

# Man of the Moment

By Sicelo Kula

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## CHAPTER 1

'University of the Western Cape'. The massive sign greets me as I walk unenthusiastically through the main entrance onto campus. It's my second term, in first year. I'm still nervous on campus. I still check out everything around me, like I'm seeing stuff for the first time: the taxis that line up on the road like bricks at a construction site, the plush green grass lining the roads that stretch from the main entrance into the rest of the campus.

It is 3.30pm on a beautiful Friday afternoon and I'm meant to be meeting my doctor – well my therapist really – at Student Health. Yes, the start of second term and already I'm in need of help.

This campus still confuses me. I am so busy staring at everything around me I almost walk into a flagpole.

“Be careful, dude! Do you wanna look like you lost a fight to Mike Tyson?” I know that voice. I would recognise it anywhere. When I turn my head Tyrone is standing right there behind me. Now there is a guy who wouldn’t feel lost anywhere. Tyrone can make sense of any situation.

“Didn’t you say you had a doctor’s appointment at four? So dude, why are you headed for Lover’s Spot? Student Health is that way,” he says, pointing in the opposite direction. Before I can shoot a quick come-back line, he says, “Oh, I see you’d rather ...”

Like any good liar, I come up with a quick excuse, “My man, you must understand. Time spent meeting my girlfriend is just as important as a doctor’s appointment.”

“Well, good luck with that Noluvuyo of yours, but I have an appointment of my own – with my books!” he says.

“Sure man, I’ll catch you later,” I call after him, but he’s already halfway to the library and can’t hear me.

I am struggling up the endless steps to the Main Hall, the sun beaming down on me, when I run into Michelle, my therapist’s assistant. I swear that chick does not look like she only left High School last year. “Weren’t we seeing you today?” she asks loudly, with the widest smile she can manage. A couple of students look my way.

“Me? No,” I answer quickly. The last thing I want is my fellow classmates knowing that I’m seeing a shrink. Michelle simply nods and walks on.

“Hey, bhuti,” one of the students in my class greets me as she rushes down past with a pile of books. That feels good. I’m still getting used to the respect that comes with my newfound ‘manhood’. Newfound as it was only six months ago that I was an initiate. I love being called bhuti. It beats all those stupid names they called me in High School, during that terrible, terrible time – the time that my therapist says I am blocking out to protect myself.

I like Dr McNamara. I like the African décor in her office; I like the monstrous brown leather seats, and the gold-plated letters on the walls that scream out:

**LOVE WILL HEAL ALL BROKEN SPIRITS!**

“You’ve shoved the memories into a deep, dark part of your brain – a mental cave of some sort,” she told me the first time I saw her. I thought she was insightful and amazing, until just last week, when she asked me if I was sure that Noluvuyo was the girl for me.

I just sat there staring at her. And when I left I was angry – and I still am – that I couldn’t answer her. Why couldn’t I talk about how cool Noluvuyo is; how much I love her; and how she turns me on at just the right moments?

I can see the grassy patch below me at the bottom of the stairs, with park benches and really tall trees that cast shadows across all corners of the ground. Lover’s Spot, they call it and why wouldn’t they? It’s beautiful. A perfect place to meet your sweetheart.

I try to think of a good line to greet my beloved with.

“I was looking forward to seeing you, babe.” That’s what I said last time. I thought it was sweet and would bring a blush to her cheeks. But she replied, rolling her eyes:

“Normal guys don’t say they’re looking forward to seeing a girl. It sounds way too eager.”

So what shall I say today, I wonder.

But greetings fly out of my mind when I see Noluvuyo under the trees –with another dude! Then I just see red.

What the hell is going on with those two? My heart speeds up and my palms itch as I run the last few steps. All I can think about is their smiles, and the way he’s leaning in, and the arm he is wrapping around her.

I want to klap him. The way I see it, the guy she’s with right now deserves to be dealt with. He’s much too close to her! His hand is resting on her shoulder. No normal guy – boyfriend – would allow him to get away with that.

I run towards him. I open my mouth to shout, but nothing comes out. And then I’m right next to him and he’s standing up. Before I know it I have smacked him right on his left ear and almost pushed his face into the ground. He wriggles away, turns around, leaps up, ready to face me.

But then three of my buddies are running towards us. Where have they come from, so quickly? Were they here all the time?

I lose focus. This guy sees his chance and knocks my wind out with a kick to my stomach. He moves swiftly and wraps a scarf tightly around my neck until I black out.

I regain consciousness and all I see is red. Noluvuyo is crying. Blood is sprayed all over her hands and shirt. This guy is lying there, bleeding. It all happened so fast. Too fast. What the fuck have I done?

## CHAPTER 2

There's only one thought in my head as we run away from the scene of the crime. I've never seen so much blood! It was like my friends had slaughtered the guy.

Apparently, Siyabonga, one of my buddies, pushed the guy head-first into the park bench's armrest. Of course, in his words it sounded something like: "That kid should thank God, cuz he was pretty close to being knifed in the neck."

Bandile didn't like this kind of talk from Siyabonga. He shouted, "Shut the hell up man! Your stupidity always gets us into shit! We could've just held the guy's arms so Mzi could make him a punch-bag."

I didn't really get why Bandile was so pissed off; Siyabonga saved my ass out there. If he hadn't intervened, I'm sure I would've been the one who was lying in a pool of blood.

The thoughts of blood are no longer in my head now; it's the apologies that I owe Noluvuyo and Dr McNamara that are. I worry about how I'm going to break this story to the Doc. I can already imagine the concern on her face; her motherly voice telling me: "Mzimasi, young man, you and I are going to teach the world that young people listen when they are spoken to properly. Violence is never the answer."

Lord knows, I don't even want to think about the horror that Noluvuyo went through, watching us lay into the guy. I can't even imagine what she's thinking now. I don't want to think about how angry she must be or what she's doing with the guy lying on the ground in a pool of blood. What the hell came over me in that moment when I laid the first punch?

We are close to the campus exit now. I look up and see the security cameras. "Shit!" I exclaim. "Kukh' iicamera kalok' pha bafethu and ziza kubona le group ingaka."

Bandile agrees. "Let's split up guys. Mzi's right; there's cameras at the exit and they'll know something's up when they see our group running, just after someone was attacked."

With no time to waste, our group splits.

Siyabonga and Denver (a.k.a. Mr Quiet) plan to cut through the bushes and find a fence far from the security guards to go and climb over.

Bandile and I have a simple plan: avoid the cameras as much as possible – even if that means lying about not having student cards – so that we can avoid having to swipe in the line of the camera’s view as we exit the campus.

Not even a single word is spoken as we make our way towards the security guards. The one guard is tall, bulky and broad-shouldered. The other is shorter, and barking out orders over his walkie-talkie. I am shaking with nerves. You can probably smell the fear on me.

I hear Bandile whispering: “Relax mf’ethu, or you gonna get us caught.”

I don’t answer. Instead, I respectfully take my hands out of my pockets. The last thing I need is to feel even more like a tsotsi than I already do. Shit! my mind exclaims, the guy’s blood could be on the jacket I am wearing. I look down in horror. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Bandile itching to tell me to just relax. Surreptitiously I brush the sleeves and the front with my left hand – my strongest hand – then wipe the hand inside my left trouser pocket. There’s surely no blood visible now.

For some reason, the bulky guard runs off. Maybe the tall one will just let us go without a search?

No, he’s not letting us go through. “Nganisondele manene,” he says in a thunderous voice, calling us closer. He starts the search with Bandile. The guy’s a true giant. His hands almost

look as if they are crushing my friend. Luckily, Bandile is clean – nothing suspicious is found in his pockets.

Now he's coming to me. Each and every one of his heavy steps pounds into my ears. He lifts my arms to a cross-like position and he runs his hands down my sides and legs, finds nothing. But he's not done yet.

He feels my chest pockets, stops, and looks at me for a second. "Yinton' le mhlekazi?" he asks, but I raise my shoulders to shrug, feeling as if the words, 'I don't know, Sir' are not good enough for me right now. He reaches into my right pocket, withdraws something. It's an Okapi knife! That fucking Siyabonga has gotten me into some real shit now. This is his jacket, not mine!

The guard handcuffs me and Bandile. How the hell am I going to explain my way out of this one, I wonder as he marches us to the security office.

### CHAPTER 3

My cheeks and my neck are itching. It must be the sweat. I'm truly panicking now, and this tiny office isn't making things any better. It feels like an oven. It's obvious now that only a miracle will set us free from this.

It's raining outside when the second security guy comes running in. "Haibo Ace, what did these boys do?"

Ace quickly answers his partner, whose name is apparently Shuta. Ace clearly doesn't want Shuta thinking that he hasn't



got a good reason for arresting us. “These boys were carrying a knife and I suspect that they attacked that Msindisi kid at Lover’s Spot.”

With these words he’s convincing me that he’s the smartest security guard in South Africa. First of all, how the hell did he find out about the attack so quickly? Secondly, how did he put it together that we’re the ones who attacked Msindisi at Lovers’ Spot?

“I don’t think these kids did it, man. On my radio they said it was four kids, not two.”

“Maybe the four of them separated into two groups so we wouldn’t catch them.”

“C’mon bra, these are just kids, not movie bad guys. And you forget that I also carry a knife to protect myself.”

I can’t believe that the guy is defending us. Ace has nothing more to say. He walks over to me and grabs my arm to unlock the handcuffs.

“Yho, dankie bra!” Bandile exclaims when his hands break free from his handcuffs. For me, though, thank you is not enough. I need to make them a speech.

“There are no words that I can come up with that would thank you enough for your understanding. Thank you so much!” I tell him. Then we walk as fast as we can, without running away, from the guard’s office. Back to freedom.

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It's Monday, but I can't stop thinking about what happened on Friday. About the blood on that guy's head, and the security guards who arrested us. My phone has been silent all weekend. A silence that has had my stomach in a knot with worry. You see I haven't heard from Noluvuyo. What can she be thinking of me?

The taxi is pulling into the bus stop outside the campus main gate. It's already 12 o'clock midday. First on my list is seeing Noluvuyo. Second is seeing Dr McNamara.

I've thought of all the things I can say to my kasi princess. Firstly, I'll pick a rose from the super-flowery campus garden. Secondly, I'll wear the biggest smile she's ever seen. Thirdly, I'll lean against one of the trees there, clear my throat like they do in the movies, look deeply in her eyes and ask: "Madam, can you help me please?"

"Just talk to the hand hey – it's got more answers for you than I do," is what I know she'll say to me.

I'm used to her talking to me like that, so I'll just continue talking. "I'm struggling to find a chick that's more gorgeous than the one that's standing in front of me right now." That is the line that'll probably knock her off her feet – I just know it! We'll even kiss afterward – at least I hope so.

Our first date still replays in my mind.

“Mzi, this food is cold,” was how she rated a two-hundred-rand plate of Cape Town’s finest foods. Even the chef had no real answer. All he could say was:

“Ma’am, it’ll lose its taste if we heat it again.”

I don’t think any girl has ever given me a bigger challenge. But I love her for it. I call her my kasi Beyoncé.

My phone is buzzing. It’s Doctor McNamara.

“Hello, Mzimasi?”

“Yes Doctor, it’s me.”

“Listen, I expected you on Friday.”

“I’m sorry. I ... I...” I stutter.

“I have an opening today. In fact in ten minutes. Can you make it?”

“Sure Doc, I’m on my way,” I say, without even telling her about the plans I had. This is supposed to be Noluvuyo’s time right now!

She puts down the phone and I charge through the Law Faculty. I’m heading to the middle of campus, but I can’t even focus on its beauty. I can only focus on how I will explain to her why I missed the last appointment.

I glance at the time – shit! My watch has a huge crack on its face. It must be from the fight. Perhaps I can tell her I couldn't see the time properly. But that's a pathetic excuse. Maybe I should just come clean.

I finally reach the set of offices where she works. This lift is taking forever to get to her level, but I'm not complaining about it today. When I get to reception, Michelle, smiling as usual, offers me tea or coffee.

"So, are you excited about the new treatment today?"

"Yes sure," I say. But I have forgotten what the treatment is. All I remember is that Doctor McNamara wanted to try something new.

Michelle accompanies me until we reach the Doc's office and then gives me a thumbs-up as I enter the doctor's room.

"Afternoon Doc."

"Well, hello to you too." She smiles and I know she's forgiven me for the missed appointment.

"So, what are we doing this afternoon?"

"Mzi, we need to help you remember all those bad memories from high school that your brain has hidden away. This is so that we can work with them to help you heal, to lessen your anxiety and turmoil," she says. I'm listening to her intently. The only other time I have listened this closely is when I first asked Noluvuyo for a date and I waited for the answer.

Apparently, only the best psychologists can get their clients to actually listen.

“So how are you going to do that?”

“I’ll be using a science called hypnosis. It’s about getting into your mind and making you focus on a place, a person or picture. Once your mind is focussed, the memories will play out like a movie in front of you and you’ll believe that you’re still in that movie. Does that make sense to you?”

“I think so.”

“OK. Let’s begin with you taking a deep breath and slowly resting your head back against the couch.”

I feel instantly relaxed. This couch is heaven! My eyes are shut. All I have is darkness and the Doc’s soothing voice.

“Your mind is drifting away peacefully to a place it remembers. It is 2010, at school. There are people there that you know. Some frightening things happen. Take me to this place and tell me what you see.”

And then I am back there at school. I’m walking up to the front gate. A group of guys see me and start laughing and calling me names.

My heart is beating faster now. I walk up to them and I start greeting each and every one. One of them, called Selby, reaches into his backpack and hands me a red water bottle. I have a feeling that they’ve tricked me before; I don’t trust

what's in it, but I still drink. It burns my tongue and my lips. It's bitter!

“Yi Randy lena sani,” he says. I think he means ‘brandy’, but he doesn’t stop talking there. He tells me: “Yek’unyaba man, sel’into zamadoda,” which probably means I should stop acting like a girl and drink real men’s stuff. I want to say ‘fuck you’, but I hold back and I continue drinking his poison. I have a bad feeling about this guy, but I still drink.

I’m going to prove him wrong – I’m a man too!

#### CHAPTER 4

Selby has got a pear-shaped head and a greasy s-curl haircut. He seems to be our leader. Everything is started by him – even the teasing. It feels as if I’m always the joke around here.

“Your shoes look like loaves of bread,” he says, and they all start laughing and calling me ‘Albany’. He clearly doesn’t know how hard my brother worked to pay for these shoes.

Another boy, Simon, starts laughing again, even after everyone stops.

“Uhleka nton’ mf’ethu?” asks Wandile, wondering why Simon is the only one that’s laughing in the group.

“All this talk about bread reminds of how I stole three hundred rand at the bakery on Friday,” says Simon, with a look of satisfaction on his face.

“What did you do with the cash?” asks Selby, looking very interested.

“You know mos, shit went down last weekend. We drank from Friday till Sunday morning.”

Their conversation is carrying on non-stop around me. I have nothing to add to it. It feels as if this is something that’s always happening to me – being stuck for words. Being the one who can’t speak up for himself in a group. The one who is teased.

One of the older guys in the school walks by. “Ey niyanxila nina makwedin,” he says, reminding our little gang that as Grade 10s, we shouldn’t be so crazy about drinking.

I’m glad the guy walked past; he gave me time to think. I have a plan now. A plan that will make all of them respect me.

I pull Selby to the side. “Eksê mf’ethu, I have a plan to get some cash. I saw sewing machine parts. They’re probably from back in the day, when this school still had dressmaking classes. I want us to steal them and sell them.”

“Waarheid? – Truth?” Selby is curious to hear more about this nerd’s plan.

“Waarheid! – Truth!” I repeat. “I know some buyers who will give us good money for them.”

Selby has a look on his face I haven't seen before. He looks proud of me. "OK," he says. And I know he's thinking, let's see if this nerd can actually pull it off.

Now I'm really praying that this plan works.

This is the perfect time to put my plan into action. It's break. Most of the kids are playing on the field on the other side of the block of classrooms. But there's a problem. The room with the sewing machines is next to the computer room and there's always a teacher in there. There's a security camera mounted outside, pointing directly at the computer room.

Selby has a solution. He takes one of the long broomsticks that the cleaners left lying around and rams it against the camera until it faces the wrong way.

We rush towards the door. I push. But it's locked. Selby pushes me to the side and gives the door one mighty kick. It opens immediately. It wasn't locked – just jammed. I can't even open a door, I chastise myself. I'm weak. Maybe I shouldn't do this. Fuck it! I'll never be man if I don't.

We make our way across the room and head straight to the cupboards. There they are – the machine parts!

We grab only the parts we can hide in our school bags, or in our uniform. I've hidden one of the parts in my jacket. I'm pretty sure they won't find it – it's an extra-extra-large jacket. "You'll grow into it," is what I remember my brother stubbornly telling me when he bought it.

"We should go back to class," Selby tells me.



“Why?” I ask. I’m convinced that the best idea is to jump the fence and head home.

“Stop asking me questions, I’ve done this before.”

We head to class.

“Don’t panic, but Mr Peterson is coming up behind us,” Selby suddenly whispers to me.

Before I can even answer, a voice calls out: “Mr Top-Five!”

No-one else but the principal calls me that so I immediately turn around (with the widest smile across my face of course). It is him.

“How are you today young man?”

“I’m very good, Sir” I say, clutching onto the machine part tighter and hoping he doesn’t ask me why I’m wearing a heavy jacket on a sunny day.

“I want you to meet Mzi,” the principal tells the man he’s walking with, as he points at me. “He’s the one I recommended for your university scholarship.”

In front of me stands a smiling man in a ten-thousand-rand suit. I stretch my hand out to greet this guy who looks like he’s a billionaire’s brother. The machine part falls out. Shit! I’m screwed!

“What’s going on here?” Principal Petersen barks at me.

I stutter. No words come out of my mouth.

“Dit was al sy plan, meneer! – This was all his plan, sir” explains Selby, quickly. He’s betraying me. I’ve never seen him panic like this.

“Mr Ebrahim,” the principal says, urgently, “if you don’t mind, could we continue our conversation later? I will call you as soon as I have fixed this situation.”

“I understand,” says Mr Ebrahim, looking at me with disappointment written all over his face. Then he walks towards where his car is parked outside Petersen’s office.

“You boys better come with me, right now!” Petersen orders, as he storms off in the direction of his office.

We drag our feet as we follow him. No words are exchanged. Selby looks like he knows exactly what’s coming. I seem to remember them calling his father about a thousand times to the school.

My brother’s going to kick my ass. “Mzimasi, boy, didn’t I tell you to focus on school and leave those stupid friends?” is the speech I expect.

On the way to Petersen’s office, Clinton sees me. Clinton is the guy my brother said I should be friends with. A guy who only talks about acing his next maths test and how hot a Porsche or Ferrari is. Never! I can’t be friends with Clinton, mna!

Petersen's office door is closed but we can hear him inside, talking on the telephone. We wait outside. After what seems like forever he opens the door.

"That was the police. They are on their way," he tells us.

My heart falls to my shoes.

"You will learn the hard way never to steal again," Petersen tells us.

We stay there against the wall, waiting for the police to arrive.

All the kids in our class watch as the police officers load us into the van. I try to make an argument about my rights. I fail. Instead, a huge blow strikes the back of my head. Everything goes black.

When I come round we are in a police cell. One of the three officers present laughs and makes the 'bad cop' speech. I've watched enough movies to know the 'good cop-bad cop' game they like to play. Looks like these policemen have watched those movies too.

"Your principal wants us to go easy on you. He thinks we're toy cops. But we don't go around just scaring schoolboys thina. We beat up little criminals like you!"

He puts on weight-lifting gloves. The other undresses us.

I get a kick that almost shatters my ribs. I fall on my side and my head hits the hard and wet floor. My brain feels like it's in a tumble drier. The same seems to be happening to Selby. The officer with the gloves grabs the back of my neck and pulls me up. But just when I begin to believe he is stopping the violence, he slaps my right eye shut.

The pain is pumping through my entire body. The only thing I hear now is Selby begging for mercy and blaming me for everything.

Wait! I hear another voice. I look up and see a fourth officer. He's begging the others to stop. "These are kids, guys! Stop what you're doing, please!" The 'good' cop.

They finally stop.

"You boys better get distinctions from now on or else I won't stop these officers next time," he says, as he pushes the other officers out.

A familiar voice in the distance is speaking to me. "I will count down from ten and when I reach one, you will wake up and remember everything you just told me." It's Doctor McNamara.

## CHAPTER 5

I open my eyes. The memories are flooding back. How when we got back to school after the police station the principal gave us a second chance. How Selby avoided me from then on.

How did I manage to forget all this? I stole stuff, and almost ended up in jail – just because I wanted to impress Selby! In fact, I wanted all of them to stop telling me that I’m weak. And then I buried these memories deep in my mind, and I have only found them again now.

But I’m never going to make that mistake again.

Dr McNamara finally stops writing on her notepad and speaks. “I’m really happy about the progress we made here today. Hopefully these memories will help you make more sense of the choices you are making now.”

“Thanks a lot, Doc. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for all your insightful work,” I tell her.

“How do all the memories make you feel, though?”

“All I know, Doc, is that I’m disappointed in myself. I don’t think I listened to my brother’s advice. I still have friends who get me into trouble, Doc!”

“Why do you say that?”

“I can’t really talk to anyone about it. All I can say is that if I wanted to kill someone, they’d help me instead of stopping me.”

Doctor McNamara looks surprised. “I thought we had an agreement that you’d always tell me everything, Mzi? I told

you that you can even call me at midnight if you need to talk.”

“I’m sorry Doc, but not right now. I just want to go home and try to make more sense of all this.”

She nods, but I can see that she wants to say more. I’m glad she doesn’t. I just want to go and see my Noluvuyo now. She hasn’t answered any of my calls since the fight. That, I decide, I can talk to the Doc about.

“May I be honest Doc?” I ask, hesitantly.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I think my relationship with Noluvuyo is in danger. I’ve called and sent her some texts, but she hasn’t responded.”

“As I have said, I’m not sure that she is good for you, you know, after all you have said about her,” the Doctor says.

“Oh come on Doc. That is unfair! She could’ve dated any guy, but she chose me. I’m lucky!”

“From all the things you’ve told me about her, I can see that she’s going to disappoint you. She’s already persuaded you to miss appointments with me. Does that show she really has your best interests at heart?”

“Doc, I think it’s best if we talk about this next time. My mind is drained right now.”

“You can’t keep running away from the truth, Mzi,” she says, as we both stand up and walk towards the door.

“See you next time, Doc.”

The trip down to the ground level of her building feels quick. But it’s enough for me to think back to my second date with Noluvuyo.

I remember how she had discarded her usual skinny jeans and All Stars for that one special night. The room stood still as she walked in. Light reflected off her dark-green, silk dress and she sparkled. I don’t think a girl would make such an effort if she doesn’t like a guy. I know she likes me.

I need to see her now. I take out my phone. No missed call from her, I see. Just before I dial her number, the phone vibrates. It’s Bandile.

Remembering what happened in Grade 10 has taught me one important thing today: bad friends should get the hell out of my life. I’m here to get distinctions and finish my degree. I reject his call. I’ll deal with him later.

I dial Noluvuyo’s number. The phone is ringing. She picks up.

“Hello?”

“Hey babe, where you at?”

“Student Centre.”

“OK, I’m on my way.”

I immediately slide the phone into my pocket and make my way there. But I hear a familiar voice behind me.

“Ek sê Mzura!” It’s Bandile. “En nou, why you not answering your phone?” he demands. He’s clearly not used to me not answering his calls.

I remember what I told the Doc about them. These guys wouldn’t stop me even if I wanted to kill someone’s mother. Instead, they’d encourage me. I want to tell him now to leave me alone, but I can’t. Instead, I say: “I was in a meeting mf’ethu.” I’m just not brave enough to chase him away right now. I don’t know how to end this friendship.

“But I have a problem Mzi. I need you. See, there’s a guy who’s showing too much interest in my little sister. I want us to teach him a lesson,” he says.

For the first time since I’ve been friends with this guy, I see just how crazy he is about blood. Why the hell does he want to spill more blood?

“Ey mf’ethu, that’s not a good idea. We’ve just survived that campus security shit. Let’s not start something new,” I say, hoping not to piss him off.

“My outie, moe’nie kak praat’ie!” he says, clearly not accepting my refusal. “You were getting beat up by that Msindisi kid and we saved your ass. And don’t forget that I’m the one who gave you Noluvuyo. I can tell her to dump you.”



I simply nod, but my mind is racing. I want to tell him that he's talking shit and that all he did was introduce me to her. He doesn't own her. But I hold back and say nothing.

"But we'll talk later, my laaitie," he says, as we shake hands and he leaves.

I make my way up the stairs that lead into the Student Centre. There she is. If I had to sum her up in one line I'd probably say she's a short, gorgeous and feisty party-animal with curves in all the right places.

"Hello, sthandwa sam."

"Hi" she says, looking much focussed on sending what seems to be an important text message.

"Listen, babe, I'm really sorry about Friday. I didn't mean to act like that. And for that whole thing to happen, I mean it was just..."

"Cool," she simply says. But I want more. I want her to scream; slap me; kick me in the nuts; or something. But maybe she's used to guys fighting over her. I take a deep breath. I want us to get to the next level of trust. I want her to hear about my past.

"Talk to me babe, please. I've got something important I want to tell you."

"Talk, then."

“Dr McNamara hypnotised me today. She made me remember all the stuff that went down in high school. I remembered how my life almost got messed up, because of making bad decisions. Running with the wrong crowd...”

“Good for you.” She barely looks up.

“I’m serious, babes. If my principal and the police had not given me a second chance, I would’ve failed Grade 10. I wouldn’t have been here with you right now.”

“Sure.”

“Babe, why is this SMS you’re sending taking so long? I’m trying to tell you something and I feel like you’re not listening!”

“Haibo, does that mean if I’m not looking at you then I’m not paying attention?”

“No, you’re not!” I say, as I grab the phone from her hand.

Charmer boy: Hey grl, who u wit & wht u doin?

Noli-Noli: Lol... Very curious nhe.

I’m wit Mzi and he’s talkin too much, as usual!!!

His talkin is usually cute, but now...eish!

Charmer boy: Oh tht guy. U need a real man, not Bandile’s puppy dog.

Noli-Noli: Lol... No man.

I can't believe what I'm seeing! I'm opening my heart to her, but this messaging crap is what she prefers instead. I can't believe she'd do this to me on such an important day!

## CHAPTER 6

Nolovuyo grabs back her phone and runs for her next lecture and I am left alone and nervous. We are writing a test just now. I am about to walk into the next lecture when I hear Tyrone calling. I turn to see him running up the steps towards me. He's sure to have studied and to ace this test.

"Mzi, are you ready for the test, bra?" asks Tyrone, with a smile.

"Eish, that question, bra, makes me forget what I've studied. But I guess I am ready."

I can't even look him in the eyes when I say that. I know I'm not ready. I only studied yesterday. I had been feeling so stressed about Nolovuyo, and now also about the memory of what I had done as a schoolboy. I still couldn't believe that I had tried to steal from the school, the school that had given me such support and encouragement. So all in all, I just can't focus on this test.

"I know you, bra – you're gonna kill it!" interrupts Tyrone, just when I begin to think too much. "You always kill these tests."

I simply smile and shrug my shoulders. I don't really have anything to add to this conversation. All I want to do right now is pray that everything will be OK – with this test and with Noluvuyo.

Tyrone is too excited, though, to notice that I don't want to talk. "I was talking to this girl just now, and guess what she told me, bra? She said that she only started studying yesterday. Do you know any good student who would ever do that?"

"Not really."

"By the way, bra, how did your session with your psychologist go?"

Tyrone must've noticed that I was falling out of the conversation. Or maybe he really is worried about me. Look at how he remembers what's happening in my life? Why couldn't Noluvuyo do the same thing?

"It was really hectic, bra. I understand now why it felt like a dark cloud was hanging over my past."

"I'm happy that you got some answers bra, but right now let's go and kill this test!" he says, as he shakes my hand, playfully.

We walk into the lecture hall. There's no time to appreciate its cinematic design and its size – over three hundred seats on a slope. I want to sit right at the top back, in the last row. I know if I sit there, no-one will see the blank spaces that I'm probably going to be leaving. The lecturers do, after all, say:

“If you don’t know the answer, please don’t waste time. Move on to the next question!”

“Good luck, bra,” whispers Tyrone, as we bump fists. I smile and climb past three more rows until I reach the last row. The chair is cold, but I’m trying my best to ignore everything else. I just want to focus on the question paper in front of me.

1. Noluvuyo and Thabo are engaged to be married. Advise them on the steps they have to take in order to legally marry each other.

I rub my eyes. How did Noluvuyo’s name get onto the question paper? I read it again. Am I going crazy?

The question actually says Noluthando and Thabo, not Noluvuyo and Thabo!

I remember what Dr McNamara told me. “Whenever you feel anxious, breathe in through your nose for four seconds and then hold it in for seven more seconds. Finally, release all the air through your mouth.”

I do the breathing trick. The air feels refreshingly cool. I feel calmer now. But that still doesn’t help me with the work I don’t know.

The lecturer takes in the papers. All I see are smiling faces. Everyone, except me, clearly aced this test. I can’t deal with this. It is 18:50 and today’s last train is coming.

“Stop stressing about the test, the train is coming now.” It’s Tyrone – he is coming to visit someone nearby my place, and so is also catching my train.

We start running. The usually troublesome turnstiles easily click open and we spin them until we get out of the campus. The station stairs are now the only thing that stands between us the train platform.

Just as we charge towards the stairs, four guys come out from the darkness – all carrying knives! There’s no escaping this one. They’re too close!

“Grab that kid!” shouts one of the guys, pointing at me.

“We’ve found you boy!” shouts a second guy. “You’re gonna pay for what you did to Msindisi!”

Msindisi! That guy who was talking to Nolovuyo; the one who was beaten up by Bandile and co.

I’m completely frozen. My feet feel heavy and my knees feel completely weakened.

“Hey, this is his friend, let’s start with him,” shouts the first guy. I see a knife in his hand, and I see him stab Tyrone. No! Suddenly there is blood all over.

A super-bright light flashes on and two security guards come running out of the campus entrance.

“What the hell is going on over there?” shouts one of them.

“That bastard stabbed him!” exclaims another of the security guards, as the gang flee.

I stand helplessly next to Tyrone. He is on the floor bleeding. And it’s all my fault.

## CHAPTER 7

I can’t believe this has happened. Tyrone is in hospital, stabbed by people he knows nothing about, just because he was with me.

I want to talk to Doc, but how can I explain all of this? I should have told her about Bandile and the guys, when I had the chance. Now my friend, Tyrone, the only friend I have who really cares, is in hospital because of me. Anger surges in me. Those bastards – stabbing an innocent man!

I went with him to hospital after I had wrapped a strip of my shirt around where his arm was bleeding from a deep knife wound. All the colour had drained from his face and he was faint. I waited with him until a paramedic came, then accompanied him to the hospital. They kept him in because he had lost a lot of blood and they wanted to check there was no internal damage.

I stayed with him until I had to go home, and then I promised that I would be back the next day. That night I brooded. What should I do?

Now, I have his favourite cooldrink and some fruit for him. I have even brought one of his textbooks so that he can study. He SMSed me asking for it. Can you believe it? Studying in hospital. But that's Tyrone.

He is lying in bed paging through the book with his left hand when I enter the ward. His right is in a sling against his chest until the wound heals and the stitches are out.

"Tyrone, I am really sorry," I start.

"I can't believe you go around with guys like that," he says, looking at me, puzzled.

I look down at the SMS I wrote in anger on the way here:

Bandile, nid help. Msingisi's frnds attacked us. Nw in hospital.

I stare at the message for a while, then press 'delete'.

In that moment, that very moment, I truly decide: I have learned my lesson. This has got to end. Bandile is no help to me now. In fact he never was.

"I don't go round with them anymore," I say to Tyrone. "That part of my life is over now. I will make it up to you, I promise." I have never felt so guilty, so remorseful, in my life.

He smiles. "I'll be OK, Mzi. The doctor says I can go home just now. I only have to come back to have the stitches out."



My phone vibrates. It's Bandile. I reject his call. I know that I will reject all his calls from now on.

“Who was that?” asks Tyrone.

“No-one important in my life,” I say. And from now on it's true, I tell myself.

The next day Tyrone is up and back at lectures. He is already making jokes about the bandage on his arm. I imagine what would have happened if he had been killed – a real possibility. It sends shudders down my spine. That part of my life is truly over.

I tell Dr McNamara all that happened. “Tyrone sounds like a good friend for you,” she says. I agree. Then she asks me about Nolovuyo.

“I haven't been able to get hold of her,” I say. “I was so angry with her when she didn't listen to me. But now I want to see her again. I'm sure she just didn't realise how important it was for me that she listened to my story.”

After being quiet for a moment, Doctor McNamara finally speaks. “You're a great young man, Mzi. But there are things you haven't learnt yet.”

At this point, she has my full attention. “You can't go around loving or caring about people that don't make you a better person. I'll make you an example. Since I met you all that time ago, I've learnt to be more patient and understanding. And that makes me a better person and a better doctor.”

“I don’t know, Doc. I still feel like I love Nolovuyo.”

Doctor McNamara sighs. “You will have to decide yourself what to do, Mzi.”

Outside her office Michelle smiles at me. “Any of that coffee?” I ask. We sit and chat. She is so easy to speak to. And she has the sweetest smile. I see a book on her desk, Hunger Games.

“Did you see the movie?” I ask.

“Not yet,” she says.

“I’m going to get the DVD out,” I tell her. “Come and watch it with me.”

“I’d love to,” she says.

Later, we meet outside on campus. But then who do I see in the distance, but Nolovuyo and Bandile.

“I am sorry,” I tell her. “There is something I quickly have to sort out.”

She looks like she understands. “OK. Good luck with the ‘something’,” she says, sitting on a bench and taking out her cellphone.

I have to go and talk to Noluvuyo while I’m still brave enough to do it.

“Eita mf’ethu,” is all I say to Bandile. “Can I talk to you?” I ask Noluvuyo.

She doesn’t say anything, and simply steps closer.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately. And I’ve realised some things about myself and about you. Firstly, I don’t think you ever loved me.”

“Haai suka, Mzi...” she starts, but I put my finger to her lips. This is my moment to talk!

“Secondly, you don’t make me a better person. All you do is make me doubt myself and constantly worry about keeping you happy. What about my happiness?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, mna. If...” she says, dismissively.

Again, I don’t allow her to finish.

“It’s over, Noluvuyo. Go and make some other guy’s life difficult!”

“Whatever! Being your girlfriend was boring, anyways!” she says, as she walks towards Bandile.

I deserve an acting award. I made the break-up seem easy even though it actually hurt so much.

“He thinks he’s clever now,” I hear Bandile saying. “Let’s leave his ass alone, then.”

I am surprised that it doesn't hurt to hear him say that, even though he was my friend for more than a year.

I go back to Michelle. She smiles when she sees me coming.

“Are you sorted?”

“Yes,” I say firmly.

“That's good.”

I look at her and know that now I have two good friends who really care about me. Tyrone and Michelle will be there for me even when I feel weak and down – in fact, especially when I do.

I don't know what'll happen after today. But, as the man I am now, the man of this moment, I'm ready to face up to anything.

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