responses brief and professional, like Tasleem and I practised at home.

“You completed half your medical degree, and in that time, you never dropped below an 85% for any of your courses?”

I nod. From the corner of my eye, I see Tasleem lean forward. She’s been silent during Dr Lakoff’s questioning.

“Am I correct in saying you were chosen to speak at the 7th African Healthcare Symposium next year?”

I’d almost forgotten about that. I try not to cringe when I nod. From a class of 500 medical students, Dr Schroeder nominated me. I stare at my hands, too afraid to look at him.

The Health Council official directly opposite me must be minuting the meeting. She hasn’t stopped typing or looked up from her screen once. Back straight, elbows tucked in, she reminds me of a court stenographer.

“Top of your class every year, Miss Carlisle.” Dr Lakoff leans back. “We can only assume the pressure’s gotten to you. We’ve noticed long absences from class each year, just before your exam.”

Oh no.

“You took a total of six weeks off from school this year alone. Care to explain that?”

Tasleem said it would be fine. If I kept my grades up, they wouldn’t care. I never expected to come under fire for this. I forget the lengthy statement we’ve prepared as I mumble my answer.

“I study better on my own.”

“What was that?” Dr Schroeder frowns. “You say you do a better job of preparing yourself for the exams than any of the faculty members in this room?”

He swears under his breath. I hope the official’s noting this in her minutes.

“Dr Schroeder—” Lakoff begins.

But Schroeder carries on as if no one’s disturbed him.

“So young, yet you have the arrogance of a fresh intern.” Schroeder narrows his eyes. Seeing him this way stuns me into silence. “You waltz in here *late*. Have you learnt *nothing* from the last few years?” He holds up one long, pointed finger. “One *second* could mean the difference between life and death. It seems you’ve forgotten.”

Dr Wellington, who headed anatomy in second year, sets a hand on Schroeder’s arm. He bristles, raises his palms, then backs off.

“Miss Carlisle, we apologize for that...” Lakoff takes a deep breath. “We have just one more question for you.”

My brain feels like a clump of stale playdough. Nodding hurts.

“All those years ago, why did you decide to apply to medical school? Why did you want to become a doctor?”

For this question, I’ve prepared.

“I wanted to help people,” I say. “I feel like I can do it better with an arts degree than a medical degree.”

There are smirks on some faces, while others remain expressionless. Schroeder’s looking down; I see only the top of his bald head.

The man who’s been fiddling with his spectacles finally speaks. His voice is steady, resolute.

“I personally handled Miss Carlisle’s creative portfolio and her art school application.”

All heads turn towards him. This man isn’t from the council. He’s Professor Bateman, the head of Reclove. He clears his throat.

“I can’t speak to her academic prowess as a medical student, but she’s certainly a gifted artist and writer. We are very fortunate to have her join us next year.”

I blink rapidly. If I cry now, this will go on an official record somewhere.

“Well,” Lakoff says, “if Professor Bateman’s given you his seal of approval, then you’ll probably do fine – more than fine – at art school.”

Just as Lakoff asks for closing remarks, Dr Schroeder’s shoulders begin to shake. An ugly burst of laughter fills the room.

“Really?!” He pounds the table with a fist.

The woman minuting the meeting must be just as shocked as the rest of us, because her fingers stop clacking against the keyboard.

“You really think you’ll make more of an impact as an art hippie than you would’ve as a doctor?” He laughs again. “After all the resources I’ve poured into you. All the opportunities! My God, my judgement was off. You’ve thrown everything back in our faces!”

“I–” my voice dies in my throat.

“To be frank, I’m only here because I thought we could sway you. Convince you to come back and finish your degree.” Schroeder shrugs. “You’ve clearly made up your mind. We expected great things from you, but,” he shrugs, “you’re not our concern anymore. Good luck paying your bills with an arts degree. You’ve turned into quite the disappointment.”

Tasleem leans aggressively forward, pushing Lakoff aside so she looks directly at Schroeder.

“Hey!” she says. “You need to watch your words, Michael.”

Being called on his first name in such a formal setting, rubs Dr Schroeder the wrong way. Before he can talk back, my mother’s claimed the floor again.

“You will not speak to Miss Carlisle like that. Apologize.”

“Why? Because she’s your daughter?”

Tasleem scoffs. Her eyes flit to me before fixing on him again. I can feel her fury from the other side of the room.

“Because she’s a student with rights. She agreed to this meeting. She didn’t come here to be interrogated or intimidated.”

A Health Council official stands up. Everyone looks at her.

“I must concur with Dr Carlisle,” she says. Then, addressing Schroeder. “As Faculty Head, I really expected more from you, Dr Schroeder. Miss Carlisle may be your star pupil – a prodigy of sorts, even – but you seem to have turned her into your pet project. Please apologize and remain behind when the meeting’s over.”

Schroeder turns pinker than my satin shirt. He mumbles his apologies to me, my mother, and everyone else in the boardroom.

The closing remarks are made by the same official who rebuked Schroeder.

“I commend Miss Carlisle,” she says. “Any student who no longer wants to be a doctor, is better off leaving med school. We don’t need any more disgruntled healthcare professionals in the system. Adara, we wish you the very best with your studies.”

All things considered, I think the meeting went well, but then my friends stop answering my calls and texts. One by one, almost every medical student I know disappears from my life. I’m banned from our shared Facebook groups, and I’m ignored when I return to clear out my locker. People who were once my best friends, seem barely to recognize me now.

Two weeks after our meeting, Tasleem comes into my room. I’m covered in red and black paint, so I stand while she sits on the bed.

“That looks nice,” she says, eyeing the fiery landscape behind me. I’m halfway through my preparatory arts courses now, and already I feel my technique improving.

“Thanks,” I say, wiping my hands on a rag. “What’s up?”

Tasleem takes a breath.

“We couldn’t secure all the funding for the AP program. Only the top achievers get to stay.”

Tasleem tells me half the students are being forced into mainstream. This means adding another year to their degree, completely derailing plans that were made, jobs that might've been secured. This explains my ostracization. I slide to the floor.

“They must *hate* me.”

Tasleem walks over and comes to sit beside me.

“By next week they'll be talking about something else. Students don't hold grudges. Professors, however...” She sucks a breath through her teeth. “The Chairperson gave Schroeder a written warning for his misconduct in that meeting. His outburst is one of the many reasons we're not supposed to pick favourites. He took your dropping out very personally.”

“I've never seen him like that,” I say. “I hope Schroeder hasn't been taking this out on you.”

In addition to being our Health Science Faculty Head, Dr Schroeder is also my mother's colleague. They both work in the neurosurgery department. As if there wasn't enough tension after Tasleem got elected department head instead of him.

My mother pushes my hair behind my ear.

“My girl,” she says. “My whole life I've had men like Schroeder try to tell me what I can and can't do. I've had enough practice dealing with people like him. Besides,” she grins, “he's not a wolf. More of a stubborn puppy.”

I laugh. People have called Schroeder a drill sergeant, a robot, a demon, the devil himself, but this is the first time I've heard him described as a puppy. My mother just keeps surprising me. The joke is over before I've fully appreciated it; something's been bothering me ever since that meeting.

“*Tannie*,” I say.

“Yes?”

“Schroeder clearly doesn't frighten you... why did you wait so long to jump to my defense when he attacked me in that meeting?”

Tasleem looks at me for a long time.

“When he started talking like that, I could've ripped out his jugular,” she smiles sheepishly, “but I wanted you to stand up for yourself. The world will try to make mincemeat of women like us. I thought it would be healthy for you, going toe to toe with a man like him.”

“So,” I swallow, “you didn't want me to look like a baby in front of them?”

Tasleem throws her head back. When she laughs like this, I sometimes forget how much we've been through together. She smooths down my hair.

“You’ll always be my baby,” she says. “I’d do anything for you. There’s no one in the world I love more.”

I tap my chin, considering.

“Ah, so if Tariq and I were both hanging from a cliff, you’d definitely save me.”

It’s a stupid question I’ve been asking since I was a child. Tasleem always gives me the same answer. She rolls her eyes.

“I’d probably die trying to save you both.”

“Okay,” I say. “Change it up a bit... who would you save *first*?”

Without missing a beat, my mother answers.

“Tariq,” she says. “Not because he’s more important, but because I know you’re the stronger one. You could hold on a little longer than him. Probably pull yourself up if you had to. It’s just how I raised you, Adara.”

She covers my hand with hers.

“You’re strong enough to get through anything,” she says.

And I almost believe her.

Thanks to an admin blunder, I’ve missed Orientation Week. I was listed as a returning student, and the change from Health Science to Humanities didn’t register on the system. Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful to have skipped all those social events – the Braai, the dance, the evening of bar-hopping on Long Street. Suffering through them once was bad enough, but now I wish I’d gone.

My first week is hell.

I still haven’t figured out where some of my classes are, and flitting between Reclove in town, and Main Campus in Rondebosch, leaves me with less than an hour each day to eat, rest, and use the bathroom.

On my first day I arrive late, unprepared, and dripping with sweat for each lecture. I thought three and a half years of medical school would’ve given me an edge, but some of my 18-year-old classmates are more well-read than even my high school English teacher was. I feel so out of my depth in my first literature lesson where blank verse, iambic pentameter, refrains, trochees and enjambment are discussed. Some of the terms are faintly familiar, but my brain has been crammed with so much medical jargon it must have pushed out everything I’d learnt in high school. Even

something as rudimentary as rhythm has different meaning in poetry. In the first semester for literature alone, we have twelve novels, three plays, and a full anthology of poems to plough through.

In Film, I can at least understand the content, but finding the hours to watch and re-watch all these movies with an analytical eye, would be the real challenge. As we enter the lecture theatre, I hear one student excitedly whispering to a friend about how lucky we are to get to watch all the classics, visit quaint film theatres, and review new blockbusters for actual course credits. By the end of the first class, she isn't smiling anymore.

I hoped Art would go better, but my unrefined talent is nothing compared to the skill my classmates had earned through years of dedicated practice. The last time I did art at school, I was still using glitter glue and stickers. Three of my classmates have already exhibited work at galleries around town, while others have completed various art apprenticeships. I'm too ashamed to mention the recreational classes I took during spring. Half of the students in my class could probably have headed those art lessons.

When the family sat down to dinner, keen to hear details of my first week as an arts major, I smiled brightly, lied through my teeth, and said everything was *fantastic*. Saskia, Tariq, and Tasleem bought it, and I've kept up the lie ever since.

As my first assignment due dates approach, I start pulling longer hours and drinking up to four cups of coffee per day, then switching to 200mg of caffeine tablets when the coffee no longer works. I never thought it would be easy, switching from medicine to art, but I expected to be treading water by now; a month in I still haven't made a single friend.

I had it easy at Health Science campus. Tasleem had taken great pains to lay the foundation for my career as a doctor, and her professional status had rubbed off on me as well. People naturally gravitated towards the daughter of a top neurosurgeon. Now I don't even talk to those friends anymore. And no one gives my surname a second glance at Reclove. Carlisle means nothing to them. I sit alone in every class.

But I'll prove myself.

When I ace these assignments, everything will be okay.

When you've spent weeks preparing for a test or working on a paper, waiting for the results can be downright agonizing. In medicine, where the answers were cut-and-dried, we got our marks quickly, sometimes as we left the exam venue. Art is different. There's no universal memorandum for such a subjective discipline. It's a two-month wait before I get any of my assignments back.

For all the differences between Health Science and Humanities, there's at least one similarity between art and med school: the hushed silence that descends when we see the professor entering with a pile of assignments. In the three months I've known him, I've never seen Professor Marx smile. It's impossible to tell from his expression how well or how poorly we've done.

He slams the pile down on the table, resting his clasped hands atop.

"Some of you have paid attention," he drawls. "I'm impressed by how much of the theory you were able to apply."

There are sighs of relief. I stayed up two nights in a row to finish that paper. It seemed a deceptively simple assignment: *Modern and Postmodern Art: A Comparison*. Perhaps it would've been easy if I had a clue what either of those things were. It took me forever to understand the definitions, and even longer to construct a coherent paper.

Marx speaks briefly about the assignment, then proceeds with the lesson.

We get our essays back five minutes before class ends. I watch, with silent trepidation, as my peers flip through their papers. My leg starts shaking while I wait for mine. Long after everyone's left class, I'm still waiting.

"Professor Marx," I say, walking up to his desk in front. "I didn't get my paper back."

The professor looks up. He must be the only academic I know who still carries a briefcase. He fishes a stapled document from the inside. I read my name on the cover.

"Miss Carlisle, I presume?"

He sits my paper down on the podium.

"Can you tell me how you went about completing this essay?"

I sense something more beneath the gentle tone. Is he about to accuse me of plagiarizing work?

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Professor." I clear my throat. "I conducted a copious amount of research—"

"That, I do not doubt," he raises his brows, "but I fear you've misinterpreted the assignment."

The professor hands it to me. Panicked, I thumb through it.

“There’s no grade?” I say.

The corners of the professor’s eyes crinkle, only he’s not smiling.

“A lot of students claim I’m tough, but I’m not heartless.” The professor shuts his briefcase.

“If I graded that, I would’ve had to fail you. And that’s not fair.”

I stare at him until he becomes a blur.

“Tell you what? Schedule an appointment with me and we’ll go over the specifics of the assignment. You can hand it to me at the end of term, before your exam?”

“Okay. Thank you... And I’m sorry.”

The professor starts lifting his briefcase, then sets it down again. He fixes me with a look of mild bewilderment.

“You’re the student who transferred from Health Science?” He doesn’t wait for me to respond. “You were doing quite well there. You sure this art stuff’s for you?”

Professor Marx looks at the empty lecture theatre. His voice has a slight echo.

“Most of your peers are really good at art, but that’s the only thing they can do. They have limited career prospects. We joke about starving artists, but that’s a reality most of them will face at some point in their lives. Some, sooner than others.”

The professor picks his briefcase up again.

“I’m one of the lucky ones to have gotten this job. And there are at least a hundred applicants waiting to take it from me.” Marx turns to me. From my seat at the back, I hadn’t noticed his greying hair. He looks much older than I imagined.

“Let me tell you a secret, Miss Carlisle. Something that might be worth remembering.”

I clutch the strap of my leather bag tightly.

“I never wanted to teach, but I couldn’t sell any of my work. Moved to Europe, thinking I’d crack it there.” He purses his lips. “I struggled for fifteen years. At some point I was working at five different places – menial jobs – just to make rent and buy food.”

“But you’re okay now, surely?” I say.

“Hm. I have a house. Wife. Kids. We live in the suburbs, reasonably comfortable. For many people it doesn’t work out that way.”

Then, for the first time, Professor Marx smiles.

“Most people see a successful academic, but part of me will always be a failed artist. You know, I’m very good at technical drawings. Wasn’t half bad at Mathematics either. I could’ve

been an architect, an engineer. But I wasted too much time loving a thing that didn't love me, instead of using my skills someplace else."

We leave the lecture hall, then stop beneath the trees outside. A green-haired student glides past on rollerblades.

"Far be it from me, or any faculty member, to try and tell you what to do with your life, but you were good at medicine," Professor Marx says. "It's not too late to go back and finish what you've started."

It took me twenty-two years before I failed at anything. Professor Marx was the kindest of all the professors who graded my assignments. I've messed up my English essay and performed even worse on the Film class test. Maybe I'm having a meltdown, because I end up at medical school and can't remember driving there.

One of my friends spot me and starts running over to the car, but I pull out of the parking lot before she can reach my window.

At home, I read through all my essays until my eyes start to burn. Then I make an appointment with Professor Marx and begin studying for my upcoming literature test. As I'm downloading resources on my laptop, I spot a new document in each of my course tabs on the website. I open it to find a class list that has the percentages of all the tests next to each student's name. My heart sinks.

Despite my best efforts, I'm sitting at the very bottom in nearly every class.

Pretending everything's okay is one of the hardest acts to pull off.

Almost five months into art school and still I'm floundering. I have no friends, and have failed or just barely passed every assignment and test. Things came to a head last night when Tasleem saw my laptop opened on the gradebook page, where the highest percentage listed was 55. She was delivering fresh laundry, when she paused and looked over at my desk. From the doorway I saw her face change, but I couldn't run from the room in time.

"Were you going to tell me about this?" she asked.

"It's not as bad as it looks. I—"

"You've failed everything."

“I’m redoing like three assignments. They’ve given me permission. The transition’s been hard.”

Tasleem brushed past me. In a voice just shy of a whisper, she spoke to me from behind the kitchen counter.

“I didn’t go into debt so that you can fuck around at art school,” she told me. She pointed her index finger at the marble countertop. “You will make this right, Adara. I don’t know how, but you will.”

I was too tired. Too scared. And too disappointed in myself to argue with her. But today, with just one month before my mid-year exams, I will pull myself together. Art, Literature, and Film were different languages than Medicine. I was reasonably fluent in the latter. Practice is all I need now. Practice and time. It worked in medical school. And I’m all out of other ideas. I’ll skip the rest of my lectures and prepare for the exams all by myself.

I bet no one will even notice I’m gone.

I’ve rented two lockers in the library so I don’t need to cart all my books back and forth. Everyday I leave home around 4am to get an early start on the studying. After some emails and calls, I managed to track down all the recommended readings for my courses. When I have questions, I simply pop the lecturer a question via email. The progress is slow, but at least it’s happening. I would’ve done this sooner if I hadn’t been so overwhelmed. I’ve never admitted it before, but art school is scary.

I don’t fit in here. My neat hair, dark wash jeans, and black leather jacket make me melt into the furniture. Med students were required to dress smart casual at all times. No sandals, no jeans, no leggings, tracksuits, cropped tops, revealing shirts or see-through blouses, and definitely no hoodies. I haven’t done much with this new freedom, but my peers exploit it. I’ve seen students in class wearing pyjamas with oversized slippers, boxer shorts, and one guy even wore a fluffy gown when he couldn’t find a warm enough jacket. And forget cropped tops; on really hot days, Main campus students enter class wearing crocheted bras and cut-off denim jeans, as if they were headed to a music festival in the desert. I’ve seen piercings, tattoos, and hairstyles that haven’t featured in my wildest dreams. Just when I thought I’d seen it all, the girl sitting behind me in English Lit raised her hand. I couldn’t tell you what question she asked because I was too

distracted by her rainbow-coloured armpit hair. For the rest of the day I wondered if she'd managed to dye her pubic hair as well. Her gynae must have an exceptional poker face if she did.

The edgiest thing I've done this year is park illegally.

I'm too normal for art school. I know it. And I'm sure my classmates know it. Perhaps I should've dyed my eyebrows purple before I enrolled. Or at the very least, bought a few more colourful shirts, a polka dot sweater, anything that would've made my med school professors cringe. My friend Naeem made the mistake of wearing ripped jeans to class in first year. I'll never forget it. Dr Schroeder paused his lesson, looked pitifully at Naeem and said, "I know it's tough, being a student. One day you'll make lots of money, but tomorrow I'll bring a sewing kit so you can fix those jeans." The class erupted with laughter. It was the last time anyone came to campus wearing what our handbook referred to as 'ragged trousers'.

The library's silent enough for me to reflect on all these things. Much as I love it here, in the peaceful, airconditioned quiet, I still need to leave in order to eat. Studying all day can wear you out, especially when you don't yet understand half of what you're reading. When lunchtime rolls around, I pack up my books and take a walk across campus.

As a budding doctor, I lived most days on my feet. I'm no stranger to staircases, but I'm unused to climbing them during adverse weather conditions. We suffered a heatwave earlier this year, followed by terrible rainstorms. Today it's just freezing cold. No wind or rain, thank God.

Main Campus is carved into the face of Table Mountain, and we've got spectacular views that I'm too stressed to appreciate right now. I don't realise how drained I am until I settle into a leather couch at the café. Tucked beneath the library and dwarfed by a store that sells almost every item a student might have forgotten at home, the quaint bistro remains hidden.

The bigger crowd heads to the food court for lunch. I know there's a fantastic burger place there, but my exams are fast approaching, and I can't imagine making progress in a place with seven TV screens and nearly 300 other students. So, for the first time, I enter the bistro. I know the prices at Kahve Corner are criminal, but today I'll pay top dollar for silence.

Low-lighting, exposed brickwork and copper chairs, lend an urban, almost industrial atmosphere to the bistro. Some wooden tables are spray-painted with art, while others boast Balinese engravings. One entire wall is a blackboard, but it doesn't display the Specials of the Day (because a place like this never lowers its prices). There are chalk paintings on the board. From

my seat I discern a cheeky portrait of a dolphin playing guitar on a street corner, a professor wearing Darth Vader's mask, and a few swearwords that have been built into mini murals.

"Cool, ey?" the barista holding the coffee pot says. He wears several tattoos, but no name tag.

"Very cool. Do you just allow anyone to draw stuff?"

I'm surprised by the hoarseness of my voice. Then I realise this barista is the first person I've spoken to all day. My coffee's too hot, so I pour a complimentary glass of lemon water. It's clear why the stuff is free; I've never tasted anything so vile.

"Brah, if you can draw, and even if you can't, just grab some chalk and have at it."

He seems a little hungover from the weekend, because he almost pours the coffee into the sugar bowl.

"I like to think I can draw," I say, still eyeing the board. I used to think I could. After failing all these assignments, I'm not so sure anymore. I haven't had the opportunity to sketch anything I'm interested in this semester.

The barista sticks a hand into his large apron pocket. "There's a bucket by the board where you can find more colours, and a duster-cloth thingy too. Ennnjoy!" He slams a fistful of chalk sticks on the table.

I manage half my sandwich before I'm kneeling in front of the chalk board, not sure what I'm sketching, but pushing the chalk around anyway, trying not to think of all the art theory I've failed. I've picked a spot in the bottom left-hand corner. Maybe it's because I miss med school with its chlorhexidine solutions and familiar iodoform stench, or perhaps it's purely because I've drawn it so often, but I start off with a plain white sketch of an anatomical heart, using blue for the veins and red for the arteries. I lean back, chalk poised between my nose and upper lip, and erase certain sections with the furry piece of cloth I'd found in the chalk bucket. Then I go in with the white again, changing the outline of the heart to the more recognizable one found on Valentines' paraphernalia. Below it I draw a big book, opened in the middle, with the words "Trauma is only Art, waiting to happen" spread across its pages in stylized cursive. I rummage through the chalk bucket searching for a brighter red and use this to draw in drops of blood spilling from the heart onto the book. After erasing and redrawing a few more lines, I dust my hands and return the chalk bucket to its hook beside a pink flowering plant.

My brain has woken up after the fifteen-minute session, and my coffee is just about drinking temperature now. I pick up my sandwich again as I pore over the poetry terms I'm trying to re-learn. I managed to find some past exam papers, but I'll get to those later.

"Excuse me,"

I read to the end of my paragraph before looking up; the man standing over me is not the barista with tattoo sleeves.

"I can see you're having lunch, and I hate to disturb you, but you look so familiar. I'm sure we've met before."

I know it's a lie. As a product of an illegal affair, I don't meet many women resembling me. My mother's toffee skin and father's pale blue eyes are a rare combination.

"I'm pretty sure we've never met," I say, apologetic, although I'm more annoyed than sorry. All I want to do is finish the last two bites of my sandwich. Instead of discouraging him, my frown has the opposite effect.

"Pretty sure we know each other. Perhaps not *know*... But I've *seen* you before."

When the stranger doesn't leave, I'm forced to take a closer look at him. He has thick brown hair, and cheeks splattered with the beard of someone much older than the teenagers that fill most of my classes. In fact, he looks nothing like half the arts majors I've seen. There are no piercings, visible tattoos, and he looks clean, like he enjoys daily showers. Even his outfit is normal; skinny chinos and a loose-fitting black cardigan that does nothing to hide regular gym visits. Though it's his eyes that hold my attention. Aside from a jawline nearly as sharp as my nose, they're probably his most distinguishing feature. The blue's a shade deeper than my own. Maybe he thinks we're related somehow?

"Sorry," I say, picking up my cup. "You'll need to refresh my memory."

He fumbles, highly unaccustomed to being forgotten.

"You really don't remember?"

I can't think of anything besides the growing list of terms and theory I don't understand. This man is wasting my time. The panic I've fought for the last few months, rises in my throat until it nearly chokes me.

"I just started on Main and Reclove this year. I don't mean to be rude, but I'm close to failing nearly all of my courses," I pause. This is the first time I've said the words out loud. They sound alien. Fictional. I take a deep breath.

“Guy with a face like yours, I’m sure you can pick up girls whenever you like. But if you’re coming onto me right now, I’m sorry. I’m so stressed out, really busy preparing for the exam, and not really interested.”

The tips of his ears redden. He scratches the back of his head. After a few seconds of awkward silence, he says,

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault. I’ve been known to get over excited.” He shows me his palms. “My girlfriend was just sitting at the table with me,” he says, pointing a thumb towards a table with two plates. “I wasn’t hitting on you. But I really have seen you before – at Red Cross. You treated my niece. Stella? She had cancer and you were one of the doctors she met at the hospital.”

Stella. That name triggers the image of a sweet face dry retching into a bucket of blood. I still don’t remember meeting the handsome stranger, but his resemblance to the 5-year-old girl I once read stories to, is crystal clear. I sink back, wishing I could melt into the faux-leather couch.

“It is you!” He claps his hands loud enough to earn a glare from the man to our left. “I knew it. Dr Addison? Adderly?”

Now my ears redden.

“Not doctor. Please lower your voice.” I put a finger to my lips. “I was just a med student, helping out. Never an actual doctor, but it’s confusing because we all wear the white coats.”

Without waiting for an invitation, he plonks down opposite me. Definitely not a first-year. No 18-year-old I’ve met so far has balls enough to disturb a woman having lunch with four books spread open in front of her.

He slides his phone over; on it there’s a screensaver of a smiling girl with spikey hair the same shade of brown as his. If I didn’t know her, I’d think it was a little boy smiling up at me.

“Hair was a lot shorter before,” I whisper.

Stella was admitted to the hospital with suspected leukemia last year. The little girl had been frightened out of her mind, lying alone in the cold ward. She’d been in a room with patients too sick or tired to play. I met her during the final weeks of chemo when she couldn’t even hold a cup.

“She’s in remission now. Has so much energy we don’t know what to do with her.” He pockets the phone. “She would speak about you a lot. Said she loved listening to you tell stories. I saw you reading to her one afternoon before visiting hours. Stella looked so peaceful.”

As glamorous as a career in medicine may seem, eventually drawing bloods, putting up drips and even performing lumbar punctures became rote. I had the toughest time in pediatrics when I competed with volunteer workers who brought pure joy into a space many children

considered downright terrifying. The small patients would scream blue murder whenever I administered a shot or examined them with my cold hands. But the second I left the room and the Friends of the Children's Hospital marched in with their trolley bags full of toys, laughter would resound. The next time she went to the States, I asked Tasleem to bring back the most colourful stethoscope she could find. I also made sure I had a novelty pen for clinical notes. Soon the kiddies simmered down, too distracted by the rainbow Littmann round my neck to register an approaching needle. Because most of the patients had families that could only visit once or twice a month, their rooms would remain empty during visiting hours. I made a point of popping in at these empty rooms; it was not uncommon to find a child on the floor with me, building a puzzle or playing a game of cards. One of the best moments of my entire career as a med student actually happened at the Red Cross. I was sitting in the corridor on a plastic chair far too small for my bum, with four kiddies helping me build a puzzle. The volunteers were too few that day and I joined them after wolfing down a sandwich. One of the girls who'd listened to my stories before, asked me to tell another one. She knocked it from my hand when I picked up a book. "Tell! Don't read," she demanded. So I began to make up a story. Pretty soon every head in that corridor was turned to me. I was standing up on the plastic table, the puzzle abandoned, as I swung my arms in wild gestures. By the time I'd finished, even the sickest kids who'd wheeled their oxygen tanks into the hallway to join us, were clapping in earnest. When I got down from table, several skinny arms reached out to hold me. In that moment I'd never felt more myself. I also got the lecture of a lifetime from a consultant who'd been watching. *You are a doctor here. You cannot be seen sitting on the floor, fucking about. Do you think this is a joke? How the hell can you expect to be taken seriously?* I'd never come so close to swearing at anyone in my life.

I couldn't have known it then, but looking back, that storytelling session was a defining moment. I knew I wanted to touch people, to make them laugh and smile the way I did that day. One of the pivotal lessons I learnt in my time at those hospitals, was that doctors could only heal the body, but it took more than surgery and medication to heal the spirit. You can't fix the bones and leave the soul broken. I still want to save people, but not in the way doctors do. There are injuries no ultrasound or x-ray can detect, and it's those I'm interested in.

Before he can ask, I give him an abridged version of why I dropped out, omitting the part about telling a story in the corridor and getting into a fight with my senior. Not even Tasleem knows that tale. I'm not about to blurt it to a stranger.

“Well, you brought a lot of joy to Stella. So much that she had me buy chocolates and a card to give you before they transferred her to Constantiaberg.”

He goes on to explain how distraught his niece was when they told her I’d left.

“They wouldn’t even give an address or a number. Nothing.”

Guilt grips my heart. I was just telling him how much value I placed on holistic care. How much effort went into building relationships with my patients and treating the person instead of the body. But what had I done to Stella and several others like her? I left without saying goodbye. Sooner or later, doctors expect all their patients to disappear, but it’s never the other way around.

“I’m sorry, about earlier. I’m not usually so dismissive.” I hold out my hand and he grips it firmly. “I’m Adara. No doctor title. Just plain old Adara. I’d prefer to complete my BA without anyone learning about my time at medical school.”

“Understood. I’m Alex. I saw you drawing earlier on. Did you do that heart?” Alex points towards the blackboard. “It’s very good.”

I peer over my shoulder. The colours show up lovely against the black.

“Thank you. I tried. This is a really nice place, even if waiter is a little hungover and the prices are—”

“Yeah. Oliver’s cool. Have you paid yet?”

I shake my head.

“Great.” Alex picks up the leather-bound menu. “I’m getting your bill.”

I blush and start a litany of refusals.

“You don’t get to fight me on this. You brought comfort to my niece when I couldn’t. I owe you a sandwich and fries, and coffee.” He pauses, smiles. “I do, however, have one little request.”

Alex asks if I would join him on a video call to his niece. Refusing would make me look like a complete asshole, so I scooch next to him as a small face appears on the screen. I know that most young children who develop acute lymphoblastic leukemia make a full recovery after a few weeks of treatment, but seeing a child who was once unrecognizably pale and thin, doing jumping jacks and screaming her lungs raw, makes me so happy I could burst.

She talks to Alex for a while before he points the camera to me. Stella’s smile falters; without warning she breaks into hysterical sobs. Alex lowers his volume, and the guy to our left, having tolerated us long enough, gets up and leaves.

“Stells, don’t cry. It’s okay, baby girl.” Alex moves the camera back to him.

“No! Where is she? Where’s Dr Addy! Put her back put her baaack!”

Stella becomes more inconsolable when I disappear from the call.

“First dry your tears, love. Go on. Be a good girl, for Uncle Alex.”

Stella dries her eyes with the hem of her blue dress. Alex laughs, “Put your dress down, Stella. Remember, we spoke about this?”

Once Stella has calmed down enough to talk, Alex pulls me back into the video. We speak for a bit, and twice she runs back into the house to fetch a box of chocolates just like the ones she bought for me, and to show me the fluffy rabbit she’d purchased, but that she’d since been taking care of herself.

“Uncle Alex still has your card. Will you give it to her?”

Stella’s request is so sweet no one could possibly refuse.

“Sure, baby girl.”

“And will you please bring her to visit one day. Dr Addy gives the best hugs.”

Alex gives me a furtive glance.

“I’ll ask her baby, okay? Now we’ve got to go. Blow me kiss.”

Stella covers her face with two small hands. This is clearly a private tradition between uncle and niece. I silently slip out of the call.

“And give one to Dr Addy, too please.” Alex gently pulls me back into view.

Stella comes frightening close to the camera. We hear the smooching noise, but all we see is one large, blurred green eye.

Once we’ve said goodbye, I move back to my seat.

“That was—”

“Intense. I didn’t know she’d break down like that.” Alex leans back. “I just thought it would be sweet for you to see her again. I shouldn’t have sprung it on you.”

“It’s okay. Kids get like that. It’s not your fault.”

The barista comes over and puts a hand on Alex’s shoulder. He introduces the two of us.

“Cool man, didn’t know you guys were friends,” Oliver says. He transfers his pen from one ear to the other. “Tell you what, coffee’s on the house for any friend of Alex’s.”

Alex winks at me, then goes back to eyeing the menu.

“Shall I get you another?” Oliver asks. “We make a real good café mocha. I’ll put extra whipped cream, just for you.”

“It would be inhuman to refuse such an offer. Yes please.” I say.

“Dusted with cinnamon and chocolate, yes?”

I nod. Perhaps too enthusiastically. Oliver turns to Alex. I notice the cow skull tattoo on the barista's throat.

"The same for you?" he asks.

Alex nervously turns the pages of the menu. I can feel him shaking his leg.

"You can just bring me a light beer."

Oliver scratches his head and nods stiffly. He leaves us with a theatrical bow. I finish my sandwich and slide the bowl of fries across the table.

"I never eat alone," I say.

Alex takes two thin chips and dunks them in ketchup. Once he's wolfing them three at a time, I tell him all I remember about Stella. His niece left a special mark on me because she underwent one of the most strenuous treatments; some days she could barely swallow and those two bites of food it took her half an hour to eat would just end up at the bottom of a bucket later that evening. Her body responded badly to the chemo; she experienced most of its side effects, but even with blood dribbling down her chin, she was always so sweet, so ready to smile.

"Aside from my mother, Stella's probably the bravest person I've met." I tell him.

Alex drowns the rest of the fries with ketchup, then goes back for more barbeque sauce. I look away when my bowl starts resembling his niece's old vomit bucket.

"What did your mother do that makes her so brave?" Alex asks.

She raised a child on her own after her family disowned her. Worked three jobs during medical school to support me, I want to say.

"Well, she's a neurosurgeon. It takes a fair amount of guts to split someone's skull open and scratch inside."

Alex shivers. His shaking leg creates ripples in the lemon water.

"Geesh. Agreed. I can't imagine she took it lightly when you decided to call it quits."

Alex wipes his hand on the paper towel as Oliver walks over with the tray. The swirl of cream atop my coffee wobbles as he sets it down. I can't help but notice that the bottle in front of Alex is not what he ordered. It makes a satisfying pop when he lifts the lid off, but it's Kombucha, not light beer. Alex takes a sip, then points out my art work on the board.

"Jesus," Oliver says. "I've got to send the manager a picture of that. Makes all the other drawings look like lame ass doodles."

The barista scurries off and takes a shot of the drawing. I'm sure my classmates' sketches look far better, but it's not bad for a former med student.

Alex's leg is shaking worse than ever. I think the fermented tea has aggravated it.

"You're busy with the Shakespearean sonnets this semester?" Alex points his bottle towards my books on the table. "Iambic pentameter, right? Gotta know that."

And he starts tapping a rhythm on the table with his fingers.

"I love this stuff."

"You actually understand it?" I gape.

"Well, I have to. They wouldn't let me tutor if I didn't."

If he'd opened with 'I'm a tutor at the university', I'd have been a lot less hostile. I bring my hands together and shamelessly beg him to teach me.

"What would you like to know?" Alex grabs another book and quickly thumbs through it, stopping at interesting pages and smiling. "You're really going to love this story. Man, I wish I could go back and do all this stuff again."

"You can! Because you're going to help me!" Then I remember something. "Hey," I say. "Is it true that you can't get higher than an 85 for any literature course?"

Alex narrows his eyes.

"Who have you been talking to?" he asks.

"The highest marks in my class hover around 80, but no one's gone further than that. What's the highest, usually?"

Alex looks at his hands. He runs the pad of his thumb across all his fingertips.

"Like, what did your marks look like? In order to tutor."

"Hm," he sighs. "Try not to think about the grades too much. Just focus on growing from your assignments. Look at the bigger picture always."

"Your marks were insane, right? Probably like eighty-five."

Alex scrunches his nose.

"Eighty-seven?"

His expression doesn't change.

"Ninety? Ninety-five?"

Alex winks. My Literature tutor spoke of one student with incredible skill and talent who went on to become a lecturer at the university. After the hellish first term I've had, my luck's beginning to turn.

"You're basically a legend on campus, Alex. I'll forget about the marks. I'll do everything you say. Just please, teach me. Please help me."

If I spoke this way to 90% of the men at med school, it would go straight to their heads. Watching Alex's cheeks redden is a welcome change from the arrogance some of my old peers displayed.

"You know what, Adara?" he looks up and smiles. "I'd be honoured to help you."

Alex is an excellent teacher. If he sees I'm not understanding, he doesn't do that thing where he slows down his words and changes the enunciation in a way that makes me feel stupid. He's exceptionally well-read and uses examples or neat diagrams to bring home his points. I listen attentively, making notes of my own. Suddenly he asks for my phone.

"Have you accessed our online platform?" Alex asks, logging into my browser.

I thought he was taking my phone to enter his number. He has to repeat his question because I wasn't paying attention the first time.

"Oh yes, I have. The courses I've registered for are up on there."

"Sweet."

Alex taps away, then hands my phone back to me, grinning.

"What'd you do?"

"Something I probably shouldn't have. Come on, I'll tell you later. Let me show you around."

Even if he is sweet Stella's uncle, I'm wary of Alex with his shaking leg, penchant for light beer, and his ability to make half a bottle of ketchup and fries disappear in two minutes. Oliver hasn't bothered to clear the table Alex was sitting at yet. I notice there's one empty plate, but that a full meal remains untouched on the other. I point to the burger and fries.

"You didn't eat your food?" I ask. "Let me get you a doggie bag so you can at least take it home, man."

Alex clenches, then unclenches his jaw.

"That's Cyan's plate. My girlfriend. She's got a thing about carbs and fat... basically she hates anything that's not a salad. Wouldn't touch the burger I bought."

"Don't you want to take it with you anyway?"

Alex shakes his head. He taps his fingers against his thigh, mimicking the iambic pentameter rhythm.

“Nah. She’d just rage if she saw it in the house. I’m not allowed to bring meals like that home.”

Sharing a house with Alex’s girlfriend sounds like the kind of hell I’d reserve for my worst enemies, but I don’t say anything. Together we stroll out onto Main Campus. It’s not so cold anymore, but the clouds have gathered overhead. We pass a fountain where a small, fluffy dog is lapping water.

“You wouldn’t see that happening at med school,” I say, trying to point with my eyes.

“No?” Alex squints back at the fountain where the owner has caught up to her puppy.

“I never saw any dogs on med campus. Also, we don’t have a fountain.”

Alex laughs.

“It sounds like a pretty dull place. I’m glad you got out. We’re lucky to have you.”

It’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me all year. Alex stops beside a big Victorian building and I almost walk into him.

“This is the Art Centre. First-year students don’t really have access to it, but some of the best film classes are held here. There’s a seminar you absolutely need to take, but the application process is rigorous as hell. Professor Arendse heads it. She joined the faculty about three years ago, and has done some amazing things. She’s a very good friend of mine. You’d love her.” There’s a contemplative pause before he adds, “She’s also like the hottest lecturer on campus. I knew guys in Commerce who snuck into her classes just to drool for an hour.”

I snigger.

“Sounds like you’ve got a crush yourself.”

“It’s pointless arguing.”

Alex shows me where the 24-hour lab and café is. We peer inside and see students huddled in sleeping bags, typing away at their laptops. Half the year is gone and I’m just discovering these places now.

I’m stunned by the beautiful gardens and the greenhouses on Main. They belong to the Botanical Department, and neither of us have access, but just pressing my face against the glass is magical enough. Alex casually points out the best parking spots and gives me tips for using them. Some restricted areas can be accessed after hours he says, because the parking attendants are too lazy to visit those after lunch.

“Where do you park?” I ask.

“I don’t drive.”

“Seriously? How do you get around?”

“I walk. But usually Cyan takes me where I need to go. Either that or I Uber.”

After he’s shown me the last of the cafes, and we’ve passed by each faculty building, I point to the lot where I’m parked, just between the two largest hostels on Main Campus. As soon as my car drifts into view, Alex tells me this is actually a restricted area. I rip the pink parking ticket from my window so fast that it splits down the middle. It’s my third one for the day.

“That’s shitty luck. Come after 1pm, no one will bother you. Cyan’s been parking here for years but they’ve never ticketed her.”

I dump my bags in the trunk of the silver Vivo and give it a firm slam. The parking lot’s nearly empty as I turn to Alex.

“I’ll drive you home? It looks like rain, and it’s the least I can do after you helped me today.”

Alex seems cautious. “Are you sure? It’s only half an hour if I walk.”

I nod.

“It’ll be five minutes by car. Just direct me.”

Alex opens the passenger door, but instead of getting behind the wheel, I toss my keys to him. He catches it without missing a beat; it’s as if he was born on the sports field.

“The parking lot’s pretty empty. How about a quick driving lesson?” I ask.

Alex turns his back to me and leans against the car. I walk round with every intention of reassuring him, but I freeze when I notice his trembling hands. Wishing I could take back the playful offer, I reach up to squeeze his shoulder.

“You okay?”

Alex shuts his eyes hard. Ten seconds pass before he opens them again.

“That was so presumptuous,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I just thought—”

“It’s okay. I think it’s better if I get home on my own—”

“I just thought it would be nice to teach you something today. You spent two hours explaining concepts to me.”

Alex shakes his head.

“I said I don’t drive. Not I *can*’t. There’s a difference. I got my license when I was eighteen.”

This is all so confusing.

“Okay. So, if you drive, then why don’t you just take the wheel? You already know where you live.”

I probably shouldn’t let someone I just met drive my car, but I’m feeling impulsive. If I’m going to be a true art student, I probably need to relinquish some of the control I exercised at med school.

“I was in an accident shortly after I passed the driving test. Never got behind a wheel again.”

Shit.

“Listen, it’s getting late. I’ll order an Uber—”

“No,” I say, reverting to my doctor’s voice.

Alex is stunned. I get the feeling he’s not used to taking orders from people, but between the shaking leg, the beer that was exchanged for kombucha, the fries craving, and the girlfriend who clearly bullies him, I’m starting to worry about my new friend. In fact, I strongly suspect—

“You don’t have to take me home,” Alex says.

I lean my hand against the car and speak into my shoulder so no one who walks past can hear us.

“Your hands are still shaking. There’s no way I’m letting you go home alone. It looks like really bad anxiety. Or a relapse.”

Alex drops my keys. One look at him tells me I’m right.

“Jesus, Alex.”

“Adara, I’m not your problem.”

I gather the keys and open the passenger door.

“Get in,”

I run around and slide into the driver’s seat. Once I’m buckled up and he’s still not in the car, I repeat the instruction, my voice raised with urgency.

When he’s in, I lock the doors and turn to him.

“What is it you’re recovering from, and how long have you been clean?”

Alex stares at his hands. I’ve seen it more times than I can remember; this is the shame associated with addiction. I repeat my questions, gentler this time. I’m his friend, not his doctor.

“I’ve got a bit of a drinking problem. Started when I was thirteen. Been in and out of rehab ever since.” Alex rattles off the details, as if speaking fast will help him escape them. The tremor in his leg is back.

I take a breath, try to detach myself.

“How long have you been sober?”

Alex doesn't respond.

“Alright. Call your sponsor if you must, but we're getting you some real help.”

“Where are we going?” I detect panic in his voice.

I put a bottle of water in Alex's hand before speeding down the road.

“First, we make it through the next thirty minutes, okay? My mom should be home by then and she'll know what to do.”

I'm sure Tasleem will be able to help Alex. Recovery and alcohol abuse may not be her area of specialization, but she's seen enough drug addicts in her time to know how to treat them. Her knowledge would exceed that of a GP or any sponsor Alex could call up. I'll just text her when I get home so she's not too shocked at the sight of a strange man in the house. As my leafy apartment block drifts into view, I can't help but grin.

Of all the boys I could've brought home, it's just like me to handpick the alcoholic.

Chapter 3

Into the Light

The recovering addict I brought home a few months ago, spent three hours talking to Tasleem in her office before she allowed him to stay the night. I can only guess what Alex told her to make her trust him so much, but I was grateful. That night we stayed up well past twelve, studying. A few more sessions with him in the weeks before my exams, and I pulled off the impossible by achieving around 80% in my Film and Literature mid-terms – just enough to bring me up to a passing grade for first semester. He couldn't help me with art, but Professor Marx was very hands-on, so I managed okay without the extra tutor. Alex did, however, sign me up for one semester with him – for poetry and plays.

With all his heart, he wanted me to succeed. So he introduced me to all the strangest, most wonderful artists and writers he knew. I became a part of his inner circle, learned to make friends of my own, and began to float, then flourish. There came a point when I could look my mother in the eye, say I'd had a great day, and mean it. Coming from the clinical, structured world of medicine to a place where no lecture was compulsory and students started dwindling two weeks into term, was daunting. Without Alex, I doubt I'd have found my way. To think it was a careless act of kindness that brought him into my life. Other doctors were responsible for saving Stella. All I did was read to her, hold her hand when she was scared. Now her uncle's become my best friend.

“Addy, do you like this Alex?” Tasleem asked me one day.

Of course I liked him, but that's not what she meant.

“He's one of the most interesting, intelligent people I've met,” she told me. “There's this spirit of sincerity in him that's rare. You and I, we've both met brilliant doctors who were prone to overdoing the drinks.” Tasleem's eyes drifted from mine briefly; her face softened. “I just wanted to say, it's okay if you did like him. If you ended up loving a man like that. I'd be okay with it.”

I don't think there was a day I ever loved her more. Tasleem told me she would accept, even embrace, the very thing her family had disowned her for.

Alexander Stewart might be the most gifted teacher I'll ever have, but he taught me for one semester only, and made me swear I wouldn't sign up for classes with him again.

“It’s far too hard to remain objective about your work. I had to send it to six colleagues for moderation before giving you the final grade.” He scolded as he handed me the marked, final essay for English Lit. I had to page to the back before I saw the percentage.

“Top of the class.” He glowed like only a proud teacher could, but he said having me in his classroom was too stressful. Alex told me he’d rather be my friend than my tutor. Quite quickly we became inseparable.

I’ve no misgivings about the role Stella’s played in our friendship, and I know it’s easier for a recovering alcoholic to be around people who don’t drink. Alex feels safe with me, and I trust him more than most people I’ve known. Tasleem trusts him too. The two of them have become gym buddies and go for morning jogs on Sunday. I think the routine and the structure’s been good for him.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Alex asked me the first time they went running.

Most things you should try at least once. So I went. And I hated it.

In her tight, panelled leggings and neon tank tops, Tasleem makes running look glamorous. When she moves, every hair and every curve stays in place; when I move, I morph into a sweaty, florid, gelatinous mess. Alex and Tasleem run alone now, with Tariq joining them on occasion.

My brother also loves Alex. It would’ve been awkward if he didn’t. I think he’s found in him the older brother he’s always wanted. An unlikely friendship, given the age gap, but Alex can reach people despite age, race, class, or status differences. It’s an enviable superpower that must’ve been hard-won.

Alex is currently completing his PhD in literature, but he’s not introverted or overly bookish like some academics. He doesn’t talk much about his own work – or himself – though he enjoys listening to others and connecting with them. He’s a formidable conversationalist and, unsurprisingly, the most interesting person in a room full of medical doctors. Tasleem was quick to cotton on and started dragging him to all the boring faculty functions. I’m not angry, really. When my mother handed my invitation to Alex, I felt relieved. My dropping out caused widespread panic at med school a year ago. It’ll be a while before any of those people want to see me again.

I’ll admit I’m a little jealous of how close Alex and my mother have grown. She feels comfortable around him, will fall asleep with her head on his shoulder, and I’ve seen her sitting on his lap a couple times too – all friendly of course. She’s roughly seventeen years older than him, but that appeals to some men.

It's mid-November when they return from a faculty dinner in the early hours of the morning. Giggling and falling over each other, they look drunk in the moonlit lounge. Alex hoists my mother up, carrying her in his arms the way a groom would a new bride, while I watch from the passageway, too mortified to blink.

"You... need to get some rest," Alex whispers, lying Tasleem down on the couch.

With pristine gentleness, he removes each shoe, covers her with a woven shawl, and plants a kiss on her hair. Tasleem winds her arms around his neck, drawing him closer when he tries to straighten. She whispers in his ear, and he smiles, presses his forehead against hers. It looks like he'll kiss her mouth, but goes instead for the cheek.

Nothing untoward has happened, so I'm not sure why I feel this way. Tasleem could date whomever she wanted. Why choose my best friend? And what about Cyan? Didn't Alex already have a long-term girlfriend?

So many questions surface and I can't ask a single one. Whatever's going on between Tasleem and Alex, I need to maintain the delicate balance. Exams are approaching and Alex is the best study partner I've ever had. I need him now. I think I'll always need him.

It's why I can't lose him to my mother.

Alex walks into the apartment, laden with grocery bags. He sets them down on the counter and looks at me, suppressing a smile.

"So I spoke to a friend of mine," he says, tossing me a can of Appletiser. "The film scripts have just been graded and guess who managed to get an 85%?"

"You're kidding!" I jump up, run towards him.

I start shrieking the way I did when Tasleem brought Coldplay tickets home. It takes me a full ten minutes before I'm calm enough to sit down. Art's gone well too, but Alex doesn't have any serious connections at Reclove, so I'll have to wait to hear what my final marks are.

"You're amazing, you know that?" I tell him. Then I open the ice cold can and spray us both with tangy, sparkling apple juice. In all the excitement, I must've shaken the carbonated drink.

Alex licks the top of his hand like a cat before we both start laughing again. He retrieves a handful of wet wipes from the bathroom. After six months, he knows where almost everything in this apartment is.

I lie on the couch, reading through my notes, while Alex sits cross-legged on the floor, moderating a pile of third-year exams with his green pen. Every so often, he'll share a paragraph or a particularly memorable sentence, providing great comic relief while I revise. Three hours later we break for supper. Alex prepares toasted cheese sandwiches. Tonight, it's just us, so we don't bother setting the table. My mother's at a conference in Johannesburg, and Tariq's sleeping at a friend's.

"You're taking poetry with Professor Ross next year, right?" Alex asks, bringing our plates over.

We sit on the floor, eating at the small coffee table. Alex has removed my mother's flower bouquet.

"Provided I pass tomorrow's exam, yes."

Alex rolls his eyes. He bites into his sandwich, making half disappear with the first mouthful; it makes a delicious, buttery crunch. My mouth waters as I reach for my own.

"He's got this extra credit thing. If you write your own poem and perform it, you can bump up your grade by almost fifteen percent."

Alex wipes his mouth on a serviette, then slides a pamphlet over to me. The lettering's red and green and gold, with festive bells all over it.

"Looks very Christmassy," I say. "*Open Mic Night. Free Entry before seven.*" I read.

"You should enter. It'd be good practice for you."

I give an ugly laugh. Alex doesn't get the joke.

"Shit. You're serious?" I glance at the advertisement again. "Ali, this isn't really for me. I paint. And I write prose, yes, but I'm not a performer. And I can analyse poetry – I mean, I was taught by you, so of course I know how mood, tone, and atmosphere are created – but I'm far from a poet."

Alex clears his throat. He holds up a finger.

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry," he says.

"Are you really quoting Emily Dickinson right now?"

Alex grins.

"I've read your creative work. You can move people. You should share your gift. Think about it."

"Can I get through my exam first? Then we'll talk?"

Alex concedes. His phone starts to ring, and he rolls onto his hip to fish it out. Finger pressed to his lip, he answers.

“Hey you,” he croons the words in a way that makes my stomach churn. When he flinches and angles the phone away from his ear, I know who he’s talking to.

This is a fight.

Alex suppresses a sigh at least thrice, is silenced when he tries to apologize, and when he says *I love you* at the end of the call, she’s already hung up. The conversation lasts thirty seconds – exactly how long it takes for acid to seep into my veins.

In silence we finish our dinner.

“Shall we continue with studying and marking?” Alex stretches out on the carpet then props himself up against the couch. Already he’s grabbed a pile of fresh scripts.

We’ve argued about Cyan before. I know I shouldn’t do it, but I hate the way she talks to Alex. The way she manipulates him and throws tantrums at the slightest provocation.

“I don’t like the way she treats you,” I tell him for the hundredth time. “Why do you let her do that? I know she’s beautiful, but you could have any woman you want. You do know you have a cult-like fan club at uni?”

Alex chews the cap on his pen. By the end of the evening, his teeth would’ve made a pattern in it.

“I’m just trying to understand why you put up with her,” I say. “C’mon, man. Like is the sex really *that* explosive?”

Now Alex laughs. He scratches the new growth of stubble on his chin.

“Adara, now’s not the time.” He gestures to the scripts in his lap.

“It’s never the time, Ali. Can you just be real for a sec?”

For a moment it looks like Alex might continue marking his scripts, that he’ll end the conversation by simply ignoring me like he’s done in the past. This time’s different.

“No amount of alcohol could make me believe I have a chance with the woman I actually like,” Alex says.

I remember the look on his face as he leaned over my mother two weeks ago. This is the closest he’s come to admitting his feelings for Tasleem.

“I can’t have her,” he shrugs, “so Cyan it is.”

Alex gives me a forced smile before thumbing through his scripts.

“I get it, yeah.” I nod. He looks up again. “Plus, don’t you think it’d be a bit weird?” I ask.

Alex pinches his mouth.

“You know, you being my stepdad?”

Like a rash, the blush spreads from his cheeks to tips of his ears. He throws a cushion at me.

“You’re such a sicko, Addy!”

He aims another cushion at my head; I toss it back like a hot potato. It’s a while before we stop laughing. Once we simmer down, the rest of the study session goes well.

By the end of the night, Alex has worked his way to the bottom of the script pile, I have revised all my notes, and I go to bed knowing the delicate balance of our family remains undisturbed.

For now, at least, things would be okay.

I said yes.

It might be the greatest mistake of my life, but I’ve agreed to perform at the Open Mic Night next week.

After passing all my first-year courses and receiving a personal congratulatory email from Professor Bateman himself, I felt euphoric, and told Alex he could sign me up for a slot at The Black Rose on Friday night. He assured me everyone would be in a festive mood and that it was my best shot at performing in front of a kind, non-judgemental audience.

“I know the owner of the café,” he said. “They’re giving out free booze that night, and who better to perform for than a room of cheerful drunks? You’ll do great, Adara.”

I made him promise he wouldn’t partake of the free alcohol before I started working on my material.

When I’m satisfied with the four-page poem, I begin to rehearse.

In the car. In the bathroom. In the morning. The evening. Afternoon. While I eat breakfast. While I get dressed. And even naked in front of the mirror with the lights on.

I grow more confident as the big night approaches. Alex wanted me to perform for him – just once before the show – but I refused. I’m worried he’ll find fault with it, that my mentor will be disappointed in me and I’ll lose my nerve before I’ve even reached the stage.

Public speaking terrifies me.

I could showcase my art in a glass box or give my writing to someone else to read through, that was fine. Sharing it in real time with an audience of strangers, on the other hand... that takes

courage. It means embracing a level of nakedness that makes me deeply uncomfortable. That's why I need to do it. That's why Alex has pushed me to do it.

I can't call myself a real art student if the most risqué thing I've done all year is park in an illegal bay.

I arrive alone, two hours before the show so I can scope out The Black Rose and make sure the lighting's perfect for my segment. I adore everything about the setup: the intimate stage, tiny Christmas trees on the counter, the red, gold, green and silver tinsel draped over everything, the mistletoe hanging from the ceiling, and the soft jingles in the background.

Maybe Alex was right. A week before Christmas everyone would be in a generous mood. I couldn't have asked for a better audience.

I'm allowed a few practice runs. I can't find a single spot on the tiny stage that doesn't creak. Maybe I should sit? But my dress is too short for that.

I've paired suede ankle boots with a blue chiffon dress that shows off just enough leg for an art student, but that would never have passed as appropriate attire for a doctor on ward rounds. I've done nothing to my waist-length hair but wash it and take it down from my trademark high ponytail; tousled and swept to one side, it feels weird. I wonder what Alex will think...

Just for tonight, I've borrowed Tasleem's best eyeliner. I hope she doesn't look for it. I made Alex promise he wouldn't tell her I'm performing tonight. If I see my mother in the audience, I might throw up, and then I'll be a dead woman. I've borrowed her boots as well – I'm pretty sure vomit doesn't wash out of suede.

I should've gone first.

Halfway through the show, after watching several performers forget their lines, fumble with crumpled sheets of paper, and one woman break down in tears from sheer terror, I realise my mistake. It's too late now. As my slot approaches, I get up and leave the room.

“Adara?”

It's Alex's voice, just outside the toilet stall. I've forgotten this is a unisex bathroom.

“It’s okay to be nervous, Addy, but you’ll do great.”

I’ve brought a hardcopy of the poem with me. I remove it from the breast pocket of my leather jacket, then open the door of the bathroom stall.

Alex hugs me tightly before prying the neatly folded poem from my hand.

“Hey, what if I forget the words?” I make a grab for the paper, but he holds it out of reach; an easy task, given he stands two heads taller than me.

“You look phenomenal. Come on, my little showstopper.”

But I won’t move. Not before he gives my poem back.

“Adara, you’ve been practising for days. You could probably recite this backwards in your sleep.” Alex waves the folded poem. “If you carry this with you on stage, it’s going to act as a safety net that will only distract you. If you know that there’s something to catch you, you’re more likely to fall.”

He gives me another hug. Tighter this time.

“Wanna know why you struggled so much in the first semester?” he asks.

“Tell me.”

“Because you kept looking back. Thinking of med school. Wondering if you’d made the right decision. You spent so much time doubting yourself and it sapped your energy.” He gives me a gentle squeeze. “You belong here. You’re an artist. You’ve got this.”

The bathroom door swings open and another woman enters. The small space can’t hold three people, so we leave, and make it back just in time for my slot.

The café is packed. People are huddled around small wooden tables, leaning against the bar countertop, or standing anywhere they can find an open space. The air’s filled with the smell of burnt oil and cheap beer. As I mount the stairs to the stage, I’m acutely aware that this stench will either become a reminder of one of the worst or best nights of my life.

I step up to the stand, wrap my fingers around the mic, and press my lips to the woven metal covering the microphone, like I’ve seen rock stars do. I’m all confidence until my eyes adjust to the light and I see, standing in the audience, the faces of all the AP med students I last saw a year ago. I count at least twenty camera flashes. There are whispers, sneers, and snickers; they’re not here for moral support.

Alex and Saskia give me big smiles and thumbs up from the front row. I swallow. I can’t let them down.

“The poem is called *The Lost*,” I say. Then I clutch at my throat, praying it was all in my head, that the audience didn’t hear the horrifying sound I just made.

Everyone’s quiet. I must’ve imagined it.

“It was wrong of me to love you/I couldn’t help myself.”

I cover my mouth with one hand, grip my throat with the other. I can’t breathe. And my voice... my voice sounds like a dying butterfly. I run from the stage, fight my way through the crowd, struggling to locate the exit. The Black Rose is on the second floor above a comedy club. As I bound down the stairs, heart in my stomach, all I hear is raucous laughter.

I remove my boots and run across the parking lot. When Saskia finds me, I’m sitting in the driver’s seat of my car with the door open, head hanging between my legs. She kneels on the cobblestones in front of me.

“Ag Adara man,” she tsks. When she tries to hug me, I fold my arms across my chest.

“I didn’t think – I didn’t know –” I lose my train of thought when I think of all those jeering faces.

“Shhh...”

Saskia holds my hand, whispering words of encouragement I’m immune to. We wait ten minutes before Alex walks up to the car.

“Where are your shoes?” Is the first thing he asks.

“Backseat. I took them off because I thought I’d throw up on them.” I stand, suddenly angry. “Did you know?” My voice cracks as I point to the café. “Did you know all those med students who hate me would be there?”

Alex shakes his head.

“Of course not, Adara!”

“How the fuck did they even know about tonight?!”

Alex puts his hands on his hips.

“They shared the flyer on Facebook. Someone from your class must’ve seen it on the Black Rose group. They tweeted about it too. Adara, I’m so sorry—”

I jump up and start prodding his chest with my finger. I’m not making any sense, but I’m angry and hurt and I need someone to blame. It’s because of Alex that I’m here tonight, that I’ve made a fool of myself in front of the people who’ve waited so long to watch me fail. My eyes start burning.

Saskia's hands are on my shoulders. She tries to hold me, but I won't let her. I'm afraid I'll cry. And I don't want to find out if Tasleem's eyeliner is waterproof or not.

When I've cooled down, Alex explains that he took to the stage immediately after I stormed off.

"I told everyone that sharing footage of the event was strictly prohibited and that all recordings were property of The Black Rose."

That's what scares me the most. Having this Open Mic Nightmare uploaded to YouTube. I rub my neck again.

"I don't even know what happened to my voice up there," I croak. "All that practice, for nothing."

Saskia's hand is on the small of my back.

"Bokkie, you were so *gevaarlik*, just getting up there. I don't know anyone brave enough to do that," she says.

Alex takes both my hands. Tentatively he draws me into the circle of his arms.

"Your cousin's right. And your so-called friends who showed up tonight are nothing but cowards," Alex adds.

"Are you...disappointed in me?" I ask Alex.

His eyes bulge.

"Are you hearing yourself right now? You're my best student in a decade. Probably ever." Alex looks back at the café. "Those people up there – those *doctors* – you're better off without them."

He wraps his thick arms around me, and Saskia does the same. Pressed against Alex's hard chest, I feel small and safe. Beneath peach fabric softener, I detect tobacco and just a hint of the sour undertone that can only be Kombucha.

"You smoking again?" I ask. His cardigan muffles my voice. Tonight it's a grey one, with an oversized collar that feels luxurious against my skin.

When Alex doesn't answer, I reach into his pocket and pull out a rectangular box. I lean back so I can look at him.

"Okay. I was stressed out. A little nervous for your part," he admits. "I may have had one."

When I flip the lid of the box, half the cigarettes are missing.

"Okay. Okay. My stomach was in knots for you. But I promise, I did not drink. Not a single drop."

I look at Saskia and she confirms this.

“I was watching him all night,” Saskia says. “He had like two *entjies* and this *weird* vinegar stuff.” She scrunches her nose.

Satisfied, I put the cigarettes back into his pocket.

“Does my mother know?” I ask. “You know you’re not supposed to be smoking at all.”

“Taz doesn’t know.” Alex rubs his neck. “But it was just for tonight. I promise.”

I don’t want to fight in front of Saskia, so I wait until we’ve said goodbye to her. When we’re alone in my car, I turn on Alex.

“You can’t keep doing this. It wasn’t just tonight. I know you, and I know your patterns.”

Alex says nothing. Won’t look at me. His leg starts shaking.

“How am I supposed to look out for you when you keep going behind my back? First, it’s the cigarettes, then it’s—”

“You need to stop worrying, okay? If you’re around, I’m fine. You’re my protector. You know this already.” Alex reaches for my hand. “As long as I’m with you, I don’t need to drink. I could never have gone into a place like Black Rose without getting wasted before.”

“Adara,” Alex lowers his voice, “are you disappointed in me?”

Something in his face disarms me. I turn to look out the window. It’s 11pm and more people are milling about the parking lot now. I hear car doors open and slam shut.

“Not disappointed. I’m scared for you.”

I let Alex reassure me. For thirty minutes he tries to convince me he’s fine.

“I know you’re afraid of how Tasleem will react,” I say. “I know what it feels like to disappoint her. I’ll keep your secret. I won’t say a word.”

This is my first mistake.

My second mistake happens two weeks later, when I let Alex talk me into coming to a New Year’s Eve party with him.

He told me I should step out of my comfort zone, made it sound like it would be a learning experience for me. But we both knew the truth: he needed me there so he wouldn’t drink. I was nothing more than a babysitter.

And I failed spectacularly in my duties that night.

Chapter 4

Looking Back

1 Year Later

Tasleem may love Alex the way she does Saskia, but there are things she doesn't know about my friend. There are things that happened last year that even Alex has no recollection of, and so it will stay. As far as he's concerned, he had a bad relapse on New Year's Eve, and checked himself into a recovery clinic in the Karoo afterwards. For a month we didn't speak, but the night he finally showed up, I realised I'd missed him more than I hated him. I've mostly put the episode to bed, but sometimes I'll wake from a nightmare, and need to sit really still as the images from that night seep from my bones. What happened on New Year's Eve, just one year ago, is a secret that will die only when I do. I don't even trust my pen to write it down. Alex is the kindest person I know, but there are things even he can't forgive.

I feel indebted to Alex. It was because of him that I got to showcase my art work in second year.

"A friend of mine might be interested in your stuff," he told me one day.

"Why? Did you send her photos of the pieces I'm working on?" I'd asked in an accusatory tone.

Alex raised his hands.

"Never. I just told her about the type of stuff you do," he said. "But she wants to come by to see your work. I know how private you are about art. Addy, I'd never share stuff without your permission. I know where the boundaries lie."

A few days later his friend visited my home studio and she loved my work. Within four months we'd put a show together. After that open mic disaster, I'd given up on the idea of extra credit for my poetry lecturer, Professor Ross, but I got the extra points for my second-year arts course.

On the evening of my art show the gallery downtown was packed, but Professor Marx managed to find me and steal five minutes of my time.

"I don't like being wrong," he'd said, swirling his glass of red. "But I am very glad I was wrong about you. And that you didn't take my advice when I told you to return to med school."

One of the waiters passed me a serviette when they saw I was about to cry.

“I’m speaking to you as an artist tonight, okay?” Professor Marx raised his glass to me. “Don’t *ever* take advice from jaded academics about art.” Then he spun around so fast, his wine almost spilled. “This is bloody brilliant. You deserve it.”

Some of my medical school friends and Tasleem’s colleagues came by to show their support, but I was most touched by my Oumie’s presence. My 80-year-old grandmother knows nothing about art and each time she squinted at a painting, she saw something different.

By the end of the night I’d managed to sell five paintings and six charcoal sketches. I was loath to part with the smaller of the two charcoal pieces, because it was a portrait of a man and a woman, holding a baby while the world around them burnt. I was particularly attached to the picture; I’d sketched it after a dream about my father. My sadness, however, passed when I saw the how much money I’d made by the end of the night.

“Fifty-six thousand. *After* the gallery deducts their portion!” Tariq gawked. Tasleem pulled his ear and then hugged him close. Alex was proudest of all. He wanted to bring the total to 70k by making the closing purchase, but I refused. I took the painting off the wall and bubble-wrapped it myself. Oumie also fancied the Leopard on Kitchen Table I’d done in oil, but I wouldn’t accept a cent from her either. As we ushered out the last of the guests, I noticed Saskia in close conversation with Alex’s best friend, Muzammil.

“What’s going on there?” I whispered to Alex.

“Isn’t it obvious?” He winked as he boxed the leftover sushi.

Every rand earned that night went towards paying off my medical school debt. Tasleem didn’t want us to move to a cheaper apartment, but we had to tighten the belt in other ways to pay back that hefty sum. Two years later, and still there’s over R100 000 owing.

Much has happened since I started down this road I chose for myself, but even when I was failing every course, I was still happier than I’d ever been as a med student. Leaving that world behind was the right move. It took me two years of hard work, failure, rejection, moments of intense loneliness and doubt, but I’ve earned my unicorn stripes. I belong here. I feel at home among these strange, spirited, wonderful – colourful – creatives.

With my final year upon me, I don’t know where to next, but I’m going to be good this time, and record every step; my journal will have every single detail documented. I have a feeling there are things in store that would top even my first art show. I’m going to do so much more than just rack up parking tickets. But all of that will have to wait.

Today we’re going on holiday.

There's two weeks left before Christmas and Tasleem's invited the 'extended family' along on our annual seaside vacation. Alex, Saskia and Muzammil will be coming with to *Kleinmond* this year, and everything must be perfect. I've put off the packing until this morning and have been tiptoeing around the apartment since 3am. It's been a tough week; my medical school friends graduated on Monday and I didn't expect to feel the way I did when I saw their smiling faces in my newsfeed. It wasn't jealousy exactly, but I envy the security that comes with a medical degree. I graduate next year, but the path still feels unclear.

I don't know what I'll do once I leave. Paint for the rest of my life? Write essays and scripts? I sold almost a dozen pieces seven months ago, but those opportunities are few and far between. My doctor friends were guaranteed jobs; people are always sick and dying, but they seldom needed art. Sometimes I think if people had more art in their lives, they wouldn't get sick as often. In any case, I don't raise my concerns with Tasleem. She agreed to fund my madness three years ago. I can't be voicing doubt with the end in sight.

While Tariq and Taz are snoring, I stack all the suitcases out front and lean my brother's surfboard against the wall. He has no idea how to use it, but Alex promised to teach him this summer.

I check all the items against the list on my iPad, then freeze as my eye catches a green folder. Wedged between the counter and bread bin, I spot my Writing Portfolio for Professor Arendse. Tasleem promised to drop it off on the way to Main Campus, but she clearly didn't. She was granted tenure last year and asked to give a speech at graduation. I only saw online photos; attending the actual ceremony must've been torture for my mother. I try not to be too angry with her as I jump into my car.

There's one person I know who can get me out of this mess.

"But I never ask you for favours anymore. This is just a small thing, Alex!"

I shove the spiralbound folder in his direction, and he sleepily bats it away. The right side of his bed is glaringly vacant. I don't bother asking where Cyan is anymore. It's not like Alex ever gives me a straight answer.

He props himself up on an elbow.

“What time is it?”

Beneath his right collar bone is the initial ‘M’. I only ever see the small tattoo when he’s not wearing a cardigan, and I’m always a bit stunned when I do. The ‘M’ stands for Michael. Just like me, Alex doesn’t know his father. He’s the only friend I have whose dad died before he was born. I’m not grateful my best friend lost his father, but it’s comforting to know another person who was born with a hole in their heart.

“What time is it?” Alex repeats, throwing the blanket off and climbing to his feet. They played a rugby match yesterday and purple bruises pepper his flank.

“It’s six. Sorry. Half past.” I say.

“Can I take a shower first? I need to wake up.”

I tap my watch. Alex scowls, swearing under his breath as he retrieves a bottle of mouth wash from the bathroom cabinet.

“What are you doing with that?” I point towards the green liquid in his hand.

“You want me to find Arendse and sweet talk her with morning breath?” Alex shakes his head.

There’s a steady stream of traffic on the way to Main Campus. Early December is graduation season, and today they’ve got ceremonies back to back. I’ve managed to convince Alex to personally hand my application and portfolio to Professor Arendse. For the last two years he’s done nothing but boast about how close they are, about how he’s her favourite faculty member. Today we’ll see if the stories hold up.

Alex takes a swig of the Listerine, swishes it around for a minute, then rolls down my window to spit it out on the sidewalk. He ducks his head as a pedestrian dodges the spearmint puddle. One day my friend is going to piss off the wrong person and I’ll probably need to post bail. When I tell him this, Alex smiles, then taps the application in his lap.

The campus is overrun with black robes and we need weave between them in order to get to Humanities on the other side.

“You really want this?” Alex asks. There are no elevators in the Art Centre and Professor Arendse’s office is five floors up.

“Al, I spent like four months working on it. You spent like two years convincing me I should apply. Yes, I want this.”

“Just making sure.”

We start the arduous journey to the top of the old Victorian-style building. The wooden staircase creaks eerily, and the lighting dims as we ascend.

I'm winded by the time we make it to the fifth landing. When he asks if I'm okay, there's just enough air in my lungs to let out a wheeze.

Alex glances at his phone.

"She's in the staff lounge. Not her office."

We trek down a long corridor, and then take a shorter, winding staircase. I've never been this high up in the Art Centre before. We stop in front of a large, wooden door. Alex presses his ear to it.

"Fuck."

The sound of dismay takes me by surprise. I turn around and see a young man, dressed in a beanie and shorts, standing in front of Professor Arendse's pigeonhole. He wears a look of utter dejection as he clutches his head and continues to swear at a volume that makes me believe he either does not know that there are other people in the same corridor, or he's too distraught to care. I glance back at Alex who's still trying to eavesdrop, then I approach the stranger.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

He turns to face me, a deep frown between his brows.

"I wanted to apply for *Creative Writing: An Art*, and I have my full application right here," he shakes the blue folder with too much vigour, "but I've missed the deadline. It says here, in fucking bold print, no late applications will be considered."

And I thought I was upset.

"I worked so hard on this damn thing. What the fuck for?" he continues.

I stare at his profile, waiting for him to say more. It's peculiar, the way his voice holds me. There's so much grief in it. If Alex had refused to help me, I would just have chosen something else. I turn back to see my friend standing exactly where I'd left him. Alex is not one to simply dive in; he likes to weigh up the options first.

"I'm sorry. You seem nice. I shouldn't be swearing so much," the stranger says. He shoves his defunct portfolio under an arm. Without thinking, I snatch it from him.

"Just trust me?" I say.

Then I run to Alex. I pull him away as his fingers brush the doorknob.

"Adara!"

“Yes, you were about to go in, but,” I hold out the stranger’s application, “my friend also missed the deadline. Please, Alex? Just slip this one in with mine?” When Alex starts glaring at me, I drop my voice even lower. “He’s standing over there, on the brink of tears. Please, Ali?”

Alex looks over at the staircase. He grabs the folder from me.

“Wait here. Don’t collect anymore late applications!”

I flash my brightest smile before returning to the guy in the beanie.

“I also missed the deadline,” I explain. “My friend knows the professor and he’ll hand ours to her directly.”

I try not to sound too proud of the favour I’ve done, but it’s hard to remain modest when he throws his hands into the air. His dimples deepen when he laughs.

“You’re fucking amazing!” His eyes flit to the lounge, then back to me. “I’m so so fucking grateful to you and your friend.” His eyebrows knit together in earnest. Never breaking eye contact, he starts walking down the stairs.

“I must get to work! If I get in, I’ll buy you a coffee? Do you drink coffee?”

I hang over the railing to keep him in view.

“Hot chocolate? Tea? Which do you prefer?” he asks, now on the fourth floor, craning his head to scream up.

“Coffee, please! Two sugars. Lots of milk.” I shout back.

“Two percent or full cream?” He’s on the third floor now, but his voice carries well without much effort.

I snort at the unexpected question. This is one of the weirdest conversations I’ve had on a staircase.

“Full cream!”

“Good choice.” He pulls a face. “Two percent’s shit. See you when class starts. Enjoy the holiday!”

And then he waves before taking off, his flip-flops slapping hard against the creaking wood. He must have a pretty cool job if they let him wear a shorts with flamingos on them to work, I think.

When I turn back, Alex is exiting the room arm-in-arm with who I hope will be my new professor. She is tall, fair-skinned, and her voice floats down the hallway like a strange kind of music. There are two folders under her arm. For a moment I wonder what he said to convince her

to accept the late applications. But then he winks at me, and I get the feeling he didn't have to try very hard at all.

I was right about this year's trip to *Kleinmond* being our best to date. Translated to English, it literally means 'small mouth', and the name's a perfect fit for the most peaceful seaside town I've ever visited.

I was a child when we first holidayed here, and one of the things that immediately struck me was the lack of burglar bars and barbed wire fencing. To my four-year-old eyes, the place was paradise compared to our tiny granny flat in Hanover Park. This year, with my cousin and two friends along for the ride, everything feels different. Better.

On the first night, Saskia and Muzammil announced their engagement. I choked on a *daltjie* – a sumptuous chili bite – when I saw the ring. They met at my art show, and Alex's long-time best friend knew a good thing when he saw it. As the story goes, he fell in love with her on sight.

"You're going to be so rich," was Tariq's initial response and no one could argue with him. Muz and his parents have their own perfume company, and they're constantly travelling to New York, London, and Dubai. My cousin was once a social media influencer but now has her own clothing line. On many occasions I've heard Saskia say Alex's friend is the first man who ever took her work seriously. "Believe in a woman's dreams and she's yours," she once told me. I'm not sure I agree. Alex had enough faith in me to help organize an event that raked in almost seventy thousand in one evening, but we're still just friends. His current girlfriend is a bitchy ballerina with an aversion to all my favourite foods. She's as shallow as the glasses of wine she allows herself. The two of us couldn't be more different. Even if I was interested in Alex, I'm not the type of woman he dates.

Muz is just as tall and lean as Alex, but with dark skin and dark hair. They both attended the same boarding school in Cape Town, and later bunked together at res as well. If I remember correctly, it was Alex's decision to move out. One day, while we're all lounging on the beach, I ask Muz to clarify. In between sips of Coke, he fills us in.

"Alex started bringing ladies over too often. Eventually I told him he had to get his own place. The apartment was way too nice to offer up, and I didn't want to leave. But I just couldn't take it anymore, you know? I was like, what the fuck is this, a brothel? Some night's there'd be

two or three girls—” Muzammil earns a box on the ear from Alex for this comment. Like Tariq, there are times when he doesn’t know when to shut up.

“C’mon, Brother Bear,” Muzammil lifts his sunglasses from his eyes to look at Alex. “You know it’s true.”

“Wow...” I sigh. “You mean he actually had choices and still went with... Cyan?”

Saskia holds her nose as Coke comes streaming out. It’s common for one of us to have a go at Al’s girlfriend. It’s one of the ways we show our love for him, but today he’s unusually quiet.

What’s up with him? I mouth. Muzammil responds by snapping a Kit-Kat in half. Code for: they broke up. Again. I roll my eyes.

“Behind these sunglasses I can still see you, you know,” Alex grumbles. He dusts sand from his shorts and runs off to find Tasleem. My mother befriended some doctors at the Lagoon Café. It’s about a ten-minute walk from where we’re lying under the polka dot umbrellas.

“He’s gone to *piemp* you, Addy,” Saskia teases. She’s wearing a sarong wrapped around the neck, paired with a sunhat that keeps falling into her eyes. “You’ll be bridesmaid and him best man, kay? Valentine’s Day next year.”

What?

“*Ha ah*, don’t come look at me like that. I know Muz because of you two. My whole life changed because of you.”

“What did your mom say?” I ask. “Does she know she’ll be back in the same room with her bastard niece?”

“Annd, that’s my cue,” Muz says. He gets up and starts towards the ocean.

“Adara, you know she doesn’t hate you,” Saskia tsks.

“She hates Tasleem. Did you forget what happened the last time they sat down at the same table?”

Saskia turns to me, lowering her shades.

“I just won’t put them at the same table. Problem solved.”

We laugh, but we both saw Tasleem’s expression when they told us about the engagement. Saskia walks in and out of our house like she’s my mother’s third child, and I see Oumie every other week, but I haven’t laid eyes on Naathierah since that dinner disaster. I know she’s since been divorced, but I don’t talk to Saskia about her mother if I can help it. Whenever we go out there are a hundred other things to discuss. The most recent topic is Saskia’s new dress designs.

Right now I'm wearing one of her pieces. The simple blue dress with its low frill collar is already a favourite.

I'm dreading the wedding. The weeks of preparation leading up to it will no doubt culminate in a shitstorm at the reception, but those problems are too far away to feel real just yet. With the sun baking my skin a delicious brown, and the sound of breaking waves in my ears, I can face almost anything.

The only person I speak of less than my aunt with anger issues, is Hoosain, my dead grandfather. But I often think of him. After I crossed that threshold to be engulfed by the weird mixture of *breyani* spices, camphor and incense, something in me shifted. Before that day, my family was Tariq and Tasleem. Just two people. But I seldom saw them. For as long as it mattered, my whole life had been dedicated to books, study, and feverishly racking up the extra-murals. All the things I participated in – from archery, karate and ballet to debate club – were too many to fit on my CV. What for? In pursuit of a dream I didn't want. A career in medicine would bring in enough money to maintain the lifestyle I'm accustomed to, sure, but being a doctor would also take me away from the two people who mattered most. No one is prouder of Tasleem than me, but her prolonged absences aren't easy. I may be far from motherhood, but I know I don't want to repeat the cycle; things have changed since I left medical school. Last week we took Oumie on a boat ride to Robben Island. Tar and I'd been when we were kids, but we developed a brand-new appreciation for the place as we strolled through the prison courtyard, each holding one of my gran's arms. My family has grown since that *janaazah*, and I have more time to dedicate to them now that I'm studying something I love. Hoosain's death helped some of us find each other again. Whatever moved through me in that house that day, gave me the courage to carve a new path.

When Saskia became a part of our lives, she brought with her a whole new world of gastronomy. Tasleem left the Cape Malay cuisine behind the day she was thrown out on the street. Everyone living in the Western world knows what a doughnut is, but it wasn't until I was twenty-two that I finally tasted a koeksister. Saskia has since introduced us to a whole range of other foods. *Breyani*, *akhni*, *mavrou*, delicately spiced *yellow rice*, fried rice with onions and cardamom, and even the legendary salty meat stew called *dening vleis*. My cousin made a point of cooking all these dishes for us, each one more delicious than the last.

“We’re making koeksisters for New Year’s Eve, right?” I ask, for the hundredth time.

“*Aweh*. But we making them from scratch. I’ll teach Tariq, but you can mos learn also?”

Saskia calls back. I hear the clanking of pots and pans as my cousin readies the kitchen.

Saskia sent me the list of ingredients a long time ago and I ticked them off before we left.

“Where’s Alex?” I ask, opening the cupboard. I’m reasonably tall, but still stretch onto my toes to find the spices my best friend packed on the furthest shelf. Alex, always the showoff.

Saskia hesitates before answering.

“He said he’d be back before supper tonight,” she says. “Can you call Tariq so we can start?”

The indirect response raises suspicion. Tonight marks the anniversary of Alex’s relapse, but I’m sure he isn’t stupid enough to get himself into trouble again. The mere decision to spend New Year’s with me was supposed to guard against that. Even Tasleem agreed, Kleinmond was probably the safest place in the world for Alex tonight.

Once I’ve tracked down my brother, we wash our hands and begin the 3-hour process of making koeksisters. I couldn’t believe it when Saskia told us the ones we’d been eating were all frozen about a month before. I can only imagine what they’d taste like, made with fresh ingredients.

Saskia’s a good cook who patiently instructs us. Once all the ingredients are laid out, she checks the cupboard again.

“Where’s the naartjie peel?” she asks.

I fetch a glossy mandarin from the fruit bowl and toss it to her.

“What’s this?” She turns it over in her hand.

“We just need to peel it. Thought it’d be better fresh.”

Tariq starts giggling. He retrieves a small spice pot from the cupboard.

“*Dried, powdered* naartjie, Addy,” he says, not even trying to stop laughing.

We start measuring the correct quantities of flour, yeast, ground cinnamon, ginger, aniseed, cardamom, cold milk, butter, and of course, sugar. Tariq gives the dry ingredients a toss while I whisk the butter into boiling water and add milk. When we’re ready, Saskia tells him to make a well in the dry ingredients. I pour my mixture in, and he incorporates it with a practiced hand.

“Very nice, Tar,” Saskia croons, leaning over his shoulder. Watching her beside my younger brother, I get the feeling she’s going to make a decent mother, even if she had the worst example.

Once the dough has reached the right consistency, we cover it in cling wrap and leave it to rise for an hour and a half while we prepare the rest of the New Year's supper. We're slapping some meat on the grill as we always do, but Tariq will be preparing his twice-cooked chips instead of the usual potato salad. When it's 6pm, the koeksister dough is pulled out and with oiled up hands we begin rolling little golf balls that are stretched into oblong shapes and placed directly in hot oil.

"Can we use this oil for the chips later?" Tar asks.

"Unless you want them to taste like koeksisters," Saskia says.

The mixture is meant to make 30, but because we're new at this, some of the balls are too small and we manage to get 40. Before they're stretched, they resemble my mother's peanut-butter-and-date treats, but their true identity's revealed when dunked in hot oil. It takes every ounce of self-control not to pop a piping hot one in my mouth. We leave them to cool, then boil them in cinnamon syrup, and finally they're rolled through a plate of desiccated coconut before the taste test.

Saskia steeples her fingers as Tariq and I take our first bites.

"What do you think?" she asks, eyes shining.

The bun is spicy and sweet, but still faintly crisp. I always expect the dough inside to be dense, but it's cooked fluffy. It's the type of doughnut that makes Cinnabon taste like day-old bread crusts. When I finish, I lick my lips and savour the most decadent gloss I've ever worn – this particular blend of fat, spice and sugar, are the ingredients to a kind of magic that should not be performed near me. I give my cousin a thumbs up. While Tariq's snapping photos of his first batch of koeksisters, I grab two more from the pile before they've been baptized by syrup and coconut.

When Saskia became a part of our lives a few hours after Hoosain's death, it was inevitable that things would change. I might not have realised it as a child, but half of my life was stolen from me when my grandfather disowned my mother. Having Saskia around has soothed the wound I wasn't brave enough to acknowledge. Tasleem wears the surgeon's mask so well, that I couldn't guess at her pain either. But the night Sas walked into our house carrying a steaming bowl of dening vleis (this dish is no gourmet meal; it's rather plain and grey, and the fat curdles in the most unappetizing manner when left in the fridge overnight), the mask slipped, and I was allowed a glimpse of a woman I didn't know still lived inside my mother. That evening, Tasleem scraped some mashed potatoes (gently seasoned with nutmeg) onto a fork and dipped it delicately into the gravy. I remember Tariq tugging at her sleeve, so eager to know if the dish tasted of her

childhood. My mother remained mute as she set her cutlery down. *Have I upset you?* Saskia asked. It looked like Tasleem might get up and walk away from the table then, but instead she did the unthinkable: she fished a piece of meat from the gravy with her right hand, and devoured the entire meal without the aid of a knife or fork. Doctors, especially those who are surgeons, should never eat with their bare hands, but I didn't dare remind my mother of this. Later that night I found her in the bathroom, her eyes red and watery. When I asked her what the matter was, she opened her mouth, but her tongue couldn't tell me why tasting such food had cracked her open.

These days Tasleem still refuses to cook like Saskia, but she enjoys the meals when Tariq makes them.

With two hours before midnight and no sign of Alex, my panic sets in. Images of him from last year begin swirling in my head until I'm visibly sick. I worry Alex has gone in search of drink, and that he's found it. Saskia reminds me that Muzammil is with him, and that he knows how to handle his friend, but *I* was with him on the evening he last relapsed. Even with half a medical degree, I was powerless.

Thirty minutes pass before Muz walks through the door. He's all smiles, armed with a big bag of fireworks to set off on the beach at midnight, but no Alex.

"Where's Al?" I ask, jumping from the couch. "It's been hours."

Muz sets his bags down and takes his cap off. He puts an arm around my neck and kisses me hard on the head.

"I last saw him this afternoon. I left him with some girl he met on the beach. You know, typical Alex stuff. Don't worry," Muz ruffles my hair the way an older brother would. "I made him promise he wouldn't get drunk."

I shove Muz's hand away.

"He's a big boy, Adara. Brother Bear doesn't need protecting."

I walk towards the balcony and lean against the railing. The glow of a full moon throws everything on the beach into sharp relief. There's a growing crowd down there, and I can hear the music clearly. If Alex is among the throng, I'm willing to bet there's a bottle in his hand. We're miles from any rehab centers. This is not the way we were meant to ring in the new year. Muz may have grown up with him, but there are things only I know about Alex.

At 11:30pm I hear Alex's voice downstairs. He's talking animatedly to Muz and Tariq but breaks off mid-sentence to smile at me.

"Hey, Addy."

Hearing my nickname only makes me angrier. Muzammil tries to get between us, but I duck under his arm and start jabbing a finger at Alex's chest.

"How could you do that to me? On New Year's Eve! Do I need to remind you what happened last year?"

Alex tries to get his hands on my shoulder, his eyes softening in a way that makes me think he's seconds from tears. Alex only cries when he's drunk. I try to smell his breath, but he holds me back.

"Would you calm—"

"Muz said something about a girl you met on the beach. You break up with Cyan six times per year, and the moment you do, you fuck the first thing that moves. You're so damn predictable."

Muzammil attempts to talk me down, and I can hear Tasleem's voice in the background, but they may as well be ghosts. I just see Alex. When I close my eyes, I can still hear his slurred voice. The most depressing montage starts playing out inside my head.

"You're the most selfish, destructive person I know. One day you won't have friends to pick you up after you've had your fun." I shake my head. "I don't know why I still put up with you. You're just another loser who can't hold his liquor."

Alex's body closes over mine and he slams his fist against the wall, right next to my shoulder. The words come out through his teeth.

"How dare you."

"I—"

"You're the only person in the world I don't need to get drunk around to tolerate. Why the fuck else do you think I spend so much time with you? You keep me sober, even when you drive me insane."

I stare. My pulse starts beating the way it did this time last year. When he saw him, looking the way he did... Closing my eyes only sharpens the pictures I'm trying to banish. Alex is so close now I can feel his anger crackle in the air between us.

"I've not been using. And I also have not been shoving my dick into anyone. I came here to spend the holidays with you and your family. You really need to calm down." Then he moves

even closer and, lowering his voice until it's a hiss only I can hear, "And I haven't been drinking. Go ahead, have a taste? Shove your tongue down my throat if you don't believe me."

Alex turns and walks away, back into the night.

I slump to the floor, then bound for the bathroom the moment I feel my legs again.

I sit on the bank of the lagoon with my plate of lamb chops and twice-fried potato chips resting in my lap. The chops are rimmed with the crispiest fat, and the smell alone is a comfort, but I haven't had a single bite. After a while, I set the plate down on the grass.

"Want some company?"

I recognize Saskia's soft voice. She stretches her legs out on the sand and wraps her pashminah around both of us. My cousin rests her head in my lap as if she's the one in desperate need of hug.

"The Lagoon Café sounds pretty busy tonight," I say, looking over my shoulder to the beach where two hundred people are swaying to live music.

"Swear the whole town's there." Saskia takes my hands and holds them to her chest.

"Hm."

When we don't talk, I can hear the sound of water reeds rippling in a gentle breeze. There's also a choir of crickets singing into the night.

"Addy,"

"Yeah?"

"Muzzy should have told you what Alex was doing all afternoon. He was unnecessarily cryptic. I *kaked* him out now. And I'm here to apologise on his behalf. He doesn't know what happened this time last year."

No one besides me knows what happened that night.

"It's okay."

Back in med school I had the opportunity to spend some time at a psychiatric hospital. It was the single most interesting, terrifying place I'd ever been. It was during my stint there that I met a woman who'd strangled both her kids. The mother broke down in tears every time I questioned her about those children. She became incoherent and a consultant had to step in and take over. She'd been abused by her parents and this childhood trauma was never addressed. All

that repressed anger and pain was taken out on her own family years later. I know better than most what unprocessed trauma can do to a person. Sometimes I think I should talk to somebody about what happened at that party, but then I consider Alex. My pain never lasts long, but there's no telling what Alex would do with the knowledge I hold. For his sake, I shoulder this secret.

"Alex used his charms on the lady over at the canoe place. We're taking them out on the lagoon. Come with, man?"

I look down and see that two cats have carried my lamb chops off. Saskia helps me up and we take a walk to where the music is. Three canoes are waiting on the bank when we get there. I really don't want to go into the water at this hour, but I don't feel like getting into another fight with anyone.

"Tar, I'll go with you?"

"Nah, going with mommy." He's already shoving off, with Tasleem waving her paddle at me.

The deep voice at my shoulder makes me jump.

"Ride with me?" Alex says. I eyeball his outstretched hand. The most peculiar thing about Alex's hands, is their unexpected softness. *The hands of an academic*, he'd once joked. *Hands that have never done a day's honest work*. It couldn't be further from the truth.

"Fine," I take his hand and lower myself into the canoe.

Soon we find ourselves in waist-deep waters. Our canoe moves too close to Tariq's in the darkness, and his two-man vessel nearly capsizes. Alex chuckles behind me. He's doing most of the paddling work. There's no moonlight where we are; everything is ink black, and the sounds coming off the shore are remote – the hiss of water around us, infinitely louder. I'd love nothing more than to swim over to the bank, but I don't have the courage to face these waters when I can't see two feet in front of me.

Alex stops paddling, but the canoe creeps along in the dark.

I turn my head to the side.

"You scared me earlier," I say.

"You scare too easily." I feel the tenderness beneath the criticism. "How did you keep calm working with patients who had worse problems than I do?"

"It's because of those patients that I react this way. Plus," I try to swing around in the canoe, but the sudden movement sways the vessel too much. "You're my best pal. You're my second brother. You know, the one I never really wanted but got stuck with anyway."

“Gee, thanks!” I hear his smile.

Far off, the countdown begins.

“New Year’s upon us. And look, I’m one year sober now.” Alex says.

“I’m sorry for accusing you.”

“I can’t blame you. But you must put that night behind you. I don’t remember a thing, and you also need to work on forgetting.” Alex’s hand comes down lightly on my back. “Can you promise me? I can’t move forward if you keep looking back.”

“Okay. Okay. I can do that.”

Alex starts saying something, but it’s drowned out as the fireworks pierce the blackness above. I’ve never seen pyrotechnics this close-up before. I can smell the charred embers that die in the water as they fall to earth. Alex tells me to look into the lagoon. He’s leaning over the canoe’s edge, his laughter breathless.

“Isn’t it stunning?” he asks, his face blue and red and green with the lights that tumble from the heavens.

The colourful display illuminates the water, and it feels like we’re sailing through cracked fire. Alex leans too far and the canoe rocks, tipping dangerously to the side.

“Shit, Alex!”

But he does it again, harder. This time we tip over. I get a mouthful of saltwater when I try to scream. Something lifts me up from below. Something warm and solid. I keep my eyes shut and hold on.

After some time, I feel warm grass on my cheek. Soft fingers are wiping hair from my face and helping me up. Alex’s features drift into view and I pound my palm into his chest. I’m soaked to the bone, and the others can’t stop laughing as they pull up on the bank. I get the feeling everyone else was in on this from the start. I want to be angry, but start laughing instead. Someone hands me a towel.

“I hiked all the way to the other side of town today. With Muz. He wanted to show me your sculpture. The art project you did in first year?” Alex steals my towel to dry his hair. I try to take it back, only he’s stronger than me.

“Why didn’t you just say so?” I ask, failing to mask my shock.

As my final sculpture project, I took a big rock, and spent all year carving out a set of tables and chairs with some construction workers. I left it there, and the community naturally decorated it

for me. There are thousands of names carved and painted into its surface now. I got a perfect score for the art piece and the accompanying thesis.

“You were too busy screaming accusations at me to listen, Ads.”

“I’m so sorry.”

The apology feels feeble, so I wrap my arms around him and squeeze. Maybe a bit too hard.

“Addy, let go.” Alex flinches.

I loosen my grip and notice the patch on his ribcage. I couldn’t see it before, but it’s visible with his white shirt clinging to it.

“I’m still a little raw from earlier. And it’s not even finished yet.” Alex pulls the shirt up and tries to re-stick the white rectangle. “You see, I got a call from a certain professor today. Told me she was very impressed with your application.”

My eyes drift from the patch to his face.

“What?!”

“Both you and your friend were accepted.”

My mouth opens. No words come out.

“Ag, fuck it.” Alex gives up on the patch and tugs it off to reveal a new tattoo. A quote. “Do you like it? You’re the first close friend of mine to get into Arendse’s programme. Wanted to do something to honour you. What do you think?”

I take a closer look. In flowing cursive, I behold the words:

Trauma is only Art, waiting to happen.

- A. Carlisle

It’s my quote. Inked into his skin.

“From the day we met. The piece I drew on Kahve Corner’s blackboard,” I say.

“Exactly. I wasn’t partying. The girl I met took me to a tattoo parlour. Congratulations, Puff Adder. You had an amazing, sold-out art show in your second year. What’s gonna happen in third year? A book deal? A movie? Who knows? But I’m proud of you. We all are.”

I turn around, still shaking my head, and find my entire family watching us.

“I got in!” I tell them, but they look at me as if this is old news. Next thing I know, I’m being hugged, kissed, and half pulled apart by a family bursting with pride. Perhaps I’ll make a

life out of this art thing after all. Graduation might be something to look forward to. Maybe, in time, the path ahead will become clearer.

Alex and I are still standing on the bank of the lagoon when the rest begin walking back to the house. *Thank you*, I mouth. His only reply is another hug. I put the damp towel over my hair and Alex drapes his heavy arm around my shoulder. We take a silent, lazy stroll home.

“Alex,” I whisper, just before we reach the house.

“What’s up?”

I’m scared, but I don’t know how to say it. Alex stops walking and turns to face me. He frowns.

“What’s wrong? I thought you’d be happier.”

“What if I can’t cut it?” I ask. “This is a big deal. I feel like people are expecting miracles from me.” I take the towel from my head, twist it around in my hands. “I would’ve failed first year if not for your help. I know I had an art show that brought in a lot of money, but that too, was thanks to you. I’m where I am because of you. I dunno if I can do this writing class on my own. And you don’t teach final years.”

Alex smiles sadly.

“Are you hearing yourself right now? I gave you the tools, that’s all I did. You wrote those exams, did all those projects – you built that sculpture. You did all the work yourself. Addy, you’ve got this.”

I feel slightly ill when Alex kisses my head. It takes me back to last night when I watched Tasleem lying across his lap and he brushed her hair. We were all curled up watching movies, but their closeness made me uneasy. It made me remember the night he tucked her in on the couch. The way Alex looks at Tasleem makes me uncomfortable. Maybe Cyan knows... maybe it made her uncomfortable too?

Perhaps, this time, their break-up is permanent.

Chapter 5

Room 804

Room 804 doesn't exist. How can it, when the building ends on the fifth level?

The professor's room is closed for lunch, so I find a spot on the wooden floor and wait. Staking out in front of her office on the first day of class shouldn't be too weird, but I fish a book from my bag anyway, just to look less suspicious. After a few minutes of staring at the same page, I close the novel and take a folded sheet from my jacket pocket. My eyes skim it until my head begins to throb.

"Hey,"

Two doors down, a student with long dreadlocks sits cross-legged on the floor. I don't know him, but wave when he does. Then I turn back to my page.

"Did you also get lost?" he asks.

"What?" I call back.

"Arendse? I couldn't find her either."

He dusts off and walks towards me. The brown eyes feel oddly familiar, but it's his smile that jogs my memory. The last time we met, he was wearing a beanie.

"I still owe you a coffee, I know," he says. "I rushed here from work so didn't get a chance to pick one up."

"I didn't get your name the first time?" I accept his outstretched hand. "I'm Adara."

"Zach."

"Almost didn't recognize you. You look different with all the hair, but I remember those dimples. You've got a pretty smile."

Zach finds the unintentional compliment amusing. He's got the kind of laugh that's contagious and a pair of high cheekbones that remind me strangely of Tasleem. My headache lets up a bit.

"You've got a face that's far too pretty for a man, in fact," I say, willing him to laugh harder. The comment has the intended effect.

"Is that a compliment, an insult, or mere observation?"

Zach covers his mouth.

"Don't know if I should cancel that coffee or upgrade it to a lunch." He grins behind his hand. Then, as if remembering something, he changes his tone.

“Thank you so much, by the way. Woulda been shit if I’d missed out on this class on a technicality like a deadline.”

“You should thank Alex. Arendse accepted only because he asked on our behalf.”

“Will he be joining us?”

“No. He’s a faculty member, like Arendse, but he’s not connected to this course. In fact, he’s the one who encouraged me to apply. I’m kind of nervous, though.” Unconsciously I start folding and unfolding the paper in my hands. “Apparently this is the most sought after programme in Arts.”

Zach beams like he’s in on the biggest open secret on campus.

“What’re you majoring in?” I ask. “I don’t think I’ve seen you in my other classes.”

“You definitely haven’t. I took the ‘scenic route’. I’m one of those indecisive kids who dragged their degree out far longer than they should’ve. This is the only course I need to take before graduation. I’m hardly on campus. I work in Montague Pavillion.”

“That’s so far away. What do you do?”

“Nearly an hour’s drive – why I’m always late. I write for a magazine.”

I didn’t think there’d be professional writers in this class. I quickly pocket the page I’ve spent the greater part of the morning trying to memorize.

“You’re on time today, though,” I say, glancing at his watch. It’s rare to see a student wearing one. Usually we check the time on our phones. I notice Zach’s because the silver timepiece stands in stark contrast to his shorts and the creased t-shirt with its faded emblem. I recognize the blue shorts with the bright pink flamingos; he was wearing it the last time.

“No way. Can’t be late for this class. I just wish we could *find* it.”

“Maybe we’ve got the wrong number. It’s 804, right?”

Zach nods. Four other students walk into the corridor. They look just as confused as us, except for the guy in front, who tries too hard to act calm and suave. I’m irritated the moment he opens his mouth.

“Best course in Humanities? I don’t have very high expectations for this professor if she can’t even give us instructions to this place,” he sneers. “Fucking incompetent if you ask me.”

We didn’t ask you. He sounds like someone who has a million more important things to do than attend a writing seminar. He introduces himself as Sebastian but I turn away before he can offer his hand. Soon more people start filling the passageway. By 15:55 all 14 students are sitting outside the office. Sebastian now has an audience to complain to.

Zach ushers me a little way down the passage, where we can breathe without inhaling sweat from a dozen other bodies. He inclines his head toward Sebastian.

“Guy’s a bit of a textbook dick.”

I nod.

“Don’t worry about him,” Zach says. “You were holding a piece of paper earlier on. Anything important?”

I pat my pocket. The crumpled sheet’s still there.

“The email said to bring a piece of writing. Not sure if it’s good enough.”

Zach doesn’t say a word; he just looks at me. Eventually I smooth out the paper and skim through it again. Knowing the person beside me writes for a living, and probably didn’t waste almost four years of their life memorizing medical terms, strengthens my resolve to tear the page. Before the rip has gone further than one centimeter, Zach stops me. I half expect him to snatch the sheet from me like some boy in junior school would, but his fingers rest lightly on mine.

“May I?”

I relent only because I’m sure he’d back down if I refused. I watch Zach’s eyes scan from left to right. He remains expressionless until he’s read every word.

“Tell me,” he looks up, “why are you so nervous you felt the need to crumple this page within an inch of its life?”

I shrug. Again he does this thing where he frowns just long enough for me to muster the courage to speak. My words tumble out in a mess.

“What if it’s terrible? What if everyone hates my writing? I’ve been scribbling away at a journal for years, but I’ve never written anything vaguely serious, or anything intended for an audience. I quit med school to pursue a career in art, and one of those dreams, is to be a storyteller. Now today, if everyone hates what I’ve written...” I take a deep breath. “What if my stuff is so boring the class slips into a coma? Will I have to resuscitate the Prof. too?”

Zach’s jaw drops.

“You’re not allowed to tell anyone I dropped out of med school by the way.”

Zach puts a right hand across his chest and raises his left palm.

“It’ll be our secret. Did you drop out in your first year?”

I hate discussing this.

“No. I was halfway through my degree when I called it quits. Prudence is not my strong suit.”

Zach's eyes bulge some more.

"Stop staring like that," I slap his forearm, breaking the trance.

"You're amazing. You've got more balls than a pool table."

The laugh that tears through me is so loud and ugly that it draws half the corridor's attention. Just then I hear heels clacking down the hallway. Arendse smiles, but does not slow down or greet when she passes me.

"Good afternoon, professor. None of us could find 804. We think there must be a mistake."

The professor nods as they clear the path leading to her doorway. The students quietly shoulder their bags and get up from floor. I feel like I'm back in junior school; I wouldn't be surprised if she marched us down the hallway, single-file, girls and boys in separate rows.

Arendse does a headcount.

"We're missing one. I told you all to be on time."

Her curt tone travels into my spine. It's nothing like the voice she used with Alex. I hope this is not one of those lecturers who treated postgraduate students like royalty and the rest like sour milk. My heart beats uncomfortably.

"Maybe someone got lost?" Zach shrugs, looking up and down the passage.

Professor Arendse purses her lips. "Please, come in," she says.

I'm not sure how everyone's meant to fit in her tiny office, but we make it work. The last person shuts the door.

"Please take out your student cards," Professor Arendse says.

She collects our cards, then slides them through a small black box, like the ones you'd find at library turnstiles. Fifteen times she keys in a code and waits for the small red light to flash green. I'm the first to get my card back; I look at it carefully, expecting the authorization to have altered its appearance.

The professor steps out from behind her desk. She's a huge woman, and her wedges make her tower well above all my classmates. On this sweltering day she's wearing a long black dress with a high neckline and plunging back. Save for the single lapis lazuli stone resting against her breastbone, she wears no jewellery. Not even earrings. Her sleek black hair is plaited and twisted into a bun secured by a bronze claw. I can see why Alex's friends snuck into her classes now. I can barely tear my eyes away.

"Ten points for style," Zach murmurs.

The professor opens the door to a full-length wooden cupboard. I imagine it holds books, but it's too dark to see inside.

“Step forward, Miss Carlisle.”

I feel fourteen pairs of eyes on the back of my neck. Professor Arendse taps a finger against the inside of the cupboard, near the left. I can't see what she's pointing to, but she asks me to place the card there.

I tap the card in the indicated spot and hear the softest click inside the darkened closet. Leaning in, I feel soft fur brush my face. Curiosity pulls me to the back of the cupboard. It's dark and musty – with a pleasant wintergreen undertone – and much more spacious than it looks from the outside. My fingers meet cold steel where the backing of the cupboard should be; it yields to the slightest pressure. There's movement behind me as the others start climbing in.

“There's a staircase in front of me. The walkway's wide enough for one person, and I have to bend slightly to follow it. The professor probably needs to crawl the last few steps in those heels.

The air grows pleasantly cool and light spills onto the brownstone staircase beneath my feet.

This can't be real, I think, craning my neck as I drink in the details.

The room is bathed in a gentle glow from the gothic chandelier overhead: hundreds of crystals cling to the iron structure like frozen tears. After the tunnel's darkness, it dizzies me to stare too long, but I can't help myself.

One side of the room is covered – floor to ceiling – with the spines of books, and directly opposite that wall, stands a Gothic arch fireplace with a collection of antique clocks perched proudly on its mantelpiece. Clustered around the hearth are various chairs and beanbags in burgundy, blood orange, and brown. We're in the heart of an African summer, but everything from the peach walls to the fur rug, makes me crave a hot chocolate and a blanket. There are paintings on the walls, and sepia sketches that talk to me, but I'm welded to the floor, getting high on the smell of leather, wood, and old books.

I've been so entranced by everything else, that I've completely skimmed over the burgundy drapes, vintage record player, and the hi-gloss table that can only be made of mahogany. Atop this table, three Japanese tea kettles are laid out, with stacks of tiny cups and saucers beside them. There's also a king-sized plate piled high with an assortment of pastel macarons. Professor Arendse is the last to enter the room, and she stands at the head of the table, drawing us in with a slow wave of her arm.

“Please, find yourselves a seat at the table.”

I pull up a chair opposite Zach, whose lips are parted like that of a teenager. My eyes rove around, taking in thirteen variations of disbelief – one girl looks about to cry.

“Welcome, everyone. To Creative Writing, An Art.”

“It feels more like Narnia to me,” Sebastian says. Even someone who’d publicly berated our teacher is not immune to the charms of this place.

“Or a Gryffindor common room!” Zach says.

There are murmurs of agreement, and Arendse quietens us down again.

“I’m very glad to see you know your classics.” She smiles. “First, I want to thank each of you. When you signed up for this class, none of you had a clue what to expect. There was one line written down as the course description. Aside from the murmurs you heard from ex-students, you didn’t know a great deal about what the function of this programme was. You had no idea what you stood to learn from me, or rather from being in this space with each other. But because you love writing so much, because you are all *wizards of the word*, you bled yourselves dry to finish those applications, even if *some* of you,”

Her eyes linger on Zach and me for just a fraction of a second before she finishes,

“Waited ‘til well past the eleventh hour to hand them in. You’ve been chosen not only for your fantastic powers of perception and the superb skill with which you string sentences together, but also because you are artists with very specific skills we must nurture.”

I see a few smirks on my classmates’ faces, but mostly all of us are over-awed by the eutopia she’s created. The professor leans into the table, her gaze lingering on each of us.

“If you look around you, at this room. It’s not your conventional lecture hall. A few years ago, I had this vision of constructing a creative space where students could feel at home, where they could produce the best possible work. And in order to *create*, you first have to *stimulate*.”

There’s restrained laughter all around us. I pinch in the corners of my mouth. We fancy ourselves matured art students, but we’re ready to burst at the slightest sexual allusions.

“I’m going to overlook the giggling and get right into it,” Arendse says. “This isn’t an easy course. There will be set readings, assignments every other day, two full-scale exams, and other formal assessments as I see fit. However, the part of this course that you should be most concerned with, is getting published. You will not pass this class unless you get published.”

A glance at my classmates confirms it: everyone’s as terrified as me.

“Now, before anyone has a nervous breakdown, let me be clear: I don’t expect you to get a book deal or anything crazy like that, but throughout the year you should be talking to magazines, to online publications... you should be circulating. What use is writing if it stays inside a journal? I’ll make you step out of your happy place and into a space where growth is possible.” As if to reassure us, she smiles. “But I’ll guide you through it all. Now, a bit more about me and this course.

“You may have heard of SAAC. It’s the South African Art Collective I started in 2008 along with a few close friends and like-minded colleagues. We wanted to change the face of art in this country. I think we got the idea in a cafe one day after one too many Irish coffees were had. We started at the school level, slowly incorporating creative elements into the curriculum, and starting various initiatives that would encourage students to build their confidence in particular skills.” Arendse pauses, shifts her weight from one leg to the other. “My colleagues and I believe that you can’t just suddenly give students creative license and freedom when they get to university; if they haven’t been introduced to it from an early age, they don’t know what to do with it when they become adults.” She pauses glances around at the room. “We never imagined it would grow into what it has today. Everything you see around you, was funded by The Collective. We have some pretty generous benefactors, and none of this would have been possible without them.”

I notice a few typewriters in a corner, as well as a grandfather clock I must’ve missed on my first glance. I wonder if the typewriters actually work or if they’re merely showpieces.

“We have a big year ahead, brimming with opportunities for all of you.” Arendse points to a wall where a few autographed books are displayed in box frames. “Carolynn du Plessis, Mark Raubenheimer, Lucius Marakeezwa, and Loren Brooke are some of the writers who graduated from this class. You may be familiar with their work.”

Shit.

We covered some poems by Raubenheimer and du Plessis in first year. And I fell in love with Loren Brooke’s bestselling fantasy series. It’s unreal that such giants have sat in this same classroom. I rub my arms, feeling goose bumps that are not aircon-induced.

“There’s going to be a few competitions, and then a really big one towards the middle of the year, where one writer will have the opportunity to get their book turned into a film,” Arendse says. “The competition is open to all young writers from Africa, but I’ve no doubt someone sitting in this room could take home that prize. I’ve read your work, and I know what you’re capable of.

Not to get you too excited, but the prize is a book deal, and then you'll get to sign over the rights for the film as well. When we had our meeting at the end of last year, they informed me the prize money stands at around fifty thousand rand now."

There are gasps. The professor waits for silence before she resumes.

"And the sum is growing all the time. We have some international donors on the board too. If you look over at the mantelpiece."

All the heads turn towards the fireplace.

"That entire fireplace, along with all the clocks and the vase that stands on top of the mantelpiece, was donated to us by some local art collectors who believe in what we do here. Everything you see in here is real. This is your space. It's not even on the layout plan of the building. We will never be disturbed, and you are the only students authorised to enter. My master's and doctoral students have their own space. I'll expect you to take ownership of this room. There's a bathroom, as well as a full kitchen."

"A kitchen? *What?*" A blonde girl seated at the end of the table gawks at Arendse.

"Yes. Fridge, stove, and oven. I meant it when I said I wanted to create a home for artists. We try to have dinner parties as often as possible."

Sebastian raises his hand.

"What about the building regulations? Kitchen underground? Where's the ventilation? Fire extinguisher?" he asks, tersely.

The professor points to a rectangular iron casing above the fireplace, and another one above the enormous bookshelf. Hidden aircons, she explains. She also points out the extractor fans and says that there are two fire extinguishers – one in this room, and the other in the kitchen.

Arendse explains some more of the rules and regulations, and then she ends off with a cautionary tale.

"Some of you might have your own ideas about how drugs, alcohol and sex go hand in hand with creating great art, and perhaps they do. But keep those things well away from this room – if I have to spend another Monday scrubbing stains from that couch," she indicates a red-and-gold Victorian sofa in a corner near the bookshelf, "I'm going to slaughter someone."

It's hard to tell if she's serious or joking.

"Tempting as it is, the furniture and items in this classroom are all antiques. We went through a great deal of trouble to procure them. It falls to you, and me, to keep it clean. In two-

thousand-and-eight, a group of three students had an all-night 'study session'. I walked in here the next day and had to throw that couch out. Have some respect for this space, please."

Zach raises his hand.

"Yes?"

"Did you ever find out which students desecrated your couch? Were you able to track them down?"

Professor Arendse's face remains impassive.

"Like were you able to trace the culprits?" He twirls his finger around. "Are there cameras here?"

The professor leans against the table.

"Is it just idle curiosity prompting you to ask this question? I'm concerned. You speak with the air of someone already planning their first sleepover on that couch."

There are titters all around. Zach smiles.

"No, not at all." But his wink nullifies the innocent response.

Professor Arendse fights to keep a straight face.

"I hope everyone else saw that. Day one and already we've singled out the flirt."

Laughter fills the room that's been deathly silent for the last hour.

"I'm sure the tea has gone cold by now, but that might be a good thing considering the heat outside. There's honey or sugar, and if anyone wants milk, there's some in the fridge." She points down a passageway leading out of the lounge area; apparently the kitchen and bathroom are down there. "I'm going to skip all those awkward introductions most lecturers force you to make on the first day."

There's a collective sigh of relief, and two guys punch the air.

"I'm going to leave it up to you. Grab some tea and go up to someone you don't know. Find a seat. Connect. I'll join you shortly."

By the way we all attack the crockery, I know I'm not the only one who's been craving tea and macaroons for the past hour. Before I pop a chocolate one in my mouth, Zach comes around and offers me a cup.

"Hi, I'm Zach," he says, holding out a hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you for the first time in my life."

The professor appears beside us.

“I’m not buying this. The two of you handed in your proposals late, on the same day. Plus, you’ve been staring at each other far more than you’ve been paying attention to me. For now, I need to see you socialising with others. Split up.”

Reluctantly, we both obey.

I approach a group of girls half-drowning in the beanbags beside the fireplace. I pick the easy chair, and introduce myself, forgetting the names of the others almost instantly.

“Everyone is following orders. Look around. Since when do third-years listen to their professors?” The student who loudly introduced herself as Khanya says.

The Japanese girl with a lotus tattoo on her hand, sips delicately at her tea before responding. “Yeah. I hear you. But look at this place. How many lecturers do you know who would go through this much effort to create a space for their students?”

Two of the girls in our group do freelance writing, while one is completing a summer internship at a publishing house. They offer unsolicited tips on how to get published and I jot them all down in my notebook.

The conversation moves easily, and soon the professor is weaving through the room, propping small packages into everybody’s hands. I stare at mine dumbly and run after her to say thank you.

“You’re welcome, Adara.” she says, handing out the last package to a student sitting so close to the fireplace, he’s almost inside it.

The item is wrapped in brown paper, with each of our names printed in impeccable Gothic font in the middle.

“Welcome gifts from The Collective,” Arendse explains. “Each year I bring presents from my overseas ventures for my students. May you fill the pages with genius!”

Everyone murmurs a heartfelt thank-you. The girl who had tears in her eyes earlier, is full-on ugly crying now. Someone passes her a tissue while Arendse pretends not to notice.

“I asked you to each bring a piece of your writing along, but it seems we’ve lost track of time. We only have a few minutes left. If there’s a volunteer?”

I’m fiddling with the string around my gift, and unfold the blue tag attached to it. *Good luck for the year ahead. Warm Wishes, Prof. A.* I smile, wishing I could send Alex a picture of the gift right now, but not bothering to take my phone out; one of the first things we were told, is that there’s no cell phone reception underground. There’s supposed to be a working landline down here, though, for emergencies only.

“I volunteer!”

This is probably the only class that can fully appreciate the *Hunger Games* reference. Zach’s voice pulls me from my reverie. He walks up to the front where everyone has a clear view of him. There’s a small raised box underneath the carpet; the professor asks Zach to stand on it.

I lean forward, resting my chin in my palm and smiling serenely until I recognize the creased paper in his hands. I’m frozen in place; if I protest, they’ll all know it’s mine. So I do nothing, imagining this is how a man on death row feels as the chemicals seep into his body. I can’t recall being more afraid in my life.

Zach clears his throat.

The professor takes a seat on the armrest of a couch where a small, brown-haired girl has curled up. The only reason I don’t close my eyes and die a hundred tiny deaths, is because his voice – when he reads my work – holds me unlike any storyteller I’ve ever heard.

I pass every test with flying colours. It’s too bad no one asked me the really difficult questions. I sometimes think I should’ve been smart enough to ask them myself, but who am I kidding? I’m seventeen. I know nothing about the real world. That’s what my father told me, and I laughed in his face all those months ago. Lying alone in this hospital bed now, my body tearing itself apart as the hours drag on, I know he was right. I hate the man down to my core, but he’s the one person who can smell my bullshit from a mile away. He was right. And that makes me hate him even more.

Zach pauses. He shuts his eyes and draws a single, laboured breath. I look around the room, but no one stares back; they’re all focused on him.

I reach for my phone. No messages. I’m half-dead, and no one cares. The sister said she’d called everyone, but my room is still empty. No flowers. No good luck cards. Only the steady beep of a monitor that brings me no comfort. A nurse comes in, followed by two smiling doctors.

‘Has anyone arrived?’ I ask. I hear my own voice crack.

‘Andrew? He’s on his way.’ The doctor says. I try to read his name tag to thank him, but the words jumble before my eyes. I remember nothing else after that. The whole day is one drug-induced blur.

Andrew's name is on my lips when I wake. I don't care about anything else. I want to see him, but the nurse shakes her head sadly. He never made it. I slump back down into the pillows; the strong stench of disinfectant makes my eyes water. I feel sick, and retch into the bucket the nurse holds out. I taste metal on my tongue. I'm pretty sure I brought up half my heart, and I actually peer into the bucket just to make sure.

"He didn't come?" I ask again. Desperately. Stupidly.

She doesn't have the heart to reply, so she takes the bucket and tells me she'll bring a glass of water. The bright light in the room makes my head spin, and I wish someone would turn it off. I don't want anyone to see these tears. I close my eyes against them. I have nothing left, but like a foolish, loyal soldier, I still fight.

I wish I could have asked the difficult questions.

'Are you ready?'

'Do you care what they think?'

'Would you give up half your life for someone you love?'

'Is your entire future worth one stupid, reckless act?'

.....

*Then I smile through the tears. It doesn't matter if I asked the really difficult questions. I would have had my answer if I'd been wise enough to ask just one small, simple one: **Does he love you?***

The weight of something solid and warm stirs me. My arms instinctively fold around it. The nurse asks me what I'll call her. She wriggles around like an overgrown worm, but when her eyes settle on my face, she grows still. Two pale blue pearls stare out at me from one horribly wrinkled face. The creature is so ugly that she's actually beautiful.

'What will you call her?' The sister asks again.

But I can't think of names right now, and the only sound that penetrates my consciousness, is the breathing of my baby girl. The realisation doesn't hit me hard; it comes slowly, like sunlight seeping into a room after an eternal night:

It doesn't matter if he loves me. Because she will.

When Zach lowers the page, no one moves. I remember that dreaded open mic night in first year. If I vomit on this Persian rug, will Arendse kick me out on the first day?

The professor rises from the armrest. She points towards the paper in Zach's hand.

“In less than a page, you’ve told us a story. Captured us with your words and imprinted images in our heads that were not there before. And this,” she turns to fully face the class, “this silence right now, that makes me know the rest of the class felt what I did too. And the best part, is that Zach, who – for all intents and purposes – is a *man*, has written this piece from a woman’s perspective. With such sincerity,” she says.

Zach chews his lower lip when he steps down from the soap box.

“Your praise is generous, and I believe, well-deserved, but I didn’t write this.” He folds the page neatly in half, and then in quarters.

Professor Arendse raises a brow.

“Well, who wrote it then?”

I turn and see that Sebastian himself has asked the question. Everyone but me looks around, wondering who the anonymous author is.

“I don’t know if she’ll ever forgive me for this, but she deserves the spotlight.” Zach points the folded paper in my direction, “Near the fireplace. Miss Carlisle.”

Everyone turns to me. I don’t know where to look, so I cover my face. There’s one clap, and then another, and another. Soon everyone is cheering, and someone even drums on the table. Professor Arendse restores order, but I need to peer through a crack in my fingers before I’m brave enough to lower my hands. I feel hot all over.

“Well done, Adara. Zach,” the professor changes her tone.

Zach looks up.

“Please do not submit pieces on behalf of unwilling writers. I can tell you believe in your friend, but the worst thing that you can do for an artist is reveal something they’re not comfortable sharing with the world yet. Granted, sometimes we need a push, and I don’t think you’ve done much damage in this case, but just having more respect when it comes to this, will go a long way.”

Something that looks like shame flits across his face; it’s gone before I can be sure. He sits back down and Arendse reminds us to monitor our emails for any assignments. We clear the rest of the macaroons on our way out. Zach walks ahead, and I sneak up, easily snatching the folded paper from his shorts’ pocket as I brush past.

“Hey!” Zach calls. “Adara, wait up.”

I keep walking, stopping only when I reach Arendse’s office.

“You gonna ignore me forever?” he asks.

Far-off I hear a high-pitched shriek; I think someone’s just opened their gift.

“Just ‘til the end of the year,” I say, shaking my head. “You had no right to read out something so personal. Dude, *boundaries*. Arendse was right, that was a *kak* move.”

Zach’s smile falters.

“Wait, you’re the seventeen-year-old in the piece you wrote? You gave birth when you were seventeen?”

I step aside as a student exits the closet. It’s the girl with the lotus tattoo.

“Bye, Adara,” she says. “Your piece was beautiful. Bye, Zach!”

“Bye, Asia,” Zach says, his eyes still wide.

“I’m *the child* in the story,” I eventually tell him. “I wasn’t ready to share that with anyone.”

“But you shared it with me.”

“And see how that backfired.”

I exit the room so fast I nearly trip. When I hear Zach calling after me, I don’t stop or slow down. I’ve parked on the other side of campus today; my t-shirt’s plastered to my back by the time I reach the car. Carefully I set Arendse’s gift down on the passenger’s seat.

I’m angrier with myself than with Zach. His intentions had been pure – he thought my work was good and wanted to share it. What I did was take my mother’s darkest moment and exploit it. I don’t think my birth even happened like that. For all I know, Dureshni might’ve been there the whole time, clutching my mother’s hand. Maybe every inch of that room was covered with flowers, cards, and stuffed animals from my all my mother’s friends. None of these things can be verified. Tasleem doesn’t talk about it. And I’ve long stopped asking.

Here’s the only thing I know for sure:

My mother would not have clapped if she’d heard my story today.

Chapter 6

The Crack in the Teacup

Now that I'm twenty-three and I reflect on my life as a child, it's always amusing, and a little sad, to recall how the simplest of things once made me so happy.

Tasleem's always loved red lipstick. Now red – and I'm talking red carpet red – is not a colour every woman can pull off, but it's always looked good on Tasleem. I must have been five when she caught me in the act, trying to smear the stuff all over my own face. *You are far too young for make-up*, she said, before snatching it away. Not even on Eid or New Year's would she allow me a tiny bit of rouge. But I quickly realised I could create my own make-up from certain candies. My obsession with edible cosmetics had reached an all-time high the day I purchased six boxes of Smarties and searched through them all to single out the lipstick-coloured ones. Those red-coated chocolates were nuggets of gold to me. I stored them in a jar under my bed and walked around with a gorgeous stained mouth for two weeks. I loved those crimson chocolates of my youth so much and bumping into Alex at Kahve Corner just before my first-year exam, was kind of like finding a box with only red Smarties in it. Most of the fantastic things that have happened to me can be traced back to my best friend. Being accepted into this *Writing as Art* programme tops the list so far.

Before heading home, I pull up outside the Neil Agget building to unwrap my welcome gift. By the shape and feel I knew it was a book, but I've never seen anything like this before. The cover is made from dried banana leaves, with my initials at the bottom, done in thin rope that's been coiled to resemble faux calligraphy. The veins of the leaves and patches of discoloration give it an authentic feel, even if the hi-gloss finish has an opposing chemical odour. Inside the pages are thin, unevenly textured, and unmistakably natural. I run a ballpoint across the first one; the page yields beneath the nib, so that it feels like I'm writing on a cushion. I can't wait to start writing in it.

I head to Kahve Corner for a takeaway coffee before heading home, only to find the rolldown gates have been closed. Inside I see Oliver, arms folded, talking to a policeman with a notepad. When he sees me, the creases in his face smooth out.

"Addy, we're just finishing up," he calls, then turns back to the policeman. While he speaks, his eyes keep darting to me, as if he's afraid I might leave.

My favourite eatery on campus looks a mess. Soil and broken crockery cover the floor. I count four splintered tables, and there's a badly bent copper chair lying atop one of them. In the back, all the hanging plants have been pulled from the ceiling, and the blackboard – the defining piece in the café – has two massive gashes in its face.

Oliver lifts the gate to let the policeman and his colleague out. The middle-aged detective gives me a nod as he passes under the gate.

“Ollie, what the hell happened?” I ask.

Oliver is shaking. I sit him down and tip-toe through the mess, scanning the place for a cup that's still whole.

“My boss is going to *moer* me, Addy. They just, they looked like normal customers. I don't understand.”

I dissolve two tablespoons of sugar in a mug and make Oliver drink it all before he tells me the story. When he's done, I need my own mug of sugared water. Perhaps even a Valium. It was a group of students, regulars, in fact. They had just eaten a meal when they got up, and for no apparent reason, started trashing everything.

“Adara, I didn't know what to do. I froze. There was one other customer and she ran away when they started. I- I- I-”

I put my hand on his knee.

“Adara, I wasn't even supposed to be here. I was meant to be in class today, but the girl who was supposed to do the evening shift was late. I don't even know if she showed up. When it happened, I just hid behind the counter. I couldn't–”

Oliver starts sobbing.

“It's okay, Ollie. I've been there. You're in such shock you just don't know what to do, so you freeze.”

He nods.

“It's not okay, though. I was looking forward to meeting my new professor. She's meant to be amazing. You know the writing class everyone's been talking about for months? I managed to get in.”

My excitement at learning Oliver's the late student, is dampened by the mess around us. I offer to help him clean it, but he declines. Something about insurance claims. We leave the place as it is, and lock up. He asks me for a lift to the train station, but I offer instead to drive him home. It's an hour detour.

“Adara, you’ll get stuck in traffic. Petrol is so expensive! I have a train ticket, just drop me off down the road,” he says, excitably waving his hands.

I open the door for him.

“Ollie, please get in. If anything happens to you, I’ll have bad coffee for the rest of the year.”

Oliver grins. It’s not much, but at least I know those vandals haven’t stolen his smile.

It’s dark when I pull into our apartment complex. I’ve got the kind of tiredness in my bones I used to feel after standing in theatre for hours. It seems like an age ago now, but I would see about ten patients a day with stories of trauma far worse than Oliver’s; now even one such tale sucks the energy from my soul. I once thought being an art student helped me recover my sensitivity – maybe it’s just made me weak.

The kitchen light is on and I hear voices. Alex and Tasleem. I see them through the wooden venetian blinds. My desire to flop down on the bed is strong, but it’s trumped by curiosity. I crouch near the window; eyes wide, ears straining.

“We need to tell her,” Alex insists.

“Telling her will change everything – you have to trust me,” Tasleem says, her hand lightly touching Alex’s elbow. There’s an edge to her voice, the kind I’ve only heard her use with a junior doctor who’d just fucked up.

I can’t hear Alex, so I move closer, careful not to trod on Tariq’s vegetable patch beneath the windowsill.

“Think of all this family’s been through. Don’t make any rash decisions. I know you better than this.”

There’s a veiled threat in my mother’s words.

“Pull yourself together.” Tasleem clasps his jaw roughly with her fingers. “I’ll tell her the truth in a heartbeat if you say a word about this to her. It is *not* beyond me to do that.”

With his face turned towards my mother, I watch Alex fall to his knees. Under the artificial light, his tears turn gold. Relapse is my first thought. Then, after watching another minute, I realise how wrong I am. Alex looks... conflicted. Broken. In his left hand he clutches a cell phone. Was

he about to call me? Alex folds into Tasleem. He buries his face in her belly, winding his arms around her hips. I'm forced to look away.

Long after he's gone and Tasleem's switched off the lights, I'm still squatting in my brother's vegetable patch, mind racing. Naathierah's words of long ago return to me. What was it she'd said? I don't know the whole story about what happened to Tasleem. My aunt had also found condoms in Tasleem's bathroom that evening, traces of a life hidden from us. Far be it from me to question my mother's choices, but I wonder now... what else is she hiding? What did Alex want to tell me, and what was she holding over him? What is he... holding over her?

Suspicion took root the night of that failed family dinner. I'll admit there've been unaccounted hours, instances where Tasleem said she'd be on call, but the hospital hadn't seen her all week. Part of me always guessed there was a man involved. My mother's recreational activities don't concern me, but the closeness between her and Alex does. Maybe their exchange confirms the fears that have been broiling within me for the last year. There were moments when I'd seen them together –sharing a private a joke or eating off each other's plates – and I imagined Alex had replaced me as his best friend. The truth, it seems, is far worse: he's replaced Cyan with Tasleem. Has it been under my nose the whole time?

I taste bile at the back of my throat, and bound for the wheelie bin before I vomit into the patch of carrot tops.

Chapter 7

Books and Brownies

When Saskia brings the wedding forward by seven months, my first thought is that she's pregnant, but I'm assured this isn't the case.

"All the prices are going up in the new year. Having it end of July will just be more cost effective. A *lekker* winter wedding, *ky wiet*." Saskia says.

Muzammil doesn't strike me as the type of man who'd need to change a date based on something as trivial as cost. At only 27, he owns an apartment that would put some of Tasleem's colleagues' penthouses to shame. Whatever the reason for the change in date, we now have much less time to prepare.

The other downside of moving the wedding up by seven months, is that Tasleem will be out of the country during that time. She's got a three-week trip planned for July that's been on her calendar since last year. You can't exactly shift conference dates.

"She'll definitely bring something beautiful back for you," I tell my cousin.

It's been a week since I eavesdropped on Tasleem and Alex. Since then I haven't said much to either of them. During her residency Tasleem averaged about 100 hours per week, but I see even less of her now than I did then. To the casual observer who sees a neurosurgeon raising two kids on her own, Tasleem's the paragon of a supermom. But between the job at the hospital, the lectures at the university, and her position as a researcher on the South African Health Professionals Council, she can just about spare a few minutes every day to be a mother. It's fallen to me to take up the onerous task; with Tariq in his final year of high school, I'm the one who makes sure the uniform's ironed, that assignments are finished, and that the cupboard and fridge are stocked with suitable foods (he still insists on cooking). Strangely, the distance has been good. I don't worry about walking in on hushed conversations when she's not around. The thought of confronting Tasleem is preposterous; the golden child isn't allowed to doubt her mother. Alex has been scarce too. He's started lecturing and apparently Cyan's also moved back. This suits me fine. Taking care of Tariq is a full-time job and dealing with Alex can start to feel like that too, especially when his girlfriend acts up – or worse, when he starts acting wildly inappropriately with my mother.

I couldn't stay angry with Zach for long. People with dimples have an easier time apologising, I think. Also, the box of chocolates he put on my desk must've helped. There's peace between us, but I wish I could say the same for the rest of the class. We see Arendse thrice a week. At first, everyone loved her, but the class grows more divided each day. Arendse seems distracted, and people are noticing. Last week she had us close our eyes and lie down on the floor for an activity, but a lapse in concentration made the whole lesson collapse. We spent half the period on the carpet, wondering how we got there. Sebastian had a few choicest words for the professor, but held his tongue until she'd left the room. Those of us who still have faith in Arendse cleared out and left him to argue with ghosts.

"Too much of a coward to criticize her to her face," Zach had commented.

In front of our lecturer we pretend to be this unit, but my classmates don't talk to each other as freely as they did in that first session, when we clutched our gifts to our chests and listened to Zach try to pass off my writing as his own. All it took was one class, a few offhanded comments about each other's work, and enemies were born. Perhaps it's because we're all so different that we don't get along? Two weeks into term and we've already seen everyone's style and genre of choice. Some students have posted extracts on the website, and a few have braved the 'Write Live' sessions and read their work directly to the class. Almost any artist can confirm that sharing work is probably the most gruelling part of the process, but preparing a piece of writing and having someone pick it apart ten minutes after completion, is suicidal by comparison. The ink has barely dried and your words are out in the world. During these live sessions, volunteers hand their work to the professor. Arendse then copies it onto a transparency and projects it against a wall (all very retro). Usually the author reads it out, but in rare cases, Arendse or someone else is selected. This component of the course used to be compulsory but trying to find willing victims is about as painful as searching for a strand of hay in a needle stack. Now anyone who volunteers immediately gets extra credit. So far we've had Oliver, Asia, Kaanitah, Nabeelah and Wing. Ollie wrote a piece about the break-in at the café, and Arendse had it published in the university paper as well as the Argus. He is the first one to get published in our class.

They still haven't caught the students who wrecked the coffee shop, but at least we know their motives. In a notice issued by the Chairperson of the Student Representative Council it stated that the bistro was hit by students protesting exorbitant university fees. He went on to say that the SRC in no way condones damage of university property, and that the case is currently under investigation. The owner of Kahve Corner installed 24hour surveillance and Oliver feels safe in

the bistro again. It's too bad I can't say the same of this classroom. Some of my peers openly resent Ollie for all the attention his story's getting.

It's a Monday morning and I find Zach vacuuming the Write Room. Class begins at 8am today, and we're always first. Zach slides his headphones into his neck when he sees me.

"Good morning, Adara!"

Distracted by the delicious scent in the room, I forget to greet back. Zach tells me it's the lavender polish, but that's not possible. Furniture polish doesn't make me salivate.

"No, it's not the Mr Min!" I insist. "It smells like food. Chocolate food."

Zach points his thumb to the kitchen.

"Kaanitah. She's been here since 5am. Heard noises coming from the kitchen, so went to check it out. I gave her such a fright – look, I'm still covered in flour." Zach turns around, indicating the white patches all over his black t-shirt. I notice he's still wearing the shorts with the pink flamingos. I don't think I've ever seen him in any other pants yet.

"You picked the wrong day to wear black." I dust off the rest of the flour. "Can I give you a hand with anything?"

"Bookshelf,"

I notice several gaps on the shelf where books have been removed.

"There're all over the room. Even found some behind the couch. Not sure if it was someone's idea of a joke, but they need to go back. Alphabetically, please." Zach says.

"Who would do that?"

"I wanna say I don't know, but I have an idea."

I start combing the room for missing books. Some are spread open carelessly, the pages folded and creased. I take a rest on a beanbag and something jabs me in the back. We have these at home too and my brother and I used to hide things in them. Surely a child's game? Not something third year students would do. When I unzip the bag, there are three leather-bound novels inside. Despite my careful movements, Styrofoam balls fly everywhere.

"Adara, no!" Zach clutches his head, eyes fixed on the carpet where thousands of the white specks lay scattered.

I hold the books up and he drops the vacuum's hose. Zach pinches the top of the lopsided pouf and lifts it off the ground. He digs into the bag, making an even bigger mess as he extracts another book. He starts laughing as the Styrofoam balls billow around us.

"Are we fucking kindergarteners?" he asks.

The smell of freshly baked brownies announces Kaanitah's presence. She is a small-boned girl, with a round nose and gentle voice. She only ever posts vampire romance to our website, but her unusual brand of humour grips even the men in the class. She sets the tray down, eyes flashing to the carpet; it looks like it's snowed in here.

"Zach, I thought you were cleaning?" and then, as if she's only just noticed me, "Hi, Addy. Would you like some brownies?"

Because Zach can't stop laughing long enough to tell the story, I'm the one who explains everything.

"*Jassis*, are these people *befok*? They hate each other and now they're taking it out on Arendse? This is her stuff. It's not right." Kaanitah's outrage mirrors my own, but Zach dabs the corners of his eyes, still chuckling.

"We're not going to clean it. I think we clean around all of this, but leave it so we can show the professor what happened." Zach suggests.

"I agree," Kaanitah says.

"Do you think she knows what's going on behind the scenes? That Sebastian, Kieran, Adam and Khanya are trying to start fights in the class?" I ask them both.

Zach nods.

"How could she not? These students are so obvious with the snide remarks. Did you see the online messages? She'll probably disable the comment feature." Zach zips up the bag and moves it to an empty corner. "And now they've started ganging up against Oliver."

The mention of Oliver's article brings the cleaning to a halt. He'd written poignantly about a break-in that affected not only the regulars at Kahve Corner, but the broader university community, and had unfairly been branded a favourite.

"He went through hell that day, and I wouldn't be surprised if he's still got some anxiety about working night shifts now," I say. There are many more things I want to discuss, but I break off when Asia enters with Wing, the Vietnamese student who's written beautifully about the Second Indochina War. He's the first person in this class whose writing has brought me to tears.

"What are you guys talking about?" Asia pulls up a chair beside Zach. She flips out her lighter, but reluctantly pockets it when Wing reminds her of Rule 7, Section 3: No Smoking.

I shoot Zach a pointed look; he says they're cool, so we keep talking. Everyone who joins the table gets a healthy chunk of brownie with a thick layer of melted icing, but the conversation is so intense that these decadent morsels are forgotten. Most of the sentiments are similar: being in a

writing class was stressful, and while sugar coating feedback and patronising one another would not help us master the craft, most of us needed to learn how to deliver criticism more constructively. Tensions are already high, and Oliver's short story being published, instead of inspiring hope, has caused further dissent.

"We should be proud of him," Qaasim says from the head of the table. The student with spiky black hair and the most luminous skin I've seen, was so quiet during the first two classes, I barely noticed him. "We all want to be published," Qaasim continues, "and it's hard not to be envious, but what they're doing to Oliver is just petty."

It's true. A few classmates had joined the website under fake email addresses and posted the most awful comments online. Now those self-same people have tried to damage Arendse's book collection. A sick thought twists my insides. I scan the room, trying to determine if anything's been removed. Could these people be capable of stealing too?

Our voices die as Sebastian comes traipsing down the staircase, Khanya, Adam and Keiran close on his heels. They see the Styrofoam mess and titter behind their hands.

"As I was saying," Asia begins, turning away from the group who settle around the coffee table on the far end of the room. "Heard they'll be interviewing Oliver on varsity radio later this week."

Sebastian appears at our table. He doesn't sit, but wedges himself between Kaanitah and Wing. A solid jaw, sleek dark hair, and green eyes, should make him attractive by anyone's standards, but even the loveliest of faces are rendered ugly by hatred and jealousy.

"Oliver's lucky. He's getting so much attention for being in the wrong place at the right time. Who knew? Trauma can actually be a gift." Sebastian smiles. "No one sitting here can deny he got published because everyone feels sorry for him. Anybody who reads that story will go 'ag shame'. That's the only reason he was published, instead of you, or you, or you." Sebastian points to a few people but makes the mistake of including me in his list. His finger in my face, triggers a chemical in my brain.

"Oliver's story was published because it's topical and affects the wider university community," I say. "It was not some sob story about how he was paralyzed by fear as the vandals destroyed things around him." I shrug. "But I suppose you could read it that way if you weren't intelligent enough to grasp the actual message."

I'm shocked by how much I sound like Tasleem. I heard her take the same tone with Naathierah at their father's janaazah.

I remain calm under Sebastian's glare.

"I was with Oliver that day. I saw what those vandals did." I pick my fork up but set it down again. The class is eerily silent. "Trauma is not a gift. It's just a burden if you don't process it properly. There are thousands of people suffering every day, but they lack the skill and temerity to make something of their ordeals. To write about trauma the way Oliver's done, takes courage – something you clearly lack. You talk *kak* behind everyone's backs. Oliver's braver than you'll ever be."

In my peripheral vision I see Qaasim bite down on his knuckles. The corners of Sebastian's mouth prick up, but it's not like any smile I've ever seen.

"You don't get to lecture me on courage when you have to get your little boyfriend to read your work out." Sebastian gestures towards Zach. "Must be nice, having a bitch to do your bidding." He laughs.

I pick up the brownie I've been longing to eat for the past hour and throw the cake at Sebastian's head; the layer of frosting sticks to his left brow. Before he can retaliate, another piece whacks him in the chest. In a matter of seconds, chocolate is flying everywhere.

Someone grabs my arm, but I pull away and a sticky hand shoves me in the neck.

"Sorry, Addy! I didn't mean that—" Kaanitah says, before ducking under the table.

"What the *fuck* is going on?"

Everyone turns towards the door. We've never heard Professor Arendse swear in anger before. I keep my eyes on the table, trying to focus on the crumbs and overturned plates. I can't imagine the look on her face.

"*Under the table. Out. NOW!*"

Asia, Wing, Kaanitah, Khanya, Nabeelah and Adam emerge from under the table, dusting off crumbs. Asia tries to comb brown icing from her hair, but only smears it further. She curses softly, then stares at her fingers.

"Professor, we can explain. Earlier, we were cleaning the room and we found—" Zach tries, but is silenced.

I hear her pad around the class.

"There's frosting mashed into the carpet," Arendse's voice makes me jump.

A few pathetic apologies are uttered.

"Sorry? Really? I come in here every day hoping something would have changed, but you're honestly the pettiest bunch of students I've had in this class." Arendse says. "What? You think I

haven't seen those comments on the website? That I don't hear what some of you are saying about your peer whose short story just got published?" Arendse's incredulity flows through every word. "And now I come in to find you're having a food fight?" She shakes her head. "There are students who can barely afford to be here and look at you, wasting food. The university just started a sandwich drive and here you are, throwing cake around before 8am on a Monday morning. I thought I'd be teaching third-years, but it seems I got stuck with pre-schoolers."

A lump grows in my throat. I feel like a child again. Like a kid who's done something very bad.

"I want to know who threw the first piece of cake. No excuses. I just want the person who threw that cake to take responsibility."

I notice Zach move forward.

"It was—"

Before he can confess to my crime, I pull him back. Tasleem would disown me if she ever learned I was the instigator of a food fight that destroyed a few Persian rugs. I'm still not sure where my words came from, or why I pelted Sebastian with a perfectly good piece of cake, but I know my mother didn't raise a coward.

"Professor, I did it," I say.

Arendse's anger becomes disappointment, then pain. It's worse than anything I imagined in my head. Desperately searching for the words to restore her faith in me, I say, "I'm so sorry. We were cleaning the room this morning and then—"

"You decided to destroy it?" Arendse offers.

My face burns.

Arendse clicks her tongue and raises her head to the ceiling, as if appealing to God.

"I can't lecture in a class that looks like this. I'm going to get some breakfast, and *if* I come back, I expect this place to be clean."

We watch Arendse leave. She's on the third step of the staircase when she turns around.

"On second thought. I'm going to drive out to a conference in Stellenbosch. Later this afternoon, I'll send out a email with an assignment."

There's not a single protest or bad-tempered groan.

"Email it to me before class tomorrow, or don't bother coming in at all."

I wait for the students to descend on me once she's left, but they've all been allocated cleaning duties. The only person who comes close to assaulting me, is Oliver, who lifts me off the ground and plants a hard kiss on my ear.

"I was late," he says. "But I heard what you said and I saw you smash cake in Sebastian's face."

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Please don't get so excited," I groan. "I was irresponsible. Arendse probably hates me now."

"Sebastian's been bullying everyone." Oliver grimaces. "He says the worst things about Arendse. If you explain to her what happened, I'm sure you'll be fine."

Oliver takes my face in his hands. His voice is soft and plaintive.

"I think I need to get your name like tattooed across my face now. You're only my newest hero."

A scrubbing noise gets louder and Kaanitah looks up from the floor. She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand.

"*Jis*. I don't care if I need to spend all day scrubbing this carpet. Someone had to tell Sebastian off. He was getting on everyone's nerves. Don't even feel bad about the cake – I wish you could've thrown the whole thing on him."

I appreciate their words, but their kindness cannot dissolve my guilt. I don't think all the carpet cleaner in the world could do that.

"Just get the crumbs," Zach says. "I don't think we can clean the carpet until we know the type of fibers it's made of. We'll only do more damage." Zach walks around with a rolled-up carpet over his shoulder. "Everything alright here? Addy, you okay?" he asks. His brows are knitted with such concern that it's difficult to look at him without wanting to cry. Oliver folds me into his arms, and I feel a hand on my back. Probably Kaanitah's.

"She's offended because they called you her boyfriend," Asia teases.

Zach doesn't reply to her.

"What are you doing with the rugs?" Kaanitah asks him.

I straighten up again but keep holding onto Oliver's arm. He's become one of my best friends, and it has nothing to do with the fact that he always smells of freshly brewed coffee.

Zach's eyes are on me. He gives the rug a pat before propping it up against the wall.

“It’s an oriental rug. We can’t risk cleaning it with the run-of-the-mill stuff we have here. Will drop it off at the cleaners on the way home. I’ll contact Arendse and ask her what to use on the carpets. We got as much of it as we could.” Zach looks around. The others are busy restacking the shelves now.

“Zach,” I say.

“Hm?”

“Will you please send me the bill? It’s my fault. I can’t have you pay for something I did.”

Oliver gives my shoulder a squeeze, then plants another rough kiss on my hair. Instead of responding to me, Zach speaks to him.

“Look at her Ollie. We just cleaned up the aftermath of a fight, and here she is, trying to start another.”

The assignment arrives at 3pm. If I wasn’t in the dog box with Arendse, I may have called her to protest the topic. Erotica. One short story. Two pages. It’s the genre we’re most divided about. Some students hate it, some think it’s too easy to write. Tomorrow we’ll set the record straight. At random, Arendse will choose two submissions to read out and we’ll vote for the best one.

I try to start on the assignment, but our group chat’s been blowing up ever since the email was sent. Everyone seems excited, and they’re even talking about bringing snacks tomorrow. Asia wants to make popcorn, and someone else is bringing drinks and biscuits. Then, of course, Sebastian starts talking trash. I can’t remember the last time this chat thread saw so much action:

Sebastian 15:20

I’ve slept with more than enough women
to give that fifty shades chick a run for
her money. :p Have this in the bag.

Qaasim 15:22

:x Mr Experience in the House, guys.

Oliver 15:23

Meh. How many words
does *Mr Experience* have so far?

Kaanitah 15:25

Oh no he didn't... :-x

Khanya 15:26

Holla! This n*gga ain't playing!

Sebastian 15:27

:p :p :p

Wing 15:28

Oh shiiit... ps. Anyone know how many
words this thing should be?

Asia 15:29

@sebastian stop talking crap. You can't write
Erotica if you haven't even read it!!!

Zach 15:29

@sebastian. You for real, brah? You really think you
need to have slept with a harem before you
can write good erotica? Reckless sexual behaviour
is not something to be proud of.
Instead of advertising your sexual prowess, you've
just let the whole class know you've probably got
an STD farm in your pants.

The replies to this message are too many to keep track of, but one in particular draws my attention. It's from Arendse herself.

Prof A. 15: 39

All valid points! But let's put it to the test.

All assignments to be emailed to me before class tomorrow. No word limit, but stick to two pages. P.S. I've selected Zach and Sebastian to go up against each other. We'll read the pieces out in class and you'll vote for the best. Also, my room smells like Lavender.

While I may not have the extensive real-life experience Sebastian boasts of, I've seen more penises and vaginas than anyone should. My time spent in family medicine and gynaecology made me privy to some of the most personal, embarrassing stories. I've had intimate encounters with STDs and seen a variety of peculiar objects get pulled from places their manufacturers never intended they go (top of the list: an entire set of car keys in a butt, and a paperclip lodged in a urethra). Writing a piece of erotica is a different kind of hell for me: I can't think of sex without picturing genital warts, pus that could be mistaken for mouldy cream cheese, or patients blushing their way through an explanation of how a bottle of shampoo found its way into their rectum. But all things considered, I've tried my best.

The scent of fresh popcorn cloaks the Write Room. It's unreal how dry kernels popped in hot oil smells better than a confection of cocoa, butter and sugar, but it does. Half the class has arrived, but there's no sign of Zach. I put the box of Ouma Rusks on the table, then pick a bowl from the stack and head to the kitchen where the rest are queuing for popcorn Asia's prepared. Her thick black hair is pulled into a loose bun, and her cheeks are flushed from the stovetop heat. She glows as she scoops our bowls into the massive silver pot. Her winged eyeliner's so impeccable, it's distracting.

“Have you seen Zach?” I ask, throwing a piece of popcorn into my mouth. Even unseasoned, it’s delicious.

Asia’s eyes twinkle.

“Yes! He’s been here for an hour already. Probably stepped out.” Asia turns to the selection of spice shakers. “Cheddar, cream cheese and chives, chutney, or salt and vinegar?” She asks. Then, remembering the smaller pot on the stove, “Ooh, or I could put some hot butter over?”

I’d never turn down buttered popcorn for artificial flavours. I hold out my bowl and Asia drizzles the fragrant, golden liquid into it; I didn’t think I was hungry before, but I’m suddenly starving. After thanking her, I move off to the side so Khanya, Qaasim and Nabeelah can be served. I’m pretty sure I saw Khanya throw a piece of cake at Qaasim yesterday; that they’re standing beside each other right now is startling.

“My money’s on Zach,” Qaasim says.

“You think he’s got a shot at beating Sebastian?” Khanya raises a brow.

“Um, have you been reading his stories online. He’s one of the best writers in our class.” Nabeelah puts in.

Khanya scoffs.

“But does he have the experience, though?” she challenges.

Qaasim snickers.

“You mean does he have the *STD farm* in his pants? According to Zach, you don’t need it.”

I detect a smile on Khanya’s face as she walks away with her bowl, braided ponytail swinging behind her.

I want to say my money’s on Zach too, and of course I want him to win this thing, but I’ve read enough of Sebastian’s work to know his level of skill.

Most people are seated and we’re waiting for Arendse to arrive. It seems everyone’s managed to complete the assignment, though some of us are on our second cup of coffee trying to stay awake. I step outside to check if Arendse is in her office, but find instead a pair of flamingo shorts pacing the corridor.

“Hey you,” I say. “Ready for your big Erotica debut?”

Zach folds his arms.

“Absolutely-fucking-not. I wrote four drafts and now I’m not sure I sent the best one to her. You’ll probably hate it.” Zach clenches and unclenches his jaw. I wonder why he’s so concerned

about me not liking his work. He's our sci-fi writer, and everyone, including me, has been praising his stories.

"Please don't tell me you've written about a Martian Man who abducts a Queen and then makes her his sex slave."

Zach blinks. He's too anxious to laugh.

"It's not sci-fi. *At all*. I'm just going to ask if I can withdraw. Think she'll be mad?"

I gawk.

"Zach, it's Arendse. And yes, I think she will *fail* you. Even I was struggling, but I finished anyway."

Zach stops pacing.

"Why were you struggling?" he asks, with more than casual interest.

Before I can make up my mind about how comfortable I am discussing this, I break off in a full explanation, spilling more than I intended. Maybe hearing about my painful experience with this project would bring him some comfort, or at the very least, distraction. Zach's eyes are the size of my popcorn bowl by the time I'm done.

"The stories I could tell you about medical school. I've seen and inhaled far too many diseased penises. Writing about them in a way that's exciting and *enticing*, is not in my skillset. Sebastian talks a big game, but I'll bet I've seen more vaginas than him."

Zach's lip twitches.

"Oh yeah?"

I nod. There's a story I haven't told anyone. Now I feel the inexplicable urge to share it with him in this corridor, exactly five minutes before class starts.

"I was enrolled in the university's first AP med programme. We were different because we had far more practical experience than the mainstream students. They deemed us more adept than our peers, and we got to do certain procedures they didn't. Under supervision, of course." I pause, wondering if this story is perhaps too much. "I was stationed in the maternity wing, when one of the mothers in labour had a cord prolapse. The registrar called me and asked if I wanted to help."

"What's a cord prolapse?" Zach asks.

"It's when part of the umbilical cord comes out of the vagina during labour. Unless the baby is about to be delivered, this is very dangerous. If the cord gets cold it can go into spasm, cutting off blood supply to the baby."

Zach flinches.

“What happened then? Did you go help?”

“Of course I did!” I beam. “Had to put on this long glove, that goes right to the shoulder,” I run my hand all the way up my arm, “and I basically had to shove the cord back. My arm went in up to here,” I indicate halfway up my forearm.

Zach’s jaw drops.

“See?” I laugh. “Sebastian’s definitely not done that.”

Zach strokes his chin, shaking his head in silence.

“Adara, you’ve got more experience than anyone in that room. I think you should have gone up against Sebastian instead. My piece feels so... *juvenile* now.”

I assure him it’s exactly because these stories are swirling around inside me that I couldn’t complete the assignment properly.

“I’ve got horror stories, Z. I saw this one guy, teenage patient. He’d had a ring ripped out of his penis during sex. We also saw quite a few dicks with deep bite marks.”

My words produce a visceral reaction; Zach doubles over as if he can feel the pain of all those men. I offer him some popcorn, but he declines.

“What the fuck?” He laughs. “I can’t eat after that!” Zach’s smiling again. I’ve dissolved his appetite and at least some of his anxiety.

Professor Arendse appears. She wears black slacks and a white blouse buttoned up to the neck. Her usual plaited bun is held in place with the trademark dragon’s claw and she masks her worry with a voice that’s too high-pitched.

“Ready for today?” she asks, eyes on Zach.

He must have thought twice about disappointing her, because he just nods and we follow her into the classroom where everyone is noisily talking and munching their snacks. I notice the Persian rugs are back. Arendse thanks Zach before we sit down. Everybody’s assembled on the floor, either seated on a pillow or slumped in one of the beanbags.

The professor thanks us for all completing the assignment. Asia hands her a bowl, but she sets the popcorn down on the table. Something’s troubling her.

“I know everyone’s excited to get started. Thank you for all your assignments, and thank you to Zach and Sebastian for being such good sports,” she sighs, “but there’s something I need to get out of the way before we start.”

People stop chewing.

“Yesterday three more restaurants on campus were vandalized. They also hit the campus store. It happened at the same time, exactly 3pm. Also, in protest of fees that are too high. Students are hugely dissatisfied. The suspects fled and a new investigation’s been opened. If you see the police vans around Main Campus and even Reclove, don’t be alarmed. The situation’s being taken care of.”

Kaanitah raises a hand.

“Yes, Miss Ahmed?”

“Should we be worried, Professor?”

Arendse scans the classroom.

“I don’t want anyone panicking. Therefore I’m making you all aware of the situation. We’ll hear more in the coming days. In the meantime, walk in pairs and try not to visit these campus eateries on your own. We’re on high alert.”

Oliver’s leg shakes; he spills some popcorn.

“Hey,” I grab his hand, “they’ll be stupid to try anything at Kahve again.”

Ollie smiles, but says nothing. I pick the popcorn up from the carpet and throw it in one of the metal dustbins we keep in the study area.

I don’t think any of us have ever been this excited about school. We put the vandals and their actions from our mind as the first piece is unveiled. The names have been removed, so we don’t know if it’s Zach’s or Sebastian’s. Arendse takes a seat beside the projector, and we follow on the screen while she reads.

Halfway through the piece, I nudge Oliver and whisper,

“What the fu—”

“I know, Ads. It’s like porn.” Ollie whispers back, aghast.

“It *is* porn,” I hiss.

Professor Arendse reads everything in a neutral voice, and I commend her for that. Every curve, sound and scent are described in painstaking detail. I feel violated by the end, and judging by my classmates’ expressions, I’m not the only one. I can’t bear to look at Zach or Sebastian.

Without missing a beat, Arendse puts the next page up. I suspect she feels even more violated than us and is keen to move on.

“So, that was the first. I’m about to read the second.”

I down some Rooibos hoping to rinse my mind of the images, but this is unnecessary. The second piece of writing sketches a whole new world, one that immediately erases the other. Arendse has printed the piece directly onto her transparencies, and the font can be read easily even from the back of the class.

Number 2

It's been six years since I left Cape Town, but I remember exactly what she was wearing the last time I saw her. When she called me last week and said she wanted to talk, my first inclination was not to start a Skype call, but purchase a plane ticket. She's not the type of woman you spoke to through a screen.

It was a sunny day and we agreed to meet in a hidden café in the suburbs, one of those places we'd frequented as teenagers. I thought this might have been our chance, that she'd called me back because she loved me, but I noticed the ring on her finger before we'd even sat down. I'd flown halfway across the world to listen to her announce her marriage to someone else. I was her best friend, she said. Would I be their best man? Though she'd cracked me open, I could only nod. She's not the type of woman you said no to.

"How long are you in town for?" She asked.

"Just the weekend." I said.

"You should come to our movie night tomorrow. It'll be like a reunion. All the old friends, together again."

I didn't care to rub shoulders with a bunch of people I haven't seen since high school, but because I'm a fool, I agreed.

"Frankie's out of town, but he'd have loved to see you." She added, hugging me close before she left. She still wore the same perfume, but she'd tossed the jeans aside. I can't recall seeing her in anything but blue jeans. She loved them so much I used to think she was born wearing a pair. Now her legs swung free beneath a short, soft dress. I shouldn't have said yes. Being alone with her was a bad idea. But what was it she said? All the old friends would be there. Chances of me spending any time with her were slim; she'd be too busy showing off her new ring.

I couldn't have been more wrong. She managed to find me amongst about a hundred other people. The movie night was on a rooftop in the middle of the city. Everyone was blanketed and seated comfortably beside their loved ones.

"You okay?" She asked, flipping her chair open beside mine. I passed her a blanket and broke off half my chocolate bar, just like I did when we were kids. Lying is not my strong suit, so I refrained from answering her.

Her brown hair had grown out and tumbled down almost to her waist. She shook out the blanket before throwing it down on her chair. Then a light summer gust lifted her skirt, allowing me a glimpse of pastel lace. Jesus, this woman was about to get married and I was trying to hide the boner she'd given me.

Ten minutes into the film she claimed half my blanket. She also stole the remainder of my Tex. She could have asked me for my pants just then, and I would have stripped naked without protest.

Twenty minutes in I couldn't focus on the fucking movie anymore because the rise and fall of her breasts was far more compelling. She'd never been the type of girl who displayed her underwear, but a cerise bra strap just couldn't stay hidden beneath her blouse. I stared at it until I grew dizzy. Over the years I'd let a hundred chances slip by. Having her so near made the weight of the loss unbearable; it was like someone had taken a chisel to my ribs.

Her thighs rested against mine beneath the blanket. The softness, the heat, it was equal parts dream and nightmare. I wanted to kiss her, but I also wanted to run. Both actions very inappropriate, I sat there and did nothing. Until she took my arm and wrapped it around her shoulder.

"Everyone thought we'd end up together, you know?" she whispered, her breath warm on my face. "Where do you think we went wrong?"

I couldn't speak. In fact, I half-thought I'd imagined the question. I must have slipped into dreamland at some point because she lifted my other hand and set it down in her lap. I felt the softness of her dress. Then the softness of her flesh. She left my hand on her knee and slowly my fingers became accustomed to their new home. I began to draw circles on the skin, working my fingertips down her thigh like it was a movement I'd practised a million times before.

"I used to dream about you." I told her.

Her breath caught. My nails gently clawed at her inner thigh. I watched her eyes close, her tongue wet her lips.

“I still do.” I said.

My confession parted her legs. I knew she was getting married, but I didn’t care anymore. I just needed to know if she tasted the way she did inside my head. I knew I’d never get another chance. I knew it would break me to watch her walk out of that church with another man. I knew I mustn’t, but also knew I’d crossed a line the moment I decided to come tonight.

Our friends were sitting in the front and we slipped off without drawing any attention.

“What if people hear us?” she giggled, as I set her up against one of the trees they’d planted on the roof. Why the fuck would you put a tree on a rooftop? I thought as my mouth went to her neck. I unbuttoned her blouse and ran my fingers over the small black bows adorning the bra straps. They reminded me of the ones she wore in her hair when we were younger. Old memories stilled my hands.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asked, her lips brushing my cheek.

“Are you sure you want me to do this?” I challenged, stepping back.

She slid the straps from her shoulders, then pulled me close. Fucking her would leave me fucked, but she’s not the type of woman you said no to. When the time comes, I’d be able to stand up, tell a few charming stories and toast to the bride and groom with a smile. But I knew I’d be thinking of her like this, naked, spread open against a tree, the city burning beneath us.

A few of us exhale when Arendse makes it to the end. I can’t speak for the others, but I desperately want to know the fate of these characters. The strips of paper are silently passed around and we fumble for pens. I hazard a glance at Zach, but he’s lying on a beanbag with a blanket over his head. When Oliver tries to read the number on my page, I snatch it away, folding it eight times for good measure.

“Be like that,” he grumbles.

“Come on, we probably chose the same one,” I whisper.

Arendse collects the strips and we watch her unfold them. She separates the votes into piles, then calls Adam to the front to double-check. They whisper briefly before Arendse makes the announcement.

“We’re in agreement. The winning piece, with eleven votes in total, is number 2.”

Everyone looks around, but Zach’s head is still covered. Sebastian’s face is much too blank for someone who’s just won a contest.

“Who’s number two, Professor? Are you going to tell us?” Asia asks, half out of her seat.

The professor waits. I think she wants the winner to announce himself, only he doesn’t come forth.

She has to call “Zachariah!” twice before he lowers the blanket. The colour in his face spreads to his ears. He keeps his mouth covered even when the class applauds. Asia is the only one who looks redder than him. Nobody notices Sebastian get up; we only see him when he’s standing beside Zach. Arendse raises her hands and we give her silence.

Oliver speaks from the corner of his mouth, “He’s probably gonna punch Zach...”

Sebastian grips Zach’s shoulder and proffers his other hand.

“For an inexperienced guy, that was a really good piece of writing. Fair is fair. You won, brah.”

Zach eyes the hand before shaking it.

After class, when we’re alone, Zach finally asks me, “So, what did you think?”

“Well, I voted for you, so...”

When we discussed the pieces afterwards, Zach received a barrage of questions. I’m not about to hurt his head with even more.

“I’d like to read your piece, if you’d let me?” he says suddenly.

The request stuns me.

“That’s not something you want to subject yourself to, Zach.”

“Come on, you are a much better writer than you give yourself credit for. You’re always scribbling in that journal. Man, what I would give to peek inside. Just to get a real look inside your mind.”

His smile assures me he’s teasing, but I start to wonder whether I should have been honest with him about the things I saw at medical school. A thousand questions from a classmate – especially one I’m so fond of – will be hard to deflect.

“When I was little, I had a journal with a lock on it. Do you remember those?” I ask.

Zach nods. He holds the door open and I walk out onto Main Campus. The sun is shining, the breeze, cool.

“My brother pried the lock off and read the entire thing. For a month he quoted random sections at dinner. I was mortified. Long story short, I’ll never let another living human read my journal.”

We pause at the fountain. It’s not running, but several ink-black starlings are floating on the surface, splashing their wings happily. Zach’s eyes linger on the birds; he seems to speak to them even though the words are directed at me.

“I’ll bet it’s good, though,” he says. “I’ll bet it’s great.”

I don’t think I need to worry about Tariq reading my journal anymore. He’s seen the notebook I carry with me, the one I’m documenting this year in, and it holds no interest for him. Probably too busy with school work and it’s probably wise not to taunt the person who irons your school uniform. Alex is the one who’s always trying to read my work, so I’ll have to hide the book from him.

Even with the unusually awful traffic, I didn’t turn on the radio today – not for the music or the updates on possible roadblocks. After all the class festivities, the hour of silence is more precious than gold. When I get home, I hear the voices long before I spot the guests through the window. Choking back nauseating déjà vu, I see Saskia, Muzammil and Alex crowding our kitchen. Tariq rushes to the door.

“What’s going on?” I ask as my brother lets me in.

“Haven’t you heard?” Alex asks, coming up to me and giving me a hug for the first time in three weeks.

“Heard what? Where’s Tasleem?”

They tell me to sit. Saskia shoves a glass of Coke in my hand, but I demand to know where my mother is. Their sombre faces make me extremely uneasy.

“Mom’s fine, Addy. But she’s still at work.” Tariq says.

A look passes between Alex and Muz. I scream at them to tell me what the hell is going on. Eventually Saskia speaks up. She says Medical School was hit today. The vandals stormed the hospital and disrupted a practical exam. People were arrested. Apparently, there are several videos online. I lean back, rake a hand through my hair.

“Tasleem wasn’t hurt. I called her earlier on. She’s fine. But they’re having meetings this evening and the Vice Chancellor is in attendance. Shit’s gone to hell. They want to shut the university down.” Alex says.

“Even UPEN and UAF are involved now. Those students were sent home today. How come you weren’t disrupted? Did you still go to class this afternoon?” Saskia asks.

“Yes, of course I went to class. My last seminar ended at 5.”

Everyone stares at each other, then Alex clicks his fingers.

“She’s got that writing class – the one underground? Those vandals wouldn’t know where to find it or how to access that classroom.”

Saskia hugs me hard to her chest. Everyone grabs a seat while Tariq finishes his butter chicken. He flips a roti; the delicious sizzle is a welcome distraction. They bring me up to speed on what’s happened during the day, and Alex divulges all he knows. Unlike my mother, he’s transparent about the goings-on behind the scenes at the university.

“You know the restaurants that were hit? It’s Kahve Corner, Rhodes Pub, Antoni’s and Sizwe’s Kitchen Club. What do those places have in common?” Alex asks, sopping up the coconut sauce with a piece of roti.

“They’re all over-priced?” I ask.

Alex laughs.

“That’s putting it mildly. Students are fed up because they can’t even buy a water or a sandwich at campus. But the bigger problem these vandals want to highlight, is that the university is not an inclusive space. People get offered bursaries, but they still don’t have enough money to attend. They’re making a political statement with these protests.”

I think hard, trying to recall something my mother mentioned last year.

“Hold on, this doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that 60% of the university students couldn’t pay their fees last year? A few couldn’t graduate or they had to take out loans in order to get their degrees.”

Alex slams a palm against the table.

“Exactly! The SRC were supposed to meet with the Deputy Vice Chancellor, but it never materialised. Now they’re demanding a meeting – with violence.”

Saskia, the ever savvy social media guru, explains the hashtags that are currently trending. Top of the list is #FeesMustFall and #NationwideShutDown. The conversation stretches on well

through dessert. When Tasleem finally walks in, Alex is the first to hug her. I don't miss the kiss he plants on her head.

"Adara, you're okay?" Tasleem asks, stroking my cheek.

"Are *you* okay? What the hell's happening?"

My mom kisses my hair and slumps down in a chair. Tariq puts a plate out for her, but she gets another call as she tears her roti in half. Tasleem puts a finger to her lips, then sets it on speakerphone. In a tired voice, the man on the other end says the university will continue as per normal tomorrow, and that we will not give in to the demands of a few students that are hellbent on destroying the place.

I sit there, listening carefully to all that's said and feeling guiltier by the minute. I'm one of the fortunate students who was given a full scholarship for medicine when I matriculated. My indecisiveness could have cost someone a place at university. I am part of this problem. Maybe Naathierah was right. Tasleem has spoiled me too much.

When Alex starts shovelling bits of chicken and roti into Tasleem's mouth, I excuse myself. Today I've no energy for their charade. If the two of them are dating, why not just tell me...

I spend the rest of the evening doing homework in between washing and drying the laundry. Only when I'm sure everyone's left, do I tip-toe across the hall to my room. My laundered clothes are still faintly warm and smell deliciously like peaches. I lie down in the pile while I finish the last few chapters of my English set work book. Given the university's unstable climate, I really can't afford to fall behind with work right now.

By the time I finish the book, I'm too tired to move, and scroll through my phone instead. I sit up when I see Zach and Sebastian's pieces have been uploaded to our website, along with several others. Zach really is the best writer in our class. I read through his piece again. And then once more for good measure.

The realisation strikes me as I'm folding up the last articles of clothing. At the very bottom of the laundry basket, I spot it: a cerise pink bra with tiny black bows. I couldn't get the straps to behave when I wore it yesterday, but I never dreamed anyone else noticed. Zach's probably sleeping, but I text him anyway.

TUE AT 23:40

I know where you got your inspiration
for the erotica piece...

When he doesn't come online, I put the phone down and head to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I see the reply just before I drift to sleep.

Zach TUE 23:45

Oh?

One word. Two letters. And my heart is drumming in my ears. I hit send before I have a chance to change my mind.

WED 00:00

I just fished it from the tumble dryer.

Zach WED 00:01

And I thought I was being subtle.

WED 00:02

:p :p xxx

Zach,

ZACH WED 00:03

Hm?

WED 00:04

Our campus isn't safe anymore.

Please take care of yourself.

ZACH WED 00:05

I won't become a statistic

WED 00:06

I'm serious.

Who will notice my pretty
undergarments if you're not there?

ZACH WED 00:07

'Undergarments'... I've never heard anyone use
that word. :p What century are you from?

Lots of people will notice. Trust me.

And yeah. Please be careful too

Alex tries to call a few times, but I let it go to voicemail. By the time he's given up, the green light next to Zach's name is grey.

Chapter 8

Carlisle Curiosity

When the vandals hit med school, they did more than just disturb fifth years in the middle of an OSCE. A few students looted the kitchen, taking food meant for recovering patients. Beats me why anyone would want to steal diabetic-friendly chicken and veg, pink jelly cups, and yoghurt cartons with a three-spoon capacity, but that's what they did. A few naïve or overly ambitious ones even tried to clear medical supplies from patient prep-rooms, but succeeded only in giving security guards the most action-packed afternoon they'd seen in years. All this to get the attention of the Vice Chancellor. These details never made the papers, but I heard Tasleem whispering them into her phone. As if she wasn't already being stretched as thin as a milk crepe, she now held a place on the University Council too. This means she's a part of the body that makes some of the most important decisions at the university. It means she was there when the Vice Chancellor heard the SRC's demands. And it means she'll be there again in three weeks when they have their annual meeting and discuss, amongst other things, fee increases for the coming year. After the three restaurants and med school were targeted, things changed at Main Campus as well as Reclove. As per Arendse's predictions, the police presence made everyone uncomfortable.

Campus security looked innocuous in navy pullovers and slacks, but having the SAPS stationed outside lecture theatres lent a sinister atmosphere to a place that had become my home. When people wearing Kevlar vests and holstered guns suddenly patrol your school, not much learning takes place. The only saving grace is that the police presence didn't last long. Once the SRC had been heard, everything returned to normal and the vans pulled out within a week. The only person who seemed distressed by this was my friend Oliver.

"Aren't you glad they're gone?" I'd asked.

"No! I was cashing in on this. I was just working a new angle for this article I wanted to write. And now they up and leave. It's not fair."

I had to laugh. Oliver enjoyed his ten seconds of fame after his story about the vandals got published. Now that the action's died down, he's back to just managing the bistro. The varsity paper had him on their payroll for five consecutive stories, all covering the #FeesMustFall campaign and the destruction left in its wake. Oliver wanted to get into the hospital to find out what really happened. I wasn't much help in this regard, what with waiting on scraps from Tasleem or straining to overhear another conversation. My distrust grows each time I catch her on

a call not meant for my ears. We never used to have secrets between us; now I feel the pile growing into a mountain. Whatever's happening between her and Alex, I could handle, but this university was mine too, and she was my mother. Did she expect to protect me by giving me as little information as she could? Most days I find her conked out on the couch still wearing shoes, and when she is conscious enough to have a discussion, I'm usually the one rushing off or trying to finish some assignment. We shared the same house, but we've gone from family to flat mates. When Andrew Carlisle died, Tasleem made it her mission to ensure I lacked for nothing. She strove to make my life as full as possible. For the most part she's succeeded. For 24 years I felt content just having a mother; now that she's slipping away, the void my father left begins to feel like a wound.

Arendse's partly to blame for my crippling nostalgia; her writing projects have grown more emotionally taxing. Over the last three months nearly every student has had some form of meltdown in class. It's not because we were working towards unreasonable deadlines, but rather because the topics forced us to unlock trauma best forgotten. Once I even caught Sebastian dabbing his eyes. The last person to crack in her class was Zach, though he had more grace than most of my peers.

"Picture the thing you love the most," Arendse had instructed. "It could be a person, a pet, a place, even an artefact of some sort."

We took a moment to visualise the thing. Quite easily my mind fixed on two people: Tariq and Tasleem.

"Now imagine what your world would look like without them in it."

Then the pens went to work. A few paragraphs in, I looked up to see Zach sitting opposite me, his brow furrowed. He hadn't lifted his pencil yet. Perhaps even the most gifted writers were not exempt from the occasional block, I thought. I caught him say something to the professor at the end.

"I couldn't do the activity."

"Why not?"

Zach leaned back. It wasn't defeat I read on his face, but rather a painful resignation.

"You asked us to write about what the world would look like without the thing we loved most," he said. "I lost that thing years ago. I would basically be describing my world as it is now. Think that defeats the purpose of the exercise."

As much as I wanted to know what Zach had lost, I fought the impulse to catch up with him after class.

The one person I didn't think the professor's tactics would work on, was me. But I was wrong. Even a hardened ex-med student could not immunize herself against Arendse's brand of sorcery. Exactly four months into semester, just before our exam, she sets the topic that finally breaks me.

What's the one thing you want most in this world? Imagine you have it.

I write about my dad.

I'd be lying if I said I've never wondered about my father. When I was younger, I used to think about him a lot.

Over the years, in painful, sometimes bitter stages, I've learned to let him go. But it wasn't until I decided to follow the same path as my mother that I truly made peace with my father's death. In my third year working shifts at the public hospital, I saw for myself the devastation a father could wreak. I watched victims of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse stumble through the hospital each day. There was one 5-year-old girl, Ntombi, whose face still haunts me. She'd had a paraffin lamp broken over her head one night. The burns were so extensive we had to intubate and do multiple skin grafts. She'd trembled as I changed the dressings on her melted head. We did all we could, but hair would never grow once the wound became a shiny scar; the lovely child would be bald for life. Her mother spun us some story of how the lamp toppled onto her head, but Ntombi spilled the truth once we had her alone: Dinner had been late, and her father had a temper. Now Tasleem's always claimed Andrew was a good man, but psychosis could remain dormant for several years until something triggered it. I know many girls who'd have been better off if they'd never met their dads. I'd like to think I'm one of them. It's only when Saskia's father fetches her from our place and I watch her lean in to kiss the old man's cheek, that I feel something cold and sad press against my ribcage. Every time I see *Boeta Salie*, I think of the man Tasleem loved, and who almost had the chance to love me.

There was a time I wanted a father. I had just started pre-school and was at that lovable age where I saw everything and spewed the most inappropriate questions. I was quick to notice each of my friends had two parents. A mother and a father. Some of the dads were boyfriends and others

were husbands. They would hoist their kids up, plant kisses on their heads and let them ride on their shoulders. Tasleem tired quickly and wasn't very good at these games. It was upsetting that other girls got to play them and not me.

"Where's my daddy?" I'd asked one evening. Not for the first time my mother's face froze in pain. I thought it a crime to see anyone as beautiful as her look so sad. Instead of brushing it off, this time she answered.

Tasleem told me everything. My father's name, how they met, how they fell in love.

"He was a white man, and my daddy didn't like that. So he threw me out of the house," Tasleem said.

"Was he angry with you?" I asked, holding onto her thumb like I did whenever she looked stressed.

"Very angry, Adara."

"What happened to my father?"

Andrew Carlisle had been a civil engineer. He'd designed and built some of the most important buildings in town, and even a few airports overseas. One day there was an on-site accident. My mother was three months pregnant when the call came.

She finished the story with tears trapped in her eyelashes. It was the first I'd ever seen her cry and I immediately hated it. I made a promise to myself never to ask about Andrew again, but I did go snooping around in her room one afternoon when curiosity won out. I just wanted to know what he looked like. Surely a rebel like my mother would have a photo somewhere.

Two hours later my hands closed around a piece of folded card stuffed in the toe of a leather boot. In the black and white creases, I saw a much younger Tasleem sitting on the lap of a man more blur than human. He had light brown hair, but I could spot no other discerning feature – not even his height was clear. Later that night my mother found me lying amid piles of her clothing, running my sticky fingers all over the photo. I won't forget her expression, but I couldn't describe it if I tried. My mother was one of those parents who owned several volumes of child psychology books. She was vehemently against hitting; if I messed up, I was given a time-out or asked to talk about my feelings. Tasleem had never raised a hand to a child in her life, but that day she beat the shit out of me.

Speaking of my father was forbidden, so my thoughts turned inward, and I began to dream of him. The dreams gradually morphed into a single, recurring story where a 5-year-old Adara gets fetched from school by a gentleman she doesn't know, and they spend the day together, eating ice-

creams and playing in the park. It's been months since I had the dream, but it returned last night, probably brought on by this assignment. I think carefully before reconstructing it for my professor.

By the time I reach the end, I'm drained, and I realise I still need to write the rationale. My brain is too tired to string a single sentence together, but I push on. I feel like, maybe if I get the dream out on paper, it will stop haunting me. My rationale reads:

I know this is but a dream, that no man named Carlisle ever fetched me from school. My father never met me, but I suppose I'd recognize him if we passed each other on the street. I see his face every morning, every evening, and sometimes in the afternoons, when I check my review. I look just like him. As close to a carbon copy as you could come. Years have numbed the pain of looking at my own face and seeing a dead man's eyes staring back, the eyes of a man who could have loved me, had he lived past my birth. I've tried to imagine what my life would have looked like with him in it, but my imagination won't stretch beyond the 5-year mark. I can't believe any man would stick around longer than that. Whether by death or free will, my father would have found some way to break my heart. Just like my mother's father broke hers. Everything must, eventually, come full circle.

I give it a read through before printing. Then I call Alex and we join Saskia and Muzammil at a garden café in Newlands for a simple pizza dinner. The wedding plans are well under way now and Saskia's brought a few more dress designs for me to inspect.

I nod my head and smile when she shows me the pictures on her tablet.

"You okay?" Alex asks, popping two olives into his mouth.

"Just tired," I say.

It isn't a lie. Unlocking all the details of a dream I never talk about and setting them down for an audience was an activity that, in my opinion, bordered on masochism. I get up to leave.

Saskia grabs an empty box and starts piling in half a pizza.

"No doggie bag for me, cuz." I tell her.

Declining a doggie bag filled with Italian food is blasphemous; I know they'll be discussing my strange behavior once I'm gone. Right now, I don't care.

“Weren’t you going to drive me home?” Alex asks, walking me out.

I’m too tired. I hope he doesn’t take it personally.

“I miss you, you know?” Alex says.

He looks so forlorn I don’t have the heart to drive away, so I lean against the wall at the entrance, keys dangling from my fingers.

“Alex, I’m sorry I never came to your class yet. I know I promised I’d visit.”

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“It’s not that. I just miss our lunches and conversations.”

I want to tell him I’m barely touching ground with all the assignments, that I’m still struggling to finish Arendse’s class work, and that I haven’t been sending my writing to anyone who could potentially publish it. I want to tell him how exhausted I am, that having Tasleem gone for such long periods while Tariq’s finishing matric, has been difficult.

He’ll feel compelled to help if I say any of this. And God, do I need his help. Now more than ever. But I can’t be so selfish. Alex has a life outside of my family. I need to let him live it.

“Oliver tells me you’ve got a new friend in the class,” Alex says. “A friend with long dreadlocks.”

“You mean Zach? You helped get him into the class.”

It must have been Oliver who told him. I wonder what other information he’s feeding Alex. And how did Zach become a subject of interest?

Alex scuffs his boot on the rubber doormat. He shoves his hands in his pockets, but withholds whatever he was about to say.

“Take care, Adara.”

He turns on his heel without waiting for a reply.

I stare at his back until he re-enters the restaurant, making the bell above the door tinkle. I hadn’t been serious when I penned that last paragraph. Now I can’t shake the feeling that it contains a sinister prophesy. Perhaps no man would last longer than 5 years; Alex is fast approaching that threshold.

Tariq left for camp this morning. He's not far from home – just in a cabin on Table Mountain – but it's an essential respite for the Grade 12s before the real work begins. It's also a much-needed break for me, although I'm dreading the pile of dirty laundry when he returns.

With Tasleem on call the apartment will be empty. I'll do some research before bedtime, see if I can find any viable publishers who'd be interested in my work. Arendse said we should be careful about the way we pitch ourselves. Many of my classmates have gotten no replies to the emails they've sent so far. I have a feeling this is going to be the hardest part of the writing course. I hope it's not the component that sinks me.

When I open the door, there's a black suitcase beside it, the handle fully extended. Tasleem is seated on the couch, dressed in a black leather jacket, some jeans and a pair of comfortable Sketchers. She looks prepared to board a flight.

“Where are you going?” I ask, trying to sound surprised instead of shocked.

I don't at first see the smudged eyeliner in the dim light.

“One of our consultants couldn't make it for a conference. His kid's sick. So, I'm stepping in. Was very last minute.”

I nod. It's just like Tasleem to pick up other people's slack. She's been doing it for years at the expense of her own family.

“They can't get someone else to do it? How many neurosurgeons work in the hospital anyway?” I scoff. “How can they ask the department head to fill in when there's only one of you?”

Tasleem folds and unfolds the paper in her hand.

“Would you rather I stay?”

“Why? Whether you're overseas or here, it's not like we have the time to actually talk,” then I quickly add, “We're both so busy. Exams are coming up for me, and you... well, you're *you*.”

My mother touches her knuckle to her nose. She holds this pose for some time before she smooths the paper out on her knee. I recognize it instantly: my assignment. My throat feels as dry as crumbling parchment.

“You had no right to read that, Tasleem.”

My mother puts the page on the table, then leans forward, resting her head in her palms.

“Why not? Your entire class will read it.”

Anger is too simple a term to express my feelings. Sadness is too linear as well. Guilt? Shame? I take a seat opposite her while I try to figure it out. The ticking clock is so obscenely loud I almost don't hear Tasleem's question.

“Is this really how you feel?”

“It was just a dream,” I sigh. “I jazzed it up so it read like a drama. But that’s just... creative licence?”

Tasleem nods.

“I remember the dream. You had it often when you were younger.” She turns the page and points to the rationale. “I mean this part. Is it true? Do you really feel like this?”

I say nothing.

“I’m sorry, Adara. That you never got to meet him. That I can’t speak of him without breaking down.” Tasleem pinches the bridge of her nose. “He was the best man I knew. Nobody could compare.”

Most of this I’d figured out myself. We’ve never met any of Tasleem’s boyfriends. Not even Tariq’s father measured up to Andrew. If he had, he’d be in our lives right now. If something is going on between her and Alex, it’s probably just physical. He’s more than ten years her junior; perhaps that’s the appeal?

I lift the affronting page from the coffee table and fold it into quarters. I didn’t mean for my mother to see it. Because of this assignment, I’m finally able to start grieving my father. I won’t apologize for this. I don’t regret writing it, I only regret leaving it open on my desk for her to find.

“Did you ever think what it must do to me? To look into your eyes each day and see him? My God, you look just like your dad.”

Maybe she’s right. I missed a man I didn’t know. I have no memories with him, but Tasleem must have thousands. She’d made plans that never came to fruition, watched a life crumble before her eyes.

“You can’t submit that, Adara. Please, don’t.”

“But then I won’t have anything to hand in tomorrow.”

Tasleem sighs. She looks at her wristwatch and gets up.

“Can’t I just give it to Arendse and ask that she not share it with the class?”

Tasleem sidles up to the door. She grabs the handle of her suitcase and wheels it in front of her. The disconsolate smile she wears doesn’t suit her; it makes me think there are cracks in her soul no plaster could fill.

“Right. Submit it if you must. I’m flying to the other side of the world while my family stays behind, so I’m hardly in a position to judge you.” She opens the door, then turns to me before walking out. “I suppose you learnt that from me. To put work before family.”

“Mom,”

“Adara, I’m going to be late for my flight.”

“*Tannie*, please.”

“Goodbye, Adara.”

Just like that, my mother’s gone. I sit quietly, listening to her footsteps recede. Then I crumple my assignment, hurl it across the room.

This is the second project in a row I’ve fucked up now. I wonder if Arendse would understand why I couldn’t share my work with the others. Would she have any sympathy left for the student who started a food fight that nearly destroyed her class?

I wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t.

I send Arendse an email, asking if it would be okay if I didn’t share my assignment with the rest of the class. She gives me a call ten minutes later.

“Adara, I’m concerned,” she says. “You did very poorly on the *Erotica* assignment and now you don’t want to submit this one for feedback. How do you expect to grow as a writer if you don’t know how people feel about your work?”

My phone feels clammy against my cheek.

“Professor, I’m sorry. My mom—”

“Is Tasleem Carlisle, yes. I’m aware. That might’ve counted for something at med school, but it means nothing in my class. Adara, you either submit this piece of writing, or you fail the assignment.”

I can’t speak.

“Adara, it’s a good piece of work. What are you so worried about?”

“Professor,”

“Yes?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Can I just submit something else, please?”

She’s silent while she considers.

“You have until tomorrow.”

Arendse cuts me off when I start thanking her.

“And Adara,” she sighs, “it had better be good.”

Redoing a project I’ve poured such thought and effort into, grates my soul, but I can’t disappoint Tasleem. Arendse doesn’t reply to my email, so I’m not sure my second attempt’s any good. I think she’s losing her patience with me. It’s been downhill ever since that cake fight. To be honest, I’m pissed she’d think I’d want preferential treatment because of who my mother is; I thought I’d left that shadow in medical school. The Carlisle burden’s a heavy one.

I don’t think writing about my father was a waste of time. Even if I don’t hand the assignment in, I’m glad Arendse got to read it. The exercise has brought me peace.

In the days that followed, I began to think of another incident I’d been unable to deal with: the New Year’s Party with Alex more than a year ago. The events of that night were locked in a vault so deep and dark, I’d been afraid to even approach the door. Then last night, while most of my classmates were out for pre-exam celebrations, I stayed in, made myself a pot of coffee, and wrote for eight straight hours.

I wrote about the days leading up to the party, the actual party, and the months following it.

My hands were shaking so badly by the end, and it had nothing to do with caffeine. It’s during the re-read that my panic set in. While I was thankful the trauma was nested in these pages, my journal – more than ever before – was now a timebomb. The idea to fit it with a lock crosses my mind, but that would only make it look more suspicious. So I stuff the leather-bound book into my satchel, shoving it between a novel and pencil case.

If Tasleem reacted so badly to two pages of my writing, I hate to think what would happen if she ever got her hands on my journal. There are things inside my diary even a Catholic priest would lose sleep over.

If I was worried about someone finding it before, there’s no way I’m letting it out of my sight now.

After the late night I’ve had, I could sleep for a year, but the phone wakes me. I’ve already decided to kill the person on the other side by the time I reach it.

“Hello?” I croak.

“Hey. Sorry for calling on a Saturday. I’d like to speak with Tasleem please.”

The kitchen clock reads 8. Jesus. Why not email or try her cell?

“She’s not here. Who’s calling?”

There’s a stifled sigh.

“It’s Munashe.”

I remember the name from a card Tasleem had received on her birthday last year. It was delivered along with chocolates and white roses. Despite feeling like my brain has been through a meat grinder, I soften.

“You sent her the white roses. This is Adara, her daughter.”

“Adara! How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. Have you tried my mom’s email? Her cell?”

Even if he has, it’s about 2am in Washington right now. She would be asleep.

“She promised to lend me a textbook for the exam on Monday. She marked off some sections in it.”

I frown. Even if Tasleem was in a rush to get to her conference this week, she would have left a note for me regarding something like this. She wouldn’t leave a student in the lurch.

“Adara, you still there?”

“Sorry,” I say. “Let me check her office.”

Because she sometimes keeps patient folders inside her study, I must find the key before I can enter. Munashe says the book’s title is *Neuroscience: Understanding the Brain*.

“Author is A. Brooke. Or Brookes,” he says. “Cover’s like a light-ish blue.”

“Hmm...” I examine the books on Tasleem’s desk. Everything’s so neat and that makes things harder to find somehow. I try the drawers; they’re both locked.

“Is it a thick book? Thin book? Hard cover? Paperback?”

Munashe laughs nervously.

“I have no idea.”

I turn my mother’s study inside out, to no avail. An hour later, I find the book on the passenger seat of Tasleem’s Pajero. Munashe tries very hard not to cry on the phone, so great is his relief. He’s got the kind of gratitude that made you grateful for having helped someone.

“I’m still on call but I’ll be done in the next two hours,” he says. “I’ll pick it up from you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “I need to be in town this morning. It’s on my way.”

I don’t need to be anywhere this morning, but Tasleem doesn’t abandon her students. Things don’t just slip her mind. Something else is going on. I’m determined to find out what.

The last three years have not altered the hospital. It's exactly as I remember it, with almost the same staff complement. After I dropped out, I couldn't bear the looks of disappointment on everyone's faces, so I made the exit as quietly as possible, without a single goodbye.

The receptionist comes out from behind her desk to embrace me, and I get the same response from the nurses I bump into. I recall their names with surprising ease, but cringe each time they call me Dr Carlisle. Maybe they missed the memo; I don't have the heart to correct them.

"I'm just dropping this off for Munashe." I strain my wrist to hold up the book. It's an 800-page tome with about seventy coloured tabs sticking out of it.

"Okay, *nana*," Precious, the nurse behind the reception desk, says. She's a solid woman with shimmering cheekbones and three epaulettes on her shoulder. "I will send him a WhatsApp message, and then tell him you were here."

She scribbles Dr Godwe on a yellow post-it, then starts rambling on about Tasleem.

"I miss her too, Precious," my reply's automatic.

"You miss her?" Precious puts her fist on her hip, aghast. "Isn't she on leave now? *Haibo*. She must spend her leave with her children."

Precious is *tsk*-ing behind the counter, unaware of how fast my mind's working right now. As far as I know, conferences don't fall under leave periods. While I'm thinking of a suitable way to ask for the roster, someone walks up and slams a clipboard on the counter. Even with hollowed cheeks and puffy eyes, I recognize my old friend.

"Naeem?" I say.

I feel as though he would hug me, but chooses to maintain a professional distance.

"Adara!" He straightens up, his smile very welcoming for someone who's probably worked back to back shifts. "I last saw you at the gallery!"

"Thank you for coming." I mean it. He was one of my few medical school friends who showed up. "You looked good on graduation day." Then, because I can't resist, I add, "Glad to see you're wearing pants with no rips in them now – very profesh."

Naeem raps his knuckles on the counter.

“*Jasso*,” he laughs, “I hoped everyone had forgotten about that. You still have a brain that remembers every detail!”

“Nothing escapes me,” I smile. “You busy with internship now?”

“Yes. The Zuma years.” Naeem rolls his eyes. “Barely touching ground. I would hug you, but I feel like *smet* after 30 straight hours. *Kasam*, you made the right decision to quit while you had the chance.”

Down the corridor, another old face appears. Clarissa. She was my mentor in first year. She looks impeccable, not haggard like so many other doctors working in public hospitals. She’s dressed from head to toe in the type of clothing Tasleem bought before she started paying off my med school debt. She’s probably a consultant now. Her thin-lipped smile smothers any urge I have to hug her.

“This area’s only open during visiting hours.” She points to the board, “Between one and two this afternoon.” Clarissa’s curt tone borders on rudeness. She turns to Naeem. “Dr Marsh, you’re off shift. You should be gone already.”

“I was just catching up with Adara.”

“There’s a cafeteria for that. Only doctors – you know, the people who made something of their lives – are authorized to be here outside of visiting hours.”

Naeem bristles. He looks ready to say something, but I gently shake my head.

I watch Clarissa fill some forms. She gives Precious instructions without a single please-and-thank-you. This is a doctor whose title has made her head grow three times its size.

“Nice to see you’re still so humble after all these years,” I say.

Precious pinches her lips and Naeem snorts. For someone who’d been so tired he could have collapsed on the floor, he seems rather alert now. Clarissa’s eyes flash.

“Clary, you don’t have to be a doctor to be a success. Adara made close to R70 000 in one evening at her art show,” he says. “But you wouldn’t understand. Only cultured people get it.”

Clarissa stomps down the hallway. Once she’s turned a corner, Precious, Naeem and I have a good laugh.

“Baby T says you’re doing so well with the art thing,” Naeem says. Precious hits him across the knuckles with her ballpoint pen.

“*Haai wena*, you’re not supposed to call her that in front of anyone!”

Naeem winces. While he rubs his hand, he explains how Tasleem got this nickname. She’s the youngest head of neurosurgery in the hospital’s history – something her team is incredibly

proud of – and they started calling her Baby T because of it. Precious leans in, casts a furtive glance over her shoulder, and whispers,

“A lot of colleagues don’t like her. They jealous because *uMama* Carlisle is very good, and she’s so young still!”

They go on to tell me she’s the first HOD under fifty.

“We’re not supposed to do it in front of anyone, but you’re literally family, so.” Naeem grins.

This makes me smile. There was a serious breach of privacy the last time I saw Tasleem. Our communication’s been choppy during the week, but it’s times like these I’m so proud of my mother I could burst. I don’t like thinking of Tasleem as a prodigy; the idea that she was born with something more than other people, seems to lessen her achievements. But I suppose it’s true: she’s always been exceptional. It’s also why her blunder – falling pregnant with me – was a mistake beyond Hoosain’s forgiveness.

Naeem walks with me.

“Shit. How you guys coping with these student protests at Main Campus?” he asks.

“They’ve amped up the security here at the hospital.”

I make a face.

“Things are okay for now, but it’s on and off, you know?”

I’m surprised when he tells me he read the article written by Oliver. I’m also reminded, once again, that I still need to get myself published. Our discussion about the protests and their destruction, is a depressing one, and he changes the topic as soon as he can.

“Hey,” Naeem clicks his fingers, “do you remember that time we spent three hours observing that tumor removal? It must have been our first laparotomy.”

“Wasn’t that with Dr Sigwela?”

Naeem laughs.

“We stood, like *doose*, for three hours,” he says, holding his hands, palm up, as if waiting for someone to place a baby in his arms.

“And Dr Sigwela rubbed blood all over our clean gloves at the end–” I say.

“*There, now you can send your girlfriend a cool pic.*”

Naeem does an uncanny impersonation.

“You know what? I got to do that to some third years last week. Wish you could’ve seen their faces.”

I bump my shoulder against his, not sure if I'm more aghast or proud.

"By the way," I say, "What you said to Clarissa earlier on – thank you. You really didn't have to."

Naeem shrugs.

"That look on her face was something else. She can dish it out, but she can't take it."

"However," I raise my index finger. "You said I made almost seventy thousand, which is correct. But you forgot to mention it took months and months of prep to organize that evening. Those pieces didn't spring up overnight."

Naeem considers this.

"Meh," he shrugs, "*she* doesn't need to know that." He touches my arm lightly. "Adara,"
"Yes?"

Naeem struggles for a moment. It seems like he has something important on his mind. I give him a minute.

"I feel like this is coming three years too late, but I just wanted to say, it's unfair, how people treated you after you left. How they started a new group chat and removed you from our Facebook page. I heard about the poetry evening thing as well." Naeem lowers his head and fiddles with the lanyard around his neck. "That was *poes kak*, man. You won't get an apology from half those assholes, but I'm very sorry they did that."

My ostracism from the medical community was something I'd expected. Not that that made it any easier to deal with.

"Don't forget about the whole AP funding thing," I say. "I'm sure that also contributed to their hatred. By the way, *I'm* so sorry they put you in mainstream."

Naeem bats it off. He's being kind, I know. His fiancée stayed in the AP stream. That couldn't have been easy.

"I think medical students are just high strung in general," he tells me. "Then there's you, who always dealt so well with stress and excelled at everything. I think people resented you because to some of them it looked as though you were handed everything. Like, daughter of the consultant... the professor. Of course, you had an edge," Naeem sighs. "Most of us would've given anything to be in your position. To throw it all away seemed... wasteful. Selfish? And that wasn't fair on you."

The unexpected revelation floors me.

"You didn't shun me for my decision, Naeem. You have nothing to feel bad about."

He squeezes my hand.

“Also, with you gone, there was no one to help us prep for tests. You kept us on our toes. And for what it’s worth, I think most of your friends just missed you too much to contact you afterwards.”

When he’s not looking, I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye. I didn’t know how much I needed to hear this until now. Three years too late is better than never. I thank him for telling me.

We pass Tasleem’s room on the way to the cafeteria. One of the many perks of being head of department, Naeem tells me, is the ridiculously spacious office upgrade.

“Oh, I’d love to see it,” I say. “Too bad I don’t have the key.”

Naeem arches a brow.

“Sure you do,” he says.

He eyes the bunch of keys in my hand; I hadn’t noticed the small golden one. My spine prickles.

“I’m sure she won’t mind if her daughter had a poke around,” he says. “You know not to look at patient folders and blah blah blah.”

“Now that I think about it, she did lend one of my novels. Can’t find it anywhere.”

Naeem nods. I’m surprised by how easily I cook up stories. This writing class was improving my ability to process trauma, but it was also turning me into a liar.

“Go look. She’s probably left it there or,” Naeem takes the keys from me and holds up the long steel one. “You can try her locker. It’s just down the hall to the left.”

We make plans to have coffee, then he’s gone. I’m left standing in front of the frosted glass door, inhaling the familiar smell of disinfectant. My mother was supposed to be on leave, Precious said. I weigh my curiosity up against my guilt.

She did read my work without permission, I think.

I slip the key in and turn the doorknob until there’s a sharp click.

The first thing I hear is running water. I’m searching for an open tap when I spot the water feature: a long pool running along the side of the entire office. It’s filled with natural pebbles, various floating flowers and other leafy aquatics. Near the edge are a pair of white bath slippers and a rolled up towel. No doubt Tasleem dips her feet in this pond after a long shift. Her desk is a deep brown, and almost sterile in its unclutteredness. The rest of the room is the same: not a hair out of a place.

I sit down on the fold out leather couch and admire the rows of books on her shelf. I'm disappointed that there's no laptop or openable drawers on her desk. Her slippers and the electric pink orchid are the only traces of Tasleem in the room.

I'm not sure what I'd expected to find. My mother wasn't stupid enough to leave anything lying around, not after she'd caught me with that photo more than a decade ago. As I'm stretching out on the couch, my eye falls on something black tucked behind a throw pillow. Thinking it's probably one of Tasleem's coats, I pick it up. The jersey is two sizes too big for Tasleem, the cologne clinging to it, distinctly male. If the rolled neck collar and overlarge buttons weren't enough of a giveaway, tucked inside the pocket I find a carton of cigarettes – Marlboro Blue. I didn't know Alex had taken up smoking again. I drape the cardigan neatly over the couch but pocket the menthol cigarettes. Maybe this is why I haven't seen him around much – they've moved their affair to the office.

Once I've locked her room, I make my way to the corridor Naeem indicated. Several silver lockers line the walls and I struggle to find 112. My heart's pounding by the time I locate it in the corner, my fingers trembling as I insert the key. I get it on the third try; it takes one firm tug before the door opens. The inside is filled to the top with papers, files, books, CDs, DVDs. I remove them all, dusting spiderwebs off as I go along. Everything smells musty. If there were ever photographs in here, they've probably started disintegrating already. Once every item is lying on the floor, I admit defeat. There's nothing inside. No sign of my mother's life before she had me.

As I start repacking the locker, my fingers brush something on the bottom. It looks like the base of the locker's been removed. I tap my knuckles against the bottom and hear a dull, plastic thud. Whatever's lying there, has been jammed into the space. In my struggle to dislodge it, my finger catches on the metal frame – my hand comes away with a chipped nail, but this doesn't deter me.

While I try to pry the plastic loose, another doctor walks into the corridor. He nods at me but is too tired to concern himself with the detritus at my feet. With his head bowed, he retrieves a wallet and keys before slinking off.

Just as I'm starting to wonder whether whatever's beneath this locker is worth losing my hand over, the plastic breaks loose and I'm clutching the lid of a pink lunchbox. There's a faded picture on the front: Tinkerbell. I barely make out her wings. This was the lunchbox I used in pre-school. Why had Tasleem kept it? I stick my hand inside the box and pull out a small, thick book.

It looks the worse for wear, but her name's still visible in blue ink: Tasleem Mowzer. I stare at the surname a long time; I'd almost forgotten her maiden name. It's a black, A6 book, the kind the tuckshop lady at school used to write orders in. Cheaply made, yet sturdy. I flip through, stopping when a drawing of an elaborate lotus flower catches my eye: it spans two pages, and there are intricate swirls, and dots in every petal. Even in plain blue ink, the skill is obvious. I run my fingers over it, feeling the raised edges of a heavy-handed artist. Tasleem never told me she could draw.

I flip to the front and pause on an earlier page. No drawings this time, just writing. In a tilted, but enviably controlled cursive, I read:

Assisted with surgery today. Only two hours, but my arms were so lame, I dropped them and almost got a needlestick. AIDS patient. I panicked and a consultant saw me crying near the sharps bin a few minutes later. He was so sweet, checked my hand thoroughly to make sure the skin hadn't been pierced. Usually consultants have this superior attitude, but not him. Even bought me a chocolate to calm my nerves. It's difficult studying medicine. Having brown skin means I need to constantly prove myself, but today was a good day. I think I'll slip a thank-you note in that consultant's pigeonhole. People are so nice here. I think I'm going to enjoy this block.

Some part of me knows – is acutely aware – of the treasure I've stumbled upon, but I cannot linger. If someone who knows Tasleem spots me, there could be an ugly confrontation when she gets back. I put the lid on the box and shove everything else back the way I'd found it, even angling the files at a perfect 45 degrees on top of the pile. Unless Tasleem dusts for fingerprints or keeps a log of all the spiders that have taken up residence in locker 112, she'll never know I was here.

On my way out, I run into a friend of Tasleem's. For a doctor, Isabella's got an unusually warm personality, but this made sense when I found out she was a paediatric specialist. She's carrying a silver thermos as she strides up to me.

"Hey, doll!" She presses her cheek to mine and gives me a one-armed hug.

"Good morning, Dr Fresnae."

"I've told you not to call me that!" She laughs, and we have the usual chit-chat before she asks me why I'm visiting. "Your mom's not here as far as I know. I hope you weren't looking for her."

I squint into the sunlight.

“No, just dropping a book for a reg who’s writing this Monday.”

Isabella tucks her short blond hair behind her ear and takes a step towards the door.

“That’s sweet of you.”

“My mom promised to get it to him—”

“But then she decides to cash in on her leave. Typical Carlisle.” Isabella clicks her tongue in that mothering way. “She’s doing a great job though, so of course her team was willing to give her the break. She’s put Dr Oscar in charge and he’s coping just fine.”

This is the second person to tell me my mother’s off *on leave*. No one has mentioned anything about an emergency conference. I try to phrase my question as tactfully as possible.

“My mom’s not supposed to be working while on leave, right. No research? No conferences? I’m just making sure. Need to keep tabs on that one,” I laugh, touching her arm.

Isabella puts a hand on mine.

“Oh, heavens, no! Please make sure she’s enjoying herself.”

The smile I show her bears no trace of my inner turmoil. I pat the little book in my breast pocket. We say goodbye, but she turns around to holler across the parking lot as I reach my car.

“One of your pieces still hangs in my office! It’s a watercolour!” she says. “Please let me know when you’re selling again?”

I blow her a kiss.

Arendse’s exam is on Monday, but I can’t study knowing I’ve found my mother’s journal. I was hoping to find photos of my father, but the discovery I’ve made will trump even an entire family album.

When I first set foot inside my mom’s office today, I expected to perhaps find a drawer filled with cards from a lover. A photo or two. Anything too incriminating to leave lying around the house. Instead I’ve stumbled upon a book that contains the answers to questions I’ve never been brave enough to ask. The journal entries are from the 1980s, which predates my birth. With any luck, there might even be a passage or two about Andrew in it. All I know for sure is that this is the only remaining artefact from my mother’s old life besides the photo of my dad. There’s a reason it’s survived all these years at the bottom of a locker.

Why had Tasleem kept it?

Why had she taken such pains to ensure it was never found?

I won’t sleep until I’ve read every word.

It's still dark when I pull up on campus.

The rain sounds like hailstones against my car. Having spent all weekend dissecting Tasleem's journal, I remained oblivious to the gathering clouds. I'm blindsided by the storm. There's half an hour before Arendse's exam. If I don't push what I've discovered in that journal from my head, there's no way I'll make it through this semester.

As I walk up the stairs, I pull my parka tight around my body. I couldn't find my boots this morning and settled for sneakers instead; the wind climbs under my jeans, teasing my bare ankles. I tossed out half my room for a pair of secret socks that barely cover my toes. Winter always comes too soon in Cape Town.

There's a crackling fire in the Write Room when I arrive. The trestle table is flipped on its side and the pillows and beanbags line the perimeter, allowing space for neat rows of desks and chairs. Instead of harsh, florescent lights, our chandelier casts a warm glow over everything. This is, without question, the most comforting exam venue I've seen. Of the six students present, only Kaanitah's claimed her desk, the rest are revising on the floor. Dressed in a beanie, scarf and fingerless mittens, she's well kitted out for winter.

"Give me Arendse's five basic rules for writing a story?" Kaanitah says, turning her head to the person on the floor directly below her. Her eyes scan the page as she sips at her steaming mug.

"Um... *gripping opening*. You need to grab the reader while you still have a chance," Oliver replies. Nabeelah's leaning against his shoulder, a large, ornate pashminah covering her from chin to waist like a makeshift duvet. I think she's asleep until she speaks.

"Is that the first one?" Nabs asks, frowning.

"What? Yes, I'm sure."

When they start arguing, I pick a seat on the other side of the room. If there are five principles for writing a story, this is the first I'm hearing of them. Must've been in Arendse's notes. Thank God this exam isn't theory-based. The journal entries I've been making have grown more damning in the last few weeks, but they've helped me rack up invaluable hours of practice. The 200 or so pages I've penned thus far would have prepared me well. I hope.

While the students trickle in, I take out my iPad and start reading through some of the best pieces of writing from this semester. I look up when I hear the commotion.

“I told you! *I told you!*” Kaanitah screams. She’s jabbing her fingers at Ollie and Nabeelah as she does a jig. “Come on! Pay up!” Kaanitah, holds out her palms.

I watch Nabeelah and Oliver hand her two pink notes while she dances a hole in the ground.

Oliver drags his feet towards me. My red plush beanbag can’t fit two people, but this doesn’t prevent him from plonking down. Oliver shoves me off to the side before drawing me in for a hug.

“I just lost my lunch money over a stupid bet,” he groans. “Good thing I get one free meal from Kahve Corner per day.”

I open my mouth, but he talks over me.

“Your husband just walked in,” Oliver says, pointing his chin to the entrance. I don’t pick Zach out immediately. His dreadlocks are hidden beneath a cap and tucked into his coat.

“Zach’s not my—”

“You know how he wears those ridiculous flamingo shorts *all the damn time*? Well, Nabeelah and I were convinced he’d wear them right through winter. Kaanitah thought otherwise.” Oliver rolls his eyes. “His desire to keep warm cost us fifty bucks each.”

I laugh hard when I see he’s right. Zach and his flamingo shorts have become a running joke in the class. Some students think he washes them at the end of each day, while others believe he must own more than one pair. Today he’s dressed in a grey coat paired with black acid washed jeans. I frown and grin all at once; it’s unusual, seeing him in boots.

“I didn’t think he owned anything besides flip-flops,” I whisper.

Oliver slaps my forearm.

“Right! But look at him now. Sitting there—”

“Winter clothes make him look so serious,” I say.

“Go say hi?” Oliver re-opens his book. “I’ma stay here and brood. Can’t really stand the sight of him right now. Cost me fifty bucks.”

I put my tablet at Oliver’s feet and walk over to Zach. Who would have thought swapping a shorts for a coat and jeans could make someone seem so intimidating? He looks like some handsome stranger until I get close.

“Zach-ie...”

My voice cracks as I sing his name. I’m overcompensating for my nervousness, but I can’t help myself. He looks up, slowly lowering his book.

“Too cold for flip-flops and flamingos?” I wink. “Don’t think I’ve ever seen you in jeans.”

“Do my flamingos bother you?” His voice drops so low it’s unrecognizable; the rich timbre I love so much, sounds menacing now. “I don’t get why you’re so interested in my fucking fashion choices.”

“Zach—”

He raises his voice the way only theatre actors can.

“Worry about the fucking exam! Not my wardrobe, Adara!”

I blink, then walk back to my seat without a sound. No one in the room speaks or moves. With my back turned to Zach, I hear someone speak. It’s a second before I place the voice.

“Bruh, I know this is rich coming from me, but that was uncool,” Sebastian says. “You should apologise to Adara.”

Oliver tries to speak to me, but I grab my bag as Arendse enters with our exam papers. I’m at the front, trying to fish my student card from my purse, when Zach crouches before me. I’m unaware of my anger until he starts speaking and I throw my bag down next to him. When I think of the knock my new aluminium flask has taken, I flinch.

“Adara,” he says, all caution now.

Kaanitah comes up from behind. She touches my elbow.

“I’ll close your bag. Just go sit,” she says.

Arendse’s wearing a hoodie – the one article of clothing I didn’t think she owned – and black leggings. Without a lick of make-up on her face, she looks half-asleep. Most of the students have made themselves a hot drink and there are mugs and saucers stationed on desks. Asia and Wing have giant muffins beside their coffee, and I spot two croissants as well. Arendse couldn’t be less concerned with exam etiquette if she tried.

“Alright. You have three hours to give me two of your best stories.” She walks between the rows, clutching a tall glass mug. The smell of warm chocolate is mouth-watering. “Carefully read the instructions. This exam counts for twenty percent of your grade. Before we start, I’ll remind you that classes for this course continue until end of term.”

A few groans are heard.

“I’m aware most of you have to study for exams, so we’ll meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays for just an hour until the end.”

Arendse explains why this extra time is crucial. All my other courses ended last week, but Arendse’s syllabus is too big, so we need the extra contact time.

“Unless you’ve got an exam that clashes with our timeslot, you’ve got to be here.” Arendse raises her brows in warning. “Alright, good luck!”

Eight barely-legible pages stare back at me when I’m finished. Some of my friends would laugh if they saw this paper. Back at med school we used to compare handwriting, and it was a point of pride that I always had the neatest. That alone should have told me I wasn’t cut out to be a doctor. Arendse collects our scripts and disappears from the room before anyone can intercept her.

Oliver and Zach approach me at the same time. Zach hangs back, sheepishly rubbing the nape of his neck.

“Did you manage?” Ollie asks.

I nod, trying to ignore Zach’s presence.

“I was halfway through my second story when she called time. I think I’m going to finish it at home and then upload to the website.” Oliver says. When he hugs me, he whispers, “You’ll be okay? Nod once for yes, and twice if you want me to get rid of Zach for you.”

When we break apart, I nod once. The moment he leaves, I feel like I’ve made a mistake. I open my mouth to call him, but Zach is faster.

“Adara, I am so—”

I raise my hand. A few stragglers turn to look at us.

“I don’t know if you woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning,” I say, “but you don’t get to take it out on me.”

“Fine, yes. I agree with you. But—”

“No buts. You don’t get to talk to me like that, Zach.”

I flip my messenger bag closed and start towards the entranceway. Zach steps out in front of me. Kaanitah hangs back with Oliver, both poised to extract me from this conversation if I need them to.

“I’m ashamed that I snapped at you, okay? I feel like a dick.” Zach’s hands hover just above my arms; the fingers reach out, but don’t make contact.

“I’m not myself today. I—” Zach breaks off to look around. He’s searching for something, and his eyes are more restless than ever when they settle on my face. “Will you give me a chance to explain? Come with me and I’ll tell you everything.”

Zach reaches into his pocket and removes a bunch of keys. There’s a flamingo head dangling on the chain. In my peripheral vision I see Oliver punch Kaanitah on the shoulder. “He’s

still wearing a flamingo! You need to give me half my money back. Come, twenty-five rand,” Oliver demands. I don’t think Zach hears them. I eye the keys.

“Where are we going?” I ask, unaware that I’ve agreed.

“Somewhere. But first,” Zach smiles until those familiar dimples appear, “don’t I still owe you a coffee?”

Chapter 9

The Detour

I try not to freak out when Zach opens the door to a red Range Rover. It's big and beautiful, and we took one similar to this for a test drive three years ago. We would have gotten it too, had it not been for my sudden career swap. I love the cream-and-black colour scheme inside. Beneath the familiar scent of coffee, I detect wintergreen and the ghost of new-car-smell. The SUV has a dual-screen system between the seats; it tilts toward Zach when he turns it on.

"Sorry, can't adjust anything once I'm driving," he says, slipping his coffee into the designated compartment between us. There's already an empty ceramic mug in the other cupholder, so I can't put my drink down.

The radio comes on in the background; it plays an unfamiliar, slow song. His long fingers go tapping across the screen, and soon a comfortable heat seeps into my parka. I close my eyes and stretch out.

"Not too warm?" Zach asks, strapping himself in.

"Hm?"

"You alright?"

I nod, running my hands across the leather dashboard. "This one's got the electronic air suspension." It's a comment, not a question. "Firenze red is my favourite."

Zach tilts his head to me.

"You know a lot about my car."

I bite my lip.

"Only because my mother is obsessed with Range Rovers. We would have bought this one, but it was a bit out of her price range after I fucked up."

Zach gives me a blank stare.

"We were deep in debt when I dropped out," I say. "Was on a bursary before, and she's still paying it off now."

Zach's unfazed by the overshare and backs out of the parking bay quite easily. I wonder if he'd be able to use this park assist during a driving test, but I don't ask. I'm supposed to be angry with him, yet I can't remember what for.

He takes his beanie off and asks me to put it in the cubby, where I find another mug, a bag of coffee grounds, and a tiny Nanopresso. I know it's called that because Tasleem was recently gifted one.

"I didn't know writing for a magazine paid this well," I say.

Trying to keep my hands in my lap and not run my fingers over every visible surface, seems impossible.

"It doesn't," Zach snorts. I barely feel it when we pick up speed. The wheels on this thing absorbs all the shock. "Was a gift from my dad."

At this point I remember my own car is still parked in an unmarked bay. Alex told me they don't ticket after 2pm, but I won't be surprised if my car is plastered with white slips by the end of the day.

"What's the matter?" Zach asks.

"Just thinking of the fine I'm going to have later. I'm parked illegally." I quickly add, "Not your fault."

"I'll bring you back as soon as I can."

He still hasn't told me where we're headed and turns up the radio when I ask. I reach for the dial and turn it down again.

"When's your next exam?" Zach asks.

"Only Friday."

It's an art practical, and I'll be fine if I get a proper night's rest before. Tasleem and Tariq should be home by then.

"I didn't even think of that. Don't want to keep you from your studies."

I turn my head to look out the window. The tint on his car is deeper than the one on mine. We pass several shops on Main Road, then continue towards Kirstenbosch and beyond. The trees grow denser on the sidewalks until there's forest on either side of us. The storm has deepened the green of every shrub and patch of grass. I don't have to roll down my window to know what it smells like.

"How cool is Arendse for letting us eat and drink during her exam?" Zach says. "I wish all my lecturers could be like her."

"I hope my exam can make up for almost trashing her class."

Zach raises a brow.

"Almost?" he asks.

We take a sharp bend, and I hold my coffee aloft.

“I can’t believe you have a coffee maker in your car. My mother doesn’t even let me drink in hers.”

Zack throws me an amused glance.

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll spill this?” I raise my cup.

“If it spills on the seats, no biggie – wipes right off.” Zach lowers the gear as we climb a steep hill. “If it spills on the carpet, that’ll be trickier to remove. But,” Zach stares into the rear-view mirror, “at this angle it’ll probably spill on you, and that’s as good an excuse as any to lose some of those layers.”

My mouth opens dumbly. I know he can see my expression by the grin on his face.

“Sorry, I’m just saying what every other guy in class was thinking when they saw you today.”

Heat creeps into my face until I’m sure my ears are red. I can think of nothing to say, so I peer out the window again. Too afraid to drink my coffee, I hold it until the car stops moving. Zach pulls into a roadside café, and an old woman minding a flower stall, waves to him. All his playfulness has vanished now.

“Is this the place? The thing you wanted to show me?” I ask.

The old stone café looks gorgeous, and I know it’ll be warm within. Are we going to have brunch on the mountainside?

“This isn’t the place,” Zach murmurs. He leans over to retrieve the beanie while I try to pretend his elbow didn’t just brush my thigh. I don’t think he realises what he’s done either. He rubs his nose with his knuckles, much the same way I’ve seen Tasleem do when she’s trying not to cry.

“Who is she?” I ask. “The woman who broke your heart?”

My heart thumps irregularly while I wait for his answer. I recall the day he was unable to finish a writing activity because he’d already lost the thing that mattered most to him. I’m not sure why I make the connection between that day and this moment. But I hope I’m wrong. I hope no one’s ever broken his heart. I hope he’s still a whole human being without fractures. But I’ve read his work. You can’t write the way Zach does without having bled.

“You really wanna know who she is?” Zach turns his beanie over in his hands.

I nod.

He puts on his cap and opens the door.

“Okay,” he says, climbing out. “Wait here and I’ll take you to her.”

There’s a bouquet of rain-splattered begonias resting in my lap as we set off to meet the woman responsible for Zach’s outburst this morning. I can’t say I like this. Sure, the guy seated beside me has an air of mystery about him, but I’m not so desperate to learn his secrets that I’d suffer through small talk with an ex. Why would he be buying flowers for someone who broke his heart? The heat is turned down, so the petals won’t wilt. I take sips of my coffee to ease my nerves.

I could be warmly tucked in my bed, making up for all the sleep I lost this weekend, but instead I said yes to a suggestion made by someone who’d been unusually moody this morning. I’ve never been in love before and now I see why: love makes you do stupid things. If my mother could see me right now, she’d flay me.

“Wanna tell me what that cup did to you?” Zach asks.

I look down and see that I’ve crushed the empty paper cup.

“Just thinking.”

Zach casts me a sidelong glance.

“Listen,” Zach begins. “Thank you for coming with me. It takes a lot of trust to jump into a car with someone you know so-so.”

“What are we going to do anyway? Do you want to use me as a prop? You know, make this girl jealous?” I pat the pink begonias. “You probably shouldn’t have bought her flowers if you want to make her jealous. I don’t know much about these things, but I’m sure this is going to backfire if you give her these.”

Zach frowns.

“Wait, you think—” he breaks off when he sees how deadpan I look. Then he starts laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just wait. You’ll see.”

It’s another fifteen minutes of nauseating twists and turns before we get to a small stone cottage beyond a plain wooden gate. The gravel crunches under the Rover’s wheels as we climb the narrow path. Zach parks beside a fountain and he plucks the flowers from my lap.

We're greeted by a friendly woman behind the counter. I saw no signs on the way up, but the mismatched décor makes it feel like a bed and breakfast.

"Zachariah!" She comes round to the front. "I thought of you just this morning. How's your dad? The twins?"

Her name's Esme, and she's got flaming red hair that's been chopped short. When she kisses Zach, she grabs a tissue to remove the lipstick.

"They're good. Twins are growing so fast."

When the tissue won't remove her lipstick, Esme licks her thumb. I expect Zach to pull away, but he doesn't. I get the feeling this is a normal ritual for them.

"It's so wet outside. Are you sure you want to visit her today?" Esme says, glancing out the window while folding the lipstick-smearred tissue. "At least take an umbrella."

With a clear umbrella in one hand and the flowers in the other, Zach turns to me and introduces us.

"This is my friend, Adara."

Esme reaches out to shake my hand. Her blue eyes search my face.

"My, well there's a first time for everything I suppose," she says.

I'm too busy pondering over her cryptic comment to appreciate the rustic garden she has. I search for another cottage at the back, but there's only a stone wall. Zach unlatches the gate; the wood has swollen, so he gives it a firm shove with the hip.

"After you,"

I walk through, cringing as the grass and mud stick to my sneakers. Had I known we'd be hiking today, I'd have spent those extra few minutes searching for my boots. I'm cold, wet, and miserable at the thought of meeting a girl Zach clearly still has feelings for, but I must admit this place is beautiful. There are several flowering shrubs in the grove, and two horses grazing in the distance. I spot a statue of a prancing unicorn in the centre of a fountain. I also hear the croaking of frogs – there must be a natural stream nearby.

"This is a stunning place," I say.

He gives a forced laugh, stopping so suddenly that I nearly walk into him. I know what he's staring at long before I see it. The black marble looks ageless beneath the overhanging tree.

"Here she is," he says, stooping to place the flowers at the base of the stone. He stands up and puts a hand on it. "The woman who broke my heart."

Beloved Wife and Mother

Lisa Marie Vestey

5 July 1977 - 1 June 2004

Gone, but Never Forgotten

“It doesn’t feel like fifteen years since she died.”

Zach stares at the tombstone as if he’d never seen one before. Today is the anniversary of her death. I come to stand at his side.

“Your mom?” I ask.

We still hear the frogs in the distance.

“I was nine,” he says. “It was sudden.”

My question so soft, I hope he doesn’t hear.

“How?”

I stand closer to Zach, curl my arm around his.

“We went riding and her horse, it saw this thing. Snake, rat, I dunno...” Zach grows flustered trying to remember the animal that helped orchestrate his mother’s death. I squeeze his arm gently.

“It threw her onto a rock,” Zach says. “If she’d landed at a slightly different angle, she’d have been okay. Maybe just broken an arm. But her head took a knock. She never recovered.”

As we stand there, getting coated by a light drizzle, I wonder what type of woman Zach’s mother had been. For a son to be standing at her graveside fifteen years after her death, she must truly have left a mark on him. I wonder how many years it would take to recover from such a loss. Is recovery possible at all?

The storm we expect, never comes. Soon the sun streaks out from behind the clouds, making the fresh raindrops glitter. Lisa Vestey is the only person buried on this property, but I try not to ask too many questions. I just let Zach talk. He needs someone more than I need answers. We sit beneath a canopy on an old swing bench. Zach extends a leg and starts rocking us gently. From

here we can't see the gravestone anymore, but we've got a clear view of the brown horse and the spotted one.

"Did they crossbreed it with a dalmatian or something?"

Zach would have choked if he'd been drinking.

"I don't think it works that way," he laughs. "That's an Appaloosa."

Zach rode often as a child. I imagine he quit after his mother's death, but he did just the opposite.

"Riding was the one thing that made me feel close to her. There was not a chance in hell I'd give it up."

"Do you still ride now?" I ask, squinting through sunlight to admire the grazing horses.

Zach clenches his jaw.

"I had to quit when I got to matric."

There's a story behind it, but Zach jumps from the swing before I can ask him to tell me. Esme gives us a cookie each before we go. It's 3pm by the time we're on the road again. Before we hit Main Road, he gets a call from his brother who wants to know what's for supper. They have what sounds like an argument before he relents and agrees to get McDonalds.

"I'll just drop you off before I get their food," Zach says.

I stop him before he turns down Varsity Lane. I'm not ready to go home yet and two years of art school has made me impulsive.

"I like McDonald's too," I say.

Chapter 10

Beautiful Things

Tasleem taught me it's rude to gawk when you enter someone else's house.

I was five when my mother's colleague had us over for dinner. She was a wonderful woman and by far the richest person we'd ever met. Thinking back, the house wasn't anything fancy – just a two-bedroom affair with a kidney-shaped swimming pool in the garden. Though the place was small, it contained all the treasures of the world – more books than our entire house could hold, scatter cushions of different silks, and even a machine that growled while it dispensed coffee. But the thing that truly captured my heart, was an old wooden piano. It hadn't been tuned for years, but my mother couldn't tear me from it. I took my dinner sitting there and our host was too polite to scream when charred pieces of burger got mashed between the keys. Tasleem gave me an earful on the drive home. I could understand her outrage at the piano thing – having a conversation over the mangled chords of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* couldn't have been easy – but I'd been generous in my compliments all evening. I wanted our host to know how beautiful her home was; instead I'd succeeded only in making her uncomfortable, and my mother, embarrassed.

“Don't touch anything,” Tasleem had told me that evening. “You can smile, but if you see really nice things, just pretend they're not there.”

That was the first and last time we ever had dinner at that house. A child's heart is sometimes unjustly punished.

A winding road leads to Zach's home. I've driven past here on my own a couple times. It's a gorgeous drive by day, with the beach not far off, but these paths are treacherous at night. Only people who live here can properly navigate them.

We drive through a wooden gate and work our way up a steep, cobbled path. No matter how I squint, I see only the outline of trees against a star-splattered sky. The car stops in the middle of nowhere. Zach leans over to collect the remaining brown paper bags on the backseat. I follow close on his heels up a dimly-lit staircase.

“I'm now just realising how much I trust you,” I whisper. “We're in the secluded woods and I'm just blindly following.”

The staircase makes an abrupt turn and I throw my hand out; as I try to find purchase, my fingers wrap around his ponytail.

“Ow! Adara!” Zach anchors his feet. “If you pull one of these dreadlocks out, it’s not like a single strand. You nearly tugged a couple hundred hairs from my head.”

I can’t see his smile, but I hear it.

“Sorry...”

“No sweat,” he says. “It’s right up here. Three more steps.”

Zach takes out his phone when we reach the landing. The screen light is reflected in the door, and it dawns on me the reason I couldn’t see the house before. My own disbelief stares back at me.

“Your house is a mirror? Like the whole thing?”

Zach looks up from his phone, catches my expression in the door. He grins.

“At night it’s especially camouflaged.”

My mother thinks it’s rude to gawk when you enter someone’s home, but she didn’t say anything about not shining a light on it to get a better look. I wedge the brown bags under my chin and dig my own phone out to enable the torch. The light bounces off the house, briefly blinding me before I shine it away. The staircase is cut from black stone, while the structure looming overhead is all mirrored panels, glass, and more smooth black pillars and beams holding it together. It’s hard to tell where the house begins as the entire thing is fringed by trees and other shrubs. I even spot some King Proteas near the stairs.

“I didn’t know you could build this close to trees,” I say, shining my light higher. The black rock is dappled with red, making the house look like it’s covered in smouldering embers.

“What?” he asks, tapping away on his phone.

I rest my hand on a slender trunk in front of a window.

“The trees. I didn’t know you could build this near to them.”

Zach turns the door handle.

“You’re not meant to, but we built around the roots. That’s why the house has this weird shape.”

He takes the bags and gestures to the entrance.

As I cross the threshold, all Tasleem’s rules are left at the door. The house is even more beautiful inside. The mirrored theme continues in the kitchen, and I run my hands across every surface: the countertop, coffee maker, bowl of fruit, and the pile of books beside it. The industrial steel gives it the same urban feel that Kahve Corner’s famous for.

Zach sets the food down on the counter.

“Welcome to my ho—”

“It’s fucking gorgeous...”

The open-plan setup allows me to see into the lounge where Zach’s adjusting a control panel. The overhead lights dim, and the fire burns brighter behind its glass enclosure. Crackling wood draws me to the mantelpiece, where there are many framed pictures, though none of his mother or father. His twin brothers are fair-skinned, with brilliant green eyes. They have Zach’s sharp jawline, but nothing more. A stranger wouldn’t know they’re related.

“Your brothers are adorable,” I say, carefully returning the photo.

Zach snickers. “Reserve judgement until you meet them.”

He removes his beanie and shrugs out of his coat. It’s much cosier inside, so I unzip my parka and roll up the sleeves.

The lounge has muted peach walls, offset by burgundy couches and chocolate brown carpeting. Several exposed canvas paintings are mounted in the living area, with two still-life fruit studies in the kitchen. They’re unrefined pieces, but not without character. There’s a massive one – about 50 x 100 cm – of a galloping horse, with a white mane and kaleidoscopic, neon fur. I feel Zach standing beside me.

“Did you...?”

“No. That was Rowen,” Zach says. “School assignment. My dad outbid everyone at the exhibition to get it.”

I lean into the couch to perform a closer inspection. The horse is a riot of colour. At least six different brushes were used, and it’s hard to tell how many types of paints, and exactly which media. Some precision lines were done with the help of a paint maker. Up close, the mixture of metallics, acrylics, pastels and neons, make no sense, but they exist in perfect harmony when viewed from a distance. There’s an art professor at Reclove who’d have yelled ‘abomination’ and slashed a knife through the middle.

“I kind of love it,” I say.

Zach tells me his brother spent a whole summer drawing sketches of horses before filling a canvas with one.

“Looks like an albino horse had waded through a river of paint... and then just decided never to wash it off.” Zach says, tilting his head to the side.

I take out my camera, and Zach moves back, giving me room to frame the shot. Lights come on in my peripheral vision, but I ignore them while I focus on the painting. When I’m

satisfied with the pictures I've snapped, I walk towards the ceiling-to-floor glass door that opens onto an unexpected vista: flowers in bloom, lit-up along a wooden footbridge. There are hundreds of yellow, pink and red petals shivering outside in the breeze. The red flowers are elongated and tapered at the top.

"The reds look like spearheads," I remark. Then I try to open the door, but Zach bars the way with an arm.

"Let me disable the alarm first," Zach keys a 6-digit code into the system before sliding the panel open with his hand. The cool night air whips against my face. This sort of breeze is the kind that should sober you up, but I still feel as though I'm walking through a dream. I hear the door close behind me.

Zach catches up with a few long strides. He's rubbing his hands and blowing into them. Evenings are always chilly without the cloud cover.

"The long stems with the pink buds are rose spiderheads. And your red spears," he leans in and points towards the tall, swaying flowers, "they're rocket aloe."

Now that we're standing on the bridge and close enough to touch the shrubs, I realise there are two types of yellow flowers. One is a kind of daisy, but the other has petals that point skyward instead of out.

"That's a cone-bush, or golden tip," Zach says.

"And these are daisies, right? I thought they bloom in summer?" I point towards the familiar yellows.

"Nah, not daisies. But they look like them." Zack reaches out as if he would pluck one. "This is a tick berry," he says, looking from the bush back to me. "I almost forgot we're not allowed to pick them. They're all fynbos."

Of course. Fynbos is the belt of indigenous vegetation in the Western Cape. Zach says there are quite a few variants growing on the property. Unless you want a heavy fine, you don't touch them without a permit.

All the night sounds can be heard in the thin evening air: the breeze as it whistles through the branches above, the creak of wood beneath our feet, a mosquito buzzing near my head, and a cricket chorus loud enough to wake the neighbours on the other side of the mountain. Zach rubs his hands again, but I'm not yet ready to go in.

"Too cold to wear your flamingo shorts?" I raise a brow. "Am I allowed to ask about that now, or are you going to have a meltdown again?"

Zach lifts his palms. Sheepishly he looks down at his jeans.

“Far too cold for that. Must’ve been a shocker to see me in pants. I live in those shorts.”

I slap his shoulder with my knuckles.

“Exactly!” I say.

After a contemplative second, I come clean about Oliver and Kaanitah’s bet. Zach shakes his head, looking off into the fynbos. He stares so long and hard, I imagine he’s trying to set it alight. Maybe he is? After all, the flammable flora requires the occasional fire for regeneration.

“That’s why I came up to you,” I explain. “It’s weird seeing you in regular clothes. What’s with the flamingos?”

Zach grins like I’ve just delivered a punchline.

“I must say, I’m disappointed.” I run my fingers along the fleshy leaves of a rocket aloe. “This place is paradise... but I expected to see at least *one* flamingo prancing on your lawn somewhere.”

A dimple forms on Zach’s cheek.

“You know they’re wild animals, right?”

“Like one of those metal flamingos you can hammer into the earth. You must’ve seen them?”

Zach nods.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you.” Then after a beat, “Adara?”

“Yes?”

“How would you like to come to my room and see my flamingos?”

The mischief in his voice makes me look away.

“Is that a euphemism?” I ask.

“I meant flamingos,” he says. “But I like your idea better.”

We head back inside. Zach stops me when I try to go upstairs.

“The twins and my dad are upstairs. I’m in the basement.”

Zach leads me down a corridor lined with more framed artwork. There are multiple renditions of comic book characters down here, probably his brother’s earlier pieces – the talent is enviable, especially for such a young artist.

The wooden floor suddenly gives way to a large glass square in the centre of another living room. I tiptoe around the insert.

“My room is on the subterranean level.” Zach explains. He crouches beside the glass insert. “These window pockets allow natural light to shine through during the day.”

He jumps on the pocket to show me how strong it is, but I still walk around the second one we pass. A steel staircase leads to his room.

“You should get a tunnel like Arendse’s,” I say, bending my head to peer into the room before we’ve reached the ground. Then I want to take back the words. There’s yet another crackling fireplace down here, and it stands in the centre of the room. The floor-to-ceiling glass box separates the study from his bedroom. Everything looks warm, luxurious.

Zach scrambles to pick clothes off the floor, then disappears through the bedroom and into the en-suite bathroom. Aside from the misplaced sock or hoodie, he keeps a neat office. Desktop and bookshelves on one side, fish tank on the other end, and – I jump when I see it – an imposing suit of armour in the corner. Zach turns on the light and apologises for not warning me. Complete with sword and helmet, the gleaming suit stands on a platform and nearly touches the low ceiling.

“Have you ever worn it?” I ask.

“Never. It’s a family heirloom. Mum brought it with her from England.”

I look at Zach like I’m seeing him properly for the first time. Now I understand why his brothers look nothing like him – they must resemble their mom.

“I’m half European,” Zach says, “and half, a bunch of other things.”

Zach takes me through to the bedroom, where there’s a double bed covered in plain white sheets and not much else. No television even. Zach presses his hand against a wooden panel in the wall. There’s a soft click before the door opens. He waves me over.

He points to a rack on the left inside the walk-in closet. When I see it, I hardly believe it: about forty pairs of identical flamingo shorts are neatly pressed and hanging on the rail. It’s how I imagined Mickey Mouse’s closet when I was a kid.

I look at the rail, then back to him, dumbstruck. The shorts are all the same size and style – blue, with small pink birds. I run my fingers over them.

“It was a prank one year – Rowen and Owen’s birthday gift to me.”

“Why *flamingos* of all things? Couldn’t they have chosen lions or cheetahs?”

“Long story,” Zach tilts his head towards the door. “C’mon, let’s go have supper.”

I pause at the suit of armour on the way up. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen one. Zach loosens the scabbard and unsheathes the sword. I try to take a swing but can’t even lift it off the

ground. The most I can do is drag it across the floor. The pointed tip leaves a thin scratch in the varnish.

“Thing weighs a ton!” I grunt, standing on the slash I’ve made.

“Right? No wonder so many people perished in battle! Not sure how you run in these things, never mind fight with them.”

While Zach puts the sword back, I walk over to his desk. There’s a calligraphy set with some parchment beside the computer. I’ve used fountain pens before, but it’s the first time I’m seeing a real dip pen. He’s even got a wax sealing kit.

“Do you know how to use these?” I ask, holding up a nib.

“Takes a bit of practice. My mum was a pro.”

I try lifting the penholder in the shape of a miniature castle, but accidentally tip it over. A shiny object rolls out across the table. Zach drops the sword and catches it before it hits the ground.

“What was that?” I ask, righting the holder.

Zach holds the silver object in the centre of his palm. It’s a ring with a modest ruby at the centre. A feminine design, beautiful in its simplicity.

“This is a good story,” he says. I try to take the ring, but his hands close over mine before I can get a proper look. “For another time, yeah?”

“Is it an engagement ring? Are you proposing to someone?” I frown, staring at our clasped hands. I press the ring back into his palm.

Zach pockets it. “I already did.”

Had I observed the visitor’s etiquette Tasleem tried to instil in me as a child, we wouldn’t be in this mess now. The evening was going so well until I tipped that penholder over.

We head back up.

“Zach, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have touched your things.”

In a bid to reverse the dour turn of events, I tell him about what happened when I was five. My anecdote makes him chuckle. Maybe the evening isn’t completely ruined.

“I love beautiful things. Can’t help myself. If I see something pretty, I just want to touch.”

To demonstrate, I run my hands across the walls, the couches, the paintings lining the passageway. Our shoulders brush in the narrow corridor.

“See? There’re too many gorgeous things in your house!”

We emerge from the passageway and I'm struck by the beauty of the main living room again. I sit down, gaze out the sliding door, and wonder what lies beyond the footbridge.

"This view's something else," I say, slowly turning back to the glass fireplace. The flames burn a deep orange. "Even the fireplace is beautiful. I'd run my hands through it if I could!"

Zach scrunches his face

"Please don't do that."

I throw my head back and he appears upside down.

"Don't worry, I won't."

"Good. There are a hundred more interesting uses for those hands of yours."

My smile falters as I sit upright.

"I was talking about your writing," Zach says.

"Sure, let's go with—"

Two sets of eyes peer out from the kitchen counter. Zach sees them the same time as I do.

The twins look a few years older than the photos above the fireplace, their boyish features giving way to high cheekbones like Zach's. They're dressed in onesies: one is a Ninja Turtle, and the other is Batman. They stare at me like they've never seen a woman before. Batman's shoving chicken nuggets into his mouth while looking me up and down.

"Is she real?" he asks, pointing a half-eaten nugget in my direction. Zach picks up his beanie and walks over. When he's near enough, he flings it at Batman.

"Of course, she's real! I knew we should've sent you to a co-ed school." Zach turns to me and shrugs. "Sorry, Adara. They don't see many girls around here."

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" the other twin asks, setting down his burger and jumping off the chair.

I rise from the couch.

"This is Adara, my friend from uni," Zach says, setting a hand on my shoulder. "Adara, these are my two lovable, sometimes idiotic brothers. Ninja is Owen, and Batman is Rowen."

I shake two greasy hands and have the good grace not to immediately grab a paper towel.

"Pleased to meet you guys," I say. "Rowen, you're the one who did the paintings?"

Rowen nearly chokes on a nugget. He coughs, then takes a long slurp of cold drink.

"Yeah. You like 'em? You an artist?" His green eyes go a shade deeper.

Zach pulls up a chair for me.

“Thanks,” I say. “Yes, I am. I fell in love with the horse. Very interesting mixed media project.”

Rowen nods as he wolfs down his nuggets.

“Did you use watercolours in there as well? Is it a raw canvas?” I ask, turning around to take another look at the painting.

“I fucking love her,” Rowen tells Zach. Then he turns to me. “Sorry, I’m just so thrilled he finally took those shorts off. First day in a normal pair of jeans and already he’s got a girlfriend! Come, let’s talk art. I wanna show you the rest of my stuff.”

I raise my brows at Zach, feeling utterly terrified, but also quite thrilled by the warm reception from his brother.

“Where’s Tata?” I hear Zach ask Owen.

“Probably upstairs. Checked on him earlier, but he didn’t want any food.”

Zach’s eyes follow me as Rowen talks me through each of his paintings. My friend looks strangely sad.

Rowen has some progressive ideas on art, and it’s refreshing to talk to someone so young and passionate again, someone who hasn’t lost the ability to play around because they’re scared their professor will ridicule them. When Rowen tells me it’s his dream to get into Reclove, I make him promise he’ll remain as fearless as he is, even if someone threatens to take a knife to his work.

“Oh man, I *wish* someone did that to my art. Would give me an excuse to properly fuck them up!”

“Language, little heathen!” Zach’s rebuke comes from the other side of room. “If you’re lucky enough to get accepted, you won’t be fucking anyone up.” Zach walks over. “Least of all your lecturers. Right, Addy?”

I nod encouragingly.

“You mean I can’t get into *any* fights at art school?” Rowen arches a brow. “I thought it was supposed to be this melting pot of passion and culture. Surely debates can get heated.”

I purse my lips.

“Sure. But we should always remain civil,” I say. I look to Zach, silently asking for corroboration I know I won’t get; he’s biting his lip, already laughing.

“She’s totally lying,” Zach says. He leans in and whispers to Rowen. “She’s so good at handling heated debates, she threw a piece of chocolate cake in someone’s face – in class.”

I've never seen a more excited teenager. Rowen practically bobs up and down as Zach recounts the episode like only a skilled storyteller can. Even Owen is saluting me from the counter by the time he's done.

"Man, she's a motherfu—"

Zach clips Rowen's ear.

"Sorry. She's a mother *mm* badass."

I struggle not to laugh. Rowen begins tugging me in the direction of his other paintings, but Zach loosens his hand on my arm.

"It's waaay past your bedtime,"

"It's only seven!"

Zach isn't having it. He tells them to head to bed after supper. As we eat, I listen to Zach's brothers tell stories about him – all the embarrassing variety. How he fell from a horse when he tried to teach them how to ride, how he took a girl to a dance and wore mismatched shoes, how he tumbled from a tree while building a treehouse.

"He what?!" I cough.

"Did you guys really have to tell that one?" Zach groans. "I'm still paying those chiropractor bills!" He gives his cup a shake, then pulls the last Coke through the straw with a grimace.

"He misjudged the strength of this one branch, and the whole thing came crashing down." Owen says, in between bites of Big Mac.

Rowen points a French fry at Zach, who bites it clean off. "His leg was in a cast for two whole months."

"That's awful, Zach," I try to sound sympathetic, but end up laughing along with his brothers.

"You know how to arm the house from the inside?" Zach asks the twins. "I'll turn it off when I come back."

I'd almost forgotten he needs to take me home. I'm sad to leave so soon.

"Where you going?" Owen asks.

"Want to take Adara across the bridge. Get away from you two for a bit."

Rowen smiles. I don't miss the wink he gives Owen.

Zach grabs his coat and beanie. He turns to me.

"You ready?"

I get up.

“It was nice meeting you both,” I tell the twins. “Keep making your art, Rowen.”

The boys wave to me as we’re leaving. Zach and I are scarcely out the door when I hear one tell the other.

“Gonna put those hands to good use.”

Zach cringes as he slides the door closed behind us.

“Jesus, they heard the whole conversation,” he says, then starts a litany of apologies.

“They’re devilishly sharp and cheeky as hell!”

The temperature has dropped significantly since we were last outside, and I wrap my arm around Zach’s to keep warm.

“Do you need me to fetch you a blanket?” he asks.

I raise a brow.

“You’ll never hear the end of it if you go back to fetch a blanket.”

Zach’s laughter echoes through the trees.

We take a slow walk across the bridge. After almost being eaten alive by moths, Zach turns off the lights. Using the cool moonlight and Zach’s excellent knowledge of his own backyard, we make it safely to the other side, where the crickets’ song is replaced by the sound of running water.

“Wait, is that...?” I turn my head. “Do you have a spring on your property?”

“It’s a stream. I’ll show you.”

I’m still getting over the fact that Zach’s house has been built into the base of Table Mountain, when he tells me there’s a small river running through his property? I’m one of those people who still measured someone’s wealth by the existence of a swimming pool... I don’t even know where on the spectrum Zach falls.

As the sound of the water grows louder, Zach shines his torch onto the stream. It’s a shallow, fast-moving spring, filled with flat rocks. There are no flying insects down here, and Zach says there’s another bridge nearby. I turn around; I can’t see the house anymore.

“You still need my arm?” Zach reaches out, and I grab hold of him with both my hands.

We take small steps in the darkness. Twice I nearly lose my footing on the uneven ground, but he’s there every time to prevent a twisted ankle. He leads me to a part of the stream where the water is a musical trickle. There’s an arched footbridge here, the kind you’d see in Japanese gardens. It’s a small one, with a light attached. Zach flips a switch, and it sputters before turning on. The bridge is covered in a soft, ethereal glow. Despite the cold, I feel warm everywhere.

Zach looks at me, then calmly asks me to close my eyes. If his plan is to kiss me, I might just let him. But instead of his lips, a hand touches my face. Zach's knuckles rest on my brow for just a few seconds before he moves away.

"Eyes closed please," he whispers. I hear him step back, but keep my eyes shut until he asks me to open them.

"What just—"

Zach takes my arm and hurries me along to where a small, shiny black shape is scuttling down the bridge.

"Is that a black widow?" I ask, panic rising in my chest.

"Not sure how it got in your hair, but you're okay, right? I see no bites on your face or," Zach moves me under the light, brushing his fingers through my hair, and running them along my neck in search of puncture marks. His brow furrows as he checks my forehead.

"No pain?" The pad of his thumb rests just under my jaw.

I shake my head.

"Phew," he exhales. "I didn't want to tell you because—"

"I'd have screamed."

"And probably have gotten bitten." Zach brushes my hair behind my ear. "We'll be safe here, beneath the light," he says. "Spiders like the dark."

Zach sits down and wraps his arms around the lower railing of the bridge. I do the same.

Down here the night seems peaceful. The sound of the stream transports me to a tranquil place free from poisonous spiders.

"Thank you, for saving my life," I say.

"If I fall into this stream, you'll do the same, right?"

"What do you mean?"

Zach swings his legs and peers over into the dark waters.

"Wanna know a secret?"

I hold out my pinkie. Zach takes a moment before he links his finger to mine.

"I never learnt how to swim," he whispers. "Go ahead. Make fun." He unhooks his pinkie again.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," I say. "I'm sure many people who own streams don't know how to swim."

Zach grins.

“Water seems shallow, so I’m sure you’ll manage. But,” I hold up my index finger, “on the off chance that you do start drowning in ankle-deep water, I’ll fish you out.”

There are many questions I have for Zac. I’d like to know why he’s the only person I’ve ever met who isn’t afraid of spiders. I’d like to know what the hell kind of job his father has that he was able to purchase a section of Table Mountain and make it his family home. I’d like to know about the ring. The flamingos. About everything. But none of these questions come out as the silence drags on. I feel overwhelmed suddenly.

“Want to ask me something?”

Zach’s eyes are fixed on the stream.

“I’ll tell you whatever you wanna know. So, ask.”

Zach crosses his ankles and I notice a small rip in the inner thigh of his jeans.

“Once we had to do an activity for Arendse, and you bailed. It was something like...” I throw my memory back. “Like, *think of the thing you love most, and imagine what your life would look like without it.*”

Zach nods.

“The thing you loved most was your mom?”

An almost imperceptible nod is the only answer.

“How much am I allowed to ask about on this topic? I don’t want to pry...”

Zach looks at me briefly, then turns his head back to the stream.

“I was a dick to you this morning. You get to be as probing as you want. I told you,” he smiles, “you can ask me anything.”

I would mercilessly be firing questions if it wasn’t the anniversary of his mother’s death. I feel like we should start there. I can’t begin to know Zach, when I don’t know anything about the person he loves most.

“Tell me about your mom,” I say. “What made you love her so much?”

Zach’s eyes flash.

“Fuck, you really go for the jugular.”

“I’m sorry— ”

“And I’m kidding.” He frowns. “Wow. Gimme a sec.”

I remember the look on Zach’s face as he stood over his mother’s grave; I move closer to him.

“She was kind,” he tells me. “You’d never have thought she came from money. She used so much of her time and wealth to help others. She moved here just after she turned nineteen.”

Lisa Marie’s father had been an Earl in England. He had no male heirs and worried all his money and land would go to the state after he died. He re-married when she was five, but his stepdaughters had even less claim to his fortune than Lisa did.

“He thought she’d be cheated out of the will after he was gone. He didn’t want to risk it, so he gave her as much of his money as he could while he was still alive,” Zach says.

Zach’s mother came to South Africa on her own, and she used some of her money to build proper schools, training colleges, and even a small hospital. She found it unfair that some people were filthy rich because they had the right surname, while others toiled their whole lives and had nothing to show for it. She wanted her wealth to mean something.

“They had to be careful. If the government learnt what she was really doing...” Zach whistles through his teeth. “Dad said every day was an adventure back then.”

“She found her wealth obscene. It made her feel guilty, I think? And then she met my dad,” Zach smiles.

“How’d they meet?” I ask, pressing my cheek to his shoulder.

Zach glances down at me.

“Oh, you’ll love this story,” he says. “Lisa was on her way to collect a consignment of books for a mobile library, when she saw this man sitting on the back of a pick-up truck,”

“Like a *bakkie*?”

“Exactly like that. He had on these awful blue jeans, and a jersey that was far too big for him, but it was his eyes that held her. My mum would never shut up about the first time she saw my dad with his beautiful green eyes. She’d say his eyes reminded her of the rolling hills in England. Said it was the same green as mist-covered grass. I’m sorry now I ever grew tired of her telling that story.”

Zach says his mother followed the *bakkie* instead of picking up her books.

“The men were so shocked to see this white woman standing on their construction site. They didn’t know what to do, so they offered her some Fanta in a teacup.”

I laugh, picturing a slender woman on an old crate trying not to get her lace gloves splattered with cement.

“In a teacup!” Zach laughs too. “Lisa asked my dad to come work for her. He didn’t need to think about it, said he would’ve worked for free if it meant spending more time with her.” Zach

grows pensive. “That’s the thing about Lisa... You just wanted to be around her. Couple years later they got married in secret. Then they had me.”

“Weren’t they scared?” I ask. “My dad was white, so I faced a lot of challenges growing up with my mom. A Malay kid’s not supposed to have blue eyes.”

Zach searches my face, slowly nodding.

“There were the challenges, sure. But they’d be damned if they let anyone tell them how to live. My mother had her wedding ring tattooed into her finger. So did my dad. He still has the ring now – just her name running around his finger.”

Both his parents were anti-apartheid activists. Zach’s mother started a magazine that published protest literature, and his dad became a lawyer and journalist, hellbent on tearing the system apart from the inside.

“He was detained and tortured for the words he wrote.” Zach’s voice wavers. It’s as though he’d lived those horrors alongside his father. “He did a good couple years in prison, but even that didn’t stop him from writing anti-apartheid pieces. He’d be getting information even while he was detained. They promised him compensation afterwards, but nothing ever came of it.” There’s real pain behind Zach’s shrug. “When my mother died, dad didn’t care anymore. Her death smothered everything else, made it *hurt less*. Nothing they did to him in that prison was worse than losing his wife.”

I inhale sharply.

“Fuck,” Zach glances at me, “you’re the first person I’ve ever told that to.”

“It’s not exactly dinner table conversation...”

Zach rubs his palms on his jeans.

Soon after his father’s release, Zach was born. Then after nearly ten years of trying, the twins came into their lives.

“They weren’t even a year old when my mother went tumbling from that horse.”

Zach tells this part of the story with a clenched jaw. He’d been nagging all week to go riding, even though his mother had not yet recovered from the difficult pregnancy.

“My mum, kind as she was, couldn’t say no when I started crying. I was a manipulative bastard. If I couldn’t have my way, I’d just turn on the waterworks.”

Zach makes a fist.

“We went down to the beach. Used to live in Hout Bay back then.... It was a balmy evening – perfect for riding. I still don’t know what went over that sand dune, but it spooked the hell out of

that horse. Mum was a brilliant rider. She could've held on if her stomach muscles were strong enough. You need to be fit to hold on to a horse... she wasn't ready yet."

I read unbearable pain in Zach's face.

"Weirdest part? It was dark, so I didn't see the blood. The sand was damp, so I couldn't feel it either. Mum looked so *normal*, lying there with her eyes closed. She might've been sleeping. It was a while before I realised something was very wrong. If I'd called out sooner--"

My hand squeezes his knee.

"You were just a kid," I say.

Zach hunches over, pressing his palms into his eye sockets. Once he's composed enough, he gets up and offers me a hand. I take it, although I'm not ready to go.

"Mum died before they got her to the hospital. Never got to tell her I was sorry."

Zach says his father took the death the hardest.

"I don't think any of us will truly be over it, but it's affected him the most. Started drinking. Got himself into a bad car accident. Dad was in a wheelchair for a good few years before he could even stand on his own."

Sometimes Zach's dad still struggles even now. On the bad days he needs a wheelchair, on the good days it's a cane. Only on rare occasions can he walk unassisted.

"He carries her with him always. There are times I think the weight might kill him."

"He never went back to being a lawyer or a journalist?" I ask.

"Never. He did a few courses in architecture and landscaping. Helped build our house. That's what he does these days. Takes his mind off everything. He likes it out here, amongst the spiders."

When we sat down an hour ago, I didn't expect Zach would tell me a story like this. I don't know what to say; it's easier to write these lines for your characters, but when there's a real human being experiencing pain right before my eyes, even the usual clichés escape me. Zach's coat hangs open, so I sneak my arm underneath, and wrap the other around his torso. I speak softly into the base of his neck.

"You're the best writer in our class. The way you talk about love and pain, will help others understand it. I think you're able to touch people the way you do, because of what you've lost." I give him a soft squeeze. "I'm not saying it's good that your mother died...pain doesn't make sense, but you're trying to make something of it, and that's beautiful."

His cheek, pressed against the top of my head, brings me comfort I didn't know I needed.

“You’re saying I’ve got this tortured artist thing down?” Zach asks.

I look up at him.

“I wouldn’t even call you that. You’ve lost much and have every reason to lash out at the world, yet you don’t.”

“Except for this morning when I did. I’m sorry about that, Adara.”

I feel Zach’s hand on the small of my back. There’s a tangible sincerity behind the light touch.

“It’s okay...” I say. “You smell like grapefruit.”

Zach’s laugh moves through his ribs and tickles my cheek.

“It’s this dreadlock shampoo I use.”

I release him before the smell leaves a footprint in my brain.

“My mother put these dreads in just before she died,” Zach says. “I haven’t had the heart to take them out.”

“Don’t. They suit you.”

It’s half an hour’s walk to the house, so we must get going. Then I remember something and pull him back.

“You didn’t tell me about the ring. And the flamingos!”

The flamingo story is a touching one. Long before the twins were born, they spent a holiday in Mozambique at an ocean resort. The lodge, situated on a tidal estuary, was home to thousands of tropical fish, and hundreds of electric pink flamingos. Zach had gone out with his dad for the day, and they arrived home to find his mother sleeping in a hammock, surrounded by about eight flamingos.

“They were on the roof, on the deck – just everywhere. She was so happy when we woke her. I’d never seen her eyes so filled with wonder.”

For the rest of his life, those pink birds would remind him of her. It’s why Rowen and Owen purchased all those shorts for his birthday three years ago.

“Your brothers are sweet. I think they’re relieved you wore pants this morning.”

“They know I never wear flamingos in winter. Cape Town’s climate is too unforgiving.”

I point to the tear in his jeans.

“I saw that earlier,” Zach says, setting his foot upon the bridge’s railing. “Pity. This was my favourite jeans.”

I fold my arms across my chest.

“You know, I used to do sutures... Could fix it for you, if you’d like?”

Zach sucks in his cheeks. It looks like he’s repressing a laugh.

“If you wanted me out of these pants, you could’ve just asked.”

I move out of the circle of light so he can’t see how red my ears are turning.

“Good thing the twins can’t hear you,” I say. “And the ring? What’s the deal with that?”

Zach digs it out. He leans against the railing, twisting the ring over in his hands. Before I can warn him to be careful, he turns around, pressing his back against the guardrail.

“I was eighteen, and stupid,” he sighs.

“Isn’t that how every great story starts out?”

Zach deposits the ring in his coat pocket, then sucks in a lungful of cold air. Perhaps I’ve pushed too far? Maybe some details were too private. I’m thinking of a way to retract the question when he starts telling me everything.

Her name was Stephanie, and they’d met at school. I imagine it was one of those coveted teen romances you’ll find stacked on any Young Adult shelf. The type of story every girl my age pretends to hate, but secretly wishes they could star in. Stephanie was his first girlfriend, and the only person who understood him after his mother’s death.

“I knew her before my mum passed away, but it wasn’t until after that we connected.” Zach turns back to the water and interlinks his fingers. “We were supposed to go to uni together. Then she got a swimming scholarship in the UK.”

“What did you do?” I whisper.

Zach steels his jaw.

“The only thing a stubborn, hormonal teenager could do. I went with her. Against the advice of all my friends and family, I just packed up and left.”

Zach’s head droops between his shoulders. He looks ready to hurl.

“I was accepted to the Peninsula Academy of Performing Arts. Was going to pursue a career in acting and theatre.”

I recall the first day when Zach read out my work. It was incredible the way he brought life to words that were trapped on paper.

“I can totally see that,” I admit. “You’ve got the face and the voice, and –”

Zach looks at me. *And?* he seems to ask.

“Never mind. Continue.” I make a lip-zipping gesture and try not to stare too hard at his profile.

“Okay,” Zach takes a second to pick up the story. “I didn’t expect my dad to pay for a decision he regarded *the height of my stupidity*, and I wasn’t going to use the money in the trust fund my mum started either. I had two young brothers who were as much my responsibility as they were hers.” Zach chews the inside of his cheek. “That money was for them. The only thing I truly owned was a South African Warmblood. The full-grown stallion was a champion showjumper. Mum and I won many competitions for dressage and puissance... But I’d lost interest in that. So, I sold him.”

“Sorry, so he wasn’t like your pet? You just won competitions with him?” I ask. I suspect it’s a naïve question.

“No, he was my pet. I’d been riding him on the night my mum died. Honestly, I think I was just looking for an excuse to sell? I loved that horse. I just – I couldn’t have him around anymore.”

My equestrian knowledge is very poor. When Zach says he managed to get close to R300 000 for his Warmblood, I gawk worse than I did upon entering the house. He doesn’t let my reaction slow his narrative.

“Once I had the money, I moved to the UK with Steph. I’d always wanted to see mum’s birthplace. And for a while it was good.”

There’s definitely a *but* in the story, although we take a while to get to it. Zach and Stephanie got an apartment together, and he took a job anywhere he could find one. While she studied, he waited on tables, wrote copy, even took a few minor roles in plays and commercials when he was lucky enough to land them. Running on the money he’d made selling the horse, they managed to see a good deal of Europe together.

“I wanted to give her everything, you know? I couldn’t ever repay her for the hours she’d spent listening to me whine about my mother’s death, but I wanted to try.”

I would tell him that being there for someone you love requires no payment, but I understand where he’s coming from. If more people knew how to appreciate others, the world would be a happier place.

“It sounds like you two love birds were gonna make it,” I say, “but you’ve got the ring in your pocket...”

Zach takes the tiny piece of metal out again; he holds it in a sliver of moonlight where it shines brighter than in his room's artificial glow. A stab of irrational jealousy won't let me admit how gorgeous it really is.

"There was a small jewellery store in Sheffield. I found them on social media and drove out there to get this made. Didn't cost much. She loved simple things..." Zach clears his throat. "She adored it. Said yes. We even started thinking of a date."

"Aw..."

"Right? Nauseating thinking back now." Zach traps the ring in a fist. "I'd been with this girl for almost ten years. She'd seen me at my worst. I believed we were solid. Then I got one helluva reality check..."

"Came home from an evening performance. Was the first time I'd gotten a bigger role... Man, I was so excited,"

I ask him what the name of the play was. He rattles something off in French, and I smile politely like I've understood.

"Steph couldn't make it. Said she had an assignment to finish. When I got home, I learnt her 'assignment' was a fellow classmate. It was like walking into a nightmare. She must've been extremely drunk, because she didn't even stop... she just laughed, took her ring off... flung it at my head. Then she told me to fetch some water."

Zach won't look at me.

"I packed my things then. Realised what must've been happening under my nose for months. Dad's words played back in my head as I left. I truly had reached *the height of my stupidity*."

Zach's regret at leaving a family and friends behind for a broken dream, is palpable. He'd blown all his money on someone who didn't have the decency to be honest with him. When he tells me he'd camped out on a friend's floor for year before he made enough money to fly home, I nearly laugh.

"Zach, you're *old money*. One call to your dad and you'd be home again."

He shakes his head.

"It was my mess to clean up."

I have questions. So many, but they all disappear when my eyes fall on the ring. I've never been in a serious relationship before, had never considered marrying any of the guys I've met. But

I know how much love can hurt. The look I see in Zach's eyes, is the same one Tasleem's worn for years.

"She must've called you afterwards. You know, once she'd sobered up?"

Silence.

"You must've gotten an explanation? An apology?"

Zach frowns at the ring.

"Never heard from her again. It's been almost five years. And nothing."

"What a... sorry. Can't think of a word vile enough."

I jump at an unexpected burst of laughter. Zach's smiling now.

"I was angry for a long time, too. Sometimes I think I still am. But everything's part of a puzzle, even if it feels like you're building it in the dark."

Zach takes a step back and pulls his arm in. A swift flick of the wrist sends a flash of silver over the railing. Unlike a smooth pebble, the ring does not skip across the surface; it just sinks where it lands. Zach seems to exhale all the breath in his lungs.

"Zach! What—" I climb onto the second railing, straining to see the ring, even when I know the current has borne it away. "If you didn't want it, if you *really wanted to get rid of it...* you could've given it to me!"

Zach's eyes are huge.

"I didn't mean it like that." I squint into the dark. "I meant," I step down. "I meant... *urgh.*"

He touches my elbow and I pull back, gripping my head with both hands.

"I could've sold that thing and used the money to help pay off my debt. What is it with rich people and just tossing stuff? You guys throw expensive, unreasonable tantrums."

Too late I realise what I've said. The only person who's thrown the tantrum is me. A million apologies rise to my lips.

"That's not even a ruby, Adara. I kept it purely for sentimental reasons. And I'm done feeling sentimental."

Zach shows me his palms when I try to apologise again.

"Relax. I'm not easily offended. But you know what," Zach's voice is sad, "if there's one thing I regret, it's ever selling Luca. I miss that horse almost as much as my mother."

The clouds are pulled over the moon, leaving the night faintly warm and starless by the time we head back. We walk slowly, like neither of us particularly want to move. Zach tells me more about

Luca. When I ask if he's ever tried to track him down, he shrugs. A horse like that has likely changed hands by now. Trying to find the stallion would be pointless, he says.

"Even if I did find him, he'd be almost as old as me."

I sense the reason for his hesitance: there's a good chance Luca might be dead. I drop the subject and continue our walk in silence, the damp grass beneath our feet, weirdly soothing.

"How did you and Stephanie meet anyway?" I eventually ask.

"I thought we were done talking about that?"

I stop. Zach walks a few steps before turning to face me.

"Just one more question please?" I ask.

Zach comes closer. There's caution in his eyes.

"Okay. Fine. But you first need to tell me something about you," he says. "I feel like I've spilled my entire life story and you're still just half a doctor with an incredibly artistic streak."

No one's ever described me that way; I kind of love it.

"Okay. Deal."

I probably shouldn't have agreed so easily.

"So tell me," Zach begins walking again, "tell me something no one knows about you."

"Something serious, funny, or in-between?" I ask, falling in at his side.

"Let's start with serious. You know, before you change your mind about this."

"Do I strike you as someone who'd easily change their mind?"

Zach gives me a pointed look.

"You dropped out of medical school."

"Only after three years," I laugh. "Which reminds me, that's the first secret you know about me." This game we're playing is harder than I'd expected. When I finally think of something, I blurt it out like I've just hit a buzzer at a game show. "A wound that's being cauterized smells like Rice Crispies with a sinister undertone."

Zach makes a gagging noise.

"You have literally ruined Rice Crispies for me," he says.

"I've ruined them for myself, too. We're in the same boat."

"Okay, what else you got? I enjoy these tales from med school so much. And even more considering I'm the only one in on this secret." Zach bumps his shoulder against mine.

There's one story no one else knows. It's about the day I realised I didn't want to be a doctor anymore. I look at Zach, trying to determine if he's earned enough trust for me to share this. Well,

I did climb into his car, even though I've seen first-hand what happens to girls who wander off with men they barely know. Zach either makes me feel safe or reckless; I can't tell where the line is anymore.

"One day I was in theatre," I begin.

"Did it smell like creepy Rice Crispies?"

I laugh.

"Not at that moment, no," I say. "It was the day I got to observe a heart transplant. One of the perks of being in AP med. Also, one of the perks of being a consultant's daughter, I suppose."

"They had to perform a midline sternotomy – so they sawed through the sternum to open the chest. And I looked inside, saw this beating heart."

Zach has stopped walking and I've slowed down too. I hold my fist up, opening and closing it to mimic a heartbeat.

"It was beautiful and unreal. I kept staring into this patient's opened chest – I wasn't paying attention to the surgery anymore. I wanted to see...if I could find a soul. I focused so hard, but I couldn't. I didn't see anything that looked remotely like a soul." I sigh. "The surgeon who took the heart out and the one who placed a new one into the recipient, treated it like just another job. And I stood there and thought... *what are doctors but glorified body mechanics?*"

I laugh, realising how stupid this all must sound.

"I saw that patient afterwards. He'd been given a new heart, but he still seemed broken. Sad. It dawned on me then. I didn't want to fix bodies. I wanted to heal souls, and I couldn't do that in the medical field."

I stare up at the sky, not wanting to look at Zach. Eventually I feel his hand on my shoulder.

"Soul Fixer," he says. "Has a better ring to it than Half Doctor."

I smile. Something that's been pressing on my chest for I don't know how long, feels lifted.

"I'm glad you left med school, Adara. You're going to smash this soul-fixing gig."

My laughter echoes through the thin, mountainous air. I cup my hands around my mouth.

"Okay," Zach says. "Now tell me a funny story."

"Also something no one knows?"

Zach shrugs.

"Whatever you like."

"Okay," I say. "I was expelled. Twice."

"*What? How did that happen?!*"

Zach's face makes me laugh. I'm going to enjoy telling this story.

"Okay, this one is serious. You're not allowed to tell a soul, because it's embarrassing to both me and my mother. And her reputation's more important than mine. Like if you tell anyone – and I'm not kidding – I'll have to kill you."

Zach swears he won't tell.

When I was younger, my favourite chocolate was a Cadbury Flake. It's got a luxuriant, crumbly texture and is nearly impossible to eat without making a mess. These days I don't eat them as much, but find traces of them on nearly every respectable Cape Malay dessert: the trifle, cheesecake, pavlova, the Boudoir pudding.

"All these desserts are making me hungry," Zach complains.

"Sorry," I say. "One day we go on this field trip – Newlands Forest, I think. It was raining that day. And I was so hungry. You see," I explain, "I was one of those kids who finished all their snacks in the bus."

In the distance, I see a faint light from behind the shrubs. It looks like someone's turned on the lights along the footbridge. I slow down to a stop.

"And I see this tree. The bark looked just as crumbly and silky as the Flakes I loved. And I picked off a chunk and began to eat it."

Zach's lips part, but I ignore his expression and power through the rest of the story. One of the teachers had seen this episode and confiscated the offending piece of tree bark. I didn't complain; it tasted nothing like chocolate and was crawling with termites. She kept a close eye on me for the rest of the day and gave my mother an earful when she came to fetch me from school.

"She could have said *anything* else, and I think my mom would've been okay, but she accused Tasleem of not feeding me properly. According to her, that was the only logical explanation for why I was eating tree bark. This was the furthest thing from the truth, of course, but my mother wouldn't tolerate it."

"What did she do?" Zach asks, mouth agape.

"She gave that poor teacher a piece of her mind like only an overworked medical intern can. My mother tore her to shreds in front of all the other parents. Then she punched – not slapped hey – *punched* the woman in the face. Her nose had to be reset."

By this point, Zach's holding onto his head with his hands.

"So I got expelled. They couldn't stand to deal with my mother. That was the first time."

"How old were you?"

“Only five.”

“And the second time?” Zach asks. “What happened then?”

My second expulsion was all my own doing. I was in my first year at junior school when a boy was mean to one of my friends.

“He was hitting her, and I couldn’t stand it. I didn’t even think it through. Happened so fast.”

“What happened?” Zach’s voice is breathless with excitement. “What’d you do?”

“Let’s just say he had more blood in his nose than that teacher,” I grimace. “Was like a horror show.”

Zach whistles through his teeth.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side,” he says. “What did your mum have to say?”

“She realised I’d probably learnt this behaviour from her. Tasleem had taught me to stand up for myself, but at that age I didn’t know how to temper my... enthusiasm. Anyway, we started practicing yoga together and both mellowed out. My favourite poses were the Warrior and the Mountain. Tasleem taught me to stand strong and tall – like a mountain.”

“Tasleem sounds like an amazing woman,” Zach says. “And you two had some adventures! I won’t easily forget those stories – thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I had fun telling them.” I smile.

Zach bites down on his lip.

“What is it?” I ask.

“So you really ate a piece of bark?” Zach’s laughing at me with his eyes.

“Termites and all.”

“And today?” Zach asks. His nostrils twitch as he fights to keep a straight face. “Have you grown out of the habit or do you still eat wood?”

“Zach!” I shove his shoulder and he catches my hand. “You’re horrible!”

He kisses my wrist before I pull back.

“Sorry,” he says. “You handed it to me.”

My face hurts from smiling. It takes me a while before I can look at him again.

“Now your turn,” I say. “Tell me how you and Stephanie met.”

“Just how we met?” Zach asks, eyes narrowed. “That’s all?”

I consider my response.

“I’d like to know how you can be sure enough about someone to propose to them at eighteen. That’s unreal to me.”

Zach’s reluctant to get into the details of his own failed relationship, but he keeps his promise. We amble along as he starts the story.

Zach had known Stephanie since primary school, and they’d enrolled at the same high school without having said one word to each other. He describes her as one of those girls who go unnoticed, until one day they shine. Stephanie’s stage was the swimming pool.

“Fuck, she was good. She was tall and had these arms and legs that would cut through the water, almost without disturbing the surface.” Zach makes a slice through the air. Even after ten years and all the pain she’s caused, I still hear admiration in every word. “If I was stressed or anxious, I’d just sit and watch her. That butterfly stroke was my favourite. It was like... poetry? Art? I dunno... it was almost too perfect to be real. That’s how she moved.”

It sounds like an infatuation that morphed into a relationship at some point. After his mother’s death, Zach withdrew from everyone. Lisa Vestey’s death could not have come at a worse point. Adolescence was confusing enough; her absence only sharpened the angst.

“Then there was this party,” Zach says. We stop walking and he tilts his chin skyward. “It was for much older kids, but we managed to sneak in. I was always a bit tall for my age. Now I don’t drink anymore, but that night...?” Zach whistles through his teeth.

It couldn’t have taken much alcohol to get a skinny 13-year-old drunk, but I won’t argue with Zach – this is his story.

“With my cheaply bought courage, I started chatting to Steph. She was great, much funnier than expected, and so pretty, even out of water.”

They soon disappeared from the crowd to find a quiet spot.

“It wasn’t really quiet. I could still feel the music bouncing off my ribcage,”

Zach tries to censor the details of their make-out session, while I attempt to find the happy medium between grossed out and jealous.

“So after about half an hour of necking—”

I snort.

“*Necking?*”

“Isn’t that what the kids called it?” he asks, a bit too earnestly.

If I smile any wider my face will go into spasm.

“I don’t know which kids you were hanging with, but continue.”

Zach laughs at himself.

“We saw it once we were under the lights inside. Her entire neck and chest were covered with these angry red marks. Let’s just say I was far too eager—”

“And seriously lacking in technique,” I hold up a pointed finger.

Zach holds up a different finger that I immediately grab. We stumble forward as the bridge to the house creeps closer. The pathway is perfectly lit. I’m disappointed. Walking in the dark with Zach has its appeal.

“Steph freaked. Said her folks would kill her if she came home with hickeys. So, drunk as we were, we turned that house upside down in search of foundation or concealer – basically anything that would cover up the mess I’d made.”

After asking several guests if they had any make-up on-hand, Zach put his hands on Stephenie’s shoulders.

“I looked her in the eyes and told her I’d fix it. Then at about eleven at night, we walked down Main Road and into this 24hr pharmacy. She managed to find the exact colour she needed. Nearly cried when she held up the little tube of concealer. She was just so relieved, you know?”

He’s speaking to me as if I’d had a similar experience.

“It was so awkward. The assistant thought she was getting the colour for her face, and they tried to match it to her cheeks.” Zach cringes. “In the end, we had to show the woman the love bites. Those red bruises looked brutal under florescent light. Poor assistant was old enough to be my grandma.”

“God, that’s so embarrassing!”

“It was! Unfortunately, the alcohol hadn’t made me impervious to the level of shame I felt in that pharmacy. Luckily there was no lecture, but she did ask me if we wanted to buy condoms or a pregnancy test when we got the counter.”

I gasp.

“I know. Was bad. But we started dating afterwards. Once you’ve been through that kind of trauma, you’re bonded for life,” Zach says. “I also learnt how to apply make-up with a sponge, and that a green concealing stick can be used to cancel out redness.”

I’m duly impressed and tell him as much. I remember the piece he wrote in class, the one he’d submitted for Arendse’s ‘Erotica Showdown’.

“How old were you when you lost your virginity anyway?” I ask.

“You were only allowed one more question. That’s cheating.”

“Oh, c’mon,”

“You’ll judge me.”

“Try me.”

“Thirteen and a half,” Zach confesses. My wide eyes spur him into a rushed explanation. “In my defence, I was as responsible as a sexually active teen—”

“*Pre-teen,*”

“Listen to the word... Thir*TEEN*. Teenager, Adara. In my defence, I’ve only been with two women. No more.”

“Since you were *thirteeeen*.”

Zach purses his lips.

“You wanna slut shame me now, don’t you?”

I shake my head.

“Maybe you were one of the responsible ones. Never got anyone pregnant?”

“No. We were careful.”

I chuckle, recalling an incident from med school. When Zach asks me what’s so funny, I tell him the story.

“There was this beautiful 14-year-old. She was barely showing. Had no idea she was pregnant until she came to the hospital. I could tell she was scared, so I asked her what the problem was.”

Sometimes patients felt more comfortable talking to the students than divulging their secrets and concerns to the actual doctors. Perhaps we seemed more approachable because we hadn’t yet been worn through by long working hours, mediocre salaries, and rolls upon rolls of red tape.

“She starts whispering to me,” I drop my voice and Zach comes nearer. “She asks, ‘Um, I’m no longer in love with my ex. I have a new boyfriend now. If I have sex with him, can I change the father of my child? I just want to swap.’ When I kept staring at her, she repeated her question. I actually called the registrar because I couldn’t believe my ears.”

Zach’s mouth hangs open. He clutches his beanie.

“Fuck. What the hell are they even teaching these kids in school?” he asks.

I laugh.

“I’ve heard worse, but that was one of the memorable nuggets from med school. Moments like that really tested my faith in humanity.”

“Steph and I weren’t that dumb. We had that going for us at least.”

We walk forward without really covering any distance. When there's a lull in conversation, I bring us back to the love bite story.

"You must've done a number on her. Phew. To have to resort to a green concealer."

Zach's shoulder bumps against mine.

"My technique's much improved these days."

"I can imagine..."

Zach slows down.

"Do you?" he asks.

"What?"

"Imagine?"

I frown as I replay my last words to him. *Shit*.

"No!" I punch him on the arm, much harder than I knew I could. "But evidently *you* do. That piece you wrote for the competition between you and Sebastian? There was a very specific description of my bra in there!"

Zach makes a face.

"You know what? I stand by my decision. Yes, I saw your," he points awkwardly to my shoulder, "your peekaboo straps sneaking out from under your top. So, you know. They grabbed my attention."

There's a weird, but not unpleasant, pressure in my belly.

"We're not so different, you and I," he says. "We both like beautiful things. When I see them, I write about them, put them in my work. Because, you know. Touching them would be sexual harassment."

I don't laugh when Zach does, and this heightens the tension.

"What is sexual harassment, anyway? Come on, give me the dictionary's definition."

Zach frowns. Maybe he thinks it's a trap.

"I guess it's a spectrum," he shrugs. "Like any sort of unwanted or unwelcome sexual contact. Including inappropriate remarks."

I take a bold step forward. Then another.

"And what if I'd wanted it? It's not harassment then?"

His Adam's apple shifts when he gulps.

“That’s something else, I think,” he says. I flatten my hands against his coat lapels. Zach looks down at my fingers; I wonder if he’s remembering the comment he made earlier this evening. Or regretting it.

“*Shit.*”

“What is it?” I ask, searching his face. Zach’s hands cover mine, then gently, but firmly, moves them away.

“I think I’ve given you the wrong idea,” he says. “Adara, I’m— we’re— this isn’t going to happen.”

Panic or desperation chases the words from my mouth.

“Why not?”

“I’m not about to fall in love with you,” he says. “You’re just not my type. You’re the furthest thing from it, in fact.”

During my brief stint at the hospital, I’d heard such tales of tragedy. People who’d watched their parents or sisters bleed out, who’d seen their relatives raped and maimed not five feet in front of them. Whenever I’d listen to these traumatic stories, there was always a sense that the pain was too visceral to be real, that the onlookers somehow left their bodies and watched these scenes unfolding from a distance. Zach’s brutal honesty makes me feel sort of like that. I couldn’t possibly have heard him say what he just did, and my soul fled my chest to escape the moment.

If I’ve never faced this kind of rejection before, it’s only because this is the first time I’ve ever reached out. This is way worse than an audience laughing at your poem at an open mic night. Some mild flirtations under a clouded night sky, weren’t supposed to leave me feeling fucked in the head. I just didn’t know being told I’m not good enough would sting this way.

“Adara,”

“It’s fine. Sorry.”

I make for the bridge, my shoes hammering hard against the wood. The thudding sounds like an onslaught against the peaceful night. A lace gets caught between two planks and Zach catches up in the time it takes me to break free. I hate that he’s not broken a sweat.

“Why’d you run off?” he asks. “Am I not taking you back to campus?” Zach sets a hand on his hip and the other on his forehead. Stress makes him look younger, and so much like the kid who’d mangled some poor girl’s décolletage with rampant kisses.

“I’ll take a fucking Uber.” I’m shocked by my own hostility.

Zach's heard it too. That he doesn't immediately react is more terrifying than if he did.

"What the hell happened here tonight? We were having a lovely conversation and suddenly... Like what the hell, Adara?" he asks.

"I'll tell you what happened," I huff. "You're still hung up on someone who hurt you a hundred years ago. I should be the one asking, what the hell, Zach?"

My patience wears thin watching him stand there with a stupid, bewildered look on the face. When I try to brush past, he pins me against the side of the bridge, one hand resting on my hip, while the other grips the guardrail. My mouth sits uncomfortably close to his throat.

"You ever wonder why we don't hang out more?" he whispers.

The railing creaks beneath our combined weight and Zach pulls me closer. With his neck almost touching my lips, I wonder if his skin would bruise the same way Stephanie's had.

"Sometimes," I say.

"I think I know why." He releases my hip, and his fingers sneak beneath my jacket until they're resting on the small of my back. With nothing but a thin sweater between us, I feel his warm touch in my spine. "I've got the same problem you do," Zach says.

"Hm?"

"Can't keep my hands off beautiful things, either. And you pretty much top that list."

I wrap my hands around his neck, almost closing the distance between us.

"You took your time to get that out," I whisper.

Zach lowers his head, but just before our lips brush, I feel his hand against my abdomen. My sharp intake of breath as I back up, is involuntary. His fingers might as well be a branding iron.

"Zach, I—"

But he's already moved beyond my reach.

"I think I should take you home," he says. "Your car's probably plastered with tickets by now."

When we get back, a tall man's standing in the kitchen nursing a cup of coffee. Dreadlocks and all, he seems the splitting image of Zach. He scrutinizes me just like the twins did earlier on. Today must be one of those rare occasions Zach spoke of: there's no wheelchair or cane. The man looks quite well.

“Tata, you shouldn’t be up this late” Zach sounds choked. “Let’s get you back to bed. Can you ma—”

Zach’s father isn’t listening. He sets the cup down, then gives me the kind of smile only people who’ve seen genuine heartache are capable of. The tattoo on his ring finger’s glaringly obvious. He takes my hand and I smile, realising too late I don’t know what to call him – I can’t say *tata*. It’d be too weird, calling a man I’ve just met, Father.

“Dad, this is Adara. Adara, this is my T– my dad. This is—”

“*Haibo, unyana wam.*” Zach’s dad clicks his tongue. “I can introduce myself!”

Zach stands aside.

“Hello, Mr Vestey,” I say, proffering a hand that he grasps in both of his.

Zach and his dad start chuckling.

“What’s funny?” I ask, eyes flitting between the two.

Not only have I butchered the surname, but Zach says Vestey was actually his mother’s last name.

“What have you been telling her, hm?” Zach’s dad frowns, still holding my hand like he’s got no plans to let go. “It’s Mr Jacobs, yes? But you, my darling, you can call me Mxo.”

I love the way his dad releases the click.

“Or you could just call me Lisi.”

“Mxolisi,” I say. I’ve heard the name before. “Is that your full name?”

We did an introduction to Xhosa in med school; I still remember the basics. The three clicks took forever to master, and I get excited whenever there’s a chance to show off my hours of practice.

Mxo’s eyes shine brightly. He turns to Zach, starts firing rapid Xhosa.

“*Uhlakaniphile kwaye umhle!*” he laughs. “*Ukwazi njani ukuzisa ekhaya intombazana enje?*”

The tips of Zach’s ears redden the same way they did when he won that writing competition.

“Dad, you can’t speak like that,” he says. “We have a guest.”

I drop Mxo’s hands – perhaps too quickly – and tell Zach it’s fine.

The glass display reads 23:30. I’m glad Tasleem’s still in Washington. Can’t imagine the lecture I’d get if I returned home at 12 on a school night, during the exams. Zach seems eager to get me out of the house, even though his father’s making me a cup of aromatic coffee. The drink’s

evidently a ploy to detain me a while longer, but Zach foils this plan by getting a bamboo cup from the shelf.

You don't need to understand the language to know they're arguing. Zach pops the rubber lid on my takeaway coffee cup.

"It's late, Zach," Mxolisi says. "She should stay."

"No!" Zach and I exclaim. They both look at me.

"Sorry," I say. "I really need to get home. I'm used to driving at night."

Before we leave, Mxo gives me another handshake. I hold his left hand a while longer and touch the tattooed ring done in cursive. He turns his hand over so I can see the back.

"It's beautiful," I say.

While the tattoo itself is no more than a few squiggles and doesn't read Lisa Marie unless you hold it right up to your face and squint hard, it still speaks of eternal love. As Mxo blinks away tears, I think of Alex, and how he's branded himself with my quote.

"My dad really likes you. He's not usually like that. Freaked me out to see him without a cane," Zach says once we're driving. The roads are empty this late. A light drizzle starts, and he activates the wipers.

"He said I'm pretty?" I ask.

Zach jerks his head. "You understood that?"

I laugh. He's worried about the other things his father said, but I could only pick out a word or two. They were speaking too fast for my untrained ears.

"Kinda. We did Xhosa as part of our Health Science syllabus."

Zach nods.

"Not pretty. I believe his exact words were 'smart' and 'beautiful'. Then he insulted me a little by asking how the hell I managed to convince a girl like you to come home with me."

I snort.

"Wait, you're serious?"

Zach gives me a look.

We stop at the traffic lights and listen to the ticking indicator until the red turns green.

"I'll give you one more question," I suddenly say.

Not sure if it'll make up for pulling away on the bridge, but it's worth a shot.

"You've shared so much with me tonight. I'll tell you anything."

Zach makes a left turn.

“Tell me what was on your mind this morning.” He glances at me. “Before I snapped at you. You had something on your mind you spent most of the day trying to forget. What’s bothering you?”

A lump grows in my throat. With our exam over, I have a moment to reflect on the things I’ve read in Tasleem’s journal... it’s too much.

“Hey, hey... Addy. Want me to stop the car?”

I nod.

We park under a tree and I tell Zach everything. I tell him how Tasleem was disowned. How my dad died before I was born. How I’ve spent my whole life trying to fit in, without truly knowing where I belong. I even tell him about how my mother beat me when she discovered me holding a photo of my dad. I tell him how I often get asked where I bought my contact lenses; these blue eyes don’t fit my face, and it’s something many people notice.

“I don’t know what my father looked like. Tasleem keeps saying I look exactly like him, but that’s not good enough for me anymore.” My tongue feels thick. “Listening to you talk about your family, just getting to meet your lovely dad tonight. It made me realise how great the hole in my life is. I can’t anymore, Zach. It’s—”

Zach puts the travel cup into my hands. When I don’t start drinking, he raises it to my lips.

This coffee’s the most fragrant, delicious drink I’ve tasted. The spicy undertone has a calming effect.

“It’s a dirty chai,” Zach says. “Tata’s favourite. Good hey?”

I take a large, scalding gulp. It is very good.

“I’m sorry for going on about my family. I had no idea what you were dealing with.”

I shake my head. I need to drain the rest of the cup before I tell Zach precisely what I read in the journal I’d found. A torrent of emotion crosses his face.

“She mentions this other man in the journal,” I say. “Not a civil engineer, but a doctor. I have no idea who he is.”

There were pages of romance pencilled in, but not a word of the man who’d allegedly built bridges.

“Do you have a name?” Zach asks. “Maybe we can find something online?”

“No name – she referred to him with initials only. There were in fact two sets of initials. It’s all so confusing.” Then I remember the name of my mother’s friend. She’s the only person who knew Tasleem back then. “Assuming the story my mother told me was true, someone called

Dureshni picked her up after Tasleem was thrown out by her father. The two of them shared a flat for a brief while, and the woman spent quite some time taking care of me as well.”

Zach pulls his phone out.

“Surname? Age? Anything else that could be important?” Zach asks, waking his phone with the touch of a finger.

“Dureshni Govender. She lives in Durban, I think. Or Cape Town. Should be forty something now. Also a doctor. Graduated from our university.”

“Hm... there are...twenty-six Dureshni Govenders here. About four that fit the profile.”

Zach hums as he works.

“You look like someone trained in the art of social media stalking...” I remark. I’ve seen the same determined expression on Saskia’s face when she’s running background checks on prospective designers and clients.

“When you work in online media, you need to hone these skills. It’s a necessary evil – ooh, seems we got something,” Zach says. “There are two options. The one is Govender-Matthew.” Zach hands the phone to me.

One Dureshni is far from old enough to be a consultant. The other one is almost certainly the person we’re searching for. Dureshni Govender-Matthew. I zoom in on her photo.

“Look here,” I say. Zach leans over until his beanie’s touching my head. “My mom said Dureshni had a strange mole on her chin. Said they’d always joked that one of them would remove it when they became a dermatologist.”

Zach squints at the picture.

“Guess that never happened,” he says. “So, where to from here, Carlisle?”

I turn the phone over in my lap. For a full minute I stare out the window before banging my head against the car seat.

“Your call, Adara.” Zach takes his phone from my lap. Our Dureshni will be attending a conference in Cape Town soon, he tells me. “You might be able to get your answers.” Zach points a palm towards me.

“What would you do?” I ask. While I wait for an answer, I take out my own phone.

“You don’t need me to tell you what I’d do.” Zach looks at the phone on my knee. “You’ve already decided.”

I doubt anything will come of the message I’ve sent Dureshni Govender-Matthew. On the off chance she is the person from my mother’s past, who’s to say she has any interest in meeting a

baby from more than 20 years ago. She might not even have the answers I seek. If the past few months have taught me anything, it's that Tasleem is incredibly secretive. Then there are the secrets her and Alex are hiding. I'm not sure she's even in Washington. I curl up on the seat and watch Zach while he drives.

"Something's still bothering you," he says.

I'm both astounded and annoyed by Zach's powers of perception.

"I've caught my mother and my best friend in secret conversations," I say. "I also found his jersey in her office."

"Which best friend is this?"

"I don't know if you'll remember. Alex? He's the one who took your portfolio into the staff lounge last year? We were both late that day."

"I remember. What do you think they're conspiring about?"

Zach takes a steep hill.

"Not so much conspiring, as... I'm scared to say it... I think they're sleeping together. I think they've been having an affair for a long time."

Zach doesn't say much until we reach the empty campus parking lot. My silver Polo is still in its spot, miraculously free of tickets.

Zach stretches to retrieve my messenger bag from the backseat. He sets it in my lap.

"What do you think about my affair theory?" I ask. "Honest opinion."

"And just to be sure, this is Alex, your tall, handsome, clean-cut friend who can often be seen sporting a cardigan? The same one I have to thank for slipping my late application to Arendse?"

"Thaaat's the one."

Zach whistles.

"Whatever you're seeing, it's not an affair." He gets out and comes round to open the door for me. He takes my bag and puts it on my shoulder.

"How can you be so sure?" I ask.

"Because it's stupid," he says. "You don't sleep with the mother of the woman you're in love with." Zach leans over me to shut the door. He finds my shocked expression amusing. "What, don't tell me you didn't know..."

"He's got a girlfriend. He's not interested in me like that."

Zach smiles, cups my face, then gets back behind the wheel. Shaking my head, I cross the street to my car. I start searching for my keys.

“Adara,” Zach’s voice carries effortlessly across the street. All those years of acting have paid off. He talks with his elbow hanging out the window.

“Whatever almost happened between us tonight, I meant what I said. I’m not falling in love with you.”

“Why not?” I scream from across the street. “Would it really be that bad? You make it sound like a goddamn death sentence!”

Zach throws his head back in a laugh. He edges forward until his vehicle is in line with mine.

“I know I’m not a slender swimmer. And I’ve never stumbled along Main Road in search of concealer to cover up a ravaged neck,”

Zach smiles.

“I wouldn’t travel halfway around the world with you, just to sleep with someone else,” I say. “*I know* I’m not your type. I wouldn’t hurt you like that.”

Zach nods solemnly.

“I know,” he says. “It’s why I can’t love you.” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Adara. But guys like me, don’t get over women like you.”

Then he drives off.

And I’m left standing there, wondering what the fuck just happened.

Chapter 11

The Longest Month

Two weeks. That's how long it's been since I've seen or heard from Zach. Since our evening together, Dureshni replied to my message. She'll be at the Marbelle for two nights. We've agreed to meet on the 31st of July, the same day as Saskia's wedding. I don't know how I'm going to pull this off, and I could really use Zach's counsel right now, but it's like he's completely disappeared. He's missed all Arendse's holiday classes and didn't even reach out to her to explain his absence. That worries me the most: even if he is avoiding me since our almost-kiss, he had no reason to shun his favourite professor. The past week has seen mild irritation blossom into anxiety. In a world with a hundred types of instant messaging, no one just disappears.

The first semester of final year has gone well. I could've done better on some of Arendse's assignments, and I've made no inroads into the publishing component of my course yet, but I'll have the holidays to work on that. There'll be more than enough time to pick up the slack in second semester.

With all my exams behind me, I don't mind coming in twice a week for Arendse's classes. We're probably the only people still attending class these days; outside of exam sessions, the place is a ghost town. Even the cafeterias are empty. I had to message Oliver two days ago for the tomato-and-cheese toasties in my hand. It's absurd, putting in an order for a simple meal like this, but Kahve Corner uses only organic, free-range, grass-fed everything, and that shit's too expensive to have go off. Ollie once joked they do stocktake on individual lettuce leaves.

I take a seat outside of the first-years' exam venue and wait for Alex. Finding a step on the staircase that's not completely covered in bird shit is no small feat, but eventually I do. Soon the place is teeming with students. One girl is so busy comparing exam answers, she nearly trips over me.

"Oh my G—"

"It's okay!" I raise my hand and stand up when I see Alex behind her. Since I last saw him, his cheeks have hallowed out, rendering his features almost obscenely handsome. With a tray of scripts balanced upon one hand, he scoops me up into his free arm. A few of the girls who just walked past, turn back to frown at us.

"I think that girl wished she'd tripped over me now," I whisper against his shoulder.

Alex chuckles.

“What?” He releases me. “Let me drop these off and I’m all yours.”

It’s a 5-minute walk to the Arts Centre, and he slows his pace to match my short strides. When a few students linger to interrogate him about the exam, Alex calms them with practised charm.

“You guys sat right in the front during my lectures,” he says. “Relax now. Go take a long lunch!”

Once they’ve scurried off, I tug on his cardigan. Today it’s a cream cable-knit. By the feel of it, probably 100% wool.

“I really hope I didn’t sound like that three years ago?” I cringe.

“Well it was cute on you.”

One of the many perks of being a full-time lecturer is having an office of your own. It’s nothing like Tasleem’s swanky setup, but I adore the mahogany desk, worn-in couch, and the bobbleheads standing sentry on the windowsill – all of the superhero variety, of course. I jump at the chance to sit in his swivel chair but stop spinning after the fifth round. There’s a small photo of Tasleem, Tar, Alex and me in the bottom left-hand corner of his computer monitor.

“From Kleinmond?” I ask, trying to loosen the Prestick.

Alex nods. He clears the desk and retrieves two iced teas from the mini-fridge. It’s the same brand my mother stocks.

“Urgh, she’s got you on that shit too?”

I catch the can, then immediately toss it back.

“Don’t you have like... literally anything else? I’m so tired of low-calorie everything.”

Alex returns the can and stoops to access the lowest box in the bar fridge; he extracts a small glass bottle of Appletiser.

“Muslim champagne!” I clap my hands. “Gimme!”

For the last half hour Alex has droned on about his first semester of teaching, and my face has now gone numb from pretending to listen. I can’t stop thinking of Dureshni and Zach.

Alex gives me an expectant look.

“Hm?” I ask, raising my brows to complete the illusion that I’ve heard everything he’s said.

“Do you want to know?”

“Of course I want to know!”

He drums his nails on the table, then sighs. Alex’s stubble is little more than a shadow today, but as usual, impeccably groomed. I’ve grown so used to Zach’s clean face that it feels weird sitting opposite a bearded man.

“I just asked you if you’d like to know how many first-years I’ve slept with so far.”

My eyes bulge.

“*You’ve what?*”

Right. My mind isn’t here.

“I like your cardigan,” I say, in a lame attempt to distract him from what a bad friend I am. “The cream is so lush.”

Alex unrolls his sleeves. Before Zach mentioned it, I hadn’t noticed quite how many cardigans my best friend owned. He has one in every colour, even pink.

“Was looking for the black. Couldn’t find it.”

Because you left it in Tasleem’s office.

“You sure Cyan didn’t cut it up after she saw my name tattooed on your chest?” I talk across him before he can change the subject. “I’m dying to know what she made of that.”

“Funny story,” Alex takes out his phone. “She doesn’t know your surname’s Carlisle... She loved the quote, and,” Alex slides it over to me. “Look,”

I’m looking at a filtered image of Cyan staring off to the side, long red hair held up to reveal black writing on her left shoulder blade. I zoom in and behold the flowing cursive that spells out *Trauma is only Art, waiting to happen. – A. Carlisle.* I slide the phone back to him.

“Please tell me that’s real?!”

He grins. “So real she needed painkillers.”

Cyan and I don’t like each other. While I make every effort to be tolerant, she doesn’t keep her disdain a secret. This tattoo is the greatest gift I’ve received. I’d kiss Alex if it weren’t for Zach’s words ringing in my head.

My friendship with Alex is unconventional at best, and dysfunctional at worst. We’re bonded for life because of Stella. The day we met he’d been on the brink of a relapse, and I took him home where Tasleem helped him. I don’t care about Zach’s supernatural ability to read people. He’s wrong about this. Alex isn’t in love with me. If he’d seen the way my friend looks at my mother, Zach would re-examine his theory.

“You been in touch with my mom?” I ask, coming around to his side. I lean my back against the table, then hop onto it.

“I’m a member of the university council. Would be hard to miss her. We have our meetings twice a week. Taz has raised some valid points since she’s become the med school rep. The hour usually drags. Now it’s filled with discussions that are relevant and, dare I say it, *enjoyable*.”

If I listen close enough, I detect the same lilt in his voice Zach had when talking about Stephanie. Maybe it’s best we don’t discuss my mother.

“Tell me, does Arendse sit on these meetings?”

The chair creaks when Alex reclines. He clasps his hands over his belly.

“She does. Why?”

“Why does the writing class still meet now? Didn’t undergrad courses end three weeks ago?”

Alex goes for his drink. He’s not thirsty, just trying to thwart my questioning.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I ask.

When he can no longer pretend there’s disgusting tea left in his can, Alex comes clean about the meetings. Whatever gets discussed is meant to stay confidential. Tasleem is almost too good at upholding this rule, but Alex cracks easily. According to him, Arendse proposed teaching time during the exam period. Wherever possible, she said, whole year courses should finish as many of their assessments as they could before the new term began. They should communicate to students that this extra teaching time was not optional or ‘for enrichment purposes’, and that it would negatively impact their GPA if they absent themselves without valid reason.

“The suggestion was met with outrage. As you know, Arendse did a brief stint as a teacher. Some members mocked her by pointing out we’re at a university. Said if she wanted to implement those tactics, she should stick to teaching kids.”

Arendse’s been tough on me, but she’s only doing her job. Hearing people talk smack about her makes me angry in a way that’s hard to explain.

Alex puts a hand on my knee.

“Adara, there’s been talk about these protests starting up again. They can’t do much with the exams at an end, but we can anticipate flare ups in the second semester. Something big is brewing.”

“And Arendse wants to finish the work before then. Makes sense.”

“There are faculty members who back her – like Taz. I suspect that’s why she’s been working these late nights. She’s doing the same thing with her med students. Just trying to finish up the curriculum as fast as they can.”

“Will it get that bad?” I ask. “You really think they’ll cancel lectures?”

Alex frowns.

“God knows what it could come to. Just finish as much of your work as you can.”

I wish Tasleem would just tell me what’s going on, instead of letting me think she’s out doing other things. Like my best friend, for example. I cover Alex’s hand with mine. Whatever else he might be hiding, at least I can count on him to be honest about this. Even when it might cost him his job.

“Thank you for telling me,” I say.

“Please take care of yourself.”

Zach be damned. I kiss Alex on the forehead.

The wind has picked up by the time we abandon the cosy office, but not even the bad weather can hold back a few overzealous students waiting for their lift. Alex is accosted by a gaggle of five as I promptly step off to the side.

“Never do that to me again,” Alex groans when their ride shows up a few minutes later.

“You’re my get-out-of-jail card.”

I frame his face with my hands and click my tongue, mimicking a camera shutter.

“The university should organize a bodyguard,” I joke. Zach might be imagining Alex’s feelings for me, but he’s right about how attractive my best friend is. “Two more minutes and they might’ve torn that cardigan right off you.”

“Vultures,” Alex says.

“Puh-lease, you enjoy the attention. Also,” I probably shouldn’t say it, but it’s out before I can reconsider. “One of my classmates said you’re really handsome,”

Alex rakes a hand through his hair.

“Oh, my. What’s her name?”

“It’s a he, actually,”

“Wow, mmkay.” Alex winks. “What’s *his* name?”

When I tell him it was Zach who'd passed the comment, Alex's shift in demeanour is so swift, had I blinked, I'd have missed it. I make sure he knows Zach had been kidding, but I grow flustered as I ramble through an explanation of why we'd been discussing him.

"I'm concerned about you." Alex pulls me back by the sleeve, maybe ten feet from my car. He's facing the wind; he screws up his eyes and appears sterner than necessary.

I frown.

"What?"

"I hear you've been climbing into cars with boys who disrespect you," he says.

I fold my arms across my chest.

"I heard what happened, how that Zach guy spoke to you. He was rude. He swore at you, but you didn't think twice before running off with him? Why would you go anywhere with a guy who'd treat you like that? What's going on with you?"

I throw my arms up, feeling cornered by all the questions.

"That's not how it happened!" I say. "No one *swore at* anyone. Where the hell did you hear that?"

Oliver must've relayed the incident to Alex. I can only guess how the story's been pulled out of proportion.

"I know what happened," Alex insists. "I want to know *why*."

Alex steels himself.

"I've been speaking to Arendse," he finally admits. "She said you did badly in two of your assignments. Said you just-just passed your mid-year exam for her. What's going on? You *graduate* this year. Now's not the time to be messing around with guys like him."

Guys like him... listening to Alex list all the reasons Zach's bad news, makes me feel ill. Knowing he's been talking to Arendse behind my back, discussing my results, only makes me angrier. My question shatters his diatribe.

"Why are you talking to Arendse about me, huh? Why do you *always* know my results before I do?!" My voice starts ringing in my ears. "And just what makes you an expert on whose house I'm allowed to visit?" I ask.

Alex stops talking.

"You went to his house?"

"We had dinner. Not that it's any of your business."

Those first-years have depleted his charm. With his features pinched together, Alex looks nothing like the friend who's earned my love and trust.

"I'm very worried, Adara." He sighs. "If Zach can lose his temper like that, he probably has an abusive streak—"

"Abusive?" I spit the word out like it's an errant elaichi in a pot of curry. "What the fuck? That's rich coming from you!"

Alex's eyes flash. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He makes the mistake of grabbing my arm when I turn to leave.

"I don't want you hanging out with him!"

I stare at Alex, then burst out laughing. It's hard to stop; the wicked sound bounces off the buildings surrounding us.

"You don't want me hanging with Zach? You're not my father!"

Alex's face crumbles too late to stop my words.

"If I did have a father, *you're* the type of man he'd warn me against!"

Alex looks like a kicked puppy. I want to apologise, take everything back, only I'm far too angry to be rational.

I back up against the nearest car when he tries to reach out.

"Go," I say. "Leave before I say something we can't come back from."

"Adar—"

"Just go!" I'm already walking away, fuming. Halfway to the car, I stop and take a second so my breath can catch up with my thoughts.

There are some people who don't know when they've been beaten, who keep fighting long after the battle's lost. Alex is not one of these people. I learn this the hard way when I turn around, expecting to see him bounding towards me, only to spot the top of his head as it disappears behind a car.

My holiday has passed in a haze of art shows, movie nights, and nonstop wedding prep. I've spent the last month obsessively avoiding anything writing-related. Whenever I pick up my pen, I think of Zach and start wondering where he is. So much for working on getting published during the vacation. Maybe Alex was right. Maybe Zach is making me lose focus.

Asia, Wing, Kaanitah, Ollie and I had lunch last week, and they're just as baffled about Zach's disappearance. Some of them think he might've gotten an opportunity to study elsewhere and just quietly left.

"We would've been notified if he'd died," Ollie said, mouth stuffed with ciabatta and chicken. You'd think for someone who works in a café, he'd be sick of eating sandwiches by now.

"Please don't say things like that!" Kaanitah punched him.

Asia seemed like the type of person who'd have milked the internet for any and all Zach-related things by now, but she could only offer me a shrug and downward tilt of the lips.

"I guess we'll find out if he's coming back to campus in term two," I said.

And we left it at that.

By the end of the holiday, I'm no closer to learning what happened to Zach than I was at the start, but at least I know where Alex is. Saskia told me he's been helping at her and Muzammil's new home in Kirstenbosch. By the sound of it, the two of them are even busier than her team of bridesmaids and caterers. In the last two months I've sampled so much frosted cake and savouries, I expected my gown to closely resemble a marquee tent at the final fitting.

"Just trust me!" Saskia said as she pushed me along the short passageway and into the backroom of the dressmaker's house. I knew the flower girls would be clad in metallic silk and tiaras, but Saskia had designed my dress and I hardly knew the colour, never mind the style.

As a kid, I was stuffed into tulle and lace, and made to pose prettily while scattering petals for Tasleem's friends, but those weddings were different, all held in churches, out on the beach, and once even up on Table Mountain where the bride's bouquet went flying off the cliff by mistake. This will be my very first Muslim wedding.

Saskia warned me the dress would be modest, that it would need to cover most of my skin, but that she'd make sure I still looked *befok* in it. As per her promise, the dress has been designed to fit my body, not the other way around: sheer lace covers my décolletage and runs down the length of my arms, while the velvet bodice hugs my breasts rather than flattens them. But it's the plain A-line skirt that's the true showstopper: it trails to the floor like molten chocolate, and shimmers ever so slightly when caught in a ray of sunlight. The fabric roll was labelled 'ink blue', which isn't faintly accurate. It's rather like someone had stolen a piece of night sky and spun it into a dress. I think *befok*'s the perfect word. I love my leggings as much as any girl, but if I must wear a dress, it might as well be one that makes me feel like a sorceress in a medieval masterpiece.

"I can't believe you'd design something like this for me. It's *your* day!" I'd chided Saskia.

And indeed it was. For when my cousin stepped out in all her ivory silk splendour, I was relegated to peasant. I'd never seen a more beautiful bride.

While packing my books for campus last night, I made a discovery so alarming it pushed all other thoughts from my mind. I tossed out all my cupboards, drawers and bags. I even posted a desperate plea to our Write Room group. After three straight hours of losing my mind, I had to admit it: my journal, as well as the one I'd found in Tasleem's locker, were both missing.

"Is it the classic leather one I always see you writing in?" Oliver asks.

A few students have popped in earlier to help me search for it amongst Arendse's books. Wing, Kaanitah and Asia are shifting the Victorian couch when Sebastian saunters in.

"*Ja*, it's that one. But there was another one. Like a cheap hardcover," I say, examining the books on a lower shelf.

"Everything okay?" Sebastian asks, dropping his backpack. Since he lost that writing contest, he's mellowed out. He's still far from my favourite person, but I don't refuse his help.

When I think of everything those two books contained, of all those uncensored entries, the names mentioned. The details about Tasleem and her family. About Alex. About Zach. About Sebastian. Even Arendse. Secrets about the upcoming protests, about the patients I've treated, whom Tasleem has treated. Things she doesn't know I know. *Things I'm not supposed to know...*

I wish I knew where I'd misplaced it, but it could've been any exam venue, any art show, any classroom. It might even have fallen out in Tasleem's car. Sweat pools in my armpits. My journal was a place where I could be as brutal as I needed to. I can't imagine earning the forgiveness of anyone I've written about.

I head out for some air and bump into Arendse on the way up.

"We have class now?" She taps her watch.

"I'll be right back,"

"Is Zach in?" Arendse points a thumb towards the wardrobe.

The mention of Zach throws me off kilter. She might as well have asked me if a pack of cheetah cubs had wandered in and made a home of our classroom. I shake my head and watch her face compress.

“Why?” I ask.

Arendse hesitates.

“There’s big news I need to share,” she says. “Remember the competition I told you about at the start of the year? The South African Art Collective initiative? Zach entered, and his script was the just announced the winner this morning!”

Arendse spends the next thirty seconds rattling off details about contracts and prize money, but she’s either too excited or my brain is too wired to make sense of anything. I smile politely and excuse myself.

It takes me two minutes and a few fistfuls of cold water before I feel ready to leave the bathroom. As I approach, I see a shape leaning against the wall outside Arendse’s class. His eyes are downcast until I’m five feet away. He slips his headphones into his neck, then raises his hand in a half-wave. Sheepishness does not become him.

“Adara, has class started yet?” Zach asks.

I brush past him, then think better of it and go back outside.

“Almost two months Zach,” I say. “And not one word. What the hell?”

Zach adjusts his cap. He’s wearing a beanie that looks too small for his head.

“You just going to stand there? Not say anything?”

“What do you want me to say, huh?” he asks. “We spent one day together. Didn’t know you wanted a detailed account of all my movements now.” He shakes his head, murmuring *fuck* under his breath. Frustrated, he yanks his cap off.

For a moment I can only stare: all his dreadlocks are gone.

The waist-length hair I’m accustomed to has been unravelled and chopped into a short, curly bob that won’t stay out of his eyes.

“Oh,” I say. “It took two months for you to get a fucking haircut?”

“No, I didn– what? Of course not!”

I’m not sure what to feel. I’m frustrated, hurt, confused, and trying hard not to touch his new ringlets; I don’t trust myself not to rip out a tuft. I should just walk away, but Zach bars my path.

“I’m sorry, okay?” he says. “I ignored you for a month–”

“*Two months!*”

“Two months. Yes. God, I’m sorry.”

Zach runs a hand through his hair – something I’ve never seen him do before.

“Look,” he says, “I’ll make it up to you, just don’t freak out on me right now. I can’t deal with that as well.”

I snort.

“Really? What happened over the holiday that was so bad?”

Zach doesn’t respond. As I stand there, I realise what drew me to him in the first place: his ability to project emotion. When he stood in front of that pigeonhole, late application in hand, Zach swore like a little boy who’d just discovered how good it feels to use bad words. The unbridled stream of feelings that poured from him that morning, spoke to something in me no one had been able to reach before. This new dead fish look he’s got going on, isn’t working for me.

“Well, here’s some news that might cheer you up,” I say. “You won that script competition.”

I throw my hands up in a half-arsed *whoo!* Still, no reaction.

“Zach, the screenplay you entered into that national competition is going to be made into a feature film. Do you understand me? You’ve won! Plus, there’s money! This is huge.”

I don’t expect him to throw his arms around me. Doesn’t seem his style to start jumping up and down in the corridor, but this unchanged expression is unsettling. Maybe something awful did happen over the holidays. I hope Mxo is okay.

The last time I saw him, Zach left me with a cryptic comment about why he couldn’t love me. I didn’t think he could top an exit like that, but he proves me wrong when he says,

“Sorry. I need to run,” and disappears down the corridor.

First my father.

Then Alex.

Now Zach.

I think I’ve just about had it with the men in my life and all their unceremonious exits.

Chapter 12

Wedding Jitters

The next day we learn the reason behind Zach's absence. He's spent the better part of the holiday in the UK, engaged in a series of book deal negotiations. While Arendse gushed over our award-winning author, Zach sat quietly. For someone who'd achieved his life's dream, he looked deeply troubled. Mid-lecture, I swap seats with Oliver so I can be next to him.

"This is insane," I whisper. "Why didn't you tell you me yesterday?"

Zach looks up, thumbing the pages of his notebook.

"You were too busy yelling to have heard," he says. Sensing my humiliation, he changes tack. "Not that I didn't deserve it."

The lecture starts so we resume the conversation after class.

Once we sit down, Zach explains how he's signed on with a publisher and will be spending the next few months polishing his manuscript. I sense a flicker of optimism beneath his unusually dour expression.

"Which book did they accept?" I ask. "Is it the one you've been submitting chapters of online?"

"No, not that one."

The way he chugs it, Zach's piping coffee might as well be water.

"It's a different thing." Then he adds, matter-of-factly, "I quit my job to so I could edit it."

"You did what? That's—"

"Crazy. I know. I've never wanted anything this bad." Zach takes another gulp of coffee. "That's why I freaked when I heard about the script thing yesterday."

"What about it?"

"They want me involved in the production. It's too much on top of this book deal." Zach rubs the top of his thigh. "Met with Arendse yesterday to discuss the possibility of pulling the script. She reminded me I signed a contract when I entered the competition. I'll get slapped with a lawsuit if I back out now. They've already started casting calls."

"Zach," I grab his hand before it can travel down his thigh again, "you'll pull this off."

Zach squeezes my fingers before letting go.

Some people tried to probe for contract details, and even asked questions about the money involved, but Arendse put an end to that immediately. While we're chatting, a few classmates pass

by. Nearly each one congratulates Zach with a handshake or pat on the back, so it's rather obvious when Asia walks the other way.

"I think someone hates your new hair," I say.

Zach stares after her.

"Or just me," he says.

"Did something happen over the holidays? With her, I mean?"

Zach swirls his cup.

"She kissed me," he says, looking up. I don't think anyone's tried so hard to read my face before. "And I pushed her away."

This explains Asia's lack of enthusiasm at lunch the other day.

"Why?" I ask, partly curious, but mostly relieved.

"Asia's great, but I'm not interested. Stringing her along isn't fair to her, or—"

"Or?"

Zach clears his throat. "You manage to find your journals yet?" he asks.

I don't recall him being in class while the others helped me search.

"How'd you know about that?"

"You posted like six messages to our website Sunday evening."

"Right." I wince. "No. Haven't found them. Retraced all my steps, but they're probably long gone."

Zach points to the noticeboard opposite our bench; it's so covered with posters it's taken on a mosaic-like appearance. It's hard to tell what any of the advertisements are for.

"Why don't you make a poster?" he says. "Something might turn up."

I'm not keen on the idea. My email and number were printed clearly on the inside of that book. If anyone with pure intentions had found it, they'd have called by now.

"Why's it so important to you, anyway?" Zach asks. Like most of his questions, it's not forceful, but this one puts me on the defence. "I've seen the kind of memory you've got. Surely you can recreate some of its contents? Maybe back it up digitally this time?"

He wants to be helpful. Right now I'm not in the mood.

"I could rewrite the whole thing in a week, down to the fucking letter," I snap, then follow up with a hurried *sorry*. None of this is his fault. "I'm worried it might land in the wrong hands, that's all. It's not just my words. Remember the journal I told you I'd found in my mother's locker?"

Zach's brows disappear into his fringe. Might be a while before I'm used to this new hairstyle.

"Shit, don't tell me that's also missing?"

Suddenly I remember something.

"Hey, if you saw that message, then you also know Dureshni got back to me."

"I was getting to that," Zach says. "How you feeling bout meeting her?"

I swing my legs onto the bench, so I'm facing him squarely.

"I never told you I'm meeting her..."

Zach lifts the lid off his cup and peers inside.

"But you are," he insists.

"How do you know?"

"Didn't you pelt the most annoying student in our class with cake?" He tilts his head in my direction. "You're Adara. You do whatever the fuck you want. And I know you want the truth."

He gets up and makes the short walk to the black-and-red vending machine at the end of the corridor. Zach slips three coins into the slot.

"Want anything?" he calls over the shoulder.

"I'm good, thanks."

The realisation hits me as he's returning: this man casually stirring his drink, could soon be famous. I imagine Zach as a guest on one of those late-night talk shows, cracking jokes, and doing quizzes with a charming host, and the hair on my arms prickle. What a peculiar feeling, to be equally proud and jealous of someone.

"What are you thinking about?" Zach asks, blowing into his cup.

"When's your birthday?"

Coffee foam splatters my cheek when Zach laughs. He gets it with the pad of his thumb.

"Two weeks. Why?"

I lean my head against the wall and smile. Even someone with Zach's imagination wouldn't believe me if I told him what I've got planned.

But first, the wedding.

Oliver, Zach, Kaanitah and I have stuck posters for my missing journals up all over campus, though I'm almost certain now Tasleem has them both. In the week leading up to her conference in New Haven, she's been unusually motherly. She's even home to cook dinner. Anyone else would ask her outright about the missing journals, but I'm too ashamed to bring it up. Thinking she's read them, is different to knowing she has. I'm kind of relieved. If a few overcooked meals is the only consequence of losing those notebooks, it's a price I'd gladly pay.

Muzammil and his groomsmen are getting ready at Saskia's new home, so Alex has given us his apartment for the bachelorette party and the wedding shower. Once all the guests have left, the bridesmaids take the spare bedroom and Saskia and I bunk in Alex's.

"I'm getting married, but you look more worried than me," Saskia says once the lights are out and we're supposed to be sleeping. The clock radio's blinding display reads 21:05.

"What's up?" she asks. "Having second thoughts about being my maid of honour?"

"No second thoughts." I turn to her. "You know Alex and I haven't spoken to each other at all since that fight?"

"It'll be fiiine," she croons.

I wonder if it will. Then a darker thought enters my mind. What if Tasleem's read the journal and told Alex what I've written? Or worse: what if Alex had found the journal and shown it to my mother? There are so many things that could go wrong tomorrow.

Once Saskia's snoring, I grab as much of the duvet cover as I can and hug it to my chest. The sheets are freshly laundered, but beneath the apricot fabric softener, I can still smell Alex. His soap, aftershave, shampoo. Once these were scents that brought me comfort. Now they fill me with the kind of dread I can taste in the back of my throat.

I was six when I last set foot inside a mosque. After the most religious man in her life demanded Tasleem get an abortion, my mother's relationship with God became somewhat strained. She still prays five times per day, fasts, and gives generously of her time and money to anyone she can, but Tasleem decided early on to expose me and my brother to just enough religion to keep us from hell. These giant domes with their towering minarets are places I've only admired from afar.

Our wedding party wears white as we head upstairs to the women's section. Saskia's dressed in billowy chiffon that I hold at the side, so it doesn't get soiled. Several women are already seated on the carpet inside when we arrive.

"*Ooh fok, we're late,*" Naathierah says. She cups her hand to her mouth; swearing in mosque is not permitted.

Oumie scowls at us.

"*Maaf, mammi,*" Naathierah apologises. She turns to me. "*Bietjie* stressed. My baby's getting married, you know?"

For today I've extended to her the same courtesy as I do with Cyan: I'm going to tolerate my aunt. I smile, giving her arm a gentle squeeze.

"*Ey, your shoes!*" Naathierah hisses.

I turn to see all the bridesmaids and flower girls removing their pumps and carrying them to the nearby shoe rack – standard protocol before entering a mosque. I promised I'd follow what everyone else did today, and not draw attention to myself. Now, scarcely an hour into the wedding, and already I'm projecting my outsider status.

"*Ieblies,*" Saskia teases.

When she calls me the devil, I gently remind her I've been assigned as her bathroom buddy for the day. Slipping in and out of that wedding gown unassisted is a near-impossible feat, so this threat hits hard.

During the Nikkah, we sit in the front row of the mosque upstairs. Put simply, the Nikkah is the marriage contract ceremony. There'll be no I-do's or walking down the aisle today. We just sit, listen and wait. Naathierah leans over and tells me women didn't usually attend this in the old days.

"We'd be waiting back home," she says. "Now they've made space for the women, too."

For someone who'd lived through those times, this new mode seems progressive. For me it's frustrating as hell. All the action happens downstairs. From our seats, we can only hear them over the microphone, while a glass balcony closed with a heavy, patterned curtain, obscures our view. After the Imam makes the welcoming prayer, a crack opens in the curtain as one aunty's curiosity wins out. I kiss Saskia's hand, lifting her veil enough to whisper in her ear.

"Be right back," I say.

The portly woman spying on the ceremony has a friendly face. Though she moves with difficulty, she gladly shifts over to make space for me. My eyes immediately pick out Muzammil. Seated cross-legged at the front, dressed from head to foot in white and black, he's never looked more handsome.

"Muzammil Doute has agreed to pay the dowry in gold coins to the value of," the Imam slips his spectacles on as he reads from a paper, "two hundred and fifty thousand rand."

Gasps of disbelief resound. The woman beside me pulls the curtain over her mouth.

"*Hy is mos ryk, dié outjie!*" she whispers.

Maybe she thinks I don't understand her variety of Afrikaans, because she promptly switches to English. Rather than taking offence, I like her more for struggling through a language that doesn't roll from her tongue.

"I wish my husband had so much. He only give me..." she throws her mind back, counting under her breath. "Twenty Suid Afrikan Rand!"

We laugh softly. Without me asking, she narrates the rest of the ceremony in hushed tones. The Imam is reciting another passage from the Qur'an, she tells me.

"Now he's asking Muzammil if he's going to marry Kia," she says, rearranging the curtain so we're not spotted.

The gooseneck mic is angled toward Muzammil's mouth as he recites in Arabic. I can't understand a word, but it sounds calming. I would not have known he'd stumbled if an older man didn't lean over to whisper in his ear. The woman beside me grips my arm, holding her breath until Muz begins again.

"*Qabil-tu nikah haha linafsi biethaalik,*" Muzammil's voice echoes clearer, less tremulous the second time.

Relief spreads through the mosque when he makes it through without a glitch.

"You can't make a mistake with *Qabiltu*," the woman explains.

Apparently even the most well-practised husbands stumbled under the pressure. It's not easy when all your male relatives and in-laws are breathing down your neck, almost waiting for you to trip up.

Once Muzammil and six other witnesses have signed the marriage certificate, the Imam recites a closing prayer and hugs and handshakes are given. From my bird's eye view, I see Tariq, all Muzammil's brothers, his uncles, and Saskia's family, but no Alex.

I turn to my new friend whose name I don't know and thank her for explaining the ceremony to me.

"Ag, man. It was mos nothing."

Then she hugs me so hard that her gorgeous blue scarf comes loose. I help her locate the pin and secure it.

"Your *doekie* is beautiful," I say, a bit soft because I'm unsure of pronunciation. Her face melts into a smile.

"Haai, my kind," she sniffs, dabbing her eyes with a crumpled tissue. "You are also beautiful."

When she kisses my cheek, her moustache prickles my skin and warmth spreads through my chest. I've just been made an honorary member of a society I'd been barred from before.

I embrace my tearful cousin before helping her into her shoes and down the stairs. I didn't think Naathierah could cry, but she's weeping by the time we reach the mosque's adjoining hall where everyone's attacking towers of savouries. My stomach grumbles, and I hurry off to fill a plate for me and Saskia. By the time she's done kissing the two hundred aunties that descend, all the food will be gone.

There are pies, samoosas, mini pizzas, cocktail shrimp, tiny lemon meringues, red velvet cupcakes, half-moons, spring rolls, a variety of sandwiches on artisanal breads, and – yes! – a pile of koeksisters that could dwarf Table Mountain itself. Not wanting to hold up the queue, I grab a large plate and start piling it with calories.

"Salaam, sweetheart," a gruff voice greets me. The man stands so close, I almost drop the plate.

"Salaam, Uncle," I greet just the way Saskia taught me.

Now that I have our food, I want to disappear, but this man won't let up. When I move off to the side, he follows me.

"You're Tasleem's daughter," he says. "And your brother?"

"Tariq?"

"Yes. Your mommy couldn't make it?"

I shake my head as good-naturedly as possible. I'm not keen to discuss Tasleem's absence, yet I know my presence has drawn attention to it. I stood out like a vegetarian at Mzoli's the last time we had a family gathering, and it's no different at this wedding. I count at least three pairs of

eyes on us. Before the awkwardness becomes unbearable, Muzammil cuts through the crowd and puts his arm around me. As the groom, he wields enviable power here.

“You were great,” I say, kissing him on the cheek.

“Really?” he laughs. “You must’ve missed my blunder.” He greets a few gentlemen with a wave but doesn’t stop to talk. “Have you seen my wife?” Muz pronounces Saskia’s new title with such heartening pride.

“I was about to ask you that. Have you seen my— have you seen Alex?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be going through with this without my brother. I saw you and Asma peeping through the curtains earlier by the way.”

I chuckle.

“You really didn’t see Alex?” Muz gives me a quizzical look. “He signed as one of my witnesses.”

“What? No. I didn’t see him.”

When we find Saskia, she leaps into Muzammil’s arms before he can even fit the ring on her finger. They’ve never been strangers to public displays of affection, but they’ve clearly upped their game with their new status as a married pair.

“Hey, honeymoon is *tonight*. Not now.” I gently pry them apart, then whack Muzammil’s hand. “You’re ruining her make-up!”

Saskia laughs from her belly as she tries to get the lipstick off his face.

“Ah, here he is. Brother bear!” Muzammil says.

When I turn around, my mouth opens wide enough to fit an entire plate of savouries. For as long as I’ve known him, I’ve never seen Alex without a beard or a decent layer of stubble. Today he’s clean-shaven, and his skin glows as if it’s been buffed and polished. Like the rest of the groomsmen, he wears a white *abaya* and fez, but the ornate black-and-gold *pashmiah* draped across his shoulders and chest, makes him look regal. Like a fresh-faced Arabian prince.

“Do you wanna lift your jaw there, hm?” Saskia pinches me. She makes an obscene gesture and one of the aunties pretends not to notice.

I watch the childhood friends embrace the way adult men are seldom allowed to. Muzammil kisses Alex on both cheeks, as older Muslim men are wont to do, but his friend does one better and kisses him full on the forehead.

“I’m so proud of you,” Muz tells Alex.

“I’m so proud of *you!*” Alex counters.

When Muzzamil and Saskia make off with the platter, I get to speak to Alex for the first time since our fight. I fiddle with the ends of my scarf as he walks over, koeksister in hand.

“Alex—”

“You look beautiful,” he says, leaning down to kiss my cheek and give me one of his firm, one-armed hugs. He smells of the same exotic oils the groom is wearing, and not at all like the Alex on the bedsheets I’ve slept in. Without the beard, he doesn’t look like him either.

“And you! You’re really rocking this Muslim-look!” I untwirl the silk pashminah and re-drape it.

Alex bites half the koeksister off, then feeds me the other half. We head off in search of more food. The way he holds my hand, you’d never think we were capable of screaming at each other in the middle of a parking lot. Alex is a lot like my mother in this respect. We can war like enemies one moment, then move on without a word. When I try to apologise, he shoves another koeksister in my mouth.

“It’s a wedding, Addy.” Alex rolls his eyes. “Forget about that other stuff.”

Alex is on his fifth cocktail roll with *soutvleis* when Naathierah bustles through. Cheeks flushed and turban askew, she looks on the warpath.

“*Kom julle,*” she says, taking the roll from me. Defiant, I pick it up again. Rather than directing her rage at me, she huffs something about the in-laws and being late for wedding photos. I check my phone. She’s right; it’s almost lunchtime. The close relatives are headed to Muzammil’s parents’ home for a midday meal, while the wedding party go to the beach and the gardens to do the photoshoot. Later this evening we’ll convene at Kirstenbosch Gardens for supper.

I’m cranky because I’ve only had two mini pizzas and a koeksister and a half. I try to keep the edge from my voice as I tell Naathierah this. I expect her to scold, but her eyes merely scan the place. Next thing I know, she’s removing her purse from her handbag.

“Come,” she says.

Naathierah leads us to a table that still has several savouries and doughnuts. She looks around again, all the while muttering about her *posh* in-laws who’d never let her forget it if they saw what she was about to do. Naathierah tears off a section of the paper covering the trestle table. She grabs an assortment of treats – samoosas, pies, crepes, koeksisters, muffins, pizzas – and rolls them into the paper. Then she rips off another piece and wraps it round the bundle again, “*Soe dat die vet nie deur slat nie,*” she explains. Translation: so that the grease doesn’t seep through. This

massive parcel she puts into her oversized handbag, which she shoves into my hands. A package like this, hastily wrapped and carried off from a function, is known as a *barakat*. Usually it's freely given, but there are times it must be smuggled out.

"There's lipsticks and stuff in the inside pocket. Not that expensive Urban Decay *goeters* your cousin uses. Is just cheap R5 store stuff. But, you know, for touch-ups," Naathierah tells me.

Alex and I stare at each other.

"What you waiting for?" My aunt steers us to the door. "The limo's leaving!"

I can't explain why, but I lean in and peck Naathierah on the cheek.

"*Kom hier*," she says, grabbing my shoulder. She removes three of the pins from my head and traps them between her nicotine-stained teeth. With the speed of a practised hand, she re-drapes my headscarf, then spins me round to face Alex.

"Look okay?" she asks.

Alex, who's holding the handbag filled with our breakfast, nods vigorously.

"You two look good," Naathierah says. "Now go!"

Once we're in the limo with the other bridesmaids and groomsmen, who are all still starving, Alex sets the handbag on the floor and opens it; the others peer inside with all the caution of a bomb squad. As soon as they see the gifts we've brought, they start cheering. Someone pops a bottle of Appletiser and the driver cranks up the music. We'll take some pictures, then the women will head to Naathierah's house and the men will go to Saskia and Muzammil's new place to get changed for the evening reception.

Alex offers me the breakfast parcel, and I go for a mushroom-steak mini pizza; even covered in coconut flakes from a nearby koeksister, it hits the spot. I take another and bump it against Alex's cocktail pie the way you would champagne glasses.

"More?" Alex asks, holding out a fresh bottle of Grapetiser.

I feel my phone vibrate.

"Just one sec," I say.

It might be Tasleem checking in to see if Naathierah hasn't killed me yet. She was worried about me spending so much time with her sister today. I can't wait to tell her we've smuggled samoosas into the limo.

But there are no messages from Tasleem. Just one from Dureshni.

Hi Little Adara. Can't wait to see you. Meet you after supper? Marbelle. Around 20:30?
I'll be in the café downstairs. They make the loveliest cheesecake! Coffee on me. X

"Ads, you okay?" Alex asks. Without the beard, even a furrowed brow can't make him look old.

"I'm fine."

He's not buying it, so I reach out and cup his face. Alex kisses the inside of my palm; the bridesmaid seated across from us looks away. I'm not sure why this annoys me.

"I'm fine," I repeat.

But I'm not.

For the whole day, I can't stop thinking about my meeting with Dureshni.

When we're under the trees in the city garden, when we're out on the beach, peering over rocky cliffs, even when we pose beneath a canopy of flowers that splatters us with icy raindrops... I can't get Dureshni out of my mind. It's only for a brief half hour, just before supper, that I manage to forget about my mother's friend. And who should provide that moment of respite, but Naathierah herself, the bitch incarnate.

I didn't expect to have a meltdown at my cousin's wedding today, but it hits me as I'm applying eyeliner. Half-dressed, I stride into the room where the bridesmaids are getting ready. Two older women are bent over Saskia, one's applying make-up, while the other fixes a gleaming crown to her head. She meets my eyes in the mirror.

"Addy, what's wrong?" Saskia asks.

"Where's Naathierah?"

"She's in the lounge, I think. But—"

I'm already bounding down the corridor and don't hear the rest. Today I'll find out just how deep the hate between Tasleem and Naathierah runs. I must know why she betrayed her only sister. I need answers to my questions. Zach might be okay with building puzzles in the dark, but I'm not.

When I find her, Naathierah's arranging flowers in the lounge. I don't give myself time to lose my nerve.

"Tell me what happened with Tasleem," I demand. "Three years ago you said I don't know the whole story. Now's your chance. Tell me."

Naathierah's eyes bulge. She seems to lunge for my throat as she pushes me back into the corridor. When I start arguing, she shoves me into her bedroom. She's red in the face from the effort.

"Hoe kan jy so uitkom?" She gestures to my bra and stay-up stockings. *"Daar's mense!"*

Now that we're in a quiet room, I can hear guests milling about outside. I'm not mortified enough to forget why I stormed into the lounge.

"I'm not afraid of you." I lengthen my spine, jut out my chin. "Everyone thinks I'm my mother's daughter, but I'm not afraid of you. You don't scare me. And I want answers."

Naathierah's eyes grow until they're too big for her head. She bursts out laughing.

"You think your mother's afraid of me?" She hits both palms against her chest. "Me?"

"She cowers in front of you. I've seen it."

Naathierah straightens her turban.

"My girl," she says. "Tasleem's only afraid she'll upset our mother. She's careful how she treats our only remaining parent."

Naathierah hands me a blanket from the cupboard.

"Wag hier," she says. *"And kanallah* don't go outside like that again."

A minute later, she returns with my dress still in its black cover. Under her chin she grips the make-up bag, and she's got the hair straightener under an arm.

Maybe being in my mother's childhood home has triggered me. Or it could be the wedding itself. I love Saskia like I do Tariq, but how is it my cousin gets to have a dream wedding like this, when Tasleem was denied it?

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me the truth." I throw the blanket off and fold my arms.

Naathierah pulls out a chair in front of the dressing table.

"Sit," she says.

"No."

"Sit."

"I'm not a dog," I say. "You can't order me around."

Naathierah doesn't answer. She hastily unpacks the make-up bag, lining items up on the dressing table while muttering frantic Afrikaans.

"You must really hate me," she snorts. "Can only imagine the things your mother's told you."

The lipsticks, brushes, and various creams bang hard against the dresser's glass table.

"She told me about the pigeon." I shake my head. "How could you feed her pet to her?" I start pacing beside the bed. "I want to understand why you two hate each other so much. How could you rat her out the way you did? What – *please tell me* – what exactly did you stand to gain from it?"

Naathierah stares, holding a make-up brush aloft.

"Was she the favourite, hmm?" I ask. "The straight-A student, the good girl? You just wanted your parents to hate her?"

Instead of answering me, my aunt unzips the suit cover and throws me my dress.

"If we going to talk about this, you better put some clothes on," she sighs. "This is a long story."

Naathierah helps me into the dress, then sits me down in front of the dresser. We agree I'll get ready while she answers my questions. She unties my bun and turns on the flat iron.

"You have Tasleem's hair. Not the colour, but the type. *Styl hare*," she remarks, combing it through with her fingers. "So soft and shiny."

My hair has never been shorter than my hip, and Saskia and I still haven't decided how best to style it.

"How about some curls? We can pin everything up or leave it hanging over your shoulders?" Naathiera folds a few pieces of my hair around my head, flicking out the edges to show me what it might look like.

"What about the *Medora*?" I ask.

The Medora is the traditional crown worn during Cape Malay weddings. It can be quite elaborate, impossible to adjust once pinned to the head, and extremely painful if done incorrectly. Saskia told me her mother was a master at Medora.

"Don't worry about that," she says. "The young girls don't really like Medoras anymore. Says it's '*ou doos*', but we'll make you beautiful. You Tasleem's daughter. We won't have to try very hard."

Did my mother's sister just pay her a compliment?

Naathierah takes out a scarf made from the same colour as my dress and sets it out on the bed beside a delicate tiara. She falls so silent once she gets started on my hair and make-up, that I almost think she's gone back on her promise of telling me about Tasleem.

"Where is your mommy, anyway?" Naathierah asks. The question is as gentle as the fingers that untangle my hair.

"Conference. She's presenting some of her research in Neuroscience."

"Your mother," Naathierah smiles sadly. "*Altyd die slimkop.*"

There's an odd mix of jealousy, awe, and pride in her voice. Once my hair's done, Naathierah goes to work on the Medora.

"We're going to pin the tiara into the scarf," she explains. "Then I'll pin it to your head, and we'll finish your make-up."

I nod.

"Okay. I'm ready," Naathierah says. She plants herself on a stool beside the dressing table; I watch her fold the scarf and begin threading a silver wire through it and into the tiara. "Ask your questions."

I want to know why Tasleem couldn't have had a wedding like this one. I want to know why the family turned their back on her when she fell pregnant. I want to know why Naathierah blurted out the secret, why she didn't come looking for Tasleem afterwards, why the family gave her – and me – zero support during the toughest years of our lives.

"You want to know why I'm such a shit older sister," Naathierah finishes the Medora and hands me the tub of pins.

"Your words, not mine," I say.

Naathierah moves behind me. She positions the crown on my head and tells me to hand her the pins when she needs them.

"I'm not the bitch my sister makes me out to be, you know," Naathierah teases. She slips a stick of gum into her mouth and offers me the pack. Now that she's proven it's not poison, I take one.

"Tasleem's never called you a bitch," I say.

"She didn't have to. I see it all over your face. Every time I get near you, I get the feeling you think I'm going to scream or try to kill you." Her laugh makes her sound like she's in pain. "I don't hate you, Adara."

"My mother's the person you hate." I hand her a pin. "I want to know why."

“It’s a very complicated story.”

“So is the crown you’re pinning to my head. But you don’t hear me complaining.”

Naathierah snorts.

“You got just so a *slimbek* like your mother,” she says. It’s more compliment than insult.

According to Naathierah, Tasleem was the golden child in the family. Always top of the class – both in school and Islamic studies.

“Do you know she turned *Hafiz* when she was just eleven?”

“*Hafiz*?” I ask.

“She can recite the entire Quran from memory.” Naathierah taps her temple. “She knows every line by heart.”

Masking my shock is impossible.

“Didn’t she tell you?” Naathierah readjusts a pin. “We had this big fancy supper – almost like a banquet – when she graduated. Invited the whole neighbourhood.”

Tasleem’s never been one to flaunt her achievements, but this feels like something she should’ve mentioned.

Naathierah sticks the last of the pins into my crown and starts applying moisturizer to my face. She removes the botched eyeliner with softened coconut oil. Since I’ve known her, this is the closest we’ve been. I can even smell her: cloying perfume and cigarette smoke.

“That’s what made it so hard for our father,” she explains. “Tasleem was such a good girl – never put a foot wrong. No one expected her to fall to pregnant. You know, Mr Raymonds, Hoosain’s boss, even sent Tassy to private school with his daughters? He could see how gifted she was.”

Naathierah dots my face with foundation and dabs at it with a round sponge.

“She had so many good Muslim boys running after her, and what did she do? She chose a white man – the very thing that was off limits.”

Once the eyeshadow’s set, I sit really still while Naathierah curls my lashes with a pair of tongs.

“May I?” Naathierah asks, holding up a glue bottle and a pair of false lashes.

“You won’t blind me?”

Naathierah rolls her eyes.

I lean my head back. The glue goes on cold, and then, one by one, the lashes are inserted using a tweezer. Naathierah's got a deft hand; it's obvious she's done this before. I blink a couple of times, just to be sure my eyelids aren't glued shut.

"There were people of different races who managed to get married during Apartheid," I remind her. "Did your parents not approve of Andrew? Is that what caused the friction?"

Naathierah asks me to hold a rectangular palette with about thirty shades in it.

"Adara, maybe it's better if you ask your mother this stuff."

"My mother doesn't talk about this. It's hard for her because of my father's death."

"She never told me he passed away. I'm sorry, Adara." Naathierah dabs her brush into a light pink colour, dusts off the excess, and swirls it across my cheekbones. She does the same with three more shades – gold, bronze, and rose.

"It's okay." I shrug. "I didn't know him."

"I didn't know him either, but if he looked anything like you, I can understand why Tasleem went crazy like that..."

A few pins start prickling my head, so Naathierah removes them. She finishes my make-up with a slick of deep plum on the lips. I thank her, sincerely, because she's done a wonderful job. I look like a glamorous evil queen.

"Adara," Naathierah leans against the dressing table. "I don't feel it's my place to tell you these things about Tasleem. Once I spoke out of turn and it ended with her on the street."

Naathierah spits her gum into a tissue and pops in a fresh stick. She chews like Alex does when he's craving nicotine.

I'm not sure if I'll ever be alone with my aunt like this again. So, I tell Naathierah the story of how my mom beat me after she caught me looking at a blurred photograph of Andrew. I'm confident I've broken her when she asks me,

"What you want to know?"

"Your side of the story. What really happened when Tasleem fell pregnant with me?"

Naathierah's hands tremble; I don't think it has anything to do with nicotine withdrawal. I give her a few seconds to peel the cobwebs from her mind.

Naathierah's story begins with their childhood.

Tasleem was younger, prettier, smarter, and had all the perks an older child should've enjoyed, but Naathierah didn't begrudge her the success. Tasleem worked hard and deserved the glory.

“We had our fights, but were so close,” she holds her fingers together. “Until one day, the guy I was supposed to marry came to supper. Everyone knew I was in love with Rafiq. And I was so excited that he was going to ask papa if he could marry me.

“So we all sitting at the table when he says – and I still remember every word – Rafiq says, ‘Hajji Hoosain, I would like to ask your permission to marry your daughter. I’ve had my eye on her for years now. I have a good job and I can take care of her.’ Oh, he sounded so sweet. Such a gentleman!”

I ask her what happened then.

“My father said yes. Oh, I was so happy. I can’t even tell you. Then he gets this beautiful ring out and my mother starts crying, and me too. And Rafiq gets up, he kneels on the floor and asks ‘Will you marry me?’ To *Tasleem!*”

The blood drains from my face.

“She turned him down. Said she wasn’t interested. I felt *so* betrayed... That he choose her, and that she had the nerve to say no when I wanted it more then anything. I found out afterwards she’d been ‘playing with him’ even though she knew I loved him.”

When I think of how easily Tasleem flirts with men, how effortlessly she bewitches them, I can’t put something like this past her. Even Alex. He was taken by her from the moment they met. If he told me he was sleeping with my mother, I wouldn’t blink.

“You actually met Rafiq,” Naatheriah says. “He was the one who fell into the Breyani pot at the janaazah two years ago? He spoke to you today. I saw Muzammil rescue you from him.”

“At the buffet table?” I ask.

“That’s the one. I bet he was asking about her,” Naathierah sighs deeply. “You know, half the family think Rafiq’s gay? He’s not. He’s just someone who never got over your mother. Won’t take a wife. It’s so sad.”

Now I wish I hadn’t been so dismissive when he spoke to me.

“We drifted apart after that. Tasleem focused on school more then ever. And big things happened in my life that she didn’t even know of. She never asked me anything anymore. Always with a nose in a book.”

Naathierah sounds bitter and hurt.

“And then I found that pregnancy test. That *positive* pregnancy test.”

“And you blurted the secret out at the dinner table. You humiliated her, just like that guy humiliated you,” I say.

Naathierah pinches her mouth.

“It didn’t happen like that,” she says.

“But you did tell her parents she was pregnant, and she was thrown out that very night?”

It’s important that this detail be true. It was what Tasleem’s been telling me my whole life. It’s what was written in the journal. Unless Naathierah could somehow refute this, she was irredeemable. No matter how many beautiful hairstyles she made or eyelashes she glued to my face, I would never be able to forgive her.

“I did,” she admits. “You right. But I didn’t know it was going to end that way. Tasleem thinks I hated her, that I was jealous and wanted to make trouble, but that’s not true. I tried to tell her. A million times. I even wrote a letter to her, that she returned unopened.”

Wait. I put my hand up.

“She said no one ever tried to make contact with her after she left...”

Naathierah’s eyes are motionless in her head.

“She said you guys just wrote her off forever. No contact from any of you.”

A tear falls onto Naathierah’s wrist.

“That’s not true...” She gets up, fetches a small stool and stands on it to reach a box in the cupboard above the dressing table. She opens it and extracts a yellowed envelope.

“Maybe it’s better you read the truth the way I wanted Tasleem to, years ago. It will help you understand what I must live with. I tried, for years, to make things right. You must believe me.”

I take the letter from her. The glue has discoloured, and it opens easily.

12 August 1991

Dear Tasleem

Maaf for everything. I’m so sorry for what happen last week. You have every right to be angry with me, but you need to give me a chance to explain. What I did, was out of love for you.

I’ve barely read two lines when I close the letter.

“How do you do something like that out of *love* for your sister?” My voice cracks. “You knew Hoosain was unreasonable!”

Naathierah reopens the letter. She urges me to continue.

We've grown apart, but I never stopped thinking of you as a sister and my friend. I never dreamed papa would be so kak about this. We tried speaking to him but he won't listen. We actually want to get the Moulana in so he can talk to him. But before we get to that, there's something you need to know. I want to tell you why I did what I did. Maybe you don't believe me, and that's okay, but I must try.

Do you remember that time I was in matric and I went away on camp one weekend? You know how papa is – he didn't want to let me go, but I nagged for a week and he gave in. Here's the thing. I never went to camp. I went to my teacher's house. I'd gotten into so much trouble at school, but she knew papa would hit me so she kept it quiet. But then it got to a point where she couldn't keep it quiet anymore. I was pregnant. That's one secret that always comes out.

I look up at my aunt whose eyes are downcast.

Mrs Daraviesa said she'd help me get rid of it. She knew a woman. Allah must forgive me. I let them put a coat hanger inside me. It remains the most painful thing I've done. I bled for weeks afterwards. And I had to come home and pretend everything was fine. I couldn't burden you with my secret... and you didn't even see something was wrong. I would cry myself to sleep. It was hell. When I found that pregnancy test, I wanted to tell daddy and mommy so you wouldn't get desperate and make the same mistakes. That coat hanger gave me post-abortion sepsis – you a doctor, so you'll understand how serious this is. They told me I may never have children now. I didn't want that for my little sister. And I knew you would get an abortion because you always put your studies before your family. I wanted to save you from making the same unreversible error.

I read the letter over again before I fold it.

“You used to be a doctor,” Naathierah says. “I can show you the letter from my gynaecologist where she said I have far too much scar tissue in the uterus to have a child. I had to get treatment for Ash– Ashman's syndrome?”

My voice is hoarse when I speak.

“But you had Saskia?”

Naathierah nods. Her mouth trembles.

“I had three operations to remove the scar tissue. It was a long time, many miscarriages. After the first one, I tried to contact your mother. No answer.”

I turn the box upside down. About thirty letters fall out, most of them addressed to my mother. There are also several pages bearing Groote Schuur Hospital’s letterhead. According to the documents, five years after her abortion, my aunt was diagnosed with Asherman’s Syndrome. In other words, her uterine walls were so plastered together with scar tissue, nothing could grow inside her uterus. I shuffle through the letters and see there are a few from private hospitals and fertility clinics too. My aunt had gotten second and third opinions and had both a hysterosalpingogram and hysteroscopy done. I can’t imagine how much it must’ve cost. All the medical certificates and reports are stamped and dated; there’s no way she could have fabricated any of it.

“I’m sorry, Adara. I loved Tasleem more than the world, and I hurt her so much,” Naathierah’s muffled sobs are heart-breaking. “Her body wouldn’t survive a illegal abortion. She was so *small*, so *tingerig!* I thought if I told our parents, they’d love and support her. She was always the favourite. I was trying to prevent a abortion by telling our father. I never dreamed he’d ask her to *get one*. I didn’t think he could turn his back on his *bokkie*, that he’d care more about what people thought, than his own daughter’s life. That was *my* mistake. If I could do it over, if—”

I grip my aunt’s hands.

While I watch the tears drip from her chin, I can’t help but marvel at the far-reaching consequences of human misunderstanding, at how two sisters who’d grown up under the same roof could be so wrong about each other. Naathierah was sure Tasleem would choose her career over her child, and Tasleem was convinced Naathierah’s motive for ratting her out was blind hatred and jealousy, when it was – unbelievably – love.

Everything’s changed now that I know Tasleem lied about her family abandoning her. I have evidence to prove her sister tried making contact just one week after she was kicked out. It wasn’t at all the way my mother said. Naathierah tells me Oumie also wrote letters to Tasleem. To her knowledge, those were returned unopened, too.

“After you moved to Rondebosch, I gave up.”

“But your daughter didn’t,” I say.

One of the bridesmaids pops her head into the room to ask if we’re ready to leave. If she sees our red-rimmed eyes, she says nothing.

“*Ja, ja*. Just ten minutes!” Naathierah shoos her away. Once we’re alone, my aunt draws me in for a hug. “You drive with me, okay? You can meet the others at the hall later.”

This evening I’ll see Dureshni. Now that I know Tasleem’s been lying, there’s no telling what other secrets her friend might reveal. It’s only when Naathierah folds me to her chest that I realise how fucking terrified I am.

On the drive to Kirstenbosch I discover Naathierah’s a chain smoker and that she’s fallen in love with the cigars Alex has gifted Muzammil. For someone whose father hated white men, Naathierah has no aversion to them. She won’t stop gushing over how sweet Alex is, and how lucky Muzammil is to have a friend like him.

“Saskia looks gorgeous today,” Naathierah says, blowing smoke out the window, “but I worry about her marrying into such a rich family.”

I grunt in acknowledgement. “That’s true. But Muzammil is a good man, even if he does have money.”

“I don’t doubt that. But his parents,” Naathierah makes a choking gesture. “They caught me stealing *dyte* this morning. His mother wouldn’t *hou her bek* about it at lunch – bloody *blikskottel*. But do I look like I care? *Ge!*”

She looks like she really cares, but I don’t tell her.

We sit in the back of the limo with the divider up. She tells me she’s never been in a car like this before.

“Weddings used to be simple affairs. People didn’t have lots of money back then. We *summa* slat a tent in the yard. And invites? There were no such things!”

How did people know they could come to the wedding then, I ask.

Naathierah slaps her meaty thigh and laughs hard enough to make her breasts quiver.

In the old days, she tells me, the bride and groom would personally visit each relative and invite them by word of mouth. There was nothing of ‘admit 1’, or ‘no children allowed’ or ‘please check the gift registry.’ She uses a decidedly white accent with the air quotes. Despite everything I’m feeling, I laugh.

“When I got married,” she says, “I went to all the family members with my daddy and he told the people ‘*Sê vir auntie die en auntie daai, hulle kan hom!*’ they would extend the invitations to all the neighbours and friends. It was kind of like,” Naathierah takes a long drag of her cigar, “like you had the right to attend someone’s wedding even if you only knew them by association.”

This concept is so bizarre to me. What about the caterers?

“Caterers!” Naathierah laughs again. “Everyone in the family *klap by*. Sorry. How do you say... they all... um,”

“Chipped in?” I offer.

Naathierah snaps her fingers, then flicks off ash in the tray.

“Yes! So aunty this made the chicken. Eight hundred pieces. Aunty that made the rice. Three hundred litres.” She does it in a sing-song voice that makes me weirdly nostalgic for a time I never got to experience. “They even donated the Medoras. Kia had to pay for this things now.”

“What about the weddings?” I ask. “Saskia says you guys don’t really have dancing.”

Naathierah nods.

“No, we don’t dance. But we used to have Roosa.”

“What’s that?”

Naathierah gives me a history lesson about the Cape Malay choirs and their love songs. She speaks with such fervour, and even breaks out in song to give me an idea what they sounded like. My mother cannot sing for shit, but her sister isn’t half bad. She beats her hand on car door, mimicking the drums and tries – but fails – to sound out the trumpets with her mouth. A smile spreads across my face as I watch her shaking her shoulders. For someone belonging to a culture not rooted in dance, my aunt moves her body with soulful ease.

“The guests knew all the lyrics! You just start up a song and everyone – even the old people – sing along. You’d have one foot in the grave, my girl, but you’ll still sing! Oh, your mother loved to go to those weddings. The boys were all after her.”

My stomach sinks as the topic shifts to Tasleem. We get stuck in traffic and Naathierah tells me more childhood stories, but all I can think of is my meeting with Dureshni. By the time we get to the hall, all the other guests have arrived and it’s already dark outside.

Alex strides towards me, then pulls up short when he sees the dress I’m wearing. For the evening he’s changed into a tux and doesn’t look too bad himself.

“You are beautiful,” he says, offering his arm. Naathierah goes in while I hang back, clutching my phone.

“Come, we’ve been waiting for you.” Alex tries to pull me towards the entrance.

But I’m already ordering an Uber to the Marbelle. It’s a minute away.

“What are you doing?” Alex asks, peering to look at my cell phone screen. “We have to go in! What the hell, Adara?” He raises his arms above his head. “You can’t run out on your cousin’s wedding! What’s going on?”

As we stare at each other, the white Corolla enters the parking lot.

“Not now, Alex. I need to go.” I turn away from him and wave down the driver.

“Adara!”

“Go back inside,” I say. “You’re doing a speech. So, you better just—”

The Uber parks behind the limo. I run over and lean in through the window.

“Sorry, *bhuti*,” I say. “Just one second.”

The driver gives me a thumbs up before I turn to Alex.

“I’m meeting someone at the Marbelle,” I say. “A friend of Tasleem’s. I need answers about my life, Alex. I think – I *know* – my mother’s been lying to me.”

Alex stands there while the driver waits for me, his Corolla idling hard in the evening silence.

“Go.” I point to the sliding doors. “Saskia will forgive me. But you can’t bail on Muzammil, too.”

Alex looks back at the entrance of the Kirstenbosch hall, then turns to me. It feels like an eternity’s compressed into a moment – that’s how long I wait before he speaks.

“I’m not letting you do this alone,” he says.

Chapter 13

What Happens When a Mountain Cracks?

Soft piano music fills the downstairs café, and a plump woman with dark eyes and hair rises from her seat in the back. As she strides towards us, the mole in the centre of her chin grows more prominent. She's dressed like a less fashionable version of one of my old med school professors – navy slacks and a plain black sweater. Without a lick of make-up on her face, I wonder how she and Tasleem could ever have been friends.

“You look *just like him*.” Dureshni stares at me like I'm a ghost from her past.

Remembering her manners, she proffers her hand.

“You look lovely. Sorry, I didn't think you'd be bringing someone along.” Dureshni gives Alex a tight-lipped smile.

Alex introduces himself. Dureshni smiles, but doesn't shake his hand.

When I tell her that we've just come from a wedding, her change in demeanour is startling.

“Congratulations!” She hugs me. “I wondered why you looked so lovely, with the crown and dress. Thought you'd come from a convention or a cosplay thing. That's what it's called, eh?”

I show her my bare ring finger and explain that it's my cousin's wedding, not ours. A school-boy blush colours Alex's cheek; he loosens his bowtie.

I mouth the word *sorry* as we follow her to the back of the café, where the lighting is low, and the chatter of the other guests, minimal.

“You were just a baby when I last saw you,” Dureshni says, nibbling blueberry cheesecake. After asking me to order for the third time, I settle for a cappuccino. I'd have preferred a dirty chai, but they don't have it on the menu. Since Mxo introduced me to this mystical beverage, I've been making them each night. Beside me, Alex stirs his own milkshake listlessly. He tries holding my hand under the table, but I move out of reach.

“What do you want to know?” Dureshni asks.

“Everything.”

Dureshni shoves her half-eaten cake aside.

“You sure you don't want something stronger than that?” she points towards my coffee. “Do you drink?”

“No. I don't drink.”

Dureshni's eyes are filled with the same fruitless pity I've read on trainee doctor's faces before they deliver bad news. Why is she looking at me like this? My father is dead. What could she say that would top that? How could she surprise me when I've already skipped to the ending of the book?

"You might start after I'm done with my story," she says.

Dureshni starts her narrative at the beginning, when she first met Tasleem. They were the only two women of colour on the medical campus of the whitest university under an Apartheid regime. No one wanted to sit with them, so they gravitated towards each other.

"We were fast friends," Dureshni says. "Taz was hilarious. Always so quick to laugh, but deadly serious when it came to her studies."

Dureshni offers a few sweet anecdotes that I'm too stressed to appreciate. A story about how they got locked in the library, how they stole dresses for the first-year ball, how they powdered their faces and coiffed their hair. I try picturing Tasleem running barefooted down the street, whooping and holding onto the sweaty hand of her friend, but my brain seems to short circuit. It refuses to accept such a vulnerable image of the woman who's been both mother and father to me.

"The change happened in third year. She started lying. Saying she'd be working extra shifts, but when I checked the roster, she wasn't even on call."

I nod, having recently discovered my mother's modus operandi. Years later and she's still pulling the same tricks. I stir my coffee.

"Started wearing different clothes. Expensive clothes. Then I spotted family planning medicine. Really expensive birth control. Yazai? Back then you had to go to a specialist to get that."

"Isn't that the generic version the Yasmine?" I ask, vaguely remembering it from one of my gynaecology blocks.

Dureshni smiles.

"You also a doctor?" she asks.

I shake my head. We're here to discuss my mother. Not me. I urge her to continue.

"And I was right," Dureshni says. "She called me one night in tears. It was maybe a year after they'd been sleeping together. Said she was pregnant, that I had to come get her." Dureshni massages her temple. Alex chooses this moment to take a noisy slurp of his drink.

My mother's friend confirms everything Naathierah told me this afternoon, and all that I've read in the journal. It's true that Tasleem was put onto the street and that Dureshni rescued her.

"I told her she didn't have to pay rent. My parents already paid for the apartment, and they loved Tasleem. Were happy to help. I'd never have expected your mother to hold down a job while studying.

"But she felt she needed to. Took up this gig at the campus library and worked a couple shifts in the lab each week. All while pregnant with you."

The waitress comes round, and Alex orders another milkshake.

"Where was I?" Dureshni asks once she's gone.

"The shifts at the lab."

"Right. These jobs couldn't have paid much, but she made a hefty contribution each month. More than I ever expected. I thought she was lying about the type of work she was doing. You know, there were other, more lucrative opportunities for women who looked like your mother."

I must look visibly sick, because Dureshni rushes to tell me this was not true, that her concerns were unfounded.

"So my mother was working as a librarian and lab tech?" I ask.

Dureshni stares at her cheesecake. She picks up her fork, then returns it to the plate without touching the syrupy confection.

"One day I came home. Found her in hysterics. She was sobbing so much, I thought she'd lost the baby. She didn't," Dureshni says. "Over and over, she kept saying she would burn in hell for what she'd done. That God would never forgive her. Again, it sounded like something was wrong with the baby. Again, she told me you were fine..."

I grip my cup and take a deep drag.

"When I asked if it was about the money, she grabbed me and demanded I tell her how I knew. I remember thinking she'd lost her mind. She seemed paranoid."

Dureshni then tells me the truth about where the money had come from. As she suspected, my mother was involved with a white man. A powerful man.

"Carlisle was his surname. Your mother struggled to spell it at first, but eventually got it right." Dureshni says. "That surname was on all the birth control packets."

When Tasleem told the man she was pregnant, he refused to believe the child was his. Dureshni lowers her voice to a whisper for the next part of the story.

“Your mother was a proud woman. She’d never been with a man before she met Carlisle, and she found it insulting that he’d accuse her of sleeping with anyone else...” Dureshni sighs. “I think the moment he said that, he lost her. She didn’t care what she did after that. And she did a terrible, terrible thing.”

My hands start shaking so much I need to set my cup down.

“What did she do?” I whisper.

“It must have happened in a fit of rage. Remember, your mother was pretty much alone in the world after her father cut her off. She was desperate. And desperation is the mother of all invention.”

“What did my mother do?”

Dureshni sucks in her cheeks. They may not be friends anymore, but she still harbours some loyalty towards Tasleem.

“She accused him of rape. Said she was forced into having sex with him... From what I could tell, the guy already had mental issues and she exploited that. Schizophrenia ran in his family and he was always worried it would someday affect him. Your mother used whatever knowledge she had of the disease to manipulate the hell out of him. Had him convinced he was crazy, that he had no place in your life. In the end, he gave her a ridiculous amount of money to keep quiet. It was enough to cover all her foreseeable expenses, enough to raise a child and put her through med school.”

My mouth is too dry to swallow.

“Here’s the kicker... the only reason he agreed to give the money, is because he really did love your mother. The idea that he could ever have hurt Tasleem, made him hate himself. So he disappeared. Went back home.”

“Home?” I can’t believe how dumb the question sounds.

Dureshni nods. The waitress returns with Alex’s milkshake and he drinks it as if he’s alone at the table, repeatedly knocking his spoon against the side of the tall glass.

“Where’s home?” I repeat.

“Your mother never told you? He was from California.”

“I thought... he was South African?”

Dureshni purses her lips. The level of pity in her eyes is unsettling.

“Adara, I’m afraid this story doesn’t have a happy ending.”

This much I know: my father is dead. There’s nothing more to say.

“Do you know how he died?” Dureshni asks.

My answer comes easily. It’s another of Tasleem’s facts about my dad that’s been etched into my brain.

“There was an on-site accident. My mother was three months pregnant.”

Dureshni stares, then laughs uncomfortably.

“Of course she wouldn’t have told you. Tasleem blackmailed your dad into bankruptcy. What she did was so... unethical. So despicable, she pushed even me away.” Dureshni cuts a piece of cheesecake. Then another. Then another, until the dessert looks more like the drainage from a cyst than something you’d put in your mouth.

My mouth floods with saliva. I feel sick.

“Adara, I’m sorry. I wish I could’ve offered you a better ending to this story...” Tears spill from her eyes as she blinks. “When Tasleem accused your father of rape, he lost his mind. He gave her all the money he had. I didn’t believe it at first. I didn’t *want to*. Then I saw this article in the newspaper one day. It was lying on her desk. Made the front page, right at the bottom.”

Dureshni digs out her phone. She sets it to landscape and moves it across the table.

“I managed to find it article in the New York Times archives.”

Architect Jumps to His Death

12/12/1991

A 36-year-old architect traumatized thousands of New Yorkers on Tuesday morning, when he leapt from his own, unfinished building during peak traffic. Sources say the man, now confirmed as one Andrew James Carlisle, had been struggling with his mental health for years. He leaves behind no family, but it is a sad day for the firm, Earnest and Frost, and the local community college where he lectured. A memorial service will be held next week. Details to follow.

There’s a suicide hotline number at the bottom of the article. I read the words again, but they feel more unreal the second time. Alex has stopped sipping his shake.

“Adara?” he asks.

I give him the phone and look at Dureshni.

“It was my mother’s fault? Not an accident...” I murmur.

All these years I believed my father’s death was just one of those unfortunate anomalies – someone at the wrong place at the wrong time. What am I supposed to make of this?

Back in med school, when we did those mental health seminars, our lecturer belaboured the idea that suicide was no one’s fault but the person who decides to take their own life. Maybe I held to that belief once upon a time, but now that I know my mother blackmailed a man with mental issues, that she forced him to believe he’d raped her... I don’t know where I stand on the subject anymore.

“I went back to Durban once this news report surfaced. I wanted no part of this,” Dureshni says.

“Do you think my mother loved Andrew at all?” I’m not sure why I ask this question. Am I so desperate to find evidence of Tasleem’s humanity? She’s lied about *everything*. Before Dureshni can respond, I start talking to myself, going over everything.

“My whole life my mother made me think she’d raised me on her own. She was honest about you helping out, but she made me believe she’d worked three jobs and hustled her ass off to put me and my brother through school. Now you tell me that money came from her blackmailing someone? Taking advantage of someone who was mentally unstable, who then committed suicide?”

Dureshni reaches for my hand. I rip it away from her. She’s a liar. She *has* to be. Maybe my father committed suicide, but there’s no way to prove Tasleem’s role in that.

“I understand you’re angry,” Dureshni says.

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“Hear me out.” She raises her palms. “Your mother was a full-time medical student. If you ever studied medicine, you’ll know how difficult it is just to stay afloat. All the students I knew who fell pregnant – even those who were married and had support – needed to take a break. Some eventually went back, most didn’t. Think about everything Tasleem had on her plate.”

Dureshni counts the items off on her fingers.

“One, she was a young mother who’d just been evicted from her home after her father had beaten her for falling pregnant. Two, she was a single parent, which brings with it a world of stress. Three, the father of her child was *white*, which meant the baby, *you*, might’ve been taken from her one day. Four, she was a *third-year medical student*. Now any med student will tell you,

third year is the start of your hospital shift year. It's the part of the degree that separates the wheat from the chaff, so to speak."

I say nothing. I've never felt more stupid.

"You want to tell me, honestly, Adara, that Tasleem managed to hold down even one job during that time? I've never been blind to how talented – *how truly gifted* – that mother of yours is, but you've got to have made a pact with the devil to fall pregnant in med school and make it through the degree without filing for leave of absence. Tasleem remained top of her class throughout everything. Her grades didn't drop while she raised you, in fact, I think your little face inspired her to be the best doctor she could be." Dureshni looks apologetic. "But I'm sorry to say, she did not hold down a single job during that time. She had to hire a night nanny just to get some rest. Doing it on her own would've been impossible. It was your father's money that helped get her where she is, where *you are*. Without him, Tasleem wouldn't even have finished her degree. Hoosain cut off all the funds when he learnt of the pregnancy."

"How—" I clear my throat. "How much money did she get from him?"

Dureshni hesitates.

"A lot."

"How much?"

"Six,"

"Six thousand?"

"Six million."

I start shaking my head, then stop. My whole world seems to move backwards.

Whenever I needed to summon courage in my life, I thought of Tasleem and all she'd given up for me. I thought of those long nights spent behind the librarian's desk, of those evenings inhaling fumes in the research lab, of her worn-out shoes and burnt-out spirit... Every time I've needed to be brave, I turned to her for inspiration.

Now, twenty-five years later, I learn that I should've been kneeling beside a grave somewhere in sunny California, whispering my thanks to the headstone of a man who'd jumped from a building because of a convenient lie she'd told.

There's no word in the world to describe what I feel.

“You ready to go?” Alex asks.

“Go where?” I croak.

The large analogue clock in the foyer reads 21:45, but it feels like I’ve been sitting here for years.

“The wedding party should be leaving soon to go to the new house. You not curious to see what we’ve been working on all holiday? If we go now, we can still make it.”

I catch my reflection in the mirror. The waterproof eye make-up has kept its promise, but all the bounce has left my curls.

“You can’t seriously think I’d return to a wedding after this. Weren’t you listening to what that woman said? Or were you too busy enjoying that milkshake to notice my life just fell apart?”

Alex takes a breath and scratches his head.

“You believe all that?” he asks, reaching into his pocket to remove a pack of cigarettes. In past years he would never have smoked in front of me.

“Did you not read that newspaper report? The dates match up. Plus, I found something of Tasleem’s a while back. A piece of evidence.”

Alex slips a cigarette from the pack.

“What did you find?”

I tell him about the journal. When I stand to go, Alex steps out in front of me.

“Can’t you let it go?” he asks. “It was years back and you heard what Dureshni said. Tasleem did it because she loved you.”

I could slap him, but my anger gives way to a simple realisation.

“You knew about this.”

Alex drops the cigarette.

“That’s what I caught you and Tasleem discussing in the kitchen that day. I was waiting outside. I didn’t come in, but I saw the two of you.”

“Adara, you’ve got it wrong—”

“What, you didn’t know? That my mother blackmailed my father? That he committed suicide?”

Alex begs me to calm down.

“I knew about the money, yes. Not the suicide.”

When I start shoving him, the hotel security asks us to leave. Alex’s shoes squeak against the hi-gloss floor, but I don’t slow down. I push through the glass doors without looking back.

I'm already on my phone, typing frantically.

"Adara," Alex says. When I don't listen, he tugs on my sleeve.

"What the fuck do you want?" I snap. "Nothing you say will convince me to change my mind about Tasleem. Okay? You just asked me to *let it go*... do you have any idea how insulting that is? You're so obsessed with Tasleem you can't see straight anymore. She's turned you into a blubbering idiot."

"Adara!"

"What?!"

Tears are streaming down Alex's face now. I'm the one who just learnt my father killed himself. If anyone should be weeping, it's me.

"Can you just forget about Tasleem for one fucking second?"

"Alex, what's the matter?"

His voice is so choked I can't understand him. I ask him to repeat.

"I leave in two months," he says. "Got a job at King's College in London."

I ignore my phone when it beeps.

"What did you just say?" I ask.

"That's why Muz and Saskia moved the wedding forward. They wanted me there. I couldn't have helped with the house if they had it later. Next two months I'll be busy tying up loose ends here."

My phone starts ringing, but I end the call without looking at the screen.

"When..." I swallow. My head's spinning. "When did you find out about this? When did you know you were leaving?"

"The day you saw me talking to Tasleem in the kitchen. That's what we were discussing. I told her not to tell you. And she asked me to keep her secret, about the money. Please Addy, don't fight with me tonight. Let's just go back to the wedding."

My mother didn't learn her lesson from blackmailing Andrew. She's now done the same thing with Alex. When my phone rings this time, I answer it. It's a short call, and I immediately order an Uber once I get off.

"Who was that?" Alex asks. His whiny voice makes me angry.

"You and Tasleem aren't the only ones with secrets."

A white Avanza pulls up and I start towards it. Alex's voice breaks when he calls after me. As we pull off, I watch him standing in the entranceway of the 5-star hotel, wiping his eyes like a

sullen child. I rest my head against the seat. I need to get out of here. I'm so sick of everyone. My phone beeps multiple times, but I don't check it.

If I look down now, my migraine will split my skull.

Chapter 14
Not Tonight

The Uber stops on one of the only remaining cobble streets in Cape Town. The road is so narrow here, it could be a one-way; the glow from the overhead lamps make the stones look as slick as river pebbles. Every click of my heel bounces off the walls, announcing my presence. The driver's lights glow brightly behind me. He said he wouldn't leave until he knew I was safe. And I've seen enough corpses to know: by night this city is as dangerous as it is beautiful.

My eyes flit to my phone as Zach steps out. I nearly lose my footing and tumble from the pavement.

"Still not used to that short hair!" I say, waving to the driver who flicks his lights before moving off.

Zach's brown eyes look deeper than usual; or perhaps it's the low lighting. He takes my hand and twirls me; the dress is buoyed up before sinking to the ground.

"Had no time to change," I say.

"Change... why? It's like someone ripped you from a fantasy novel."

Zach spins me again. I swear he just wants to see the dress billow to the ground. For a blissful second, I forget why I've rushed over here.

My phone rings: the caller ID reads Dureshni. Zach arches his brow, but I pull him back when he tries to step away.

"Sorry for calling so late, Adara," Dureshni sounds cautious.

Zach moves us into a doorway where the light from the streetlamp is softer.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

Dureshni sucks in a breath.

"You still with Alex?"

"No,"

I move closer until I'm sure Zach can hear her.

"I didn't want to mention anything in front of him," Dureshni says. "Everytime I said a word against Tasleem, he tensed."

"You can speak now."

"There was another man. Christopher Carlisle. He invited your mother to the funeral."

"Wait," I tighten my grip on Zach's arm. "She flew out to Andrew's funeral?"

“She did.”

“That’s fucked up…”

“It’s not for us to judge. But I thought you should know… that man, Chris, was Andrew’s brother. I can’t tell you much about your dad, but you can try contacting Christopher. You found me. Maybe you can track him down too?”

My head droops onto Zach’s shoulder. The smell of grapefruit takes me to a place far from this one.

“You still there?” Dureshni asks.

“I’m here,”

“Will you go looking for Chris?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Yale,” she says. “He might’ve been a lecturer there. I know it’s where Tasleem met Chris. I remember only because she was so excited about it. He paid the airfare, hotel, everything.”

My mother accepted money from the man whose brother she’d blackmailed and driven to suicide. Zach doesn’t pull away when I sink my nails into his arm.

“I’m sorry for all of this,” Dureshni says. She sounds sincere.

“Do you know how old Chris would be?”

Zach crosses his fingers. He bites down on his lip, straining to hear her reply.

“Definitely older than your father. If he was an academic twenty years ago –”

“He’d be around sixty now?”

“If not older, *ja*.”

Zach touches his thumb to his index finger, forming an OK sign. Once I’ve hung up and stowed the phone inside my dress pocket, I let out a breath that deflates my lungs.

“There’s no way I’m going to find him,” I admit.

“Not with that attitude, you won’t,” Zach says. “We started this together. I’ll help.”

A sliver of hope pierces the darkness. I’m still searching for the words to thank him, when Zach turns the handle on the door behind us; faint sounds echo within, and the smell of fresh popcorn makes me salivate.

“You can tell me everything, but it’s freezing out. Let’s get you inside.” Zach flattens himself against the wall so I can slide into the passageway beyond. He bolts the door behind us and leads me down a series of corridors before we reach a room with a fingerprint scanner.

The walls are plastered with posters that we pass too quickly for me to read.

“What is this place?” I rub my arms. “Some sort of theatre?”

The scent of melted butter is pure torture.

Zach presses his left thumb onto the reader. The door opens and I follow him into a modest dressing room. There’s a single bed in the corner, an old couch directly behind the door, a closet with a black coat hanging from its doorknob, and a dressing table with a lighted mirror.

“You’ve never been? It’s *The Oculis*. Most popular indie theatre in Cape Town.”

I’ve seen it in the art magazine Alex subscribes to. I just didn’t think it would be found in such a derelict part of town.

There are photos on the wall near the bed. Small polaroid snaps that I’m tempted to inspect. Zach leans against the dressing table and asks me to close the door. He eyes the couch.

“Please sit down before you tell me what happened.”

The cream divan is splattered with an assortment of stains I’m too exhausted to care about. Even as loose springs bite into my arse, I’m grateful for the seat.

“I didn’t know where you were when I called. Sorry for disturbing your evening.”

In this light I realise why Zach’s eyes look different: he’s wearing make-up. The bronze eyeshadow’s so subtle it melts into his caramel skin, and the eyeliner’s more seamlessly applied than even mine. And again, no shorts. Zach’s black pinstriped suit looks like it was cut just for him. He’s wearing a plain black shirt with a tie covered in cerise specks. I can’t see the finer detail, but I’ll bet those are miniature flamingos. I’m forced to smile.

Zach smooths down the tie.

“It’s okay,” he says. “They’re in the final act anyway. Glad you called.”

I can’t stop staring at his eyes. They’re distractingly pretty.

“Did I pull you off stage?”

Zach snorts.

“God, no. My acting days are over.”

“Oh, I thought,” I awkwardly point to my eyelids. “The make-up and everything – looks really good by the way.”

Zach readjusts his tie and laughs.

“Yeah, that’s what happens when you hang around backstage while they’re getting ready.”

Zach holds up his hands and wiggles his fingers. “They did my nails too.”

I see the pink glitter, alternating with matte black on each finger. Again, he makes me smile even when I don’t want to.

“I’m just here supporting some friends,” Zach explains.

I tilt my head towards the photos, waiting for him to confirm if these are the friends in question. Why would someone not in the show have access to a dressing room? I know even less about theatre than horses.

“Thanks for meeting me. I didn’t know where else to go.”

Zach’s smile activates one dimple only. He looks worried. I watch him fold his arms, tucking his hands under his armpits so that only the thumbs are visible.

“All those typos in your texts,” Zach clicks his tongue. “Dureshni must’ve said a lot.”

I exhale through my teeth.

“I wish you knew what was going on in my head right now,” I say.

The couch creaks as I lean back.

When I close my eyes, Zach’s voice sounds like it’s travelling to me from the other side of the world.

“Take your time. I’ll be here,” he says.

I squeeze my eyelids as I review the details I’ve learned tonight, as well as the secrets whispered by Tasleem’s journals. My mother’s lies haven’t merely set her on a pedestal: they’ve made her into a god who didn’t lift a finger to get people to follow her. Munashe does. Alex does. Rafiq probably always will. And Andrew did. Like so many fools before him, my father followed Tasleem, only to have her lead him to his death. I wonder if he’d known the moment he set eyes on her, that my mother would seduce and blackmail him... if he’d known it would end with them scraping his body off the pavement, would he have turned away and ignored her charms? Probably not. And that makes me angrier than any of this.

My eyes open with difficulty, as if sleeping too long has welded them shut. Zach’s still standing in the same spot. He’s fiddling with a makeup compact, opening and closing it idly.

“This whole thing is—” The Medora’s pins dig into my head; when I tug, it feels like I might rip pieces of my scalp off. “Urgh... this whole fucking mess makes me so angry.”

“I’m sorry. I’d like to offer you a cup of coffee, but the snack bar is on the other side.” Zach puts the compact down on the dresser.

Some of that popcorn would be great, but it’s not going to change what happened tonight. Though I could use a cup of coffee.

“They sell dirty chai here?” I ask, hopeful.

If there’s an elixir that could bring me comfort, it’s probably that.

Zach crinkles his nose, then grins.

“I wish I could peer through that crown and into your head, but I can’t. You need to tell me... Did Dureshni confirm what was written in your mother’s journal?”

“That, and *much more*. What she said is so surreal, I’ve no choice but to believe it. You just can’t make this shit up.”

Zach looks at me until the silence wrings words from my throat. I’m beginning to think this is a well-practiced technique of his.

“So, Tasleem Carlisle, senior lecturer, doctor, single mother to not one, but two children, and,” I spread my hands out in front of me to emphasize the title, “*youngest Head of Neurosurgery in the history of Groote Schuur*, lied to me about basically everything. She spent the last two decades weaving a web of deceit that started unravelling the day I found that journal. Tonight I finally learned the extent of her deception, and let me be the first to tell you,” I slam my palm onto the armrest, “it is *fucking spectacular*.”

Zach folds his arms again. The frown on his face has not relaxed since the moment we entered this room.

My story is almost as complicated as Zach’s own family history, so I tell it slowly, trying to fill in any gaps. I tell him how my mother returned Naathierah’s letters unopened. I tell him what those letters contained. How my aunt was only trying to save me, not spitefully throw my mother under the bus. And I save Tasleem’s blackmail for last.

“My mother made me believe her family had written her off, when they’d in fact reached out on several occasions,” I say.

“Maybe she had her reasons for ignoring them?”

I smile sadly.

“That’s not the part I’m upset about. I can forgive her for that. What I can’t forgive is...”

My voice breaks. The only man I’ve ever cried in front of is Alex, and I can’t afford to spill tears right now. Not here. Not in front of Zach.

“When Tasleem fell pregnant, she knew what would happen. She was a brown woman. He was older, white, *and a man* – he had power she could only dream of. She knew he’d leave her, that she’d be stuck fending for the child – for me – on her own. If a brown woman accused a white man of rape...” I pull my lips back from my teeth, but it’s not a smile, “back then they wouldn’t even process paperwork for something like that.”

So she did the unthinkable.

“Her actions were not only unethical, they were *illegal*.”

Images of a younger, more willful, more dangerous Tasleem flash across my mind.

“My father was American. Didn’t know the rules of Apartheid South Africa very well. Add to that a history of mental illness... he was a soft target. Tasleem convinced Andrew he had raped her, then blackmailed him for six million. All that talk of working three, four jobs while she was at med school? Lies! For the longest time she’s been my hero... but in reality she’s no more than...” I search the room, hoping to find the right words on the ceiling. “A thief. Coward? Criminal? She built our lives – her entire career – on money she’d stolen from someone else. From someone who probably did love her. And now she’s got,” I count them off on my fingers, “four high-paying jobs. Walks around like she owns half the damn city, but peel away the make-up, the designer coats, the shoes... and she’s just as rotten as everyone else. Probably worse.”

My headache returns. The pain throbs beneath my skull; I tug at the Medora.

“I can’t look at her the same. Not sure what’ll happen when she gets home. I don’t think I can forgive her for this.”

Zach puts up his hand. He wears a frightening grimace.

“Adara, just stop,” he says. “I really like you. The last thing I want to do is fight, believe me. But you’re starting to sound a lot like those kids I couldn’t stand at school. The ones who did nothing but complain about their parents, when I’d have given anything to see my mother alive again.”

The heat creeping up my neck, coupled with a prickly Medora and shoes that suddenly feel too tight, make me forget to run my words through my mind before saying them.

“I’m sorry I expected you to understand. You’re a momma’s boy after all.”

When Zach stares at me instead of replying, I quickly launch into a makeshift apology.

“And you have every right to be! Your mother was a *saint*. Mine’s the furthest thing from it.”

Zach picks up the makeup compact and throws it from one hand to the other.

“Your mother is *alive*,” he says. “I’d rather have an imperfect mum I can talk to, than a perfect one who’s dead. You have no right to crucify Tasleem. You don’t even know the whole story. Did you even ask her why she did what she did?”

Coming here was a mistake.

“She’s lied about everything else.” I sneer. “Why tell the truth now?”

“I think you should talk to her.”

“I don’t know who she is anymore!”

“Then talk to her and find out! You don’t even know how lucky you are.”

Why this was the first place I thought to come tonight, is beyond me. Sitting alone at home would have been better than talking to yet another man who irrationally sided with Tasleem. Zach doesn’t even know my mother and he’s backing her. I’ll tolerate Alex’s loyalty, but not his.

“Why the fuck are you defending her?”

“Seriously?” Zach waves his hand up and down. “For starters, *she raised you!* That’s reason enough for me to believe in her.”

I sigh deeply.

“I just can’t reconcile this Tasleem with the one from the Coffee Coat episode.”

Zach frowns.

“Coffee Coat?”

Recalling that day is the most painful thing I could do right now, but I want him to understand my anguish. Telling this story might help.

Just before we moved to Rondebosch after my mother’s internship, there were some documents she needed to post. The Athlone Post Office was right around the corner from my pre-school, so we popped in there one day after work.

“It was *kak* cold that day. There was snow on the mountain. Not weather to be outside,” I explain.

We stopped at the corner shop for hot chocolate. Tasleem, as usual, opted for coffee. Back then she still took sugar and full cream milk.

“As we approached the post office, we noticed this old man sitting there. He didn’t ask us for money, nothing. But he was shivering so hard his teeth chattered.”

I rub my hands up and down my arms; recalling the memory sucks the heat from the room.

“Tasleem handed the man her coffee. She’d barely taken a sip. Then we walked into the post office, did our business, and when we came out, he was still sitting there, clutching his cup. He took small sips – not because it was hot, but because he was savouring it. He thanked us again. Tasleem could see he was still cold. So she shrugged out of her floor-length leather coat and draped it around his shoulders.”

Zach’s mouth opens much the same way I’m sure mine did almost two decades ago.

“Years later, I asked her why she’d done it. She told me the world had given her enough, and that she needed to pay it forward somehow.” I shake my head. “I can’t imagine someone who

would give her leather jacket to a complete stranger could be the same person who'd blackmail the man who loved her."

"You really can't see it, can you?" Zach asks.

"See what?"

"Your mother's only crime is loving you more than she loved your father. She chose you, Adara. Lied for you, stole for you... fuck, if given the chance, I'll bet she'd have killed for you."

"She might as well have."

"What?"

It seems I've omitted the final, most crucial detail.

"I didn't tell you? My father didn't die in an accident like my mother claimed he did. Shortly after she blackmailed him, he flew back to the States. First chance he got, he flung himself off his own building. If she hadn't accused him of rape, hadn't blackmailed him to the point of bankruptcy, he would never have left South Africa. I'm almost certain he'd still be alive."

Zach clasps his hands behind his head. His mouth opens soundlessly.

"Yeah. I'm not being a brat about this, Zach. My mother's a doctor who took an oath. She's in a profession that requires a high degree of ethics and moral responsibility... yet she manipulated, blackmailed, and ultimately had a hand in killing a man... a man who happened to be my father."

"Adara—"

"I came to you hoping you'd listen and understand, but you're taking Tasleem's side, just like everyone always does. I'm so sick of this shit."

"Adara, I didn't know. I'm sorry. You mention all these things your mother's done, but then I look at you and I also find it hard, reconciling your mother – someone who made you and raised you – with everything you've just told me."

I press my palms into my eye sockets.

Don't Cry. Don't Cry. Don't Cry.

I open my eyes to see the pained look on Zach's face. *I'm sorry*, he mouths. *I am so sorry*. I choke back a sob, grateful no tears fall.

A minute later Zach clears his throat.

"What do you want to do?" he asks. The question sounds so light, you'd never guess we'd been discussing blackmail, rape, and suicide a moment ago.

"Get some food, good coffee, and erase the last few hours? That's what I want to do."

Zach claps his hands once, then rubs them together.

“Okay. We’ll do that.”

I lean forward, brightening a little.

“Really?”

“Really.”

The door nearly hits me in the face as I stand up; a woman wearing fishnets with a short leather skirt bursts through.

“What a show!” she huffs.

She inhales her bouquet of white roses, then rips off the mic stuck to her face. The roses hit the bed and two heads break off, falling to the floor with a light thump. Her eyes fix on Zach. I don’t need to see her face to know she’s smiling.

“I would’ve gotten off stage a lot sooner if I knew you’d be waiting in my dressing room.”

The woman unfurls her high bun and, light-footed as a ghost, walks over to him.

“Sky, I wasn’t—”

“Won’t you shut up while I unwrap my gift.”

One hand slides beneath Zach’s jacket and she places the other firmly in his crotch. I watch her rise onto the tips of her toes, angling her mouth towards his, only Zach lifts his chin, so her lips end up in his neck.

“Skylim, stop.” He sets a hand on her shoulder and turns her around. “We’re not alone.”

Skylim looks at me through slitted green eyes. She turns her head like a cat who’s just sneered at a meal, then she whispers something to Zach.

“We were just leaving. I should’ve known better than to use your dressing room—”

“You should’ve.” Skylim balances against the dresser as she removes her strappy heels. She kicks them off to the side and stands two heads shorter than Zach. “I don’t mind,” she peers over Zach’s shoulder to look at me, “if you want to bring your friends into my dressing room, that’s fine. But you will make it up to me tonight.”

“I was actually just leaving.” Zach walks in my direction without tearing his eyes off Skylim.

“Not coming to the cast party? Director’s supposed to be there, you know. It’s tradition.”

“I’m not the director.”

Skylim looks through him at me.

“He’s lying. He played a big role in tonight’s show,” she says, unbuttoning her blouse and slipping out of her skirt. Zach catches the tiny piece of leather and sets it neatly on the bed.

Skylim’s lace underwear is visible through the diamond-patterned fishnets, and her plunging bra

distracts even me, but Zach might as well be talking to a tele sales agent for all the interest he shows.

“I’ll join you guys next time,” he says.

Zach jerks his head in the direction of the door, and I take that as my cue to get up. I’m already outside when she calls him back.

“Oi! You still have my key. You can let yourself into the flat. Don’t keep me waiting.”

Zach leans against the doorframe like someone reluctant to leave.

“Goodnight, Sky.”

She blows him a kiss as he pulls the door shut.

“I’m really sorry about that. It was dumb of me to use her room.”

I shrug. The evening has numbed me enough not to be jealous over the exchange I’ve witnessed. We start walking down the passageway. The stench of nicotine mingles with the smell of roasting kernels and fresh coffee. A few doors open and close as the actors come off stage; some wave or greet Zach, but no one comes close enough to disturb our conversation.

“Sky can be... well, you saw how she is.”

“Hm,” I pull up short. “You don’t have to babysit me all evening. You’re welcome to go meet up with them. Or her.”

“What are you talking about?” Zach frowns. “Sky and I are just—”

“Fucking. It’s pretty obvious.”

Zach’s face cracks. Suddenly he’s laughing.

“Sorry,” he wipes away a tear. “Of all the places I could put my penis... Is that really what it looked like? You think we’re sleeping together?”

I swallow hard.

“Doesn’t bother me.”

Zach grabs my hand and we double back. Outside of Skylim’s dressing room, he puts a finger to his lips before scanning his thumb. The door opens a crack.

“Psst,”

“I knew you’d be back,” Skylim croons. It sounds like she’s patting the bed. “You just gonna stand there? Be a tease?”

“First,” Zach says. “Remind me when last the two of us...”

“Kissed?”

Skylim makes a series of lip-smacking sounds.

Zach shakes his head. “The other thing.”

“What?”

“When last did we hook up?”

Something goes flying against the doorframe and Zach ducks like he’s expected it.

“*Very funny! I think I’d have remembered!*” Skylim sounds enraged.

“So, never, right?”

He nearly gets hit again, but slams the door shut in time.

Zach turns to me.

“See what I mean? Putting my dick in a meat grinder would be less painful.”

I pick up the bottle of nail polish that’s fallen and hand it to Zach.

“Do you think she’ll need that?”

Zach scrunches his nose.

“Let’s leave it outside – to be safe,” he says.

We start down the corridor that’s now filled with extras in various states of undress. Zach opens a door in a wall off to the side and we head down the stairwell leading to the underground parking. One of the first things we learnt at medical school was never to use the hospital’s stairwells at night, but I feel safe with Zach. I spot his red SUV as easily as I would a fire truck.

“Zach,”

He fishes his keys from his pocket. The taillights flash as he unlocks the doors.

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry.”

We get into the car.

“What for?” he asks, shutting the door and buckling up.

“Last semester we had a moment on your bridge. That’s all,” I say, staring at him. “Whoever you choose to sleep with... it’s none of my business.”

Zach purses his lips, drums his fingers on the steering wheel.

“I know. But maybe it should be.”

Just a block from the theatre lies a street lined with nightclubs, sports pubs, cafes, and restaurants, lit up in neon purples, reds, and electric pink. We pass several trendy eateries and come to stop in

front of a nondescript rectangular hatch door. The stone oven casts a warm glow from behind the counter, the smell of baking bread a deadlier temptation than buttered popcorn.

I tug on Zach's sleeve.

"My love can be bought with bread," I say.

He laughs.

A man emerges and turns down the Bollywood tune on the stereo.

"Salaam, Zakkie!" The man leans over to shake Zach's hand, then places his palm across his heart like I've often seen Muzammil do with Alex.

"Wasalaam, brother," Zach says.

Zach holds up three fingers, then one, then two, presumably the numbers attached to items on the menu. In his high-pitched Pakistani accent, the man – probably the owner – shouts the order too fast for me to understand a single word. He gives me a gold-toothed grin before disappearing into the back.

"What's *gullickynun*?" I ask, once we hear the clang of metal and more rapid-fire instructions from the kitchen.

Zach sits down at the small plastic table outside; he pulls up another stool for me.

"You'll see."

He taps his foot in time with the music while he rearranges the spice shakers in the centre of the table. He puts the salt beside the peppercorns and groups peri-peri, lemon & herb and something called Fisherman's Spice on the other side of the wooden rack.

The creak of an unoiled hinge announces our food. I smell the spices through the dull green packet and pull my chair closer, grabbing a stack of serviettes. I can already taste the meal, but Zach shakes his head. He gestures towards the cups in the holder at his elbow.

"Grab the drinks for us?" he asks.

Carrying the towering packet with both hands, Zach leads me down a few dimly-lit streets. There are people smoking under overhangs and on corners, drinking and talking loudly – a peaceful enough scene, but I know how fast that could change. Remembering the bodies rushed to the C14 trauma ward fresh from this part of town, I widen my strides to stay close.

"I need to stop following you down lonely pathways late at night," I say, referring to my trip to his house last semester. Blindly following him had made the blood thrum in my veins; that same electricity courses through me now.

"We're here," Zach says, stopping in front of a high stone wall.

I grab a fistful of my dress so it doesn't absorb the murky water on the pavement.

Zach asks me to check his pants pocket.

"Other one," he offers me his left hip and I dig until I find the keys at the bottom. "It's the longest key. Ancient-looking."

There's a thin, bronze key with a bent tooth attached to the bunch. Uncertainly I hold it up.

"Bingo."

Zach walks a little way ahead and stops before a flowering shrub outside the ring of lamplight. I can't see what he's tilting his head towards until I'm right in front of it: tucked behind the lush greenery, lies a gate, and beyond that, a staircase.

"Open it, please," Zach says.

The key slides in easily, but the lock is rusty with disuse. It takes me a few seconds before I hear the bolt slide out.

Zach walks up the staircase with the confidence of someone who knows I'll follow.

"Lock up behind you."

For good measure, I test the gate and move the greenery back over it.

My boots scrape along the stairs while my dress trails noiselessly behind. There are more steps than I'd bargained for, and I'm slightly winded by the time the shrubs clear and the night sky breaks open above me. On the landing there's a small garden overlooking the bustling streets.

"I'm starting to think you've got a map marked with all the magical gardens in Cape Town." I raise my voice so he can hear me above the wind playing through the overhanging branches.

I tilt my head back, turning slowly to get a better look at the foliage. I see mostly shapes in the dark – an outline of a tree or a larger bush – and the flash of a petal or leaf that catches the moonlight. This place must look spectacular in full sun.

Zach unpacks the Styrofoam containers and sets them down on the stone floor beside a large bottle of water. The breeze opens one box, but he catches the lid, anchoring it with a flat parcel. The evening air is ripe with the scent of warm bread and roasted garlic.

"I've never been this hungry in my life," I say.

Zach pats the earth beside him. Despite the crisp air, the patch of grass looks warm and inviting. Before I reach Zach, I'm called by the sparkling city below. The garden stands three stories above ground level, with only a waist-high railing fencing it off. From here, the colour palette is different: I see blue, magenta, and various shades of green and gold. It's as though an

overexcited child has sprinkled Christmas lights all over town a few months early. I hold onto the railing and stare, unable to drink in the view fast enough.

I feel Zach at my elbow.

“Is it always so bright?” I ask.

He takes the coffee from me.

“All that glitters is not gold. But yeah, it is beautiful from here.”

We watch a red party bus turn down one of the busier streets. Several women tumble out of the double-decker. Their shrill voices reach us as if from a distant planet.

Zach has moved our food so it’s near the railing. He falls into a comfortable seating position, legs dangling between the iron bars. I recall our conversation on the footbridge at his house; it feels like years ago.

“Food’s getting cold.” Zach offers his hand.

I’m not as lithe as him and my ungainly movements are worsened by the long dress. Zach frees my heel when it catches in the velvet. His good-natured smile has me biting back the self-deprecating remark.

“I discovered this place in my first year back from England.”

Zach unfolds the serviettes, trapping them between his thighs so the breeze can’t steal them.

“It’s gorgeous,” I say.

I ruck my dress up until my knees can slide through the iron bars, grateful for the sheer stockings Saskia gifted us this morning; the stay-ups protect me from the chill.

“It’s serene up here. High enough to keep us safe, but not so far away that you can’t enjoy the evening’s atmosphere. I’ve watched the weirdest things happening from here.” Zach chuckles. “Lift your chin, please? Don’t want to get any tikka marinade on that dress.”

I expose my neck to him, and Zach slips the soft tissue behind the yoke of my dress. His knuckles prickle the skin on my collarbone.

“You okay?” he asks, tucking two more serviettes in, then handing me a few for my lap.

“Tell me about the shit you’ve seen while up here?”

Zach places the Styrofoam box in my lap. The smell of masala, chillies, garlic, and lemon zest is overwhelming. One of the first things you learn as a new doctor is never to inhale anything directly, but to lean in and gently fan the scent toward your nose. The Professor who taught us that lesson had clearly never eaten Pakistani-style tikka on a garden rooftop. I bring a succulent chicken strip to my lips; saliva floods my mouth after the first bite.

“Wait,” Zach fumbles with the square parcel. “Almost forgot the most important part.”

He unwraps the flatbread I smelled outside the shop. It’s thrice as big as a regular roti and so fluffy it looks filled with helium. Zach tears it perfectly down the middle, folding my half and tucking it beside my crispy wedges. He breaks off a small piece of bread, takes a bite, then chews slowly, contentedly.

“And that look?” he asks.

For the fourth time today, I could cry. Not from frustration, worry, or anger. I feel grateful. I hope he can read it on my face.

I pull the chicken apart with my fingers and wrap pieces of it into the *gallickynun*, which I discover is naan bread, brushed generously with garlic butter. The rich, zesty sauce runs down my fingers, and I lick it off before it soils the sleeve of my dress.

“Can be a messy meal,” Zach says.

“But so delicious!”

“The messiest things are often the most satisfying.”

I try not to overanalyse his comment. Instead, I ask him again to tell me stories of the things he has seen from his secret garden.

“The thing you have to remember about this place, is that it’s so high up, no one bothers to look, but the sound still reaches you surprisingly well. Especially in the dead of night when people are having drunken arguments on the pavements.”

I start chewing my food faster so I can give him my undivided attention. I’m finishing my chicken by the time he starts, but I have saved my coffee and wedges for last.

Zach tells me he’s witnessed more fights between couples than he can count on all his fingers and toes combined.

“My favourite was probably between a guy and two girls. Between all the swearing, I just about made out that the man and his girlfriend were cheating on each other with the same woman.”

I gawk.

“Sounds like a soap-opera level betrayal. How’d it end?”

Zach shrugs.

“Club owner chased them off before I could find out what happened. But in my mind the two girls ended up together.”

I grin. Of course that’s his preferred ending.

Zach tells of a large woman who'd dragged her underaged son away from his friends. And if that wasn't humiliating enough, he threw up on himself before they made it to the car.

"Mother was screaming at him the whole way," he says. "Using swearwords I'd never even heard before."

"Wish I could've seen that."

Zach tells of a man who'd fallen from the second storey of the hotel across the street, but was so drunk he got up, hailed one of our death trap taxis, and probably collapsed in his bed when he got home.

Once Zach finishes his wedges, I put mine between us and we split the last few before starting on our coffees that are still faintly warm.

"Whoa," I breathe deeply as I peer into the coffee cup, detecting cardamom, cloves, hints of pepper and nutmeg, a generous amount of cinnamon, and something else I can't place. It's familiar and alien all at once.

"It's a little different than the way Tata makes it," Zach says, taking a drag of the flavourful brew. "My dad thinks he's a real barista, but most of the time he just spoons some chai powder into the coffee. Ashraf really knows his stuff. Makes it from scratch, the traditional way."

I close my eyes and take another whiff of the coffee. Not being able to identify the last ingredient bothers me. Zach laughs when I ask him. He tells me it's star anise, the same thing that's used in my favourite Malay doughnut: the koeksister.

"Hey, want to hear a riddle?" I ask.

Zach nods.

"What do you call a composer who chugs these on the regular?" I raise the cup with both hands.

Zach purses his lips, repeats the riddle, then lifts his shoulders in defeat.

"Tchaikovsky."

"That's so bad it's actually good." Zach shakes his head. "*Tchaikovsky*. I'll need to remember that."

I look at the brown cup as though it contains an unspoken secret. We sip in silence, granting this beverage the respect it deserves. I take a gulp, swishing it around in my mouth before swallowing. This dirty chai is thick without being heavy; the cinnamon mixed with the liquorice undertone of the star anise, lends an unusual depth to the sweetness. It's unlike anything I've poured down my throat.

“I swear this stuff enters your mouth and reaches your very soul,” I say.

“Hm. It finds every crack and crevice... and fills them all.”

“Well not *all* of them.”

Zach nearly brings coffee through his nose. I slap him on the back when the coughing fit starts.

“And they complain about women having a gag reflex,” I say.

My dry remark only aggravates his cough. I rub his back and pass him some water which he declines.

“You’re just full of jokes tonight,” Zach says.

“I’d rather laugh than cry.”

I lean my forehead against the railing and the metal tiara in my Medora makes a loud clang. I’ve accepted the futility, but tug at the stupid thing anyway. Zach drains his cup then offers to help me remove the pesky head piece.

“There’s like a million pins in it,” I groan.

Heedless of these warnings, he turns on the phone’s flashlight, and angles it towards my head. I feel his knees against my lower back while he works; it takes every ounce of self-control not to lean against him. For half an hour Zach worries at the Medora, patiently locating pins and dropping them into my hand. A few of them have spots of rust.

“Fifty-one, fifty-two, *fifty-three!*” I count.

Zach removes the chiffon scarf and hands me the tiara inside.

I glance at him over my shoulder.

“Check if I’m not bleeding,”

Zach carefully parts my long hair, searching for scabs or spots of red.

“Can’t see anything. It was probably just irritating your scalp. Was pinned tight.”

His hands come away before he’s had the chance to run his fingers through my hair. I mask my disappointment by requesting one more story.

Before Zach tells it, he drapes the scarf around his shoulders and sets the tiara upon my bare head. Without all Naathierah’s intricate folds, the metal head piece feels like a naked crown. It sits lightly on my head, but Saskia said the aunties would’ve thrown a fit if we ditched the traditional Medora in favour of this.

“I’m sure you get this a lot, but you should wear a crown more often,” Zach says.

I snort, readjusting the tiara. I straighten my back, swishing an invisible sceptre through the air.

“You think I’d make a fair ruler?”

I don’t know where the British accent comes from, but it makes Zach’s eyes crinkle with laughter.

“You’d be worthy, yeah,” he says. “I’d follow you.”

Zach’s earnestness knocks the air from my lungs. He wears the same look I’ve seen men give my mother.

“H-how’d you figure?” I stammer.

“You’re good. Kind. Intelligent. And I think you could inspire hope in people.”

I turn towards the city below, silently laughing.

“You got all of that from the way I look in a crown with fake diamonds?”

“That, and the dress. You’re a real badass. Even my brothers could see it.”

I steal another glance. Zach’s expression remains unchanged. I used to envy the way people stared at Tasleem, the way they placed their trust in her. Now I feel the weight of that gaze, and it’s too much to bear. Zach’s eyes hold expectation. He looks at me like I’m about to change the world, but I can’t even keep my own one from falling apart.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” I say.

“Sure?”

“You’re obviously the star of our class now, but hey, I always knew that—”

Zach snorts. For someone with so much confidence, it’s not easy for him to accept praise. This only makes me like him more.

“I guess my question is, how do you do it? I did the research. You’re like the youngest student doing this course to get a book deal. You’ll end up on Arendse’s wall of fame before any of us. Honestly, Zach,” I look up at the sky, then back at his profile. He’s opening and closing his empty coffee mug. “I’m in awe of you. And I really need to get published this year or I won’t graduate. I can’t fail Arendse’s course. Please, *please* give me some advice. How do I become as good a writer as you?”

Zach’s smile spreads across his face slowly.

“Jeez, Adara. Wow. Um…”

“Sorry. Maybe that was too much all at once.”

“Firstly, thank you. You have basically just stroked my ego from now until the end of eternity. If no one ever says another nice thing to me in my life, I think I’ll be okay—”

I cover my face and laugh.

“Honestly? I don’t think there’s a recipe,” Zach tells me. “You’ve gotta keep trying. Gotta keep failing. And I have failed. *A lot*. I’ve been rejected. I’ve done so many writing jobs that went unpaid. I’ve been booed off stage more times than I can count.” Zach laughs. “Shall I continue?”

I start slapping his knee.

“You see! How do you deal with such rejection? It’s so hard for me to put myself out there. It’s terrifying!”

“Well, that’s what makes it worth it. Vulnerability is scary as shit. Writing about things that matter – that truly resonate with other people – it takes guts. And even when you have done that, even when you’ve created something you know in your heart is truly magnificent, sometimes people still don’t get it.”

“How does that not crush your spirit, Zach?” I rest my head on his shoulder. “With medicine it was one plus one equals two—”

Zach chuckles.

“That doesn’t hold in the art world. Most times it’s one plus one equals *fuck all*.”

It’s a sad reality, so it’s weird when we both start laughing hysterically. Maybe it’s the way Zach says *fuck all*.

“Zach, you’re pronouncing it wrong. If my cousin were here, she’d tell you to say *fokhol*.”

Zach tries it out.

“Fokhol?”

I nod. “Fok...hol. Just like that.”

Suddenly we’re screaming it into the sky, across the cityscape, into the bustling streets below. We scream until the word starts sounding like some strange, perverted mantra.

Fokhol!

Fokhol!

Fokhol!

Strangely therapeutic. Saskia would be proud.

As our madness subsides, Zach turns to me again.

“Adara, there’s no easy answer to the questions you ask or the problems you’re facing. I’m far from having all of this figured out, but if I can give you just two pieces of advice it would be

this: you need to dig deep. The stories you write should help you grapple with your own struggles. If it's too easy... if it doesn't make you bleed, just a little bit, then you shouldn't write about it."

"So... be a masochist?"

Zach grins. He holds his thumb and forefinger together.

"Just a smidge, yeah. That's one way to look at it."

"What's the other piece of advice?"

"Fuck. Everyone."

When I stare at him, unblinkingly, he clarifies.

"Sorry, not literally," he tells me. "I mean, just do what you need to do. Be unapologetic about it. Don't listen when people try to change your mind about something. If they push you down, you push harder."

I remember something Professor Marx told me once, about not listening to jaded academics. I tell Zach about the gallery evening I had last year, how I managed to sell my art for the first time. His smile seems frozen in place as he listens to me. It's a little unnerving, not knowing what's on his mind.

"I don't know why you think you need my advice," Zach finally says. "You've got this whole artist thing down."

Maybe it's the way he looked at me earlier tonight. Maybe I'm just feeling generous. Maybe I'm feeling a little bit masochistic, but I ask him to pass me his phone. Zach only thinks I'm so perfect because he hasn't seen me embarrass myself before. I really hope one of those med students ignored Alex's warning and uploaded the video anyway.

After two minutes of searching through YouTube, I find the awful one-minute clip from the open mic night.

"Okay," I tell Zach. "Please know that I have never shown this to anyone, but I want you to see it."

I set the phone to full screen and turn the volume right up.

"Is that?" he asks, pointing at the screen, eyes shining with anticipation.

"Yes, it's me. Just wait for the good part."

I hand the phone to him, and we watch, heads pressed together.

Zach's jaw drops. In disbelief, he stares at me, then plays it again.

"See?" I pull a face. "I don't look very regal there, do I?"

"You look beautiful, but your voice. What the hell happened?"

I tell him about the shockwaves that were sent through medical school when I decided to drop out, that I looked into the crowd that night and saw several students standing there, praying I would bomb, their smartphones recording every moment of my humiliation.

“Jesus. AP med sounds like a cunt factory.” Zach pockets his phone. “What happened afterwards? Did you ever get to perform your poem?”

“Nope. My career as a poet lasted just over a minute. So much prep and no one heard more than one line.”

“Do you still remember it?” he asks.

“After all that practice?” I snort. “The thing’s inscribed in my brain. I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.”

“Then you have to perform it. Right here. Right now. In front of the entire city.” Zach spreads his arms wide, including all the bars, eateries, and nightclubs we passed on the way up. “C’mon, they’ve even turned on the lights for you.”

When I try to protest, he places a water bottle in my hand, and shoos me onto the imaginary stage behind us. He does a drumroll on his thigh. Using his best ringmaster’s voice, Zach announces:

“For one night only, ladies and gentlemen – *the great, the magnificent, the absolutely, unbelievably intelligent and stupidly hot – miss Adara Carlisle!*”

I stand awkwardly on the spot.

“Oh God, Zach. I feel like an elephant’s about to trample me.”

Zach claps his hands, shushing imaginary audience members. He’s too committed to this to let it go. I take a breath, close my eyes, and hold the water bottle to my lips.

“It was wrong of me to love you/
I couldn’t help myself./
Loving you was better/
Than being left upon the shelf.”

I open the bottle of water, take a sip, then continue.

“You were never mine to cherish/
Yet you felt so good to hold./
To look into your eyes forever/
I would myself have sold./”

Zach starts clicking his fingers, the way they usually do at spoken word evenings. I set the water bottle down on the floor, and move to the other verses, eyes still shut.

At some point during the recitation, I grip my dress in my fist, stumble to the ground, and sit there, looking broken and forlorn in the last verse, when I finally open my eyes, and stare at the audience of one.

“We built a life together,
Then you died before your time./
To love you is to lose you,/

I must suffer for my crime.”

By the end, Zach’s forgotten all his spoken word etiquette. He is openly clapping and whistling now. I jump up, do a small curtsy, and he helps me down to my seat beside him.

“You…” Zach shakes his head.

“Be honest? I wrote that when I was in my first year.”

Zach looks out across the town, at all the flashing lights, the neon signs.

“You have enough electricity to power the whole damn city, Adara. Thank you, for sharing that with me. If those assholes had given you half the chance, you’d have gotten a standing ovation.”

Zach tells me he’s never performed at an open mic night before. Poetry’s not his area of expertise.

“But you might’ve inspired me to try tonight. Was that poem about your mother?”

“Is it that obvious?” I ask.

Zach smiles.

“So, lover’s quarrels aside,” I clear my throat, “you must’ve seen some hectic shit from up here in your secret garden? Tell me more stories.”

Zach takes the water bottle from me.

“You know how in movies when someone gets hit over the head with a bottle, it shatters on contact? That’s breakaway glass.” Zach points to a red post box down below. “Right there I saw a man smash a whiskey bottle over a woman’s head. She went down and that bottle didn’t have so much as a scratch on it.”

Zach brings his hands together in front of his face. He looks ready to pray but covers his mouth and nose instead, his thumbs pressed beneath his chin. Then he runs his hands through his hair, locking his fingers behind his neck.

“I called the ambulance. The police. I also threw stones at the guy from up here.” Zach looks off to the side. “There are a few rocks over there in the corner. They didn’t do much damage, but I managed to scare him off. I waited with her until the ambulance arrived.”

“And the police?”

Zach shrugs.

“Don’t know if they ever showed. I went to the hospital the next day to check on her.”

I hate to think how many women get hit and don’t have someone around to call an ambulance or make sure they get to the hospital. I touch Zach’s knee. He leans in and points towards the white-and-red KFC to my right. He smells of ginger, coffee, and cinnamon. I make a mental note that a really strong dirty chai neutralises garlic.

“See that blue neon sign to the left of the KFC?”

I squint.

“*The Blue Lagoon?*”

“Uh huh. I was in matric when we went clubbing there. I’d just turned eighteen and we had a big party.”

A pang of nostalgia pierces my chest. Not for the first time I envy all the people who’ve known Zach longer than I have.

“Must’ve been nice,” I say.

“My cousin was killed that night. One bullet in the stomach.”

“Zach,”

“His mother can’t make peace with it. They never found out why or even who killed him.”

I lean my head on Zach’s shoulder. I imagine I feel his lips against my hair, but I don’t look up. His mother, his horse, his fiancée, his cousin. All gone. But if you met him on the street, you’d never guess the burdens he was carrying.

“You have lost so much, Zach.”

He reaches for the water bottle again, takes a sip, then passes it to me. I drink and pass it back.

“You say that like you haven’t felt pain.” Zach’s chest rises as he inhales. “We’ve all seen shit, Adara. We’ve all suffered.”

Zach leans away from me. Slowly, he tears his eyes from the view and fixes them on my face.

“We all have our monsters. I’m just more honest about what mine look like.” Zach gives me a lopsided grin. “At least with you I am.”

“Why is that?”

Zach twists and untwists the bottlecap.

“I don’t know. I guess because you’re patient? You’re not forceful about things.”

My laugh sounds maniacal in the thin night air.

“That’s weird,” I say. “I feel like I can be quite forceful at times. Like I want what I want.”

Zach’s smile grows until both dimples are visible.

“Like earlier this evening, you mean?” He shakes his head. “Those *typos*, man.”

It’s the second time he’s mentioning this. My battery’s died, so I can’t check the messages I sent him.

“That’s it,” I say. “I need to see these infamous typos.”

Zach reaches for his phone, unlocks it, scrolls a bit, then hands it over. I feel him watching as I read.

Adara

31 JUL AT 22:00

Zach has sent you a pin.

Please be safe! Uber’s are sketchy at night.

Esp when travelling to town. Send me your

location so I know when to come outside.

Adara?

You still there??

Addy???

31 JUL AT 22:07

Stop tryna fuckin call me Zac! Head’s gonna explode.

I’ll be right there. Just give me a sex!

31 JUL AT 22:07

I've spotted the heinous typo. I drop the phone in my lap and peer out at Zach from behind my hair.

"That message from you was more terrifying than Skylim in the room just now. Even with all her theatrics, all the gimmicks and taught confidence, you with your typos wield far more authority."

Zach's laughing with only his eyes. He's enjoying this too much.

"Who said I was joking?" I lower my voice. "Do you have a sec to give me a sex?"

When Zach stares blankly, I pass him the phone and point out the reply to my alleged request.

"Technically, you already consented to this."

Zach pockets the phone. He crosses his legs and rests his chin in his palm.

"Firstly, the ellipsis at the end of that okay is an indication of reluctance or at least uncertainty in my voice, so you can't hold me to that. It's shaky consent at best."

Now I'm the one trying hard not to laugh.

Zach holds up two fingers.

"Secondly, it's going to take a *lot* longer than a 'sec' to do all the things I want to do to you..."

I can't tell if he's joking anymore. The evening is still, breezeless, as if the earth itself is holding its breath.

"You look really beautiful tonight. I mean that." Zach brushes the hair from my face with his pinkie. It's a featherlight touch, but he might as well have kissed me on the neck the way my skin tingles. "That dress is something else, and those stockings..." Zach whistles through his teeth.

It could be the whistle, but I suspect it's the knowledge that he's been secretly eyeing my lace stockings for the last two hours that makes me smile so big my face could crack.

"My cousin made the dress and she gave me the stockings this morning." I pull my dress an inch higher, so he can see the lace stretched across my thighs.

"She's got really good taste," he says.

"Yeah, Muzammil isn't too bad either. That's her husband."

Zach looks up and laughs before his eyes return to my legs. I think this is the longest any man's ever stared at me.

"I've always wondered how these stockings stay up," Zach frowns.

I flip the lace band over, so the rubber strip faces outward.

“This is how. It sticks to your skin.”

Zach bends over my lap and enjoys a textbook ah-ha moment when he finally understands the mechanics of my stay-up stockings.

I whisper the words.

“You can feel it if you like,”

Zach’s fingers trail along the rubber strip attached to the lace.

“And this little thing keeps it in place all day?”

There’s a tremor in his voice. I wet my lips.

“Like magic,” I whisper.

“Like magic,” Zach repeats.

“I bet you’d peel them off quite easily.”

“Or maybe you could keep them on...”

Zach looks up and winks.

I shove his shoulder.

“Oh you’re a freak like that, huh?”

Zach winds my arm around his neck. The evening is no longer quiet. My heart beats restlessly in my ears. Too loud for me to think. Maybe that’s how these things work. Your brain switches off. Body takes over.

I scoot forward, feeling the grass against my bare thighs. My ass might be green tomorrow. I couldn’t care less.

Zach rests his forehead against mine before I can get close enough to kiss him.

“You flinched the last time we tried this,” he whispers.

“I know. I’m sorry. It was so stupid of me.”

“It wasn’t stupid.”

“I don’t know why I did it.”

“I do,”

I freeze, then lean back on my palms.

“You’re not ready yet. And you’re feeling a lot of things tonight. Kissing me will only complicate everything.”

I sigh theatrically.

“You have too much self-control for someone who lost their virginity at thirTEEN.”

Zach snorts. His fingers rest upon my thigh; he's careful not to touch the skin.

"You sound disappointed."

"Maybe I am."

Zach lifts my hand.

"I've had enough drunken trysts," he says. "I don't need more."

Zach turns my hand over and kisses my knuckles. I wish the chai coffee could have washed the scent of garlic from my fingers as well. If that's what my skin smells like, Zach's kind enough not to react.

"But you're not drunk, and neither am I..." I point out.

"You're in pain. And pain can make a person drunker than the contents of any bottle."

"Do you have to wax philosophical right now? On this beautiful night, with me in a dress like this?"

Zach grins.

"It's almost too beautiful to take off."

"I like that you said almost."

I hope this is the end of the discussion. I hope he'll lean in, give up, kiss me.

"Adara," Zach cups my cheek. He's so close now I can smell his cinnamon breath; it's dizzying. "You just found out your mother blackmailed your dad and that he threw himself off a building. You're vulnerable. You're scared... and I'm not about to take advantage of that."

"Didn't you used to love sex?"

"And I still do. I just don't want your memory of us tied to all the shit you discovered today."

"Shouldn't that be my decision to make?"

Zach gives me a chaste peck on the mouth. He pulls away so fast I'm surprised he doesn't get whiplash.

"You'll have the chance to make this decision again... on a night when you're not so hurt."

I clamber to my feet, dusting blades of grass from my dress and the back of my thighs.

"You picked the worst possible night to become a prude."

Zach smiles. He crouches at my feet and starts collecting the empty boxes and used cups.

"You'll thank me in the morning," he says.

There's a manila folder on the backseat of Zach's Rover. I sneak a peek through the window while he fumbles for the right key. A photo of a beautiful, green-eyed girl sticks out at the side. Zach

opens the door for me, but before I can lean into the back to take a closer look at the folder, he beats me to it. I watch him dive for the folder and shove it onto the far end of the seat.

“Now I really need to know what’s in that...”

“You’ll have to wait.”

Zach starts the engine.

“Casting calls opened a month ago. Been going through some of the files of prospective actors.”

“The girl with the green eyes... is she one of your characters?”

A grin is the only reply.

Zach drives me straight home. There are no more detours, and the silence between us is pregnant with questions. My apartment block draws closer and my time with his is almost through.

“Zach?”

“I’m not coming in for a ‘nightcap’, if that’s what you want to know.”

“I’m done trying to seduce you tonight,” I say. “I’ll go back to the drawing board to re-examine my strategies before trying again.”

Zach fails to hide his smile.

“When you came back this week... you seemed different. Did something happen in London? You can tell me.”

Zach forgets to depress the ratchet and the handbrake makes a grating sound as he rips it up.

“A lot happened in London. Some of it I’d sooner forget. Besides,” he casts me a furtive glance, “tonight’s about you. Let’s not discuss my problems.”

“I don’t want to talk about Tasleem and Andrew or Chris right now. I’m so tired of it all. Tell me about you. Aren’t you supposed to be honest about the shape your demons take? So, tell me what they look like.”

Zach smiles when I quote him. We pass a few more blocks before he speaks.

“I know part of you is sad because you didn’t get to know your dad,” Zach says. “But maybe you’re better off. It sounds harsh, but sometimes family is shit.”

I let Zach cross the intersection before I put my hand behind his neck.

“I went looking for two of my relatives – mom’s stepsisters – in London. The first time they saw me was at her funeral, and I thought a do over was in order. They’re family, right? Second chances and all that.”

Zach clenches his jaw. In the distance I see the outline of my apartment block. Tariq must be sleeping already.

“They invited me to their home. Started off civil, but once they were on the second bottle of wine....”

Zach pulls up outside the complex. He kills the engine and sighs plaintively.

“They called me a coon.”

“What’s that? Like a clown?” I ask.

“It’s probably the most offensive British term for a black person.”

My mouth opens.

“People like that... fuck. Zach, you shouldn’t—”

Zach takes my face in both his hands.

“It didn’t bother me. *Ndinegazi leGorha.*”

Between my basic understanding of Xhosa and how distracted I get whenever Zach unexpectedly throws it into conversation, I catch only one word.

“What’s that about blood?”

Zach laughs, gently squeezing my face before letting go.

“*I have the blood of a warrior.* My father fought for this country. He fought for the freedom to love my mother. I’m not ashamed of that.”

The lump in my throat traps my words.

“My aunts told me I’d killed my mother,” Zach says. “It’s nothing they hadn’t said before, but hearing it now that I’m older... It cut me. It cut me because I think they’re right. Adara, what if I really did kill Lisa?”

The tears that have been threatening to spill from my eyes all night, finally do. Zach wipes them away with his thumbs before they slide down my cheeks.

“Listen to me, Zach. I know what a murderer looks like. And it’s not you.”

Thank you, he mouths.

Zach sees me through the gate and waits until I’ve reached the apartment on the second floor. He’s still wearing my scarf, but he can keep it. Sadness has hunched him over, made him much smaller than he really is. And that’s okay. Being sad is better than pretending to be happy all the time. Zach isn’t afraid to be honest. Spending time with him makes me feel less alone. Less scared. The chicken, chips, fresh bread and coffee we shared tonight was better than any meal I’ve

eaten at a five-star restaurant. There is magic in simple things. Maybe Zach's teaching me how to see it again.

I know much more happened in London, but the drive was too short for him to tell me everything. I whip out my phone. Perhaps there's enough juice to send just one text.

Zach stands at the gate, holding onto the bars until he sees me pointing at my phone. I type fast, praying the text will go through before the battery dies.

My screen goes black as I hit send.

Fuck.

But when I turn to the gate, Zach's smile can be seen all the way from my balcony. *Nightcap? Last chance*, I'd typed.

They're not the three words I'd wanted to say, but they've made him happy, and that's a victory I'll take.

I've done something so crazy it's earned me a seat at Zach's birthday dinner.

He's the image of surprise when he walks in and sees me seated beside his cousins and brothers, Mxo armed with the camera to capture everything. Since our rooftop picnic, Zach and I have mostly been talking on the phone. He's received special permission from Arendse to miss a few lectures on account of the upcoming film screening that's got the entire Humanities Faculty abuzz.

After dinner, presents and one boardgame (his dad insisted the twins keep it short), I hand Zach a blindfold and lead him out back.

"Is this like a sex present? I'll be so bummed if it isn't," he says, not knowing his father and brothers are walking beside us. Rowen pretends to gag, and Owen closes his ears with his hands. Zach would see their horrified expressions when he replays the video.

We follow a zig-zag pattern to throw him off and take a circuitous route across the bridge to get to our destination.

When the time comes to remove his blindfold, my pulse hammers through my veins. I've never put such effort into a present before, but Zach's changed my life. It's because of him that I met Dureshni, learnt the truth about Tasleem, and had the strength to go home and pretend

everything was fine. It's also with his help that I'll find Christopher and finally put this whole thing to bed.

When I contacted Mxo almost three weeks ago and told him my crazy plan, he was keen to help, but wanted to know what it was about his 'idiot son' I loved so much. *He's touched my life the way no one ever has. I'd like to do the same*, I told him. And while my motivations were pure, when Zach is standing right in front of his gift, I realise – probably for the first time – how spectacularly skew this could go.

It's too late to turn back, so I pull the blindfold off – and watch his smile crumble.

“With your dad's help, I tracked him down,” I say, handing Zach the reins.

The blood bay stands a full 1.8 meters tall, its coat glistening under moonlight. Owen and I spent all afternoon braiding its tale and mane. We wanted him to look the way he would've just before a competition, and used a photo Mxo provided as inspiration.

Zach's eyes drift downward, taking in the white stockings, then up again to look at its bald face and blue eyes. The horse's nostrils flare as it sniffs Zach's head. For a few agonising seconds I wonder if it will open his mouth and take a chunk out of him. A low rumbling in its throat becomes a full-on whinny as it rubs its head roughly against Zach's shoulder, almost knocking him down.

“He remembers you!” Rowen exclaims.

Zach winds his arms around Luca's neck and speaks to him the way a father would to a child.

“How long have you been planning this, hm?” Zach asks, trying to dodge the horse's kisses. It takes a couple of bumps in the face before he gives up and allows the animal slobber over him. Luca seems convinced there are sugar cubes lurking in Zach's hair.

Having caught their footage, Mxo and the twins run off to the house.

“How'd you even find the money to buy her back?” Zach asks. “Adara, I can't accept this.”

I raise my hands, trying my best to explain, but it's hard to focus with a horse munching on Zach. It's not been a minute and already his hair's plastered to his forehead, slick with drool.

“Luca took a bad fall a few years ago,” I tell him. “He can't jump as high as he used to. The owner didn't want him anymore. She gave him to us for free.”

Zach's eyes are huge.

“Shit...” He strokes Luca's shoulder. “You're okay now, boy. You're home.” While looking at me, he curls his arm around the horse's neck.

I tell Zach Mxo has all the paperwork, so he can see exactly what Luca has done since he was sold. He changed hands twice after the initial sale.

“Adara, I don’t know what to say... This is the best present anyone’s ever given me.”

I lean in, sure he’s about to kiss me.

“But you really shouldn’t have,” Zach says.

I watch him lead Luca back to the stable. He takes a moment check the water and food, then bolts the bottom half of the door. He climbs onto the lower door beam and waves goodbye to Luca. For one glorious moment, Zach is ten again.

He shoves his hands into his pockets as he walks back.

“Why did you tell me I shouldn’t have? You just said it was the best present. You’re confusing me again,” I laugh sheepishly.

Zach gives me a hard, searching look.

“Horse-riding was the best part of my childhood. I resented myself for abandoning Luca. Having him back here, it’s a dream come true.” Zach sighs. “Adara, I’m moving to London at the end of the year.”

Zach glances at the stable.

“Now you’ve just given me one more thing to say goodbye to.”

Chapter 15

Movie Night

Things have returned to normal at campus, with everyone preparing for exams as the year draws to a close. Arendse has given me an extension on two assignments, and the opportunity to redo the failed Erotica piece from first semester. And I'm trying, but I'm struggling. Everytime I put pen to paper, I just want to write about my mother. About Andrew. About all the secrets I've learned this year. None of that content is publishable, so what's the point? I'm doing okay in Art and Film, but Arendse's course has fucked me in the worst possible way.

A month before my finals, Alex and Tasleem fly to Johannesburg for some or other conference. I wouldn't be surprised if they've booked a single hotel room. But I've lost interest; I'm done trying to figure out what's going on between them. To Alex's credit, he hasn't yet told Tasleem about my meeting with Dureshni. Things have been weird since the wedding, so it's a little surprising when he shows up to our weekly family dinner with Saskia and Muzammil.

After learning the truth from Dureshni, I'm looking at Tasleem with new eyes. She's entitled to her own life, and her own secrets, but I've started scrutinizing everything she says and does. It's exhausting. For once I'm glad she's barely home.

"I'm so excited for the film festival this weekend," I tell Saskia after dinner.

She makes a face that I know can only precede bad news. A family function's just come up. She can't make it. When you're newly married, I'm told you're required to attend even the most trivial of events.

"I'll go with you," Alex announces.

"But that's the Friday night before you leave for King's College." *Also, you kind of hate Zach, and I'm only going for him.*

Alex shrugs.

"All the more reason to go with you, then."

He hugs me to his side before walking out. I sit at the window, watching until his Uber arrives.

After our last fight, I thought we'd reached the end, but this friendship is bulletproof. Maybe he puts up with me because he's sleeping with Tasleem? Knowing what she did to my father doesn't seem to have affected Alex at all. If anything, the two of them seem more attached than before. I wonder how she'll take it when he leaves on Sunday. Who will she discuss all her big

problems with? It's been years since she's confided in me. I was easier back when I was a med student and we had more in common. I used to miss those conversations. Now I could go my whole life without learning anymore of her secrets. I struggle sleeping just knowing the ones I do.

Zach's short film forms part of The SAAC Film Festival. It's a two-week programme that takes place in Old Harbour, one of the most historically rich places in the city. It was where the slave ships docked the first time, where Oumie's grandfather first set foot on our shores. The Little Harbour Theatre is both a gallery and a cinema. I've never been, but my friends from Reclove have often invited me out here. Apparently the upkeep is ridiculous. The maintenance of anything built on the shoreline of the ocean is insane. Sun, wind, and salt destroyed things with no apparent effort.

On the evening we pull up at the theatre, the place is beautifully lit and teeming with film fanatics. Nearly everyone from Arendse's class is here. Mxo intercepts me before I can join them at the snack bar.

I leave Alex with Arendse as I go over to Zach's dad. Instead of the friendly handshake I'm expecting, he gives me a bear hug. Rowen and Owen do the same.

"You came!" they say, almost in unison.

Dressed in matching pinstriped suits, the twins look more grown up than I recall. Mxo looks equally smart, in his black bowtie and coattails. He speaks excitedly about his son's achievements and tears up when he tells me how proud Lisa would've been.

Tonight Zach will accept his award and give a brief speech before the short film screening. He said they were hoping to get funding to turn the movie into a full feature. Over the last few months he's been quite hands-on during the production process, and even assisted with the scriptwriting. Four months isn't a long time to make a twenty-minute film, especially if it's got to be award-winning quality, but I know it's going to be brilliant.

"Hey hey," Zach says, walking over. He rests his hand on the small of my back and kisses me on the cheek. Surprisingly, the twins don't recoil. "So glad you could make it," Zach smiles. "Where's Saskia?"

"Ag, I'm sorry. She couldn't come," I say. "You nervous yet? Butterflies in the tummy?" I tickle his belly and he grabs my hand.

Rowen answers before Zach can.

“He’s *totally* going to blow our minds!”

“Yes he is,” I say. “And I couldn’t be prouder of him if I tried.” I tuck Zach’s hair behind his ear. His suit matches his father’s. In the few weeks I’ve known them, his family’s crept into my soul. During the days leading up to his birthday dinner, I visited often and enjoyed many litres of chai coffee. Talking to Mxo made me wonder what it would’ve felt like to have a father. Zach promised he’d start searching for Christopher Carlisle after tonight. I’ve tried to find him on my own, and was half tempted to rope Saskia in, but decided not to. Since the wedding, I only see her at family dinners and I’m not discussing this with Tasleem nearby.

Once his dad and brothers have wondered off to get snacks, Zach leans into me.

“It’s really too bad Saskia couldn’t come. I was looking forward to meeting the woman who designed that beautiful dress,” he says.

Tonight I’m wearing another of her designs. It’s not as fancy as the bridesmaid’s gown, but it’s still pretty decent. Knee-length, black, with a matching fur shawl. I was going for Old Hollywood when I picked it out.

It made perfect sense for me to be Zach’s date for the evening, but he wanted to come with Mxo and the twins. This I understood. If I was accepting an award, I’d also want Tariq accompanying me. I’m not so sure about Tasleem...

Alex approaches with Arendse. Our professor is overcome with emotion when she gives Zach a hug, and he looks visibly sick when she lets him go. A look passes between him and Alex. I feel like I’m missing something.

“Congrats, man.” Alex shakes Zach’s hand. “You’re the rising star in our humble English Department.”

Zach nods stiffly. Once Alex and Arendse disappear into the crowd, I turn to Zach. He looks more lifeless than melted cream.

“I don’t remember seeing Alex on the guest list,” he says. “Is he the person you brought with instead of Saskia?”

I nod.

I want to tell him that his suspicions of Alex being in love with me are stupid, that he’s got nothing to worry about, and that I’d gladly sit beside him in the theatre. I’ll ask Arendse if I can swap seats. I want to explain all of this to him, but Zach’s disappeared behind the building. When I find him, he’s bent over a bin. I hold his hair back from his face while he dry heaves.

I guess the butterflies in his belly have grown into hornets.

When the screening begins, I'm sitting beside Alex. Zach said it was fine, and that I should probably be with my friend during the screening, as long as he, and I quote, 'kept his damn hands to himself'. I still believe Zach's concerns are unwarranted, but my God, I didn't know a sprinkle of jealousy could add this much thrill to a relationship.

We sit through three other short films before Arendse takes to the stage. Dressed in deep red, she looks resplendent beneath the spotlight. She tells the audience more about the competition, how many finalists there were, and ultimately how easy it was to pick Zach's film out of the pile.

"There's an authenticity to his work that's hard to replicate," Arendse finishes. She then calls Zach on stage as the crowd applauds. I turn my camera on as Alex clears his throat. I don't think he's impressed, but this night isn't about him.

After Arendse hands Zac a small golden shield, someone comes on to set the mic stand lower. Zach's a head shorter than our professor.

"Good evening, everyone. Thank you for coming out."

He's probably practised that line in front of the mirror a thousand times. I can't help but smile.

"And thank you to the South African Art Collective for this prestigious award, to the wonderful Professor Arendse for begging us to enter this competition, and to my family, for their unwavering love and support."

Rowen and Owen start whooping and a few others join in.

"But most of all, I'd like to thank the woman who inspired me to be a better writer. She's redefined passion for me. She was top of her class, but gave up a career in medicine in pursuit of the arts. She's the bravest person I know."

I press my back into the seat, wishing it could swallow me. Thank God no one here knows I dropped out of medical school. *Except Alex*. I don't dare turn my head.

"Without her, I wouldn't be the writer I am, and there's no chance in hell I'd be holding this award."

Zach looks down at the trophy.

"I hope you'll enjoy the film. It was a labour of love."

As he leaves, the lights are dimmed, the mic is removed, the cheers die down, and the screen turns on.

The film opens with a close-up of a woman's face. I recognize her from the photo in Zach's car. Her eyes are red-rimmed, like she's been crying. The room she's sitting in is quiet, save for the odd voice, the beep of a computer, and the sound of wheels spinning on a tiled floor. A white coat glides past. *A hospital*. The girl closes her eyes and a noisy flashback appears.

We cut to a party scene.

The usual – drugs, alcohol, random hook-ups all over the place, but all authentically South African. There are bottles of Black Label everywhere. We zoom in on a man's face. He's beautiful, with a strong jaw, and he's already drunk off his arse. He leans against the girl he's with, whispers something in her ear, then disappears even though she tries to pull him back. The girl looks so young, and not at all like someone who frequented parties like this. She's got a virginal innocence about her; leaving her alone is criminal. I already don't like the male protagonist.

We return to the quiet hospital, where we're now offered a close-up of the girl's hands. She rests them in her lap, twiddling the thumbs until someone hands her a folder. She starts filling out a few official forms. The pen trembles in her fingers. Another flashback hits.

We're back at the party where the girl has attached herself to a guy who looks just as out of place as her. In his glasses and Star Wars t-shirt, he keeps talking to her about how much he doesn't want to be at the party, how he wishes he'd stayed at home, playing online games. Typical nerd stuff. He makes a few cringey jokes, and they move off when the music gets too loud and the couples dancing around them, too drunk. They disappear up the stairs, but this games addict is clearly gay, so the girl is safe. The flashback ends when they overlay the door closing with the door opening in the hospital.

Back to the present. The green-eyed girl has filled out the form and a friendly doctor puts a cup of coffee in her hand. Someone offers her a clean shirt, which she declines. Her leg starts shaking as we cut to another flashback.

Inside the room, the sound of the party seems miles away. The guy sits on the floor beside her as they talk about everything and nothing.

"Have you ever been with a girl?" she asks.

"No," he replies.

They start kissing, but she doesn't want to play this game anymore, tries to get him to stop, only he's too strong. As the rape sequence unfolds, the audience realises this man isn't gay at all. He has preyed on this defenceless girl and she's about to pay the price. He gets her out of her jeans, and she starts screaming as his fingers slide into her. With his other hand, he tosses his glasses aside – they're probably just as fake as everything he's said tonight.

“Shut up,” he growls, tearing the underwear apart in his efforts to get it off.

Oh God.

The man has climbed between her legs, but his evil grin disappears as he struggles to wipe liquid from his eyes and mouth. She's lost control of her bladder and momentarily blinded him. The girl slips back into her jeans, nearly tripping as she flees the room.

She knocks down several doors, searching for her friend. The audience cannot hear her screams, which makes the scene more terrifying. When she eventually finds her friend, he's having sex with some girl. The room is covered in smoke, and there's a cooker with heroin and cocaine in the corner. The male protagonist has several scabs just below the crook of his arm. He's clearly an addict. While she screams, he just keeps having sex, completely nonplussed.

“I was raped!” the girl sobs. “Can't you hear me!”

Sick of her whining, the male protagonist pulls out of the other girl. He looks like he's about to tear her a new one for disturbing them, but instead he collapses on the floor. The rest of the audience thinks he's dead, but this is what an overdose looks like. He will be dead if he doesn't get help. The girl who was just raped, pulls her friend's pants up, and tries to carry him out of the room. He's too heavy. She calls someone from the hallway to help. A guy drops his beer and rushes over. They carry him outside where the night air revives him just enough for him to whip his penis out and piss on her shoes. Once he's in the backseat, he vomits all over the leather interior. To her credit, the girl says nothing. She just rushes him to the hospital. Where she now sits, waiting.

We cut to the present and zoom in on her piss-drenched sneakers. She lifts her head when a woman doctor walks in.

“Your friend's going to be fine,” the doctor says. “You brought him just in time.”

The girl nods. Her eyes fill with tears as a voiceover plays in the background.

My friend will be fine. What about me?

The credits roll and the cinema breaks into applause.

I'm the only one who doesn't clap. I sit quietly, peering over at the empty seat where Alex was a moment ago. I've solved the mystery.

I know who found my journal and what he's done with it.

I can't find Alex after the screening, so I wait in the foyer, amongst the crowd of adoring fans. My worry turns to anger when I see Zach posing for photographs and talking to a few reporters. His eyes fix on mine, and he makes a last comment before walking over.

"I can explain, Adara. Just give a second to explain." Zach says, already holding his hands up.

I give him a second only because I've got no words yet.

"Your journals fell out in my car. I knew what they were, and I read them because I wanted to understand you better. I just— I wanted to know *everything* about you."

Zach moves us off to the side of the foyer so we don't block the foot traffic.

"I was moved by your story, and Tasleem's. I started writing about you both. And about Alex. I thought your story deserved to be told, but I didn't think I'd win. I tried steering the production in a different direction, but the directors were adamant we had to show this rape-overdose scene if we wanted to raise the funds for a full feature. It was out of my hands. I'm sorry."

I try to listen to the rest of Zach's words, but seem fixated on the feeble *I'm sorry*. There must be a way to apologise for taking someone's life, for exploiting their innermost secrets for money and fame. I spent the better part of the last two years trying to get over what happened on New Year's Eve. I couldn't even tell Tasleem about it. Many people – Zach included – have wondered whether Alex and I would end up together, but I always laugh when I get asked this question. Yes, he was beautiful, and yes, he was kind, but a piece of my soul was chipped away the night I saw his demons. Alex was so fucked out of his mind that evening, he couldn't even remember what happened. Afterwards he tried asking me, but I chose to protect him. I thought it was the merciful thing to do. It was the coke and the heroin and the alcohol that changed him that night. As long as he stayed off it, he'd be fine. As long as he never learnt the truth, we would be fine. When I decided to write what happened in my journal, it wasn't so someone could share it with the whole world; it was so that I could move past it and start rebuilding my own one.

“Say something,” Zach pleads. “Or better – break something. My nose. My chin. Anything. Go ahead. Tear into me.”

I stare at him.

“Adara, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I meant what I said. You inspired me—”

“And you *stole from me*. You took secrets that weren’t even mine to tell and made them into a spectacle.”

I step back when he reaches out.

“Adara, look what you’ve lived through. You’re the strongest person I know. I wouldn’t have done this if I thought you couldn’t handle it. I did it to honour you.”

“What?” I scream. “This isn’t even about me! You know Alex is a recovered addict? We’ve tried so hard to keep him sober and I can only think the mess I need to clean up right now. How dare you stand there and tell me you did this to honour me. This must be the most self-indulgent thing you have ever done!”

Zach looks away.

“All those conversations...The stories you made me tell you...”

Zach starts shaking his head. Again, he tries to touch me.

“You wanted to get into my head to make your little film...”

I think I might pass out. Alex leaves for England in two days. How the fuck do I glue our friendship back together before then?

“You put posters up trying to find my journals, when you were the one who had them all along,” I say. “You just used me for a story.”

“That’s not it at all!” Zach’s voice cracks. “Would you just listen to me? I thought your story deserved to be told. You weren’t brave enough to do it, so I went ahead and did it instead.”

“It wasn’t yours to tell!” I huff. People are staring, but I can’t stop myself. “*I trusted you.*”

Zach rubs his nose and shuffles his feet.

“And now, my friendship with Alex... I don’t think we’ll come back from something like this. He couldn’t even remember that night, but watching this might’ve triggered some shit.”

I remember how Zach vomited when he saw Alex. I thought it was nerves. Now I know better.

“You knew,” I say. “You *knew* he’d respond like this, but you weren’t expecting him to come.”

Zach ignores the people who wave to him. I need to find Alex. I must make this right. Before I leave, I say one more thing to Zach.

“All personal feelings aside, this was a damn good film. I can see why you’ve won. You’re,” I pause. “You’re going to be – *you already are* – a great writer.” I wipe at my eyes with my shawl. “But you can’t treat people like this. We are more than just our stories.”

I turn to leave, then remember something else.

“I meant it. You *are* the most talented writer in our class. I looked up to you. Wanted to be just like you. But if I need to betray the people I love to get to where you are, I’d rather fade into obscurity.”

I reach into my bag for my car keys, then give him one last look.

“You’re going to straight to the top,” I say, and I mean it. “But you can’t build your empire on the blood of others.”

I drive from Old Harbour to Alex’s apartment. I know he’s in because the lights are burning. I graze my knuckles knocking on his door.

“I’m sorry Alex! I didn’t tell him anything. Zach stole my journal and Tasleem’s!”

I scream myself hoarse until the door opens. I send a flurry of apologies his way, but none pierce his heart. His nostrils flare as he stands there and listens. When he speaks it’s as though he hasn’t heard anything I’ve said.

“You were assaulted, and I did nothing.” Alex speaks to the balcony behind me. “I fucked another girl in front of you.” He repeats it until the words stop sounding like words.

“How can you even look at me?” Alex asks, finally meeting my eyes.

Rather than answering, I look away. And that’s a mistake I can’t take back.

Two days later Alex leaves without saying goodbye. I try to text, call, email... but can’t even find him on Facebook.

It’s like he never even existed.

Chapter 16

The Crack in the Mountain

Last week I made a chilling discovery while preparing Tariq for his final English Lit paper. We were discussing what makes Nick Carraway a reliable narrator, when my brother shoved his books aside and got up from the table. He looked incredibly despondent.

“What do your grades need to look like for cooking school?” I’d asked.

Tariq merely shrugged.

“I’m not going. Not next year anyway.”

For as long as I can remember, Tariq’s wanted to be a professional chef. This was the first I’d heard of him not going to culinary school. He tried feeding me some bullshit about a gap year, but eventually I learned the truth: he couldn’t go because Tasleem was still paying off my debt. I won’t graduate until the scholarship I’ve wasted is paid in full.

This isn’t something I can discuss over the phone and I haven’t seen Tasleem all week. I thought once Alex left, she’d be home more, but the opposite’s true.

I also received two unexpected emails last week.

The first was from Dr Schroeder, the Health Science Faculty Head. His email contained a heartfelt apology and warm wishes for the future. He also attached a photo of one of my charcoal sketches he’d purchased anonymously last year. I was still figuring out what to reply to this email, when I saw another, more urgent message from Professor Bateman, summoning me to his office.

I didn’t know it at the time, but I learnt it months after the Health Council meeting almost three years ago now: Professor Bateman doesn’t often make public appearances. That he’d shown up to that meeting with all the senior doctors and the council officials, spoke volumes. He believed in me. When I entered his office last week, it was a different man who sat on the other side of the table.

“Adara,” he said, all formality. “It’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

I nodded. I would’ve felt better if he’d had student records or test scores in front of him, but the desk was barren, save for a calendar, computer, and a holder with pens.

“I’ve been monitoring your progress since you started at Reclove. I know it’s not been easy. Professor Marx told me you had trouble adjusting initially.”

“Mm hm.”

“Then you started shining, like I knew you would. Your show last year – big success.”

With bated breath, I waited for the inevitable but.

“We’re almost a week from finals now. Your marks look fine, for the most part.”

Bateman removed his spectacles. He leaned forward slightly.

“Adara, you’re still missing credits for your writing course. Arendse tells me you haven’t been published yet? She also hasn’t seen rough drafts for your two final assignments. Is this correct?”

I looked away from him. I didn’t know I’d started crying until he offered me a box of tissues.

“Miss Carlisle.”

Slowly, I looked up.

“Is there anything we can do to help you? Anything that *I* can do?”

We both knew the time for interventions had passed. Arendse had given me extensions, and one by one, I missed them all. What could I tell Bateman? That I was sorry my whole life had fallen apart?

My best friend abandoned me?

I was betrayed by the guy I trusted?

My mother blackmailed my father and then he committed suicide?

I accompanied my friend to a party one night, where I was raped, and I’m still struggling with unprocessed trauma?

They all sounded like fiction to me. Perhaps I should’ve just written about my own life and handed that to Arendse?

“No, Professor.” I shook my head. “You’ve done more than enough for me.”

I wanted to add *I’m sorry to have let you down*, but the words got stuck in my throat.

It’s a Sunday night, exactly a week from my finals, when Tasleem walks in at 9p.m.

“Hey, Addy,” she says, as casual as if she’s just returned from grocery shopping.

“When were you gonna tell me Tariq’s not going to cooking school?”

Tasleem removes her neck scarf, drops her bag on the counter.

“Didn’t I?” She looks surprised. “He decided to take a gap. You know, earn some money before he goes off. I thought he’d have spoken to you about it.”

I get up from the couch.

“No, he did,” I say. “You’re still paying off debt. That’s why he can’t go. There’s no money.”

Tasleem turns her back to me while she makes coffee as noisily as possible.

“How can you make him pay for my mistakes? I fucked up. I wasted that scholarship. You should make me pay.”

My mother slams the coffee grinder against the counter.

“Was I supposed to make you wait tables to pay off half a mil?”

“Maybe, yes. That would’ve been the sensible thing to do.”

Tasleem suppresses a laugh.

“Don’t be stupid,” she says. “In any case, it’s too late for that now. Don’t you want to graduate? That debt won’t pay itself—”

My expression trips her up.

“I don’t want your money,” I say.

Tasleem frowns.

“Adara, I’ll pay the debt, don’t worry about—”

“I said,” I stare straight at her, “*I don’t want your money.*”

My mother looks wounded. She stirs an ice-cube into her espresso before drinking it neat. Then she mumbles into the empty cup,

“You never had a problem taking my money before.”

“That’s because I thought I knew where it was coming from!”

I know it as the words leave my mouth: I’ve said too much. Before she can respond, I’ve fetched my leather jacket, grabbed my car keys, and bounded out the door.

Campus looks haunted on a Sunday night. I shouldn’t have come here alone, but I needed to get away. Our luxury apartment used to comfortably fit the three of us, plus two guests; now it feels like I’m suffocating there.

I pass the closed doors of Kahve Corner and Sizwe’s Kitchen Club. Ever since the student protests, campus restaurants have been closing at 9p.m. Pity. I could really go for one of Oliver’s coffees right now.

The cool night air revives me, clears my head just enough to think rationally. There's one week left. Maybe it's not too late to finish Arendse's assignments. As I pass the library, an idea hits me. I couldn't write about Tasleem, but I could still write about myself. The security guard smiles from behind the glass. Before I've decided to enter, he opens the door.

"Enkosi, bhuti," I thank him as I walk in.

After half an hour, I've found what I need.

I'm at the counter, checking out four books, when I hear a loud thudding noise. The only three postgrads still working at this hour, look up from their desktops as the security guard comes running through. Behind him, there's a loud shattering of glass, followed by footsteps.

"Out! Out! The back way!" The security guard orders us. He repeats the instruction in rapid Xhosa.

The librarian who was assisting me a second ago, has disappeared. I shove the books under my arm and follow the other students. Everyone's talking at once. Their panic makes me widen my strides.

"What's happening?" a girl asks, turning to look back. Her friend grabs her hand and pushes her forward.

We exit down the stairwell. Twice, I almost trip, but someone pulls me up.

"I forgot my bag!" a voice cries.

"Fuck, my laptop is still upstairs." Another says.

The security guard's voice cuts through the cacophony.

"Out! Out! Out! Quick!" he says, before muttering more instructions over his walkie talkie.

It's no safer outside than it is inside.

I'm heading back to my car when I feel it, the vibrations in the ground. I can't tell where it's coming from until someone throws a petrol bomb through the window of a mini van parked on Campus Avenue. It explodes and several faces are lit up in the dark. Some wear full masks, while others have covered themselves in red and black war paint. I start running long before I'm seen. The louder the chanting grows, the faster I move.

Out of breath, I stumble into the Arts Centre. I enter Arendse's office, swipe my card, and bound down the stairs to the Write Room. It's the safest place I can think to go right now. When I get there, Zach's already inside. The few times I've seen him since the night of the screening,

we've avoided each other. I think he gave up trying to talk to me after the first hundred ignored calls.

"Adara?" Zach looks up. "What—"

I throw my books down.

My words are drowned out as the protestors pass the Arts Centre. A series of deafening shots pierce the night's silence, then a loud crash sends dust cascading from the roof. Footfalls thunder overhead.

This must've been what Alex was trying to warn me about. I rush up the staircase to lock the inside door of the wardrobe before they can get to it. Before they can get to us.

"What the fuck's happening?" Zach peers out the window; the night's aflame. Several protestors are chanting war songs. Struggle songs.

I tell Zach how Arendse anticipated this and scheduled extra teaching time during the exams.

The footsteps and voices grow louder above us. Their Xhosa is too fast and muffled for me to catch. Zach puts a finger to his lips while he listens.

"They're looting the place," he says.

I roll my eyes. "No shit."

There's a computer, printer, some books, and maybe a few pieces of jewellery in Arendse's office.

"They can't get inside," I say. "I've locked the door."

"Good."

Outside, students are gathered around drums of fire, talking, then chanting. Suddenly they disperse; seconds later a car explodes. We duck on reflex.

"Fuck, that was a campus vehicle. It's been parked here all week." Zach gapes.

"That's public property... what the hell?"

"Come away from the window," Zach tells me. He draws the curtain even though this place is thickly shrouded with bushes and nearly impossible to spot from the outside. "Let's call the police. We'll leave when they get here."

There's no cell reception underground, so we use the emergency landline.

"No dialling tone," I say, slamming the phone into its cradle.

It's possible the telephone was just a showpiece. Zach grabs his hair. All the fire, loud noises, the petrol bombs – it's too much. I thought I'd be ready to tear into him after three weeks of silence. Seeing him this way simmers me down. I go to him, grip his shoulders.

“Zach,”

He looks at me.

“You're okay. We're okay. They can't get to us. We have food in the fridge and a bathroom. We can last the night and then things will be fine.”

Zach nods. I move my hands up to his face. He jumps as another petrol bomb explodes outside.

“Hey,” my thumbs stroke the light sheen of stubble on his cheeks, “remember, you're not afraid of black widow spiders!”

Zach laughs. I think he's a bit hysterical because another explosion just went off above us. It sounds like they're pelting the Arts Centre with explosives.

“Who told you I'm not afraid of black widows?” Zach shouts so I can hear him above the sound of breaking glass. “I only picked that one up because I was *more afraid* you'd get bitten. But I'm terrified of those little fuckers!”

Our heads turn towards the window; the screaming outside is deeply unsettling.

“You don't understand,” Zach grips my wrists, “I've been through this before. I can't. Not again.” He removes my hands from his face.

What do you mean? I want to ask. Then it hits me. It was a news broadcast I'd skimmed over. With all the wedding drama and meeting Dureshni, I was slow to make the connection. There were terror attacks in London during July. The same time Zach was there. That's what happened. That's why he was so changed when he returned from vacation.

“The attacks in London... oh my God, Zach.”

I make a grab for his hand and he pulls back.

“I don't want your pity,” he snaps. “And I sure as hell don't deserve it.”

There's another crash above us. I disappear into the tunnel to investigate, then come back to report what I've found.

“The door's bolted shut. Can't open it from the inside,” I say. “Think something's fallen into the wardrobe and covered the entrance.” I look back into the tunnel. “It won't budge.”

Zach stares.

“Y-you mean we're stuck here?” he asks.

“Looks that way.”

Zach paces the room, goes back to the window, peers out, then plonks down on a beanbag at the far end, nearest the kitchen.

I step forward, but he holds up his palm.

“No, no. You stay there,” Zach says. “If we’re stuck here, you need to stay on your end of the room.”

“You left two hundred missed calls on my phone. We’re trapped down here and there’s nothing to do but talk.” I hear the disbelief in my voice. “You really have nothing to say? Shouldn’t we at least try to be friends again?”

Zach jumps up, one hand balled into a fist, the other pointing at me. His frustration is spectacular and terrifying.

“Show me a guy who’ll be happy being friends with a girl like you! Just show me, Adara!”

I open my mouth, but his words smother mine.

“Alex?” he laughs. “You were gonna say Alex?! If you believe that, you’re just as deluded as him!”

When I’m sure Zach’s asleep, I grab two blankets and settle on the couch, listening to the noises outside. Above the intermittent screaming, there’s an occasional bang, roar of a passing vehicle, or another explosion. Stun grenades set off in quick succession, announce the police presence. One woman’s shrill voice rises above the others. *Jou ma se poes! Leave her!* She screams. It sounds like the commotion’s unfolding right beneath our window.

“Fuck, when does it end?” Zach asks.

“Were you talking to me?” I say. “I’m sorry. Couldn’t hear you from the other side of the room.”

Silence. I’ve tuned into the war outside by the time he speaks again.

“If that aircon stops working, we’ll run out of oxygen. If we die tonight, I don’t want you thinking I’m an asshole.”

“I don’t think that, Zach.” I sigh. “You’re just... confusing.”

His chuckle sounds muffled, like he’s tucked his head under a duvet.

“That’s one way to describe it.” I hear shuffling in the corner, then he appears, blanket draped around his shoulders like a cape. “Can I sit with you?”

“Only if you wear pink.”

Zach snorts. “I loved that movie.”

He props his back against the couch, and I’m left staring at the top of his head. We listen to the night in companionable silence.

“It’s surreal,” he says. “We’re sitting in the middle of this, but so removed from it.” Every so often his eyes drift towards the widow, where the orange flames glow behind the curtain. They seem contained, so that’s something at least.

“What are they even fighting for?” Zach asks.

Lower fees? Better facilities? Equality?

“Education,” I say.

The word’s loaded, but neither of us bother unpacking it. I tell Zach what Alex told me, but he has little to contribute. I think he finds the violence just as senseless as I do. There must be more effective methods to communicate dissatisfaction than destroying a university.

“I can only imagine how you must feel, Addy,” Zach says. “You went through so much to get here, and now they’re fucking everything up.”

“I feel like I’m part of the problem, though. I wasted my medical school bursary. That’s money that could have gone to someone else. Someone whose mother isn’t a neurosurgeon.”

For a whole minute, no one speaks. Then I ask him, “What are you doing down here anyway?”

Zach slams his head against the couch.

“Studying,” he groans. “Just want this damn year to be over.”

“Hm.”

“What were *you* doing on campus?”

“I needed some space.”

Zach clears his throat.

“That why you’ve been avoiding me?”

When I don’t answer, he gets up, walks to his backpack, and pulls out a white envelope and a stapled document that’s folded down the centre.

“I’ve been walking around with these for the last month.” He offers them to me. “Been working up the courage to give them to you.”

I sit upright. The envelope isn't sealed, so I easily untuck the flap. Zach sits across from me, resting against an ottoman.

"I'm sorry about the whole script thing," he says. "We got the funding for the feature, but I pulled the plug on it."

"You did what?"

Zach laughs nervously.

"They'll probably sue me – like a give a fuck. That film," he shakes his head, "it wasn't worth losing you over."

I don't know what to say. I look away from him and empty the envelope. The page inside bears our University emblem with a small table below it. It's my fee account balance.

"You only need the student number to pay. Found yours on our website. I knew you wouldn't accept the prize money if I gave it to you."

I stare at the balance and the balance stares back.

Zach's paid every cent, and there's at least another R60 000 left over. I feel sick. What is it with the Carlisle women and guilting men into throwing criminal amounts of money at them? I fold the page and return it to the envelope. I'm not my mother's daughter. I won't be bought.

"Zach, you can't just write a cheque when you hurt someone."

He wraps the blanket tighter around his shoulders.

"I know the money changes nothing, but I can't keep it. The story's yours. The money belongs to you."

Too exhausted to argue, I do the graceful thing and thank him. Hopefully some other student will get their scholarship now, but even with the debt paid, I'm still short of course credits. No amount of money can get me out of the hole I've dug.

"Adara, what's wrong?" Zach asks.

I decide to come clean.

"You're right," I say. "The money changes nothing."

I take a deep breath before telling him about my meeting with Professor Bateman last week, about how I haven't yet finished Arendse's assignments. While I sit with my head in my hands, Zach walks over to where I've dropped the library books. He reads out each title:

"The Neuroscientist Who Lost Her Mind. When Breath Becomes Air. At the Edge of the Scalpel. This is Going to Hurt."

He looks at me.

“Are you going back to medical school?” Zach whispers.

I shake my head.

“This is my last attempt at not fucking up the year,” I explain. “I have a week to finish two assignments. I think I failed the Erotica thing.” I sigh. “I can’t write about my mother, but I can write about me. About my time as a doctor.”

“Why didn’t we think of that ages ago?” Zach puts both hands on his forehead. “I love your med school stories.”

I point my chin at the books.

“Those are medical memoirs,” I explain. “I obviously can’t read them all. Just wanted to get an idea of the style.”

Outside there’s another crash. I tell him about how the protestors stormed the library while I was there, that I didn’t even get to check out my books. I wonder what kind of fine you get for stealing from the library.

“I was hoping to start on these assignments tomorrow. Now the library will probably be closed.” With my face turned to the window, I say, “Had a big fight with Tasleem tonight. Working from home seems like the worst possible idea.”

I need peace and quiet. The library was my best bet. Zach looks away as I turn back to him.

“You’re right,” he says, eyes fixed on the window. We can hear the chanting start up again. “There’s no chance you’ll get done with anything on campus tomorrow. If you need a quiet place to work, there’s always my house? Between the two of us, I’m sure we’ll finish your assignments.”

“I can’t do that to you. You’re studying for exams!”

Zach crinkles his nose.

“Weeelllll,” he shows me his teeth, “someone may have mentioned I’m Arendse’s top student... so I kind of... *maybe*... already pass without sitting for the exam.”

“Zach...”

“I’m serious. Let me help you.”

I picture Zach’s gorgeous house again. His subterranean room. Spacious desk. Comfortable bed, with the crisp, white sheets.

Maybe he can smell my thoughts, because he adds, very cheekily,

“Maybe we can give you some new ideas for the Erotica piece, too?”

I cover my mouth as I bite my lip.

“Fine. Let’s do it!” I say.

Zach sits down beside me. He gestures to the remaining document in my hands. After finding my fee account balance in the other envelope, I’m almost too afraid to unfold this one. On it there are several email addresses, some ringed in blue. The list spans almost four pages.

“All the Christopher Carlisles I could find. The ones that are a closer match to the person you’re looking for, I’ve highlighted.”

I keep staring at the list. I’d completely forgotten about this.

My eyes scan the different regions of America. New York, California, New Jersey, Connecticut, Texas... it seems Chris Carlisles are scattered far and wide across the States. I count thirty blue email addresses, most of them with Facebook profiles attached.

“Thank you, Zach...” I say, but I can’t look up.

“I really hope you find him. You deserve the truth.”

Staying angry with Zach is hard, especially when he carries chai powder in his backpack. We sit beside the fireplace, sipping quietly as we listen to the erratic noises outside. Zach starts telling me about London.

“What you said that night on the bridge bothered me,” he says. “You accused me of not being over Steph. So I called her. Turns out she was working at the university.”

Zach says part of him hoped she was unchanged, that she’d be the same woman who’d cheated on him – just as callous and selfish. But the years had altered her. Stephanie wasn’t the person he’d fallen for, but she also wasn’t a bitch.

“We met at this pub on campus. Had a meal together.” Zach looks wistful. “She’s still just as beautiful as I remember. Maybe even more so.”

As expected, Stephanie wanted him to come home with her.

“She seemed to fall into this ‘familiar mode’, and was lying halfway across my lap by eight p.m.”

“That must’ve been nice,” I say, nursing my coffee.

Zach chuckles. His shoulder brushes mine.

“Having someone who once rejected you, throw themselves at your feet? Yeah, it’s nice. Be lying if I said it wasn’t.”

“So, what? You went with her?”

Of course, Zach pauses his narrative here. He's a masterful storyteller and I expected no less.

"I would've, I'm sure," he finally admits. "But then she twirled her finger around one of my dreads. She tugged on it, said she really liked how long they'd grown. And – it was the weirdest thing – that comment pissed me off."

Zach's eyes drift to the window.

"If she didn't mention the dreads, I'd probably have left with her. Then I did something I'm not very proud of."

"And you're going to tell me? Please don't make me wait."

Zach smiles.

"I leaned in, dropped my voice to a whisper, and told her to go fuck herself."

When I ask if he really said that, his cheeks grow flushed and it has nothing to do with the warmth emanating from the fireplace. Soon we're both howling with laughter.

"Wish I could've seen—"

"Yeah, it was as satisfying as you imagine." Zach's grin fades. "Though I felt bad afterwards."

Zach says he wandered around campus in the early hours of the morning, revisiting all the places they'd frequented back when Stephanie was a student. Some of the old haunts still existed, while others had been replaced by commercial equivalents.

"Then out of nowhere people started running. Students. Staff. Anyone who was on campus, just started screaming and fleeing."

Zach tells of gunshots, screams, of people getting trampled on. Of the smells he'll never wash from his mind. I move closer, linking my arm through his.

"I didn't even know blood could smell like that. There was so fucking much of it." Zach's hand covers mine. "I disappeared down this street, trying to find shelter. Saw this broken shopfront window and went in. Figured they'd already passed,"

It seems a sensible plan, hiding in a place they'd already hit.

He picks a spot on Arendse's bookshelf and stares at it. There's a faraway look in his eyes; he's in a place now that I can't go with him, though I want to.

"I don't know how long I crouched behind that counter. It didn't even feel real..."

Zach says he wanted to text someone, but he'd lost his phone while running. The tremor in his voice makes me squeeze his arm.

Only when he couldn't hear them anymore, did he emerge from the hiding place. By then the streets were empty, and everything that could be trashed, was.

"I ran like hell, then slipped in a puddle of blood. Can you imagine *slipping in a puddle of blood?*"

I tilt his chin towards me.

"You forget I was once a doctor-in-training," I say. "I've slipped in numerous blood puddles."

This gets me a smile.

"For us, it was just an occupational hazard. Seeing it on the road is much different," I say.

Zach admits he'd walked into the attack because he'd been chasing ghosts from his past. If he hadn't insisted on seeing Stephanie, he'd have been in his hotel, miles from the melee.

"The whole time I was behind that counter, I kept thinking *what if I die, what if I die...* then an even scarier thought entered my head."

What could be more frightening than death, I wonder. Zach pushes my hair from my face with his pinkie.

"What if I don't see Adara again..."

"Well I'm here now." I rest my forehead against his. We're so close, his breath prickles my lips. "How many more near-death experiences will it take to get you out of those clothes?"

"I never know the answers to your riddles,"

I untie the blanket around Zach's neck and lead him to the couch. When I try to pull him on top of me, he resists.

"W-what are you doing?" he whispers.

In truth, I don't know what I'm doing. After he stole my secrets and made them public, I shouldn't trust Zach, but he's the only person in the world who knows me as well as I do. Of all the people who could've taken my journals, I'm glad they ended up in his hands.

"I'm not being your friend," I say.

I press my mouth against his; for the briefest second, I worry his lips won't part beneath mine, but they do. His hand around my waist pulls me deeper. Zach tastes faintly of cinnamon and liquorice; this kiss is the dirtiest chai I've ever had.

This time he lets me pull him onto me. Not breaking the kiss, I roll myself on top of him, so that he's pinned to the back of the couch, his hands resting lightly on my thighs. I shrug out of my jacket as we break apart.

“Fuck,” Zach rasps.

“We can, if you like?” I tease.

Zach reaches up to kiss me again. His mouth moves from my lips, to my cheek, then rests against my neck.

“Am I going to need concealer after this?” I thread my fingers through his hair, gently tugging it backward, so he’s forced to look at me. I love how ragged his breathing is.

Zach clasps his hands behind my back.

“How about I just kiss you in a place no one can find?”

I help Zach out of his jacket, then start pulling his shirt over his head, but it’s snagged on a couch button. I nearly fall back trying to tug it free. Our heads bump.

“Fuck,” we say at the same time, then start laughing.

I didn’t used to have such a dirty mouth. He’s rubbing off on me.

Once he’s lost the shirt, he chases my mouth again, but I push him back so I can run my hands across his shoulders and down his chest. The skin is smooth and warm, and the muscles tense when he pulls me near. Zach is strong, without being bulky. I frown at the tattoo under his right arm. I didn’t think he had any. It starts on his pectoral and ends under his bicep. He raises his arm and I discern the U-shape of a magnet.

“It’s a horseshoe,” Zach says.

When he was younger and Luca was just a playful colt, the horse picked him up under the arm and swung him around.

“I was seven and had just started to ride.”

I trace the outline of the tattoo.

“That must’ve hurt,” I say.

“Like a motherfucker. A horse has a crushing bite, so it didn’t pierce the skin. Just left a bruise, but the bones inside were badly fractured. It was months before I could ride again.”

“So you got a tattoo to remember it? Why would you want to?”

“Painful memories can also be beautiful, I guess.”

I kiss him so I’m not tempted to ask more questions.

We kiss and touch until my dress has fallen from my shoulders and bunched around my waist. The pressure in the pit of my stomach is both unbearable and delicious. I want to keep going until neither of us can think straight, but the old doctor side of my brain slows things down.

I've never gotten this far with a man, so I don't know how to be tactful about this. The question comes out all wrong.

"Are you... clean?" I ask.

Zach sniffs his armpits.

"I showered this morning, I swear," he says.

I slap a hand against my forehead and lean back.

"Relax, I know that's not what you meant." He laughs and pinches my thigh. "After I caught Stephanie cheating, I had myself screened for everything. Then did another test six months later. There was one other girl after her, but we were safe." Zach scratches his head. "Look, Adara—"

I grip him with my thighs.

"I believe you," I say, ready to kiss again, but Zach sits up on his elbow. "What is it?"

"I know how you feel about all of this. I've read your journals—"

I wind my arms around his neck.

"Great. So I don't have to explain all these complicated things to you."

Zach inhales deeply through his nose.

"You jumped the last time we tried this," he says. "Just say the word if you want to stop."

Zach moves his mouth along my shoulder, collarbone, and across the tops of my breasts, while his fingers trace my ribs. He kisses my skin with too little pressure to leave a bruise, but just enough to send tingles up the nerves in my thigh. I arch my back and push on his shoulders.

Zach's laugh prickles my neck.

"Yes ma'am," he says, planting kisses along my belly.

I don't know why it happens, and couldn't explain it to him if I tried, but the feel of his mouth on my stomach makes me want to kick him through the teeth. I check this impulse in time, then press my heels into the couch until I've crab walked right onto the armrest. It's too late to hide my fear. His face looks worse than that night on the bridge.

"Zach, I'm sorry, I..."

He blows out a breath.

"It's okay."

A minute passes before Zach gathers up my dress. I watch him turn the sleeves out before handing it to me. My vision blurs with tears.

"I'm sorry I keep doing this." I take the dress and cover my face with it. My shoulders shake while I sob. When I look up, Zach's frowning.

“Here, let me help you.”

Both my bra straps have slid off and Zach pulls them back onto my shoulders. Then he slips the dress over my head, zips it up, and combs his fingers through my hair until it’s neat enough to tie up.

“I keep fucking this up,” I say.

He sits down beside me.

“I told you, Addy. If you wanted to stop, we’d stop. I meant it.”

“But, *I want you*. It’s just, I—”

“Are you afraid of me?” Zach whispers the question, like the answer might wound him.

“No! It’s—”

I start sobbing again, and Zach asks if he can hold me. It seems a stupid question but hearing it sends another crack across my soul. I fold myself to him. When he tries to pick his shirt off the floor, I stop him; I enjoy the feel of his skin beneath my cheek too much to relinquish it so soon.

“Can we just lie here?” I ask.

I wish he’d smile, but he merely obeys. We lie side by side while I wait for my thoughts to slow down so I can speak.

“I was very angry with you after that film screening,” I tell him. “That New Year’s party’s the reason everything’s so messed up... why I can’t let you close to me without wanting to hurt you.”

“We’re close right now,” he points out.

“This is different. You know it’s not the same as—” Anger trips me up. I can’t even remember what I wanted to say.

A few protestors pass by outside. Zach doesn’t translate their words this time. It doesn’t matter anyhow.

“Just tell me, Zach. Why’d you do it?” I flip onto my belly, propping myself up on the elbows so I can look squarely at him. “And don’t give me that bullshit about you wanting to honour me. What’s the real reason you took my secrets and sold them?”

Zach folds an arm behind his head and lets the other dangle off the couch. He speaks with closed eyes.

“Kareemah Jordan,” he says.

“Is that another ex of yours?”

“I barely knew her.” His chest rises with a laboured breath. “Was this timid girl in my matric year. One day she never showed up for a Physics prelim. No one even noticed until they did roll call.”

Zach rolls onto his side. His eyes fix on my shoulder instead of my face.

“Halfway through someone needed to pee. Mrs Pfeiffer went with her, but neither of them returned to the hall. They’d found Kareemah strung up in the bathroom. The letter she left behind revealed everything, including the name and address of her rapist.”

I know the incident he’s referring to. It happened the same year I was in matric.

“You attended Grove?” I ask.

“Yeah. Did you read it in the paper?”

I nod. For a good few weeks it overshadowed everything else in the news.

“I thought of Kareemah when I read your journal. She’d been raped... didn’t tell anyone, and killed herself because of it. I know what I did was wrong, but I believed that if you shared your story with other women, they might feel brave enough to confront their own demons. If it could help even one girl feel less afraid, less alone... well, isn’t that the purpose of stories? Inspiring hope in people?”

I’d been too caught up in my own grief to see it this way.

“I’m not making excuses for my actions.” Zach looks at me. “I should’ve considered your feelings first... but your words struck a chord. Your story moved me. It felt selfish not to share it.”

Things have quietened down outside, and I give my thoughts room to breathe.

“Seeing it on the screen like that... it was something else, Zach. You captured my fear exactly. And the decision to make the guy who lead me upstairs gay? Genius. It sent chills down my spine. It was like reliving it all over again.”

Zach’s fingers rest on mine.

“You shouldn’t have had to go through it again. I’m so fucking sorry for that.”

“Don’t be. I needed it,” I say. “You made me remember some things about that night, stuff I’d blocked out because of the trauma. Even tonight, while we were kissing, more memories came back.”

I sit upright, crossing my legs beside him.

“I have this fear of a man being on top of me, pressing down on me.”

Zach nods. “I read it in your journal. That’s why I was reluctant to move when you tried to pull me onto you.”

I press his hand against my lips and let the silence build.

“My skin remembers the trauma long after the bruises have healed,” I whisper. “This whole year with you,” I look around, “in this magical class. Finding my mother’s journal, watching that film... It’s helped me piece together that night.”

I begin telling Zach everything, exactly as I remember it. The evening didn’t end with me peeing on the assailant’s shoes and rescuing Alex.

“Urinating on him only made him angrier,” I say. “He was so strong. He covered me. Tried to choke me, and at some point, he got his fingers in my mouth. Tried to gag me.”

Zach pushes himself up to sit beside me, with knees against his chest and one hand touching my ankle.

“Then I bit him – so hard I heard a bone crack.” I make a strangled noise as I fight back tears. “He put his hand over my face.” I make a claw with my fingers. “Kept swearing... was like he was trying to crush my nose. And there was blood. *Everywhere*. It got in my eyes, my mouth. Pretty sure I swallowed some of it.”

I see it all again, like the memory’s barely an hour old.

There was no time to slip back into my jeans; I just grabbed them off the floor, and ran out wearing only my underwear. That’s another detail Zach had changed: my boyleg briefs weren’t torn, but they’d left burn marks on my thighs when he pulled them off.

“You portrayed Alex’s rescue exactly how I remember it. Except, of course, I was running down the stairs in my underwear. I changed into my jeans only when I got to the hospital.”

In Zach’s film, they show me sitting in a chair, passively waiting for news of Alex. That’s what I wrote in my journal, but it’s not what happened.

“I got someone else’s blood in my eyes, in my mouth... I had to start post-exposure prophylaxis immediately.”

I found one of my mother’s friends at the hospital, and they helped me. While Alex was being taken care of, Dr Sadan drew two vials of blood and sent them off to the lab for tests.

“She could see I was in a bad way, and I stupidly refused counselling.” I wish now that I’d taken her up on the offer. “I let her examine me down there, though. Just my luck that I knew a gynaecologist.” I try to laugh. “There was some tenderness. A few cuts... nothing that needed stitches. She cleaned me up, gave me a mild sedative, and sent me home.”

In the days that followed, my results came back clear.

“No HIV, no Hepatitis B or C. Normal renal function,” I say. “But the guy was gone, so they couldn’t test him. And you know how the window period works. To be safe, I had to finish the course of PEP. Which was cocktail of TDF, FTC and ATV/R.”

Zach gives me a blank stare.

“Tenofovir, Emtricitabine, and Atazanavir/ritonavir. One capsule, and two massive pills, plus an anti-nausea tablet that didn’t a fuck help me. For a month I was on that. Side effects were shit. Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting... I even turned yellow.”

Zach frowns hard.

“And nobody knew? You went through that alone?”

I nod.

“Why didn’t you say something, Addy?”

This is a question I’ve spent many nights agonising over. When I shrug, Zach does his little magic trick: he stares until I’m brave enough to answer.

“I didn’t want to be a statistic. A victim,” I say. “I’ve seen many women who’ve been assaulted get blamed. Get told they were asking for it. You are cross-questioned and your story is twisted and warped so badly you’re not even sure what happened to you anymore. I was terrified no one would believe me. It was hard for me to even come to terms with the fact that I’d been raped. For the first few months, I thought of it mainly as an attack. An assault.”

“When you say it, the thing no longer has as much power over you anymore.” Zach tells me.

My eyes well up.

“It’s okay to say it, Adara.”

“Did you know,” a tear rolls down my cheek, but I don’t wipe it, “over three million US women claim their first sexual experience was rape?”

We let that hang in the air.

“Adara, if you just say it—”

“No, Zach!” I am firm. “Just don’t. You don’t know what it’s like. People find out you’ve been raped and that’s all you are. A *victim*. A *survivor*. Different names, but it’s all the fucking same. You become what’s happened to you. I’m so sick of it.”

“You’re right, Adara. We do become what’s happened to us. Mxo was arrested and tortured. People see him as a war prisoner. A freedom fighter. That’s all. They forget he’s also a father. An architect. That he was once a husband. *I get it*. For years after my mother died, I was treated like an orphan. That’s all anyone saw.”

I apologize to him. I'm not sure why, but it feels right.

"Tell me," Zach says. "After it happened, you went looking for Alex. Why didn't you just get out of there? Why didn't you just say well fuck him, and save yourself?"

I narrow my eyes.

"It's all in the journal. You read it. Don't make me say it again."

"I want to hear it from you. *I want you to hear it.*"

Anger. Despair. Terror. It bubbles to the surface until I'm trembling.

"Alex could have died from an overdose," I say. "I couldn't just leave him there!"

I breathe shakily, wiping at tears even as more run down my face. I get up from the couch, and stride to the other side of the room.

"And yes, I was raped. There, I said it! *I was raped!*" I scream. "Fine! It might take years to repair the psychological damage, but they were *years I would have*. You know what there's no cure for? A corpse. I wasn't going to leave my friend to die! Alex has always struggled to love himself. So I took it upon myself to love him. That night someone else's pain was greater than mine. Alex needed saving more than me."

Letting loose years of pent-up emotion is exhausting. I'm so tired, angry – so utterly spent – but I'm thinking clearly for the first time since that night.

"Rape isn't the end. For many it feels that way, but you can come back from it. You can heal yourself. *Rape is not death.*"

Zach slowly raises his palm to me. His eyes shine with... pity? Admiration? Whatever it is, I don't like it.

"Would you stop looking at me like that?!"

"Like what?" he asks, getting to his feet.

"Like you expect me to fucking change the world."

Zach picks his shirt off the ground, pulls it over his head.

"You said you were afraid no one would believe you if you told them?" he says.

Zach points to his chest as he closes the distance between us.

"I believed you," he says. "Arendse believed you. Our classmates believed you. The South African Art Collective's panel of judges believed you – so much so that they backed that belief up with over a hundred thousand rand."

He takes out his phone.

“Fifty-three.” He shows the numbers with his fingers. “That’s how many emails and letters I received from women – daughters, mothers, wives – who saw our twenty-minute film. Explaining how moved they were by the protagonist’s strength – *your strength*.”

Zach hands his phone to me. I’m staring at several screenshots of emails and instant messages from strangers. I pass it back before my heart can break.

“You’re not a statistic. You’re not a victim,” Zach says. “If we are the things that happen to us, then you’re a hero. You were raped, but you still had the strength to save your friend’s life.”

Zach tilts my chin upward and I straighten my spine, standing taller.

“Tasleem’s a formidable figure – just from reading those journals, I’m kind of terrified of her. But Adara, you have power too. Don’t ever forget that. Your story made me brave enough to survive a terror attack. Can you imagine what it would mean to a girl who’s had her spirit broken? To a mother who’s been living with a secret her whole life?”

Far off, I hear an ambulance’s siren.

“Tell me,” I put my arms around him, “how does the story end? How does your film end?”

Zach purses his lips.

“I’ll send you the screenplay, hm? You can see for yourself.”

“No, I’ll wait for the film.”

“Do you mean—”

“Yes, Zach. Go finish your film.” My resolve increases with every word. “Let’s make something of my trauma, if we can.”

Zach swings me off the ground in a hug. The world outside may be bleeding, but I feel like I’m finally starting to heal.

“Just think,” he whispers against my hair, “of all the souls you’re about to fix.”

I wake to the sound of clanging metal. It’s still dark out, with a few fires burning in the distance, but the riot is over. Zach stands in front of me, screwdriver in hand. Behind him, the grate that once covered the window now rests against the wall. I lean over the arm of the couch and smile. I’m sure we both knew there was a toolbox tucked in the kitchen cupboard, but none of us wanted to escape last night.

“Looks like they’ve all cleared out.” Zach says. “Let’s get you home before they decide to come back.”

Before we go, I splash my face with cold water and pack my library books in Zach’s bag.

I grip Zach’s shoulder while I climb onto the ledge and he passes his backpack to me before jumping out. The window can’t be locked from the outside, but he pushes it closed behind him. We look around and behold the aftermath of last night’s fire festival.

A few iron drums still burn along the path, illuminating the damage: burnt out cars, broken doors and windows, cracked statues, and at least six malfunctioning fountains, all of them spraying water in haphazard directions, too far from any fires to be useful. There are plastic bottles littered everywhere. I don’t see the glass, but it crunches underfoot. The smell of beer and cannabis is vomit-inducing.

“Don’t touch that!” Zach says.

I step away from the cannister. He tells me it’s a stun grenade.

We walk down the road, noticing more damage once we examine the place. All along Main Campus, framed portraits are strewn – some hacked, others burnt.

“These used to hang in the Arts Centre,” I say, stopping in front of a landscape picture of the Waterfront before it became a shopping mall. My heart breaks. When I turn around, I see Zach standing over a pile of old books. They look even worse than the paintings.

“C.S. Lewis,” Zach says. “Arendse’s initials are inside.” The cover has come off completely. Zach stuffs the pages into the cover and stows it in his bag. “I’ll see if I can fix it for her. The others are unsalvageable.”

We walk for a bit, but when I turn around, Zach isn’t there.

“Adara,” he calls.

I spot him under a tree. He’s clicking his tongue and using a soft, coaxing voice.

“Come on boy,” Zach croons, gently tugging on a leash. A large black shape emerges.

I see the reflectors on the harness and saddle first. The black horse nickers as Zach leads it into the light.

“It’s a police horse,” he whispers. Zach tries to keep his voice low, but his excitement can hardly be contained. “I didn’t even know we still had them in Cape Town.” He strokes the beast’s mane and it tries to lick him. Zach’s tongue keeps clicking. He asks me to come closer and say hello.

“Hello,” I say, a safe two meters away.

Eventually Zach convinces me to climb on with him.

“Well, at least I finally get to ride something,” I say, holding a little tighter to him.

I didn’t think we’d be able to laugh about this so soon, but it’s a nice surprise.

“So last night,” Zach clears his throat, “while we were– while I was kissing you and stuff,”

“What about it?”

“Did you think at all about weird penises and like the STDs you saw as a doctor? I remember you struggled with the erotica assignment. I hope I didn’t take you to that dark place.”

I put my head against his shoulder and start shaking with laughter.

“I didn’t think of that at all,” I confess. “I wanted to be safe when I asked you about the STDs, but having you that close didn’t make me think of those horrific sights.”

One of the male students once asked the gynaecology consultant – a friendly woman who was down for answering the even the grossest of questions – if poking diseased vaginas all day would ruin sex for him. I was kind of relieved he’d asked this question, because I’d been wondering the same thing about all the pus-filled penises I’d been prodding. She assured us we’d be fine.

And she was right.

Depending on who you’re examining, human anatomy could resemble anything from a furry, moth-eaten snail, to a worm that’s been soaked in brine, but when you actually like the person you’re with, sex is more than not half bad. The human body becomes something entirely different – something magical – when it’s attached to a person you love.

“You can relax, Zach. You haven’t ruined sex for me.”

He wipes an imaginary bead of sweat from his brow.

“Phew. Adara?”

“Yes?”

“Did you mean it last night when you said I could go ahead with the film?”

“Of course. Did you think that was just pillow talk?”

Zach laughs.

“Listen – if you’re okay with it – maybe we can put your name on the film or the script? Do a based on a true story thing? I can’t take credit for everything. I wouldn’t have had a story if it wasn’t for you.”

“Zach,”

“Think about it? You don’t have to answer me now.”

We ride in silence for a while. I must've been really upset last night to have parked my car all the way on Main Road.

"Zach, you can put my name on it. I don't mind, but," I sigh, "won't you get into shit? If they learn it wasn't strictly fiction? I don't want this damaging your career. I know it's the most important thing to you."

Zach turns so I'm staring at his profile.

"A powerful woman once told me not to build an empire on the blood of others," he says. I feel goose bumps on my arms. I can't believe he remembered that.

"There are more important things than my career, Addy."

When words escape me, I plant a kiss on his shoulder.

"It's still okay if I work from your house today?" I ask.

"Of course." I hear the smile in his voice. "Come by anytime. I'll text you the code. You can let yourself in."

Even as we pass the destruction on campus, I feel hopeful. I'll get through this. I'll finish the assignments. Now that I know I can graduate, nothing's going to stop me. I press Zach closer as we follow a sharp bend.

I like how natural Zach looks on a horse, how strong he keeps his back, how easily he's able to make the turns, how effortlessly he calms the animal when we veer too close to a fire.

The last time I mounted a horse, I was around six – and it was actually more of a donkey. Tasleem had taken me to a fair where they had one. We paid R20 for a guy holding a rope to lead me around the circle twice. I kept trying to kick the horse so it would run off with me, but my small legs did nothing to urge it forward. Zach loves the story. It's crazy to think we grew up in the same place, at the same time, with parents the world didn't want together, but our stories couldn't be more different. Zach owned horses, while we paid good money for donkey rides.

"This isn't even riding," Zach says. "It's not even a trot. Do you want to go faster?" he asks, shortening the reins, and curling them around his fist.

"Not too fast," I say.

Zach digs his heels into the animal, and it picks up the pace. I shriek, then laugh, as we lurch forward. The wind whips my face, and I can't hear anything above the thunder of hooves. Fleeing a burning landscape on horseback, I can't help but feel like I'm in the middle of an apocalypse.

Only once we get to the Main Road does Zach slow down. He gives the horse a pat on the side, clicking his tongue while murmuring his thanks. Something about the way he soothes the

animal makes me think he'd make a good dad. It's the same feeling I got when he helped me back into my dress last night.

"Just think," Zach says, "what a story this would make for our grandkids."

I rest my cheek on his back.

"Grandkids?" I'm grateful he can't see my stupid grin. "What happened to all that *I can't fall in love with you* nonsense? Was that all just a lie?"

"Technically not a lie." Zach dismounts and helps me climb off the horse. "You can't prevent something from happening when it already has."

The Main Road is trashed almost as badly our campus. Every station on the radio is buzzing with what went down at the university last night. One reporter says five students have been hospitalized with serious injuries, while others were arrested.

I turn my phone on to several messages I'm too tired to read. My lips taste faintly of cinnamon, of cardamom. Of Zach. I'm ravenous.

When I get to our apartment, the light is still on in the kitchen at quarter past five. Stranger still, there's cigarette smoke wafting down the stairwell. To my knowledge, no one smokes on our floor.

I balk at the top of the staircase when I see her. Sitting in front of the balcony, wearing a black nightgown, one thin cigarette dangling from her fingertips. She tilts her head, takes a long drag, and flicks ash into the tray with a practised hand.

"Tasleem?"

She uncrosses her legs and the nightgown slips open to reveal a black mark on her chest, just below her left breast. The fabled tattoo: two cursive initials joined by an ampersand – *A&T*. She covers herself, unaware that I've seen. *A&T*. Andrew and Tasleem. I wonder if she got the tattoo after or before he killed himself.

Wisps of smoke ring her head. Tasleem turns to me, blowing smoke from the corner of her mouth; a whiskey glass wouldn't look out of place in her hand right now.

"I tried calling you," she drawls. "Not like you to wander in at this hour."

I have just enough strength to laugh.

“You’re lecturing me? Right now?” I point to the death trap in her hand. My whole childhood was spent listening to Tasleem’s lectures on smoking. The irony’s almost too decadent.

“Where were you?” she asks.

“Really?” I shove the door open. “I don’t have to answer that.”

Tasleem crushes the cigarette in the tray. She gets up slowly, gripping the balcony’s railing.

“Adara—”

“Tasleem,” I snap. “I told you I don’t want your money. I’m so tired, so hungry. I don’t know what all of this,” I gesture to the ashtray and cigarette, “is supposed to be, but it’s not making me feel sorry for you.”

Tasleem sways, then suddenly she’s retching over the balcony. Vomit falling from the second floor makes a horrible splat on the concrete below.

Sometimes I’ve imagined – fantasized about – what it would be like to see my mother as an unremarkable human. Not a neurosurgeon who raised two kids. Not a woman men adored. Not someone who always won first place. I thought I might’ve enjoyed watching her slip just an inch below perfect. But this – seeing her struggling to stand, wiping partly-digested food from her lips – this isn’t what I want.

“Mom,” I croak. “I’m sorry—”

“Adara, something’s happened.” Her voice wavers. “Alex. There was an accident.”

I hear the word *concussion* followed by the sentence that never brings comfort or closure to anyone: *He didn’t make it.*

I haven’t eaten or slept in the last twelve hours. People mill about the lounge; I feel hands on me, hear my brother’s choked voice, and Muzammil’s quiet sobbing in the background. Saskia presses her lips to my head each time she walks past, but I feel nothing. Tasleem’s had the phone glued to her ear all day. After a shower and change of clothes, she’s all business again; her brush with humanness had been short. An email went out informing the university of the death of one of its most formidable academics. I remained unmoved as Tasleem read it to Muzammil and his wife.

Muz presses something into my hand, kisses me awkwardly on the eye, and speaks words that don’t make sense.

“She’s in shock,” Tasleem whispers to Saskia. My mother pops a small round pill into Saskia’s hands, tells her to give it to Muzammil. Later, I see her give the same tablet to Tariq, who falls asleep on the couch beside her.

A tiny woman with a pinched face shows up on our doorstep. Tasleem tries chasing her away. It’s Cyan, Alex’s girlfriend. She throws herself on me, trying to pull out my hair, and I barely resist. Tasleem gets her off me with a few hard tugs.

Several others walk in and out, too many people for me to keep track of. Arendse also perhaps. I can’t be sure. When I see a message on my phone from Zach, I just switch it off.

When I hear the word ‘overdose’ I speak for the first time since last night.

“No. *No*. Whatever he was dealing with, he wouldn’t have used. He promised. He was *done* with that.”

I hate that I sound like a child.

Tasleem’s eyes fill with pity. She keeps apologising. To me. To Muzammil. To anyone who crosses our threshold. I wonder why. She had a hand in Andrew’s death, sure. But she’s not responsible for Alex’s.

No, no. This one’s all on me.

By the time everyone’s cleared out, I’m sitting at the balcony, in the same spot I found Tasleem last night. I don’t want to move, but I let her sit me down in the study while she goes through her filing cabinet.

There’s a damp piece of paper in my hand with a four-digit code on it. I can’t remember how it got there.

Tasleem sits down opposite me. She’s holding a brown folder.

“What’s this?” I ask, smoothing the paper strip out on my knee.

“It’s the code to the safe in Alex’s old office. Muzammil gave it to you.”

I fold the paper, tuck it into my pocket; I think I’m gonna be sick.

Tasleem sets the folder down in my lap.

“I’ve been dabbling in psych,” she says. “For the last two years I’ve been sitting with Alex. Ever since you brought him home that night, almost three years ago.”

I frown at the folder. She could lose her license for this. Doctors aren't supposed to disclose patient details to anyone, not even ex-medical students who happen to be their daughters. Tasleem touches my knee.

"Think you're taking this so hard because you didn't really know him," she says. "There were parts of Alex dark enough to drown in. He wanted to protect you from that. I also think he was afraid of what you'd do if you ever saw the real him."

Too numb to feel fear, I flip it open.

According to her notes, the sessions started shortly after Alex and I met. Once a week, then twice, and even three times. They met at home, her office, on campus, and even at coffee shops or quiet restaurants.

This explains all those secret conversations.

I shouldn't be reading these documents. He was very candid with her. About his family, about his abusive relationship with Cyan, and especially about me. When I get to the entries made about a year ago, just after his severe relapse, I make a discovery I can't handle.

"It says here, his mother blamed him for his father's death, that they drifted apart after that." I lean forward, analysing the notes. "This can't be right. Alex's dad died before he was born – just like mine did."

Tasleem taps the folder, urging me to continue.

Even after my third reading of the page, I can't believe it. I turn to Tasleem, hoping for answers.

"One of the first things Alex told you," she says, "was that his father died before he was born. That was a lie he told to get close to you. He didn't think of the consequences back then. If he'd known how much you'd come to mean to him, he wouldn't have lied to you."

Tasleem points to me to another page where I finally learn the reason why Alex doesn't drive.

He was eighteen when he rammed the car into his father. After years of tormenting his mother, sister and himself, Alex couldn't take it anymore. He killed his dad and they covered it up. For the rest of his life, his mother hated him for it.

I try pushing the folder back to Tasleem, but she won't take it.

"I didn't record it because he didn't want me to, but Alex was sexually abused as a child. By his father."

No.

I reflect on all the times she could've told me this. All the opportunities Alex had to confide in me. Why wasn't I worth his trust? And what had Tasleem done to earn it? She who'd blackmailed my father. Anger is the first emotion I feel at the edge of the numbness.

I read through the last few entries, then discover a loose page dating back to a year ago. Tasleem makes a grab for it too late – I've already seen my name. I jump so the folder's out of reach.

According to the notes, some memory of New Year's Eve came back to Alex a week after the incident. Tasleem went to visit him at the rehab centre in the Karoo, where he told my mother he remembered me getting into some trouble at that party with another guy. That there was blood on my underwear. That he felt bad for not protecting me.

"You... you knew. That I was raped. And you didn't say anything."

Tasleem's eyes are sad.

"I couldn't risk upsetting him or breaking your friendship apart. He needed you and this family."

I throw the folder across the floor, sending the pages flying.

"I am your daughter! And you chose HIM."

Tasleem stands up and tries to talk to me in that calm, psychologist voice she probably used on Alex. I go to my room before I say something I can't take back.

"Adara, it wasn't like that. Alex was *me*." I hear her footsteps behind me. "He was disowned by his family, too. I wanted to give him everything I never had! He was alone. And you've always had me and Tariq, now Saskia and Muzammil."

"Do you even hear yourself?!" I scream.

I pull my suitcase from under the bed and start filling it with anything I can find.

"For a month I was on PEP. I was jaundiced and in pain. And you did *nothing!* You did *fokhol!*"

Tasleem looks on as I stuff items into the suitcase, punching them down with my fists. When I finish, I scan the room, searching for something to break. My eyes land on her.

"I know why you didn't ask me about it. You couldn't risk the setup you had. If you ruined things between me and Alex, he wouldn't be able to come here anymore."

"You're right," Tasleem admits.

"The sex must've been something else." I throw the case on the floor and the handle extends with a sharp click. "So, how'd it work? One fuck per session?"

Tasleem cracks the back of her hand across my face. I cup my mouth; the fingers come away bloody.

She begins dabbing my lip with a used tissue, but I shove her off. The commotion wakes Tariq. When he sees my face, he starts crying. Back when we were kids, he'd burst into tears whenever I got hurt. I kiss him roughly on the forehead as I brush past.

I grab my keys from the bowl on the counter, then turn around, lingering at the door.

"I understand why you didn't confront me. Rape isn't a big deal." I shrug. "Sometimes you can even make a couple million from it."

The Sunday night campus riots started a nationwide revolt. Several universities had to close, and nearly all the exams were cancelled. Where possible, we were given assignments to make up the final credits. In his statement, the Vice Chancellor warned students to come to campus at their own risk. Apparently, the Art Centre had caved in and entry was barred until they could clear the rubble. I'm not sure how much of what I read in the newspapers should be trusted. The latest article I read mentioned a sacrificial slaughter of a goat in one of the lecture venues.

I really shouldn't be here, but I need to collect whatever's in Alex's safe before they clear his office.

The damage to the Art Centre is heart-breaking, even though the lower floor looks like it's been repaired. The outside's still a mess; I tread carefully to avoid shards of glass. I shouldn't have worn flip-flops today, but I hardly noticed my outfit when I left Naathierah's house. It's been three days since my fight with Tasleem. We have not spoken since.

Inside, the hallways are wet and littered with broken chairs, books, splintered tablets – I even spot an overturned fridge and a shattered coffee machine. As I round the corner to Alex's office, I realise I'm not the only one disobeying direct instructions from the Vice Chancellor.

"Jesus, you scared me," Sebastian says, closing the door behind him. "What are you doing here, Adara? You know exams have been cancelled, right?"

"Just picking something up," I say, dropping my voice to match his whisper. "How much trouble do you think we'll be in if anyone catches us here?"

"Do you think they'll mistake us for protestors?" Sebastian shakes his head. He unfolds the newspaper under his arm, tapping the headline on the front. "You see this shit?" he asks. "Several

thousand Rands worth of books and antiques were taken. Someone even ripped the aircon unit out of the wall in our Write Room.”

I read the headline:

Crack in Mountain Swallows Thieves

“What the hell does that even mean?” I ask.

Sebastian tells me a few students went missing over the weekend, along with some expensive campus property. And the Write Room was one of several places that were hit. Kahve Corner, Sizwe’s, Burger Shack – even the campus stationery shop – were looted.

“There’s also a growing list of missing people,” Sebastian says.

There were many mysteries of Table Mountain, but this is the first I’m hearing of a crack that could swallow people. It was a *mountain*, people got lost all the time. It’s as simple as that. This was just the tabloids trying to capitalize on tragedy. Or maybe what’s happening is so horrifying, they’d rather make up stories about *Tokoloshies* kidnapping students and demanding ransom money in the form of antique books and air conditioners, than face the truth that our tertiary education system is fucked to hell.

I give the newspaper back to Sebastian.

“Seven of our classmates made the list.” Sebastian puts the paper back under his arm.

“Wing, Khanya, Kaanitah, Asia, Nabeelah, Oliver and Qaasim.”

My face falls, but I try to keep calm.

“I’m sure they’ll turn up,” I say.

They have to.

Right now, I can’t digest the idea that my favourite barista might’ve been harmed during these riots. I hope he didn’t go chasing after some story.

Sebastian and I talk for a bit. My apology comes out of nowhere.

“I’m sorry about the chocolate cake.”

Sebastian laughs. He rolls up the newspaper and swings it like a bat.

“I’m lucky you didn’t hit me with anything harder.” He folds his arms. “I’m sorry too. I know it was a pain to share a class with me—”

“At least we still had a class to share.”

He grimaces.

“That’s true.” Sebastian struggles to find the words. “My older brother applied for Arendse’s post. He didn’t get it. So, I had like a personal vendetta or something.”

I nod slowly.

“But she’s *brilliant*. The best professor I’ve had.” Sebastian lifts his pants as we walk through a puddle, but the bottoms are already soaked. “It’s too bad her classroom got destroyed.”

We talk some more. He’s the first classmate I’ve seen since the riots. And I doubt I’ll catch up with any of the others this year.

“You know Zach’s looking for you, right?” Sebastian says. “He left like a dozen messages on our chat group.”

I nod stiffly. I had a feeling this might happen. I know I should’ve answered his calls or at least texted back, but I don’t have the energy to deal with Zach right now. And there’s no chance in hell I’m going to finish those last assignments. I was someone else when I agreed to come to Zach’s house. I was filled with hope that night. Now... I just feel empty.

Before he leaves the Art Centre, Sebastian calls back to me.

“I heard about Alex,” he says. “He was my lecturer in undergrad. Will definitely be at the memorial service later this week. Adara, I’m so sorry for your loss. He was a great guy.”

It’s the sincerest thing I’ve heard Sebastian say.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I almost say yes.

“No, Sebastian. I’m really not.”

He leans against the opened door, smiling sadly.

“That’s fine,” he says. “I don’t think any of us are.”

I’ve lost sleep over what’s inside Alex’s safe. Muzammil said his friend put it there almost three months before he left for King’s College. My key to his office still works; I close the door behind me.

I take a deep breath as I look around. The only time I was in here, we shared toasted cheeses and laughed at Cyan’s tattoo together. I was worried I’d be able to feel him in the room somehow, but he’d cleared everything out when he left. A few stubborn pieces of Prestik is all that remains where his bobbleheads once stood on the windowsill.

The safe is inside the cupboard, and the code works on the first attempt.

I’m not prepared for what I find.

Chapter 17

Carlisle Compassion

A concussion wasn't what killed Alex.

Muzammil called to tell me the truth once him and Tasleem had collected the body. It was a drug overdose, the very thing I'd saved him from two years ago. *Amitriptyline* this time. I had no idea he was on antidepressants. Another thing I didn't know, was that Alex had converted to Islam five months before his death. *He signed as a witness at Saskia's wedding*, Naathierah had told me. *Only Muslims can be witnesses*. Alex spent the last three years glued to my family, only to have death turn him into a stranger.

The Janaazah took place at Naathierah's house on Friday, so I made sure I checked into a hotel on Wednesday morning. I didn't have the strength to face Tasleem. To face any of them.

During my time away from home, I wrote a letter to Alex. It was the only piece of writing I've managed to do since his death. A eulogy just didn't feel right, so I did something else and emailed the letter to Muzammil. I followed Zach's advice, dug deep, confronted my fears, made myself more vulnerable than I've even been... and Muz didn't even reply.

Zach was right.

Sometimes you'll make a piece of art that you might feel is the best thing you've ever done, and others won't get it. *One plus one equals fokhol*. Not that it matters anymore. I'm so, so tired, of everyone except Naathierah. To think, three years ago I couldn't stand the sight of my aunt. Now she's the only one I want to be around.

I arrive an hour before the time and I pick one of the withered benches overlooking the ocean. The salty breeze plays through my hair, bringing me a sense of peace I haven't earned, but nonetheless appreciate. Absentmindedly, I finger the thin silver chain around my neck. In place of a pedant, a sapphire ring dangles between my breasts. I twist it over in my hands until I hear trolley wheels approaching.

"If you didn't know before, then you must know now, how much I love you," Naathierah says, setting the suitcase down next to the bench. She gives me a hug that almost lifts me from the ground, then plants a wet kiss to my temple. "*Os' Khallits staan nooit vroeg op op 'n Sondag nie!*" She kisses me again. "Only you could convince me to get up this time," she says.

"Did you bring everything?" I test the weight of the black suitcase. I can't even lift it.

"Yes, and yes, and *yebo*."

We walk to the railing where the early morning sun has already baked the metal hot. Below us, a few toddlers are playing in the tidal pool.

“Thank you for meeting me,” I say, tying my hair so it doesn’t whip in my face.

Naathierah *tsks*.

“What else was I now gonna do? Say no to my only niece?”

Niece is still a title I’m trying to get used to. It makes me smile each time I hear it. And I heard it a lot, staying in Saskia’s old room for three days. Naathierah runs her own catering business, and the house had been filled with delicious smells throughout my time there.

“What time’s your flight?” Naathierah asks.

She undoes her turban and re-twists it around her head. She isn’t wearing khol, and something else is different as well; I can’t put my finger on it. Are her lips thinner?

“Ten,” I say. “But let’s leave earlier then I can buy breakfast for you.”

Another thing I discovered while living with her, is that my aunt’s a crier. I hadn’t pegged her as one, but she’s able to burst into spontaneous tears. All that bitchiness at the dinner table years ago? Just an act. She wipes at the corners of her eyes. Maybe she’s skipped the khol on purpose today.

Naathierah takes a water bottle from her bag and unscrews the cap. Then she pulls something fleshy-coloured from her denim jacket.

“*Hou gou soe*.” She hands me the bottle cap, and I watch her rinse her dentures off before slipping them into her mouth. A few early morning joggers do a double take as they pass us.

Naathierah smiles brightly.

“Now I can *mos* enjoy that *lekker brekvis* you promised me!”

I can’t stop laughing.

“*Hoekom lag jy soe?*” Naathierah shades her eyes to look at me better. “You know your mommy also had false teeth when she was small?”

I hand the bottle cap back to her.

“No way. You’re lying. She’s got all her teeth in her mouth now.”

I’m sure I’d have noticed a set of dentures lying around the house.

“*Now ja*, but she used to have *lekker skew* teeth! She *mos* went for implants when she graduated from medical school.”

Wow.

I try picturing Tasleem with what Naathierah terms a *papbek* – a deflated mouth – and I can't. My brain won't accept that reality.

"I can't believe you planned all of this without your mother knowing," she says.

Naathierah's referring to my trip to Vietnam. The night I learnt the truth from Dureshni, I started planning it. I'd wanted to go directly to America, but I didn't have the money for that, so I completed an online TEFL course and secured a job as an English teacher overseas. Teaching isn't my dream job, but it checked a few other boxes: it took me away from Tasleem and gave me a fresh start. Two things I desperately need right now.

"It's just for six months, until I make enough money to go to America."

With the extra money Zach deposited into my student account, I've paid Tariq's fees for the first year of culinary school. I don't want him feeling indebted to Tasleem the same way I was. If I could free him from a few of my mother's apron strings before leaving the country, I had to.

"*My kind*, you must please be careful. A woman traveling alone is always a target. You read all this stories... *please* be careful." Naathierah removes a toilet roll from her handbag. She wraps a few sheets around her fist and blows noisily. Allergies, she says. "Kia and Muz were thereby me last night. They still trying to cope, shame. They told me they can't lose you as well."

I don't want to talk about this, but I suppose it was inevitable.

"How was the funeral?" I ask, turning to look at the kids playing below. One's removed his swimming trunks and is wading naked through the water.

"You mean the *janaazah*?"

"Yes. Sorry, that's still weird for me."

Naathierah sighs.

"There was a lot of drama. So *onnoorag*, man."

My aunt says the local Mufti, who served as a religious advisor and was a close friend of Muzammil's family, was fuming when he found out they'd flown Alex's body all the way from London to be buried in Cape Town. In accordance with Muslim rites, he was supposed to be buried right there where he died. You must hasten to get the body under the ground.

"The Mufti knew something was up when he saw how bloated and blue—"

"Please don't."

"Sorry."

By the time Tasleem and Muzammil arrived in London, Alex's grandparents were already planning his funeral. Much to their dismay, their grandson had drawn up a new will, stipulating he

be buried in accordance with Islamic law. After the autopsy had been performed, they brought him home.

“It was a whole thing. The Mufti wanted to know why they brought him back. They almost didn’t bury him, then your mother stepped in. She had this whole argument prepared – even quoted parts of the Quran. It was quite something.” Naathierah says. “They had to close his whole face, because of... you know, we don’t put make-up on the body *mos*.”

I fiddle with the necklace while she tells the story. Alex’s mother, whom none of us had ever met, also turned up. It had been ten years since she last saw her son and it took three men to get her away from the gravesite.

“Only the men go to the grave for the burial,” she explains. “But his mother wouldn’t listen. Muz said she was hysterical. Wanted to climb into the hole with him.”

Naathierah rolls off another piece of toilet paper for nothing; my eyes are still dry. I must look like a monster. I’ve shed no tears since I learnt of his death.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” I tell her.

“Why didn’t you come to the janaazah?”

I’ve been waiting for this question, but I’m still not prepared for it.

“Alex and I were friends for almost three years.” I tell her the story of how we met, how he helped me when I was failing all my courses, how he connected me to all his friends in the art world and even organized my first show.

“He did have a lot of friends,” Naathierah puts in. “My house was never so full. All those students showed up too. There must’ve been three hundred people crowding the street. We had to buy like six more pots of Ahkni.”

I think of those girls who cornered Alex at the foot of the stairs after their exam and wonder whether they paid their last respects.

“It was too hard, Naathierah,” I say. “I thought I knew him, and then I find out all this other stuff after he dies? I felt like a fraud attending that funeral. It would’ve been like going to a stranger’s janaazah. I can’t love someone I don’t know.”

“But of course, you can!” Naathierah says. “I loved you long before you were born. The idea that your mother might’ve had an abortion scared me so much that I told her secret and lost her. But I loved you too much to let anything happen to you.”

Some hair has escaped my ponytail, and she tucks it behind my ear. I give her a weak smile.

“I obviously love you more now that I do know you.” She winks.

I remember something.

“You know, I don’t understand you, Naathierah.”

She raises her brows.

“You rat your sister out to save her life and mine, but then you go and do something so cruel like feed her pet to her. What’s the reasoning behind that?”

Naathierah stares at me until she starts laughing.

“*Haai!* I completely forgot about that!” She leans over the railing and one of the children waves to her. “Okay, so your mother did have a bird – *Pielie* – and she loved that *duif* so much, it was weird. On the day she comes home with her first grade 1 report. *Joh*, they were so proud of her. Bought her this princess dress she wanted from Truworths.”

I can see where this is going.

“So you were jealous?”

“Not jealous. More angry. I was proud of her too, you know? The dress didn’t bother me, but they used the money they’d been saving up to buy me a pair of new school shoes.”

I flinch at the injustice.

“I was *moering*.” Naathierah makes a fist. “So when they asked me to pick a pigeon for supper, I went out to the cage and—”

“You picked *Pie*—”

“Will you let me finish?” She raps me lightly on the arm. “*Pielie* was gone. Someone had left the *hok* open. I picked another bird.”

“So he flew away? Weren’t their wings clipped?”

“His *sieka* grew back. Tasleem was so busy with schoolwork towards the end of the year, she didn’t play with him for a while. Otherwise she would’ve noticed and asked papa to clip the feathers again.”

Now I’m laughing.

“Naathierah,”

“Aunty.”

“Fine, *Aunty*.” I lean my head against her arm. “You really need to tell Tasleem about the pigeon. And the truth about why you spilled her secret to your parents. You need to stop letting her think you’re a bitch.”

“That’s one of the nicest things you’ve said to me!”

I put my arm around her shoulder even as I roll my eyes.

“You’re actually really nice, Naathierah.”

“You know who else is nice?” She asks. “Muzammil. You were right about him.”

She tells me Saskia’s husband spared no expense when it came to Alex’s janaazah. Over and above the traditional rice dishes, there was a full buffet spread enough to feed the hundreds of guests who’d shown up. They also had professional baristas preparing coffee for everyone.

“*Ek het nog nooit sowat gesien nie.*” Her eyes grow big. “Can you picture that... everyone standing around with their Mochas and cappuchinos. Some people even took coffee to-go. And all these little pastries. But,” she shakes her head, “do you know, he refused to let anyone get near the body? Usually we pay *tukka mandis* – trained professionals – to *ghusl* the body and wrap the shroud, but Muz did it himself with the help of Tariq.”

Naathierah tells me Muzammil didn’t want anyone gossiping about Alex. Only the most trustworthy of Muslims could clean the body. Any marks or ‘secrets’ of the bodies they washed, should remain private.

“Alex had a lot of tattoos,” I say. He died with my name on his chest.

“Hm. He was a good person.” Naathierah clears her throat. “Lot of nice people at the janaazah. You know *ne*, it was the first Muslim funeral I’ve been to where I wasn’t running around in the kitchen. I got to speak to your friend.”

I let go of her arm and straighten up.

“What friend?”

Naathierah opens her bag and pulls out a plastic carrier.

“Zach. I met him at the memorial service. What a charming *ou*.” Naathierah pulls a battered hardcover and a thick brown book from the plastic bag. “He wanted to give this to you himself.”

I take the books. After six months, they feel strange in my hands. They look exactly the way I remember, except there’s an envelope inside my journal.

“It’s a letter.” Naathierah takes the books from me.

“Do you know what’s inside?”

She clicks her tongue.

“Man, I will *mos* not go read your letters!” She winks. “I’ve learned from my mistakes.”

I tear it open and find impeccable calligraphy inside. For a moment, I just gaze at it, angling the page so I can see the slightly raised lettering. When I’ve read to the end, I read it again and pass it to Naathierah.

“Are you sure?” she asks, already taking it from me.

“You know you want to.”

She doesn't need a second invitation. I hold the journals while she scans the page.

Naathierah's just as impressed with the handwriting as me.

“This is a lot,” Naathierah says. “*Sjoe*.”

I take the letter from her, glance at it once more, then tear it neatly down the middle. My aunt's gasps do nothing to prevent me from shredding the entire thing. When I'm satisfied with the tiny pieces I've made, I let the wind take it.

Naathierah's mouth hangs open long after the letter's gone. She starts going off about how people don't write letters anymore, how men don't speak the way Zach do, and that I've just destroyed something I should've treasured.

“Plus, the environmentalists will *moer* you for littering so!”

I clench my jaw.

“If I read that letter one more time, I don't think I'd be getting on a plane to start my new life. Zach's not the man I'm supposed to be chasing after right now.”

Naathierah shakes her head, probably wishing she'd grabbed the letter from me before I made the first tear.

“You know,” she says. “I had the chance to talk to Zach for almost three hours at the *janaazah*. We sat together, then we took a walk to the shop around the corner.”

I try picturing Zach opening Naathierah's rusted gate or sitting on an old metal stool in the backyard. In my mind he seems out of place. Just like I did once upon a time.

“Tasleem came to stand with us and,” Naathierah giggles, “he was *terrified* of her. I think it's because he had the journals in his car.”

“Or maybe because he'd read the journals and made them into a film.”

“He did what?!” Naathierah gawks. “*Yasso*, there's never been a dull moment in our lives since you came along. Really.”

When I ask Naathierah what Zach told her, she's quite cryptic. For someone who so readily dispensed secrets in the past, she couldn't have chosen a worse time to develop a conscience.

“He's crazy about you.” Naathierah looks out at the ocean; the wind has picked up now, making ripples across the surface. “And he's so grateful to Alex who brought you two together. Zach said he sneaked his late application in along with yours.”

I bite my lip, feeling the heat behind my eyelids.

“Before they took the body to the grave, we lined up for *ziyarat*, like when you say goodbye to the dead person. They uncovered a small piece of his face – just the eyes and forehead.” Naathierah looks at me. “Zach stood behind Muzammil and Saskia. She obviously couldn’t touch Alex because she’d break his *wudhu*, but Muzammil kissed Alex’s forehead. And when it was Zach’s turn, he did the same. Took Alex’s head between his hands, and kissed him right here,” Naathierah taps her forehead, “middle of the *voorkop*.”

I cannot hide my shock.

“I was close enough to hear him whisper to Alex. Know what he said?”

I shake my head. I don’t want to know.

“*Thank you. And forgive me.*”

I step away from Naathierah when the dam finally breaks. I’m not even sure why I’m crying. Is it for Alex, for Zach, for Tasleem, for all the students who went missing, for Oliver... for Andrew... for everything?

I reach into my pocket and hand the crumpled piece of paper to Naathierah. It’s the letter from Alex. When she’s done reading, she tucks the letter safely into her bag. Probably thinks I’m going to tear it up again.

“*My fok,*” she breathes.

“He had no right. No fucking right to say those things to me after he was dead. For three years he was in love with me,” I point to the ring around my neck, “leaves me this! Like what the fuck am I supposed to do with it now?”

Naathierah stares at me like I’m mad. And maybe I am.

“He spent so much time with my mother... I thought he was sleeping with her. Meanwhile he’s out buying me wedding rings...” I shake my head. “I had no idea.”

Naathierah scoffs. She starts wagging her finger and shaking her head.

“No. Huh uh,” she laughs. “You’re my niece. My *only niece*. And I love you like a daughter, but I won’t stand here and listen to you talk *kak*. My girl,” she clicks her tongue, “I knew Alex loved you the day I met him. And deep down you knew it as well.”

I’m angry. I’m seething. Because she’s right.

Alex’s feelings were always there, floating beneath those mood swings, those fits of jealousy. He was always so quick to forgive me. He loved me. It was just easier to pretend his feelings were directed at Tasleem.

“You didn’t feel the same way.” Naathierah’s question isn’t a question.

“I should’ve paid more attention. I should’ve been there for him. Maybe he’d still be here if I didn’t have my head so far up my own arse.”

“Hey!”

Naathierah gives me a rough hug.

“Alex had problems long before he fell in love with you.”

“But I should’ve seen it! I should’ve been a better friend to him. I should’ve watched him closer.”

“My girl,” Naathierah sighs. “Alexander was an adult. You can’t put people under 24-hour surveillance. He made his own decisions. You can’t blame yourself.”

She repeats this until I listen. She smooths my hair down.

“We can’t choose who we love, Adara.”

I tell her about Zach’s film and how it probably triggered Alex just before he left.

“You’re right,” I say, pulling the ring from my neck with a sharp tug. The sapphire is dazzling in the sunlight. I draw my arm back, much like Zach did on the bridge that night. Naathierah grips her head, but I freeze before she can stop me; my fingers won’t release the ring.

“I can’t do it,” I croak.

“*Is jy dan befok?*” Naathierah pulls me away from the railing.

Zach was able to toss Stephanie’s ring because he’d let her go. I’m different. Maybe there’s a part of me that does love Alex. Perhaps I’ll carry him with me always. Maybe it’s my curse.

Naathierah pries my hand open. When she says she’ll keep the ring safe until I get back, I believe her, but I turn so she can tie it around my neck again.

“You won’t throw it away?” she asks, clutching it to her chest.

“I promise.”

I feel it weighing me down as she secures the clasp. I blink rapidly to stave off tears.

“What’s on your mind?” she asks.

I look down at the ring, then tuck it beneath my shirt.

“If he’d given this to me while he was alive, I wouldn’t have accepted it.”

I’ve never noticed before; Naathierah looks a lot like my mother when she smiles.

“Like I said, we don’t choose the ones we love.”

“You’re right,” I sigh. “I’m in love with the man who helped kill the man who loved me.”

I’ve never admitted it to anyone.

“What does that say about me, hm?” I laugh.

Naathierah grips my face. I don't know how badly I need to hear her words until I do.
"That you're human," she says.

We buy strawberry smoothies and walk along the promenade, wheeling my suitcase behind us.
"So you gonna go to Vietnam first, and then meet Christopher Carlisle in America?"

My straw growls as I slurp the last of the smoothie. I shake the carton, hearing only ice.

"That's the plan," I say. "We speak almost everyday now. He seems super nice."

"Hm,"

I glance at Naathierah.

"My mother knows I'm going, doesn't she?"

"You know I don't have the best track record keeping secrets!" Naathierah puts a hand on my arm. "You didn't think I'd let you travel halfway around the world to meet a stranger, did you? Your mother gave Chris a call, just to make sure you found the right Christopher Carlisle."

I laugh. I expected her to tell my mother.

"Hey, I got you talking to Tasleem again." I clap my hand against the empty smoothie carton, feeling quite chuffed.

"That you did, my girl."

I do a little curtsey.

"*Jy's fokken mal!*" Her laugh sounds like a cackle. Some people turn to look, but I don't mind.

"You know," I say, "I don't think I want to be an artist anymore. Kind of a shit omen that the university's been destroyed. I'll teach for a bit, but I have no clue what I'm gonna do with my life."

"You'll figure it out, I'm sure."

"Because I'm Tasleem's daughter, right?"

Naathierah stops walking.

"No," she says. "Because you're Adara. If you could forgive me, then you're stronger than your mother ever was."

We cross the park to stand in front of the railing again. I grin; it's just occurred to me that every important conversation I've had this year has happened in front of a railing.

Naathierah tosses our empty smoothies in the bin.

“I almost forgot! Your teacher – your professor – she asked me to tell you to please check your email. The university one.”

“Arendse spoke to you?”

Naathierah nods. I take my phone from my pocket and turn it on. I haven’t looked at my university email since Alex’s death.

As usual, there are several notifications about graduation balls, textbooks, summer school, holiday programmes, fundraising efforts...

“Ah, I see the email.” I say, opening it up.

Adara,

I wish I could’ve told you this in person, but you’ve been impossible to track down. I did, however, ask your aunt to deliver my message to you.

In light of recent events, I’m awarding you the course credits you need to pass my class. The letter you wrote to Alex has been published. It’s a bittersweet moment, but know that I am proud of you. And he would have been too.

Best wishes,

Jodi Arendse

P.S. Zach spoke to me at the janaazah. He showed me your journals (why did you not submit this work to my class?), and we both agree that your name should be on that film. I’ve spoken to the SAAC and they concur. We’ll be in touch.

I read the email three times before it sinks in.

“Naathierah,” I ask. “How the hell does she know about the letter I wrote?”

“Oh? I didn’t tell you? Muzammil read it out at the memorial.”

I clutch at the railing for support. I hope I don’t throw up.

“*Wag gou,*” Naathierah says. “Saskia asked me to show you something. I brought it with.” Naathierah fishes a university newspaper from her bag. On the front page there’s a big photo of

Alex giving a speech at graduation day last year. He's wearing a red cloak instead of his usual cardigan. He looks happy and healthy, the way he wanted the world to see him. Beside the photo, is a copy of my letter, printed word for word, just as I'd sent it to Muzammil.

"You made everyone cry, Adara. Muz broke down when he read it, and Tasleem had to go onto the stage and finish the last part. Then she also started crying." Naathierah holds her hand over her heart. "It's been years since I've seen your mother *tjank* like that."

I can't make myself read the letter again, so I give the newspaper back to my aunt. I'm grateful to have passed, but I'm not happy. Everyone's seen the letter except Alex, the person I wrote it for. My words have brought closure to the mourners, but they aren't powerful enough to bring him back.

At long last, one plus one equals two. Only Zach didn't tell me it might feel this way, he didn't tell me how shit it could feel to finally be understood. Finding my voice, the moment my best friend loses his, doesn't seem right.

"Adara, you know Alex really would've been proud of you..."

Hearing her say that, only sharpens my grief, but I just nod.

"Thanks, Naathierah."

"Listen," she's serious again. "I know this stuff with Alex is a lot. I also know you're very angry with Tasleem, but *kanallah* don't repeat our mistakes. Please don't turn your back on your family. I just got to know you. It's not fair that you're leaving so soon."

I frown into the sunlight, wishing I'd brought my shades.

"Don't choose your American family over us. Please come back. Okay?"

I shield my eyes as I turn to her.

"Naathierah, I've known you and Sas for more than three years now. You guys are *amazing*. And the best family. Oumie also," I grip her hand, "but I don't know *anything* about the other half of my family."

"Do you *really* have to go?"

"Yes," I say. "There's a world on the other side of this ocean I've never seen. And there's a man waiting there who's stronger than any of us. He forgave my mother. I have a lot to learn from him. I need to be there right now."

"You'll be safe? And you'll call?"

"Of course."

Naathierah wipes my cheeks before I even realise they're wet. Maybe I'm worse at goodbyes than I thought.

"So what have you and Tasleem been talking about?" I ask, genuinely eager to know.

Naathierah brightens a little.

"So many things," she laughs. "You won't believe how much you have to say to someone after twenty-five years."

I'm happy for them. I can't be around my mother right now, but I'm glad she's got her sister back at least.

Suddenly Naathierah starts patting all the pockets of her jacket. She feels around inside each one before extracting a piece of folded paper. It looks vaguely familiar.

"Sorry," she says, handing it to me. "I promise that's the last thing I have for you."

I frown at her, then unfold the paper. It's an old bank envelope, cut in half. It still bears the blue Standard Bank logo. Through the frosted window I see a single hundred-dollar bill.

"A small *slaavat*," Naathierah says. "For when you get to America."

"I recognize this envelope. Didn't you throw one like this back at Tasleem at the janaazah?"

It comes back to me now. Naathierah had been so angry. Said she didn't want my mother's money.

My aunt sucks in a breath.

"That was not one of my finest moments," she admits.

"Why do you cut the envelope in half like this?"

Naathierah shrugs.

"Back in the day there was no money for envelopes. Maybe this was our way of recycling? When people go to Makka we give them money in half-envelopes."

The longer I stare at the hundred-dollar bill, the more clouded my vision becomes. This gift means more to me than the huge deposit Zach made. I pocket the money, then give Naathierah a tight hug.

For a while afterwards, we say nothing. We just stand, side by side, watching the waves lap the shore. She's the one to break the silence.

"I realised something recently." Naathierah rests her elbows on the railing, propping up her chin. "I always thought it was love that kept a family together, but it was love that tore our family apart. Specifically, your mother's love for Andrew." She wears a wry smile. "And it was death and duty that brought us back together. When papa died, you all came back into our lives."

“Don’t worry,” I say, feeling the meaning behind her words. “I won’t wait for death before I return.”

“Good.”

After a while, Naathierah nudges me.

“Did you know Tasleem’s got a tattoo?” She gawks. “She showed it to me yesterday. They’re going to burn it off with a hot poker in hell, but it’s so sweet. A&T.”

“*It’s weird!*” I gape. “You don’t brand yourself with the initials of your dead lover. Don’t you think that’s a bit morbid?”

Naathierah gives me a quizzical look.

“A&T,” I say. “Andrew and Tasleem.”

My aunt whacks my shoulder.

“*Adara and Tariq!* She got it after your brother was born.”

I cover my mouth with a hand. I don’t think I can take any more surprises this year.

“You know, I even saw Tasleem smoking last week,” I whistle through my teeth. “Never dreamed I’d see the day.”

Naathierah inhales sharply. When they were younger, she says, Tasleem caught her smoking and threatened to tell their parents. Naathierah convinced her to try a cigarette too.

“Once she’d smoked, she couldn’t tell for me without getting into *kak* as well,” Naathierah explains. “The smoking thing was my fault.”

“How old was she?”

“Around ten. ‘leven?”

When it dawns on me, I clap my hands together.

“You see!” I slam my foot on the railing’s lower beam. “Tasleem ultimately made her own decisions, but *you manipulated her*. We all influence one another. We can make each other do certain things or act a certain way. Whether it’s smoking a cigarette, having sex, or overdosing on antidepressants.” I count the items off on my fingers. “I don’t care what anyone says... *we do have power over each other*. And we must be careful how we use it.”

“Huh.” Naathierah folds her arms. “Never thought of it that way.”

“We are who we are because of the people around us.”

And I’m going to be better. I’m going to pay closer attention to everything from now onward. For Alex. For Andrew. For Ollie. For all the people we’ve lost.

When Naathierah taps her watch and says it's time to go, I hook my arm through hers and pull her tightly to my side instead. I take a lungful of crisp, salty air.

Sometimes the beach can smell like the wrong end of a gynae ward – rotten and rancid – but today isn't one of those days. Today's just beautiful.

I need to take a minute to make sure I remember it.