



Mercy

THABI MAJABULA

MERCY

by

Thabi Majabula

© Copyright Thabi Majabula 2013

This is a legally distributed free edition from www.obooko.com

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal use only: it must not be redistributed or offered for sale in any form.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious.
Any similarities to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

CHAPTER ONE

Mercy gave Albert a kiss on the cheek as he came through the front door. He moved out of her reach. Mercy took his bag and deposited it on the floor. She closed the door and took his hand, leading him.

“How was your trip?” she asked.

“Alright. I want to bath and sleep,” he replied, trying to withdraw his hand from hers.

“You will, just come with me, this won’t take long.”

“I’m tired, Mercy,” he said irritably. Mercy ignored him, and entered the lounge. Abruptly, he withdrew his hand from hers.

“Dolores? What are you doing here?” he demanded. Dolores had stood on seeing him, and she was looking at him out of guilty eyes.

“I invited her,” said Mercy.

“Get out of my home!” Albert commanded Dolores. Dolores picked up her handbag.

“She’s not going anywhere. Sit down, Dolores,” said Mercy.

“I’m the head of the house and...” said Albert belligerently.

“That remains to be seen.”

“Are you challenging my manhood? I paid amalobolo, and...”

“Sit down, Albert,” Mercy said tiredly. Albert glared at her, and sat down. Mercy and Dolores sat down too.

“I’ve been hearing rumours, and I want to clarify things with you both, instead of relying on hearsay. Dolores, are you fucking my husband?” asked Mercy. Dolores gasped in shock.

“How can you ask me that? Don’t you trust me?” asked an outraged Albert.

“Should I trust you?” asked Mercy.

“I’m your husband!” said Albert, as if that explained everything.

“Are you fucking Dolores?”

“I won’t sit here and be interrogated like a criminal,” said Albert, getting to his feet and turning to the door.

“If you don’t answer my question, I can make things difficult.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m informing you that I want honesty from you, and if I don’t get it, I’ll speak to Aaron. That promotion you’re applying for requires a stable home. If I talk to Aaron...”

“Stay away from him!”

“Are you fucking Dolores?”

“Will you stop being so crude!”

“Yes, or no.”

“What made you think...”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“And I’m not going to,” said Albert, as he turned to leave the room. Mercy took her phone out of her skirt pocket and dialled a number.

“Hello, Miss Dean. Can I speak to Mr Croucamp? My name is Mercy Ngema, and I want to tell him about one of the candidates applying for the position of CEO,” she said into the phone. She could hear that Albert’s footsteps were no longer approaching the door. She listened to Miss Dean.

“You’re bluffing,” said Albert. Mercy did not look at him.

“I’ll hold as long as it takes, Miss Dean. This is too important to call about later,” she said.

“Put that phone down,” said Albert, approaching her.

“It’s about our marital situation,” said Mercy into the phone. She gasped as it was snatched from her. She gasped again, as Albert slapped her. She put her hand on her cheek, and looked at him in disbelief. Hearing a sob, she looked at Dolores. She was looking at Albert out of shocked, fearful eyes.

“Hasn’t he done this to you yet? It’s only a matter of time,” said Mercy.

“Shut up! Shut your ignorant mouth, Mercy!” shouted Albert.

“Dolores, are you sleeping with Albert?” asked Mercy. Albert raised his hand to slap her again.

“I’ll report you to the police, and I have a witness to make my case stronger. Hit me, and kiss your promotion goodbye,” said Mercy. Albert glared at her, then he threw her phone across the room. Mercy looked at Dolores.

“Are you sleeping with my husband?” she demanded. Dolores looked at Albert.

“We’re engaged,” she said.

“Oh!” gasped a shocked Mercy.

“You didn’t tell me we were becoming polygamous, Albert,” she said.

“Polygamous?” shouted Dolores.

“Of course, you’ll be the second wife.”

“I will not!”

“Then how will this work?”

“He’ll divorce you.”

“Really? Albert, is that what you told her? Wasn’t it presumptuous, considering that you haven’t asked me for a divorce?”

“You said you’d asked her for a divorce, Albert, and that you were waiting for your youngest child to grow a bit more, before you divorced,” said an indignant Dolores.

“I said nothing of the kind,” said Albert.

“You promised me that we’d marry in two years, when your child won’t be as traumatised by divorce as she will be if you divorce now.”

“I never said that.”

“Then how did we get engaged? I will never be a second wife!”

“I haven’t asked it of you.”

“You said...”

“You heard what you wanted to hear, Dolores. How could you come here? I told you never to come here, and never to call me here.”

“Mercy said...”

“Why would you even talk to her? She has nothing to do with us.”

“So you admit something’s going on?” asked Mercy.

“Dolores, leave,” said Albert.

“Are you fucking her?”

“Did you just learn that word?” Mercy stood and went to pick her phone up. Albert realised where she was going and tried to stop her. They scuffled, and Mercy got the phone. She was surprised that it had not fallen apart. Albert grabbed it from her.

“Do you want a divorce, Albert?” she asked.

“What?” demanded a shocked Albert.

“Do you want a divorce? Dolores says...”

“She has nothing to do with us!”

“Are you engaged to her?”

“I’m married to you!”

“Is she going to be your wife?”

“No!”

“Then what’s going on?”

“Nothing!”

“We’re engaged,” said Dolores.

“I *have* a wife, and I’m not looking for another one,” said Albert.

“You said...”

“The best thing is for you to leave.

“I’m going nowhere!” screamed Dolores. She was panting, and tears stood in her eyes.

“Leave!” said Albert. They shared a long look, then Dolores picked up her handbag, and left. She was crying as if her heart had been broken.

“What’s going on with you?” Albert demanded of Mercy.

“I don’t like being made a fool of,” said Mercy.

“Bringing that woman here and using such course language is not the way you behave.”

“It hasn’t been, but it’s more effective than my silence,” said Mercy, as she left the room. She went to the main bedroom, gathered Albert’s clothes, and threw them outside the bedroom.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded, as he stood outside the bedroom door, his entrance hindered by his pile of clothes.

“I’m not sleeping with a sfebe,” replied Mercy.

“I’m the head of this house, and I’ll sleep where I please.”

“You *were* the head of the house, but not anymore.”

“The only person who can stop me from being the head of the house is me.”

“You have.”

“I have not!”

“When you started staying away from home and leaving all decisions to me, I became the head of the house. On top of that, you bought that child, Dolores, a car, and set her up in a house. You’ve lost yourself the right to be head of this family.” Albert stared at Mercy in shock, he clearly could not believe that she could say such words to him.

“You can sleep wherever you please, but it won’t be in here,” said Mercy, as she closed and locked the door. She waited for Albert to bang on it, but he did not. Mercy showered, and dressed. She stood before the mirror, wondering if she was serious about ending things with Albert. She studied her reflection. She stood at five foot eight, she was of medium build and medium complexion. There were grey hairs on her head. It was not surprising, age and stress were taking their toll.

She could see why Albert had gone for Dolores. She could not be more than twenty three years old, her hair was styled, and she was built like a model, which was what men seemed to favour. Mercy recalled a time when being full figured had been attractive. She caressed her cheek, unable to believe that Albert had slapped her. He was not going to do it again. She would nip it in the bud. She had put up with a lot from him, that was not one of the things that she would tolerate.

She went to check on their youngest child, Alie. She was fast asleep. Mercy was glad that she had not been woken by the noise that she, Albert and Dolores had made.

When she returned to the bedroom, it was locked from inside. Mercy felt her blood boil, then she told herself to calm down. Albert had the bedroom for the night, but that was all that he was going to get. She went to sleep in one of the other bedrooms.

When she woke the next morning, Albert had left. Mercy’s domestic helper arrived, and Mercy went to the police station to report Albert for hitting her. He was home when she returned with the police.

“MaNdlovu, where are you coming from We’ve been waiting ages,” said MaBhengu, Albert’s mother.

“Are you Albert Ngema?” asked a policeman.

“Yes. What can I do for you?” asked Albert.

“You are under arrest for beating your wife?”

“What?”

“Did you not lay your hand on her?”

“No!”

“She says you slapped her.”

“Yes, but...”

“That’s what we’re arresting you for.”

“It was just a slap!”

“Violence is violence, sir. You have the right to remain silent...” said the officer. Mercy watched Albert as he was read his rights, and handcuffed. He could not believe what was happening. The police escorted him out of the house. Mercy closed the front door and leaned on it, feeling very guilty.

“MaNdlovu, what’s going on? Albert told me you’d had a misunderstanding, but why must you have him arrested?” asked a shocked MaBhengu.

“He hit me,” replied Mercy.

“So what? What woman hasn’t been hit by a man at one time or another?”

“It’s illegal.”

“It’s natural! How else does a man prove his leadership in the home? Every woman knows if she challenges a man, she’ll get what’s coming to her.” Mercy heard footsteps and looked away from her mother-in-law.

“Mama, why did those policemen take Baba away?” asked Alie, as she joined the women. She was seven years old, and very curious.

“Ask her. Ask your wicked mother why she had your father arrested,” said MaBhengu. Alie greeted her with a hug, then she turned to her mother with a questioning look.

“Omama are not allowed to hit obaba,” said Mercy. Alie looked confused.

“Baba hit Mama, so he was arrested,” continued Mercy.

“Oh, is he coming back?”

“We’ll see.”

“Of course he’s coming back. If anyone leaves this home, it’ll be your wicked mother,” said MaBhengu, giving Mercy a filthy look. Mercy told Alie to get cleaned up, then she went to the kitchen. Her helper had started to make breakfast, Mercy gave her the day off, and took over the cooking. MaBhengu had followed her to the kitchen, and sat watching her work.

“MaNdlovu, are you going to throw away twenty-eight years of marriage over nothing? You’ve been a wonderful wife, and my son’s been a great husband to you” she said.

“Has he?” asked Mercy.

“Of course!”

“Only a wife can know that, not an outsider.”

“I know a good husband when I see one.”

“Point me in his direction next time you see one.”

“MaNdlovu, I don’t need nonsense from you.”

“You can leave my house.” Mercy could not believe that she had said that.

“What?” shouted an outraged MaBhengu.

“This is my son’s house, and *you*’ll leave it, not me, never me,” she continued.

“I will never leave it. When I die, I want this house burned down with me in it,” returned Mercy.

“Who said you’re dying? You’re not dying. All you have to do is remember your place and not challenge your husband, and you and Albert will continue with your wonderful marriage.”

“I don’t want this marriage anymore.”

“There’s no woman under the sun who wants out of marriage. No woman worthy of the name leaves a marriage, no matter how bad things get. Women persevere, and that’s what you’ll do.”

“Why? Albert has already left me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s been unfaithful and...”

“Every man does that, it doesn’t mean the marriage is over.”

“He promised his latest woman that he’d marry her.”

“What? No! You must have misunderstood.”

“I heard it from her.”

“She was lying.”

“Ask Albert. He hit me for confronting them both about it.”

“How could you do that? Don’t you know that you never confront a man about that? You just put on a brave face, and wait until he gets over the sfebe.”

“I’m done waiting for him to tire of other women, when I’m right here. I’ve been patient for thirteen years, and it hasn’t helped me.”

“That’s your fault.”

“My fault?”

“Who did you talk to about it? Did you talk to any of the elders in his family?”

“Yes, several times, and you all said you’d talk to him. He hasn’t changed his ways, so I don’t know whether or not you spoke to him.”

“Of course we spoke to him.”

“Then why hasn’t he stopped being unfaithful?”

“He’s a man, no one can dictate to him.”

“Have you ever heard of HIV, Mamazala?”

“Of course I have, who hasn’t? It’s that illness that has no cure. It’s the curse given to the wicked who sleep around.”

“Your son gave it to me.”

“Liar!” shouted MaBhengu, clearly shocked to hear Mercy’s words.

“He’s the only man I’ve ever slept with. You know I was a virgin when I married him.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been faithful to him.”

“That’s the way it should be.”

“He hasn’t been faithful to me.”

“Men have needs.”

“He caught the virus from one of his women, and passed it onto me.”

“Are you saying my son has Aids?”

“I don’t know, what I know is that he gave me the HIV virus.”

“You’re killing him, sfebe,” shouted MaBhengu, as she raised a hand to hit Mercy.

“If you hit me, you’ll join your son in jail,” said Mercy. MaBhengu hesitated, then she lowered her hand.

“You gave my son Aids,” she accused.

“No, I didn’t, he gave me the virus.”

“We gave your family many head of cattle, and you repay us by killing our son.”

“He’s the one killing me.”

“Who’s killing you, Mama?” asked Alie, as she came into the room.

“Your mother’s killing your father,” said MaBhengu, as she left the room.

“What does Gogo mean?” asked Alie.

“Your father gave me the HIV virus,” said Mercy. Alie gave her a long look, then she left the room. Mercy sat down, put her arms on the table laid, her head on her arms, and wept.

Suddenly, everything was too much. She felt lonely, unloved, side-lined, and she was afraid that living without Albert would lead to her and Alie dying from starvation. An even bigger fear was that he would take Alie from her. The other two children were adults, and she knew that they would keep in touch with her, regardless of how Albert treated her.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and raised her head. Alie was standing beside her, looking at her with concern. Mercy forced a smile and wiped the tears off her cheeks.

“It’s alright, Mama,” said Alie.

“I know, Alie,” said Mercy.

“Stop crying.”

“Okay.” Mercy stopped the sobs from escaping her, but the tears would not stop falling. Alie put her arms round her, and she closed her eyes, holding her child close. Pull yourself together, you’re scaring Alie, she told herself. She withdrew from the embrace, cleaned her face, and smiled. Alie gave her a long look, and nodded, relieved.

“Can I eat?” she asked.

“There’s your food,” said Mercy, indicating the bowl of porridge that she had dished up for her.

“Thank you, Mama, you’re the best cook in the world.”

“Thank you,” smiled Mercy. She went to clean her face in the bathroom. When she returned to the kitchen, MaBhengu had joined Alie, and they were both eating with great gusto.

“Have you found a lawyer for your husband?” asked MaBhengu, as Mercy joined them at the table.

“How can I do that, when I got him arrested?” returned Mercy.

“Go to the police and tell them you made a mistake.”

“I didn’t.”

“You challenged him. What kind of woman challenges a man?”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Alie, get dressed. You’re going to Dudu’s party.”

“Great!” said Alie. She finished her food, washed the dishes that she had used, and left the room.

“MaNdlovu, your children are very well raised. That can only happen in a good marriage. Are you prepared to throw away your good marriage? For what? You’re not young, you can’t be expecting to find another man,” said MaBhengu.

“I’m done with men, I’ll live alone.”

“Fetch your husband home, and all will be forgiven, even your insolence.” Mercy stood in silence, and left the room.

Minutes later, she and Alie joined MaBhengu in the lounge.

“I’m taking Alie to a party,” said Mercy.

“I’ll come with you,” said MaBhengu.

“You’ll get bored, there’s nothing to do.”

“I’m coming.” They dropped Alie off at the party, then Mercy drove off.

“Are we going home now?” asked MaBhengu.

“No,” replied Mercy.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

“But...” Mercy gave her passenger a quelling glare, and MaBhengu kept her words to herself. They arrived at the river.

“What have you come to do here?” asked MaBhengu.

“You can come with me, or stay here. If you stay in the car, you can’t come out until I return because I’ll have the keys, and if you leave the car unlocked, it could get stolen.” Mamazala climbed out of the car and looked about uneasily.

The area surrounding the body of water was dirty, and the people milling about the neighbourhood did not look trustworthy. Mercy locked the car, and walked to the river’s edge. She took her shoes off and knelt. She closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. In a short while, she was in a different world, where she felt relaxed, appreciated, and appreciative.

She was sad to open her eyes when her alarm clock rang, reminding her to fetch Alie.

“Can we go now?” asked Mamazala. Mercy was surprised that MaBhengu had not interrupted her. She stood, put her shoes on, and led the way to the car. She smiled, noticing the people that had gathered round it.

“They’re going to kill us,” whispered MaBhengu. Mercy did not blame her. The people beside her car were mostly dirty, some looked as if they had been in fights, and some were fighting.

Mercy approached them, and they all turned to her, and smiled. She greeted them and asked about their families. They vied to tell her about things in their lives. She opened her boot and gave out several boxes of food and clothes. The people thanked her and walked away.

Mamazala, who had stayed away from the car, approached. Mercy climbed into the car, and Mamazala joined her. Mercy started driving.

“How do you know those people? Does my son know you associate with people of that nature? What happens if they kill you? Who’ll look after Alie if you get yourself killed? Who are those people?”

“That’s not important.

“What were you doing at the river? Does Albert give you permission to come out here alone?”

“I’ve never asked him.”

“I’m telling him. You should never return to that place.”

They picked Alie up. She was very pleased with the party, and the party pack that she had been given. She was also very proud, because Dudu had liked her gift best.

Mercy made sandwiches for a late lunch, and Mamazala was not impressed. Mercy then made dinner, and helped Alie to bed after her bath.

Once Alie was asleep, Mercy went over the assets in her home. She had started compiling an asset list three months earlier, after receiving pictures from her private investigator, of Albert and Dolores on holiday in the Maldives.

“MaNdlovu, how will you sleep without your husband beside you?” asked Mamazala, joining her in the dining room.

“Goodnight, Mamazala,” Mercy said dismissively.

“He’s my son. I’m in his home, where is he? In jail, because his heartless wife put him there, after giving him the disease of death.”

“Goodnight!”

“How dare you snap at me! This is my son’s home and...”

“It’s my home.”

“My son is the man, he owns everything here.”

“Goodnight!” Mamazala glared at Mercy, and left.

Later, Mercy tossed and turned in her bed, then, after three in the morning, she freshened up, and left her home. She rang the doorbell at Tim’s home. It took a long time before he asked who it was. She identified herself. He opened the door, and looked her over.

“Mama, what is it? Why are you here so early? Has something happened to Alie?” he demanded.

“Your father’s in jail, because I laid a charge against him.”

“What?” Tim clearly could not believe what he had heard.

“He hit me, so I reported him.”

“Oh!”

“We’re getting a divorce.”

“It’s about time.”

“You don’t hate me for wanting a divorce?”

“No! He’s been mistreating you for years.” Mercy hugged him, relieved that he was not siding against her. She released him.

“I need to tell you and your sister something. Can you come with me to her house now?” she asked.

“Sorry, I can’t come now,” he said.

“It won’t take long. I want you to hear this from me, not from your Gogo.”

“Gogo’s in town?”

“Your father brought her to talk me out of asking him about his latest woman. Can you come with me, please, my son?”

“Sorry, Mama. I have to take care of things to do with my marriage. If I don’t, my marriage will fall apart.”

“I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“Thank you, Mama, but there’s nothing you can do. Tell me what you need to tell us.”

“It’s not something we can discuss standing outside your house.”

“You told me about the divorce here.”

“I’m HIV positive.” Tim staggered as if she had hit him hard.

“What?” he whispered.

“You heard me.”

“How? Baba?” Mercy nodded. Tim swore. Mercy made her goodbyes, and left to see Dora.

Dora did not respond when Mercy told her about Albert’s arrest, nor about the impending divorce. When Mercy told her about her HIV status, Dora drew back in shock.

“How could you not protect yourself?” she demanded. Mercy did not reply.

“Mama, how careless can you be? Baba’s been cheating on you since I’ve been able to understand the concept. The least you could have done, was refuse to sleep with him, or use condoms,” said Dora. Mercy shrugged.

“Say something,” insisted Dora.

“I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“We were brought up to believe if you denied a man what he wanted, he’d get it elsewhere.”

“He was already getting it elsewhere! Couldn’t you have used condoms?”

“How would I have introduced the topic? He’d have accused me of unfaithfulness.”

“So what?”

“He’d have made a case with his people, and I’d have been sent back to my people in disgrace.”

“You’d have had a lot more years to live than you do now.”

“I have to go, before your Gogo accuses me of meeting a lover.”

“That’s nonsense. I’ll come with you.”

Mercy walked into her home just after sunrise.

“Where are you coming from this early in the morning? Did you even sleep in this house? You’re making it clear you gave my son the disease of death,” frothed Mamazala. Mercy opened her mouth to speak.

“You’re wicked! You had my son arrested for nothing. We’re going to show you how we treat people who mess with us,” continued Mamazala.

“Hello, Gogo,” greeted Dora. Mamazala stopped in her tirade, and looked behind Mercy.

“Dora? Dora! It’s so good to see you,” she said, as Dora approached her. They held each other tight, then they withdrew from the embrace and looked each other over.

“How have you been, child? Why haven’t you been in touch?” asked MaBhengu.

“I started a new job, I’ve been very busy.”

“Did you know that your mother...”

“I don’t want to talk about her, I want to talk about you. What have you been up to?”

“Your mother...”

“How did it go with that competition you entered?”

“That was ages ago, now, I’m one of the judges, and...” said Mamazala, as Dora led her away. Mercy sighed with relief. She went to the kitchen to make breakfast. She smiled when she heard Alie give an excited squeal. The sisters were obviously greeting each other.

When the food was ready, she called out to everyone to come and eat. Mamazala had forgotten her anger, and she was talking about her other grandchildren, telling Dora and Alie what they were up to. After the meal, Dora invited her Gogo to see her new home and Mamazala accepted gladly. Mercy’s heart overflowed with love for Dora as she left with her Gogo.

CHAPTER TWO

The following day, Mercy asked her lawyer to serve Albert with the divorce papers that had been in place for over a month. During her lunch, Mercy fetched Alie from school and drove her home. Albert was standing just inside the front door, when Mercy opened it.

“Baba? Hi!” said Alie, very excited to see him. She made to hug him, he evaded her.

“Go to your room, I need to talk to your mother,” he said curtly. Alie’s face fell, then she looked between her parents.

“Don’t hit her,” she said. Mercy gasped in shock.

“What?” shouted Albert.

“Don’t hit Mama again, you’ll go back to jail if hit her.”

“Who told you I was in jail? What lies have you been feeding this child?” Albert demanded of Mercy.

“Gogo told me and sis Dora that you were in jail.” Albert looked at her, surprised. Alie held his look.

“Don’t hit her,” she repeated, then she left. Albert turned to Mercy.

“I spent the weekend in jail. With criminals! What kind of woman does that to her husband? How could you not come and get me out?” he demanded.

“I have to get back to work,” said Mercy, turning to the front door.

“You’re not going anywhere,” said Albert, as he closed and locked the door, before pocketing the key.

“Are you going to feed Natalie? All your money’s been going to Dolores,” said Mercy.

“Shut up!”

“I have to go to work, to earn money to feed and educate Natalie, since you think it’s beneath you to do it.”

“Shut up!” Mercy gave Albert a long look, and opened her handbag.

“What are you doing?” asked Albert.

"I'm phoning the office to say you won't let me work the rest of the day."

"Go then!" shouted Albert, throwing the key at Mercy. It hit her on the cheek. She felt a red wave of anger fill her. She moved quickly, and invaded his space. They eyeballed each other, both panting. Mercy was relieved that she did not hit him, as she wanted to. She withdrew from him, and went to pick up the key. She approached the door, Albert moved out of the way. She unlocked the door.

"This conversation is not over," said Albert ominously. Mercy left. After work, she phoned home telling her housekeeper that she was stuck in traffic. She sat almost an hour in her car killing time outside her office, then she drove home, using a route that she knew was crowded with traffic. She arrived home much later than usual.

"Where have you been?" demanded Albert.

"Work," said Mercy.

"Until this late?"

"I was stuck in traffic."

"You should have used..."

"I heard on the radio that there were traffic cops on the usual route. The car I use is unroadworthy, we both know that." She watched Albert study her, as if to find out if she was lying or telling the truth.

"I have to see Gerty off, then we'll talk," she said of her helper. Albert nodded. Mercy walked past him to the kitchen. She thanked Gerty and gave her money for a cab, then Gerty left. Mercy took a deep breath, and returned to Albert.

"How dare you send me divorce papers!" he said.

"What are we in this marriage for?" she returned.

"The children."

"The ones you ignore? I don't think so."

"I'm in this for the children!" he said belligerently. Mercy looked away from him to avoid calling him a liar.

"I need Ma to talk sense into you. Where is she? Did you send her away? You're so disrespectful and irrational these days, I wouldn't put it past you."

"She left with Dora."

"Dora was here? Why does she never come when I'm here?"

"Ask her."

"I'm asking you."

"I don't know, Albert."

"Have you poisoned her against me?"

"What would be the point?"

“There’d be no point. Those children will always be mine. So, what did you hope to gain by having me arrested?”

“I meant to show you that every time you do it, I’ll have you arrested.”

“That was the first time in almost thirty years.”

“It was one time too many. No one hits me, ever!” vowed Mercy passionately. Albert was stunned by her vehemence.

“Well, I’m back, and I’m still the man of the house. As for those divorce papers you sent, I’m not signing them.”

“Suit yourself.”

“I will, I always do.”

“I’ve decided to take the same liberty.”

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I say so.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“How will you suit yourself? You don’t even know how,” derided Albert. Mercy felt anger fill her again.

“I’ve decided to take a lover,” she said impulsively.

“What?” shouted Albert.

“You have a lover. You’ve had lovers for the past thirteen years.”

“That’s immaterial! You cannot have a lover!”

“I can, and I will, because you’ve given me HIV.”

“What?”

“I’m HIV positive. I can only have got the virus from you, you’re the only lover I’ve ever had.”

“No!” said Albert, looking sick to his stomach with horror.

“Seeing as I’m dying from a disease of sex, I figure I may as well get a man who’ll give me great sex.”

“How dare you talk that way!”

“I have nothing to lose, Albert. Whatever life I have left, I want to enjoy, and live away from you.”

“I’ll never let you go.”

“I’m not going, you are.”

“I’m not leaving, and neither are you.” Mercy left, and went to check on Alie. She was fast asleep on her bed. Mercy smiled, and sat beside her, watching her. Her smile faded. She was concerned that divorce would financially disadvantage Alie. As she watched her child, it

occurred to her that Albert had not given Alie so much as a rattle. None of the money that had raised Alie had come from her father.

Ever since Albert had started having affairs, less and less of his money had come to the family, until about ten years ago, when he had stopped financing the family altogether. Mercy nodded, she and Alie would be fine, until death separated them. Mercy decided not to think about that. She kissed her child, stood, and turned to the door. She gasped, noticing a movement. Albert had been leaning against the door, and was in the act of straightening. Mercy approached him, and closed the door.

“Is there something you want?” she asked.

“I wanted to see you with our child.”

“Why?”

“Because it pleases me. I always watched you with the children.”

“Not with this one.”

“I’ve started tonight. I checked her homework, and tucked her in.” Mercy drew back, surprised, genuinely surprised. Albert smiled, pleased to have surprised her. She walked off. She could hear Albert following her.

She could feel him watching her as she started cleaning the supper dishes in the kitchen.

“How was your day?” he asked. Mercy stopped what she was doing, and looked at him.

“Why do you ask?” she returned.

“I want to know.”

“Why?”

“You’re my wife, I’m giving you attention.”

“Why?”

“You’re my wife!” Mercy gave him a long look.

“It was long. How was yours?” she asked, turning back to her work. She frowned, not interested in hearing about his day.

“Once we were in court, and I was given bail, things started looking up. I spent the afternoon with Natalie. She’s very bright, and so talkative. She talked my ear off, but I didn’t mind. Some of what she says is interesting. I’ll come home earlier from now on, so I can spend time with her,” said Albert. Mercy did not respond.

“Wouldn’t that make you happy?” asked Albert.

“Alie’s the one who must be made happy.”

“And you. You’re my wife.” Mercy did not even bother responding to that in her head. She finished washing up, and dried her hands.

“Aren’t you eating?” asked Albert.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Did you eat out? Who were you with? What did you talk about?”

“I said I’m not hungry. That’s all there is to it.”

“Don’t get short with me.”

“Then don’t interrogate me. I haven’t found the lover I want, but when I do, I’ll let you know, I won’t go behind your back, the way you’ve done with me.”

“You can’t get a man. Who wants an old woman like you? I can’t get it up, looking at your overweight body. You should eat less and go to gym.”

“Leave.”

“What?”

“Leave, then you need never look at my body again.”

“You’re my wife, I have a right to look at your body.”

“The last time you touched me was seven years ago, when Alie was conceived. If she’s HIV positive, or if she has Aids, I’ll never forgive you, Albert.”

“If she’s sick, she got the sickness from you.”

“After I got it from you.”

“I don’t have the virus, or Aids.”

“Then where did I get it?”

“From your lover.”

“Where and when would I have met him? When did your spies report that I have a lover?”

“I...”

“I know you have people spying on me, and it sickens me.”

“They’re not spies.”

“Yes, they are. They’ve been monitoring my movements for a long time. You think because you cheat, then I cheat too.”

“I...”

“Do you monitor your other women? It’s them that are more likely to cheat. What’s to stop them from being with two or three husbands that don’t belong to them?”

“Shut up!”

“I don’t like those words. Don’t use them on me.”

“I’ll speak to you anyway I please.” Mercy gave him a long look. The man that she had loved was gone. This new man, who hit her, spoke rudely to her, cheated on her, and who had been neglecting the family for years, was someone she resolved to be rid of.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” asked Albert.

“I’m looking for my husband.”

“I’m right here.”

“You’re not my husband,” Mercy said dismissively as she made to walk past him. He stopped her by holding onto her forearm.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“My husband was faithful to me, and raised our children with me. Ever since you started cheating thirteen years ago, you’ve neglected the family.”

“What makes you think that’s when I started cheating?”

“You were cheating before that?”

“The point is, I don’t want you saying I’m not your husband. I put that ring on your finger to show that I’m your husband.”

“What ring?”

“This one,” said Albert, grabbing Mercy’s left hand.

“Where’s my ring?” he demanded.

“On the dresser. You can have it back. I have no use for it.”

“Put that ring back on your finger, and keep it there.” Mercy freed herself and left the room. After her shower, she went to sleep in Tim’s room. She cried herself to sleep, realising that there really, really, really was no hope for her marriage. It was over. For good.

Next morning, she joined Albert and Alie for breakfast.

“I’ll take you to school, Alie,” said Albert. Mercy looked at him, stunned, doubting if he even knew which school Alie went to. She looked at Alie. Alie had stopped chewing, her mouth was gaping, and she was looking at her father out of round, shocked eyes.

“Close your mouth,” said Albert. Alie closed her mouth and turned to Mercy.

“Mama, can Baba take me to school? Is he allowed?” she asked. Mercy forced herself not to laugh.

“Of course I’m allowed to take you to school,” Albert said firmly.

“Baba can take you, but I’ll fetch you,” said Mercy. Alie nodded.

“What if I want to fetch her?” asked Albert.

“The school has strict rules, they don’t allow people they don’t know to pick up the children. They don’t want to be accused of letting strangers kidnap children.”

“I’m her father!” said an offended Albert.

“They’ll need your ID and proof of residence...”

“What?”

“...and we’d have to go together when you give them your details, so they know I know you, and vouch for you.”

“I don’t need anyone to vouch for me!”

“Those are the rules, and when I enrolled Alie, I agreed to them.”

“Mxmxm,” Albert kissed his teeth. Alie washed her plate at the sink.

“Can we go now, Baba?” she asked. Albert stood and left the room. Alie kissed Mercy’s cheek and followed him. Mercy frowned. She did not want Albert anywhere near Alie. The

proximity of the divorce made her fear that he would take Alie and she would never see her again.

Mercy was walking to her car at the end of her work day, when Albert appeared from nowhere.

“What’s your problem?” he demanded.

“What are you doing here?”

“What did you tell Aaron?”

“Nothing.”

“You told him a pack of lies, and now, I’ve been forced to withdraw my application for the promotion.”

“I haven’t spoken to him, or anyone else at the company.”

“Liar! I was told to withdraw my application because I have marital problems. You’re the only one saying we have problems, so you must have said something to someone.”

“I’m not arguing with you here,” Mercy said firmly. She walked to her car and drove off. The rest of the week was very tense. Albert was giving her the cold shoulder and trying to make Alie side with him, but Alie did not take sides.

That Saturday, as Mercy expected, her in-laws and her family arrived. Albert had always resorted to bringing the families together whenever she had an opinion different from his. The families had not been called together in some time, as Albert had not lived with Mercy for some time. As Mercy had requested, Dora fetched Alie, then Mercy, Albert and their families sat down together.

Albert told everyone that MaNdlovu, that one there, he said, pointing at Mercy, had had him arrested. Everyone gasped in shock and horror as MaBhengu nodded. Albert then said that Mercy had cheated on him. Everyone gasped in outrage, and expressed disappointment at her wickedness.

“It’s my turn to speak,” she said.

“You can’t say a thing. This man is a saint, and he’s willing to forgive you everything, if you drop this nonsense about divorce,” said Nkanda, her eldest brother.

“I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Yes, you have. You heard our in-law say...”

“There were circumstances.”

“There are never circumstances that allow a woman to be unfaithful.”

“I haven’t cheated.”

“Your husband said...”

“I haven’t cheated! I’m thinking of it, but...” There were gasps of shock and outrage.

“...but I haven’t done it yet.”

“What kind of woman allows that kind of thought to cross her mind?”

“One whose husband cheats on her.” Everyone looked at Albert.

“Men have needs,” said one of his uncles.

“He gave me HIV,” said Mercy. There were gasps of disgust and horror, then people started leaving, almost stamping over each other to get out of the house.

“It’s not true,” shouted Albert, over the stampede. In seconds, he and Mercy were the only people in the house.

“See what you’ve done!” he accused.

“No matter how many people you bring to talk to me, you and I are getting a divorce.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Not at all. It will happen with your full co-operation.” Albert stormed out of the room, then Mercy heard him roaring off in his car. In the late afternoon, a small number of Albert’s relatives returned.

“Albert isn’t here,” said Mercy.

“We came to see *you*,” said the eldest member of the group. Mercy looked at them uneasily. They were also ill-at-ease.

“Whatever’s going on between the two of you, fix it, and keep your domestic issues domestic,” continued uncle. Mercy looked at him enquiringly.

“Whether or not he’s given you a disease...” he continued.

“He has,” said Mercy.

“Keep it to yourself! We don’t want people to associate us with immoral people.”

“You *are* related to an immoral person.”

“Keep it quiet!”

“It will come out in the divorce proceedings.”

“There will be no divorce!” Mercy saw no point in arguing, and went to prepare refreshments. When she took them to the lounge, Albert was back, and he was talking to his relatives in low tones. They fell silent when they saw her. She gave them the food, and left.

She drove to the river, and knelt beside it, her eyes closed, as she allowed her spirit to be re-energised by it. When she returned home, Albert was alone.

“Did you go to your lover?” he asked.

“Ask your spies. I’m sure they’ll give you a blow by blow account of what I did.”

“I don’t like your attitude.”

“I don’t like yours either.”

“You have no right to say that to me!”

“I’m going to sleep.”

“I haven’t eaten.”

“Then eat.”

“You haven’t cooked.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Get me some food.”

“Ask Dolores.” Albert drew a sharp, shocked breath, and looked at her in disbelief. She went to shower and to sleep.

She was surprised when Albert joined her in the kitchen the following morning.

“My family didn’t like it when you told them I gave you HIV,” he said.

“You did.”

“I did not!”

“Have you been tested? Have you?”

“I’m healthy.”

“So am I.”

“Then how can you say you have...”

“I went to donate blood a year ago, they told me then that I have it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“If you recall, you’d been away from home for three years at that time.”

“So you really have the virus?”

“Why would I lie about that?” Albert gave her a long look, then he started eating. He left afterwards.

In the late afternoon, Dora returned Alie. The sisters sat in the lounge talking to Mercy, then Albert returned. As soon as he entered the room, Mercy noticed Dora tensing. She and Alie greeted Albert and Alie told him about her weekend. Dora had nothing to say beyond hello. Mercy gave Albert food, and he started eating. Dora made her goodbyes.

“Why are you leaving? We haven’t had a chance to talk,” said Albert. Dora looked trapped.

“You’re my child, I want to know what’s going on in your life,” continued Albert. Dora stood.

“Sit down,” said Albert. Dora sat down reluctantly. Mercy sent Alie out of the room, then she stood to follow her.

“No! Stay, Mama, please,” said a panicked Dora.

“I’m your father, we don’t need third parties when we talk to each other,” said an outraged Albert. Mercy sat down.

“I’m sorry, Baba, I don’t want to talk to you,” said Dora. Mercy gasped in shock. Albert looked as if he would expire on the spot.

“What kind of talk is that?” he demanded.

“I think it best that we keep away from each other.”

“No!”

“It’s for the best.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t talk to you respectfully.”

“Of course you can, and if you can’t, it’s your mother’s fault.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“How dare you contradict me!”

“Each time I see you, I remember seeing you and mamncane Hazel, naked, on her bed.”

Mercy and Albert gasped.

“I can’t respect you, because I can’t forget that image. Bye, Mama,” said Dora as she stood, and left. Mercy looked at Albert, he was looking at her. She stood and went to check on Alie. She was entertaining herself in her room.

Mercy went to the kitchen to start preparing dinner, but she suddenly discovered that she needed to digest Dora’s words. She sat at the kitchen table, closed her eyes, and clenched her hands tightly together, to stop herself from falling apart.

She heard a chair scrape, and opened her eyes. Albert was sitting opposite her, watching her. They were silent a long while, watching each other. Mercy did not know whether or not she wanted to ask questions about what Dora had said. Alie joined them. Mercy stood to finish dinner.

She lay awake all night, feeling bad for Dora. She went back in time, wondering when Dora had seen her father in such a compromising situation. Dora had adored her father, but just before her twelfth birthday, her attitude had changed. That had been years after Mercy had realised that her husband was cheating on her. She had often wondered why Dora had suddenly changed towards her father, now she knew.

After work the following day, she phoned Alie to let her know that she would be home late, then she asked her housekeeper to stay late, then she went to visit Dora.

“Why did you never tell me?” she asked.

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” replied Dora.

“I knew he was cheating within weeks of his first affair. That must have been about two years before you saw him with Hazel.”

“Why didn’t you leave?”

“I wanted to raise you myself. Your father would have taken you and your brother from me, and who knows who he’d have found to take care of you.”

“Life is so unfair.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Where were you?” demanded Albert, when Mercy arrived home.

“I’m not going to answer that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I refuse to be interrogated.”

"I'm your husband, I have a right to know..."

"I went to ask Dora about you and Hazel," said Mercy. She and Albert watched each other, as Albert moved from foot to foot. Mercy went to check on Alie, then she went to sleep.

When she woke up, Albert was sitting beside her, watching her. She sat up quickly.

"What is it? Is Alie alright? Is it one of the other children?" she demanded.

"The children are fine."

"Then what is it?"

"We need to talk." Mercy felt cold in the pit of her stomach.

"I have to get to work," she said.

"I've asked Tim to take Alie for the night." Mercy wanted to kick him. Who was he to come into the life she had built for Alie and start organising things to suit himself?

"We'll talk after work," he said, then he left.

After work, Mercy took the long route home. She found Albert waiting for her. She greeted him, and joined him reluctantly in the lounge.

"This has to stop," he said.

"What?"

"This living of separate lives. Aren't you going to say anything?"

"We've done it so long, it's second nature."

"It needn't be."

"I guess not, but I prefer it."

"What?"

"I'm past trying to be a wife to someone who doesn't want me."

"I want you."

"You said my body's unsightly."

"That's true...but we can work around that."

"I don't want to."

"You're being hasty. We have a good thing."

"Why were you unfaithful if it's so good?"

"Come on, Mercy, you know men will be men."

"I want out."

"No!"

"With me out of the way, you and Dolores can marry." Albert kissed his teeth.

"Good luck with her," said Mercy.

"I'm done with her. She went to the papers and told them I'd promised to marry her, and that I hit you."

“You did.”

“Why did she go to the papers? Everyone looks at me differently now, and they have a bad attitude towards me. The bosses told me to kiss any promotional aspirations goodbye. Why was she so vindictive?”

“Ask her.”

“I’m done with her. Now, I can focus on us.”

“Yes.”

“You agree?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s great!”

“If we both focus, we can be divorced soon.”

“No!”

“Divorce is all I’m interested in.” Albert gave her a searching look.

“I’ll take Alie,” he said smugly.

“We’ll see.”

“No, we will not see! The children belong to me!”

“The court will decide.”

“The court has nothing to do with it.”

“Albert, did you even know what school she went to?”

“I know now.”

“Is your plan to ship her to your mother or your sister? If it is, I’ll fight, and I’ll win.”

“She’s mine!” Mercy looked down, to avoid letting him see her roll her eyes at his predictability. She went to freshen up, then she lay on her bed, wondering how to make divorce attractive to Albert.

CHAPTER THREE

The following week, he was very good about taking Alie to school. The first two nights, of the week after that, he was home to tuck her into bed with Mercy. On Wednesday, he phoned Alie to let her know that he was working late, on Thursday evening, he did not come home or make contact, and the same thing happened on Friday.

“Where’s Baba?” asked Alie.

“I don’t know,” replied Mercy, who had decided long ago, that she would lie as little as possible to her children.

“Why doesn’t Sisi like him?” Mercy gave Alie a surprised look.

“Who said she doesn’t like him?” she returned.

“I see the way she looks at him, and she never talks to him. Why, Mama?” Mercy felt very uncomfortable with Alie’s line of questioning.

“Did you finish your homework?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Let me see it.” Mercy was relieved that Alie did not pursue the subject of Dora and Albert.

Her lawyer, Bryce, told her that a court date had been set for the divorce proceedings.

“How did you manage that? He was served with the papers recently,” said Mercy.

“I didn’t do it, but you must have friends in high places.”

“Me?”

“The case was pushed forward.”

“By who?”

“You tell me.” Mercy did not know anyone who had the power to help her to get a court date in so short a time.

“Who are you sleeping with?” demanded Albert over the phone.

“What?” gasped Mercy, shocked to be asked such a question.

“You must have slept with someone pretty well connected to have a court date this soon.”

Rather than answer, Mercy cut the call, panting in fury. How dare Albert accuse her of that! She calmed down, and fetched Alie from school.

Albert was home when they arrived, and he was livid.

“Have you no shame? Must you parade your lover...?” he demanded.

“Go to your room,” Mercy said to Alie. Alie hastened away.

“Stop scaring my child by shouting,” said Mercy.

“She’s no longer your child. Whoever your lover is, he can’t help you keep Natalie. I’m taking her, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” Mercy opened her mouth to contradict him, then she changed her mind. She made to follow Alie.

“Aren’t you going to defend yourself? Won’t you at least lie, and say you don’t have a lover?” sneered Albert.

“Would you believe me?”

“No.”

“Then there’s no point,” said Mercy, leaving the room.

She found Alie on the phone, crying. She put an arm round her, and took the phone.

“Hello?” she said.

“What did he do to her? I’ll kill him!” roared Dora.

“I’ll take care of this.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you later, right now, I need to talk to your sister,” said Mercy. She cut the call, and kissed Alie’s forehead.

“Alie?” she said. Alie looked at her.

“It’s alright,” continued Mercy.

“Baba’s mean!” said Alie feelingly.

“He’s upset, with me, not you.”

“Did he hit you?”

“No!” Alie studied Mercy, and nodded.

“He’s cross with me, because we’re getting a divorce. Do you know what a divorce is?”

“You want to live in one house, and he wants to live in another one.”

“Yes.”

“Who will I live with?”

“I’d like you to live with me.”

“I’d like that.”

“Baba also wants you to live with him.” Alie frowned.

“The judge will decide what’s best for you,” continued Mercy.

“I don’t want to live with Baba. I’ve always lived with you, and I like it. Baba’s mostly cross, and he hits you, and he only lives with us sometimes.” Mercy had no response to those words. She felt uneasy as Alie studied her.

“Do you love Baba?” she asked. Mercy drew back.

“I...I...” she stammered.

“He has a girlfriend.”

“What?”

“Before he came to live with us, I saw him at school, kissing another girl’s mother.”

“Oh!” gasped Mercy.

“Did you know he has a girlfriend?”

“Er...I have to go to work,” said Mercy.

“Is that why you’re divorcing him?”

“Do your homework, I’ll see you later,” said Mercy. She kissed Alie’s forehead and almost sprinted out of the room.

She could not focus at work, wondering how many times her daughters had seen their father with other women. Had Tim also seen him?

She was making breakfast the following morning, when Alie ran into the room and clung to her waist, crying.

“Alie? What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Baba says he’s taking me to see Gogo, I don’t want to go,” said Alie.

“Natalie!” shouted an angry Albert. He came into the room, clearly in a temper.

“What are you doing here? I told you to get into the car,” he continued, glaring at Alie. Mercy put her arms round her child. She did not know this man who seemed to revel in scaring her child. Alie hid behind Mercy.

“Get in the car, this instant!” screamed Albert. Crying, Alie ran out of the room.

“Where are you taking her?” asked Mercy.

“I don’t have to clear anything with you concerning my children,” shouted Albert.

“She’s scared of you because she hardly ever sees you.”

“She’s my child,” Albert said firmly, and left the room. Mercy followed, and found him in his car, in the driver’s seat. He was looking into the back seat and gesticulating angrily. Mercy approached the car.

“I can come with you to make things easier on Alie,” she said. Albert ignored her, and drove off. Mercy stared after the car, worried about Alie. She resisted the urge to follow them. Albert would make things worse for Alie if he thought Mercy did not trust him with their child.

It became dark, and still Albert had not returned Alie home. After eight that evening, Mercy phoned Albert.

“Yes?” he said.

“You and Alie aren’t home, is everything alright?” she asked.

“I’m at my mother’s.”

“When are you bringing Alie back?”

“When I’m good and ready,” shouted Albert, then he cut the call. Mercy closed her eyes, feeling cold.

She did not sleep. She spent the following day at the river, asking that Alie be fine, wherever she was. Albert returned home after eight that evening. Seeing him alone, Mercy ran to look in his car, it was empty. She returned to the house.

“Where’s Natalie?” she asked.

“Out,” replied Albert.

“She has school tomorrow. Tell me where she is, and I’ll fetch her.”

“She’s enrolled in another school.”

“What?”

“She won’t miss a thing. Goodnight,” said Albert as he left Mercy in the entrance hall. She followed him to the main bedroom, asking where Alie was, who was looking after her, which

school she had been enrolled in, and who would take her to and from school. Albert ignored her, and closed and locked the bedroom door on her. She banged on it for over an hour, while he ignored her.

She phoned her lawyer Bryce. He assured her that he would do everything in his power to find Alie. Mercy said that she was going to file a kidnapping charge, Bryce concurred and assured her that his private investigator would also work on finding Alie.

After the call, Mercy freshened up, climbed into her car, and drove to her mother-in-law's home. She arrived after three in the morning. The people there were not impressed to be woken that early. When Mercy asked about Alie, everyone returned to their huts without answering her. She slept in her car, and woke with the early risers. She helped to fetch water and firewood, then during breakfast, she asked again about Alie.

"Ask her father," said MaBhengu.

"Please, Mamazala, tell me where my child is," begged Mercy.

"She's not your child, she's Albert's child. You should go now."

"I'm not going anywhere without Natalie." The rest of the day, MaBhengu and her brothers and sisters-in-law made a concerted effort to ignore Mercy and make her feel very unwelcome. She was not given lunch or dinner, and she was denied water when she asked for it.

After dinner, Albert arrived.

"Are you going to be reasonable?" he asked her.

"Reasonable?"

"I want you to stop the divorce."

"What does that have to do with Natalie?"

"If you stop the divorce, you can see her."

"See her? She lives with me!"

"Not anymore."

"What do you mean?" asked Mercy, feeling faint.

"Natalie has a new living and schooling arrangement."

"Since when? I'm her mother, I have a right to know where she is."

"No, you don't. Drop the divorce, and you can see her twice a month."

"That's rubbish!"

"Fine, once a month then."

"Albert..."

"Divorce me, and you'll never see her again."

"Don't do this, Albert. I'll give you anything you want, if you bring my child back home."

"Her home is with me now." Mercy pleaded and begged until everyone went to sleep.

“Drop the divorce, you stupid woman, and you can see Natalie,” said Albert, as he went to sleep. Mercy cried until her tears dried, then she climbed into her car and drove off.

Exhausted, she almost had several accidents, missing other cars, trees and animals by the skin of her teeth. She arrived at Dora’s home towards dawn.

“What’s wrong, Mama? What’s happened?” asked Dora. Mercy phoned Bryce.

“What is so urgent?” he barked.

“Albert says I’ll see my child once a month if I drop the divorce. If my child’s not home soon, I’m going to stab Albert to death,” declared Mercy.

“Mercy, that would be ill-advised.”

“I want my child back home!” thundered Mercy.

“She’ll come back to you, she’s been found.”

“She has, can I go get her?”

“She’ll be brought home.”

“Bryce...”

“I have to go.” Mercy threw her phone on the sofa.

“He took Alie?” asked Dora.

“Yes.”

“Are you really going to kill him?” Mercy gave Dora a long look, then she sat down, suddenly exhausted.

“You need to sleep. Did you tell them what’s going on at work?” asked Dora.

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll do it. Come and shower, then you can sleep in my bed.” Mercy fell asleep as soon as she was in Dora’s very welcoming bed.

When she woke up, it was early afternoon. She freshened up, and found Dora in the lounge.

“Didn’t you go to work?” she asked.

“I was worried about you, so I decided to work from home.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I’ve never heard you threaten anyone with violence.” Mercy sat down.

“Keep your job, Mama, don’t neglect it. You need to show that you have a source of income so you can look after Alie,” continued Dora.

“I know.”

“And don’t kill that man. I know you want to, I do too, but that won’t help Alie.”

“Your father doesn’t even want her.”

“I know, that’s why you need to look like a saint, and dig up all the dirt on him, so he looks like the devil’s creator. If you need a witness for his infidelity, I’ll be your witness.”

“Dora! No.”

“We can’t let him get away with this.”

“She’s scared of him, she didn’t want to go with him. I should have followed them, I wanted to, and decided against it. I’m so stupid!”

“Stop that, Mama. You have to stay positive. Alie’s coming back to you. Recriminations don’t help you or her.”

“I feel useless sitting here. I’d better go. I want to be home when Alie returns, and Bryce said if I want the house, I should stay in it.”

First thing the following morning, Mercy had all the house locks changed, for the doors leading into the house, and those in the house. She moved all of Albert’s clothes and personal effects to the garage. She was exhausted after all that moving. She locked all the doors leading into the house, and lay on a couch in the lounge, as she did not have the energy to walk to a bedroom.

She was woken by loud noises. Her heart pounded with fear. Someone was at the back door, making a lot of noise. She forced herself to creep to the kitchen on shaky legs. She grabbed a butcher knife.

“Who is it?” she demanded in her deepest voice. The noises stopped.

“Mercy, open the door,” said Albert.

“What do you want?”

“To come into my house.”

“Did you bring Natalie?”

“Let me in, Mercy, this is my house.”

“Why aren’t you in jail? I told the police you stole my child.”

“What?”

“You took her from her home, and didn’t return her, that’s called kidnapping, especially considering that she didn’t want to go with you.”

“I’m her father and I don’t need to steal her! Let me into my house.”

“This isn’t your home anymore, go to Dolores.”

“Will you forget her!”

“No, I won’t forget her, or Hazel, or whoever you were with when you fetched her child from Natalie’s school.”

“Are you spying on me?”

“Your personal things are in the garage.”

“What?”

“Everything else, the court will divide between us. Get away from my door. I’m trying to sleep.”

“Open this door, right now!”

“Go away!” The noises started again. Mercy realised that Albert was drilling through the door. She shouted his name, but he could not hear above the noise. She phoned him. The drilling stopped and he answered his phone.

“If you force entry into my home, I’ll have you arrested for trespassing,” said Mercy.

“I’m not trespassing, this is my home, and I’m the head of the house.”

“The house is in my name. If you force entry, you can be arrested again.” Mercy listened to the silence over the phone, then the call was cut. She heard the sounds of Albert gathering his tools, then she heard his footsteps as he went to the garage. She sat at the kitchen table listening for him. She wished she had security cameras to see what he was doing. Over an hour later, she heard him drive off.

She went to the kitchen door. The key would not go into the keyhole, and there were holes around the door handle, where Albert had drilled. Mercy cursed. She would have to spend more money fixing it. She took pictures to send to Bryce, then she pushed her washing machine to the door, in case Albert returned. She sat at the kitchen table, and decided to sleep there. She was stiff the following morning.

She phoned for someone to come and fix her door. When her helper, Gerty, arrived, she told her to expect someone who would fix the door, then she said that her husband was not allowed on the premises, under any circumstances.

When she was ready for work, she went to the garage to get her car. Most of Albert’s clothes and some of his small bits of furniture were gone. His bigger pieces of furniture were still there, and her car tyres were slashed.

Mercy dropped her handbag and raised her hands.

“This is it!” she shouted. Gerty ran to her, concerned. Mercy pointed at the tyres. Gerty gasped and asked who would do such a thing. Mercy said Albert had done it, Gerty gasped, shocked.

Mercy phoned Dora, asking for a lift to work. While she waited for her ride, Mercy fumed. Albert had cheated on her, neglected the family, left all financial responsibility on her shoulders, and gone from home on six different occasions for time periods between a year and six years. He had stolen her Natalie, compromised the security of her home, and then he had slashed her car tyres. She photographed them to show Bryce.

I can’t even remember why I married this man. What I do know, is that I’m not safe with him, my child isn’t safe with him, and I can never live with him. The divorce is on, I’ll get my child back, and I’ll never, ever cry over that man again, she vowed.

Dora phoned to say that she was stuck in traffic. Mercy took a taxi to work and arrived late. After work, she went home, she wanted to be there when Alie was returned. She took the following day off work to wait for her daughter.

Albert phoned her, threatening her for having him arrested again, for nothing.

“Natalie is my child! How can I be accused of stealing her? When I get out of here, you’ll see me,” he said ominously. Mercy asked one of her nephews to stay with her in case Albert carried out his threat.

The following night she was woken by her ringing phone, after two in the morning.

“I’ve been phoning you for over an hour. What’s your game?” demanded Albert.

“What is it?” yawned Mercy.

“I’ve brought your child. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Of course, but why so late, she should be in bed.”

“Are you coming to fetch her or not?”

“Where are you?”

“At your gate. I’ve brought the spoilt brat, and now I’m leaving. If she gets kidnapped from your kerb, don’t blame me.”

“Albert...” He had cut the call. Mercy hurried to the front door, and out to the gate. Alie was standing in the dark, crying, scared, shivering in skimpy sleep wear, as the wind howled around her. Mercy unlocked the gate, and hugged her child. She brought her onto her property, locked the gate, picked her child up, and took her into the house.

She forced herself to take pictures of her, before putting her in a warm bath, and singing to her until she stopped crying. After the bath, she dressed her warmly and made her some soup. When Alie was finished drinking her soup, they slept together on Alie’s bed. Mercy was glad to have her child in her arms.

When they woke up, it was midday. Mercy looked at Alie. Alie looked her over as if she was trying to see if she had changed.

“Are you alright?” asked Mercy. Alie nodded.

“I’m glad you’re home,” continued Mercy.

“So am I.” Throughout the day, Alie, an independent child, clung to Mercy. She did not want her out of her sight. Dora visited and that cheered Alie. Dora was upset by Alie’s clinginess, and advised Mercy to take her to a therapist.

After Dora left, Mercy asked Alie about her new school. It was across town, and Alie had hated it. Mercy returned to work the following day, with Alie, who had become upset when Mercy had said that she was leaving. Mercy phoned Alie’s old school, and managed to get her re-enrolled. In the early afternoon, the two of them went to the river. They had been there together before, and Alie played with some of the children while Mercy energised herself at the river’s edge.

The following day, Alie returned to school with joy. Mercy was relieved that she was regaining her confidence. She spoke to the psychologist at work about Alie’s traumatising, and she was assured that her medical aid would pay for Alie to see a psychologist. She met Bryce and gave him the pictures that she had taken.

A week later, she met Albert in court for the divorce proceedings. They did not greet each other, but took their places beside their lawyers.

Bryce put it to the court that Albert had kidnapped Alie as he had seldom been home, and she only had a nodding acquaintance with him. He added that Albert had probably traumatised her by dumping her in an unfamiliar environment, with a woman who was not likely to feel kindly towards her. Albert had always left Mercy for the same woman, and he had three children with her. He had taken Alie to her.

Bryce pointed out that Albert was unstable as he had left Mercy on six occasions, and then left the mother of his other children the same number of times, and he had been engaged to Dolores, while still married to Mercy. He showed that Albert had been in jail twice, and showed the pictures proving his violence to Mercy and her property, and how little regard he had for Alie's welfare. He put it to the court that it was not in Alie's best interests to be with Albert.

Albert's lawyer said that Mercy was an unfit mother. When pressed for details, all he could come up with Mercy's HIV status. She gasped, horrified that Albert would publicise that about her.

Bryce showed that Mercy had only ever had one lover, and gotten the virus from Albert. Albert did not like that at all.

The judge awarded the divorce, and awarded Mercy sole custody of Alie. Albert was given visiting rights. He was stunned by the outcome.

Days later, Alie went to her first session with a psychologist. After it, she was chatty and relaxed. Mercy was hopeful that she would be fine.

They were dining when Alie gave Mercy a long look.

"What is it, my child?" asked Mercy.

"The doctor asked about Baba."

"Oh?"

"Am I going to see him again?"

"Yes, but he won't live with us, and you won't live with him."

"I don't want to see him."

"You're going to visit him this weekend."

"I don't want to!"

"I'm sorry, Alie, but you have to."

"Why?"

"Because the judge in the divorce said you must." Alie turned away from Mercy. Mercy sighed.

Days later, she was surprised by a visit from one of her brothers, Morris.

"What's this I hear?" he asked.

"About what?"

"A divorce. Are you divorced, Mercy?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Why should I have told you?"

"For the same reason you told us when you wanted to get married." Mercy looked away from him.

“Did either of our parents divorce the other?” he asked.

“You know they didn’t.”

“Then why did you divorce your husband?”

“I couldn’t live with him anymore.”

“Every marriage has challenges, but people don’t get divorced.”

“It’s done with, Buti.”

“No, it isn’t. Your in-laws want us to return amalobolo?”

“After this long, and after three children? That’s nonsense.”

“They say you stole their children.”

“I didn’t!”

“You have Alie.”

“The court gave her to me.”

“Take her back to her father.”

“That will never happen. If those people visit you again, tell them to talk to the judge about having a different custody arrangement.”

Mercy arrived home from work one evening, and an uneasy Alie met her at the front door.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mercy.

“She’s here.”

“Who?”

“The other mama.” Mercy drew in a shocked breath. Did Alie mean the woman that Albert had left her with? What did she want? Mercy followed Alie into the house. The woman in the lounge was young, and beautiful. Albert clearly had a thing for thin young women with long weaves.

“Can I help you?” she greeted. The woman gave her a hostile look.

“Alie, go and finish your homework,” said Mercy.

“I finished it,” said Alie.

“Then go and check it.” Alie left reluctantly. Mercy put down her handbag, and crossed her arms across her chest.

“What’s the problem?” she asked.

“Why did you divorce Albert, if you’re going to be chasing after him?” demanded the woman.

“I don’t understand,” said Mercy, frowning.

“Don’t play innocent with me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He’s never home, and when I ask where he was, he says he was with Natalie.”

“He hasn’t seen her since he brought her back, in the middle of the night, before the divorce was granted.”

“Liar!”

“You can leave now.”

“I want my man!”

“Then go and find him, because I assure you, he isn’t here. I have no use for him, that’s why I divorced him.”

“You know you want him. You call him at all hours...”

“I do not! Why would I want a man not only incapable of fidelity, but who also gave me the HIV virus?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“He never told me that he was...”

“You can leave now.” The woman gave her a long look.

“Are you trying to get back with Albert?” she asked.

“No!”

“Then where does he go when he doesn’t come home to me and the children?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care.” The woman stood and left. Mercy could not believe the audacity of the woman in coming to interrogate her, when she was the husband thief, who had stolen Albert before Mercy had divorced him. Alie joined her.

“Has she gone?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Mercy.

“I thought she’d come to fetch me.”

“She can never fetch you.” The following evening, Albert arrived to fetch Alie for the weekend. Alie hid behind Mercy, and peeped at him.

“Tell your child to get into the car, now,” said Albert curtly. Mercy brought Alie from behind her and knelt before her.

“Alie, we talked about this. Baba loves you and wants to spend time with you,” she said. Alie looked at Albert uneasily.

“Go with him, he’ll bring you back,” continued Mercy.

“No he won’t. He’ll leave me with the other mama, and never bring me back,” Alie said tearfully.

“Get into that car, now!” shouted Albert. Alie ran crying out of the room.

“Try not to shout at her, she’s scared enough of you, without you shouting at her. I’ll bring her bag of clothes,” said Mercy.

“She has clothes, and I don’t need you tell me how to be a parent,” Albert said curtly, as he left. Mercy followed him, then she hurried past him, and reached the car before him. Alie was

in the back seat, crying. Mercy opened the car door, and sat beside her, hugging her. Alie clung to her.

“Baba missed you, that’s why he wants to spend time with you,” said Mercy. Alie looked at her in disbelief. Albert climbed into the driver’s seat, and watched them.

“Ask him,” said Mercy. She and Alie looked at Albert. He looked cornered.

“Did you miss me, Baba?” asked Alie.

“Yes, Alie, I missed you. I’m taking you and your other brothers and sister out tomorrow,” said Albert. Alie gave him a long look.

“Will you bring me back?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Will that other mama shout at me?”

“Not if you do as you’re told.” Alie looked from him to Mercy.

“I’ll be right here when you come back,” said Mercy, hugging and kissing Alie again. Alie nodded. Mercy clipped Alie’s seat belt, then she climbed out of the car and closed the door. She watched Alie being driven away. She could not sleep, worried about her child. She decided to continue to film all visits that Albert made to her home, as she had filmed him when he had come to fetch Alie.

She hired a private investigator the following day to follow Albert, and film his interactions with Alie, and where he left her. She spent most of the day at the river, after thanking her nephew for staying with her, and returning him to his home.

CHAPTER FOUR

When she returned home, Tim and Dora were waiting for her. She hugged them, and let them into the house. They followed her to the kitchen as she went to prepare refreshments.

“Mama, sit down,” said Tim.

“I’m making you something to eat,” she said.

“Please, sit down.” Mercy looked at his serious face, and sat down at the kitchen table. Tim and Dora joined her.

“There’s something we have to tell you,” said Tim.

“What is it?” asked Mercy.

“Baba remarried.”

“Oh! That was quick,” said a shocked Mercy.

“Did you know?”

“No.”

“He should have told you.”

“He doesn’t have to tell me a thing anymore.”

“Are you alright with this?”

“It’s none of my business, except in so far as it concerns your sister.”

“There is that, but there’s also the inheritance. Are we out in the cold, now that Baba has a much younger wife, who’s given him more children?”

“I don’t know.”

“He and I are in a business venture. I hope he’s not planning on tricking me and my children out of what’s ours. If this new wife tries anything, I’ll make her sorry.”

“Tim!” gasped Mercy, horrified. Tim did not make threats, generally speaking, but when he did, the consequences were dire for all concerned.

“I don’t want you doing anything that will land you in jail,” she said. He stood, and started cooking, banging pots, pans, and crockery with a vengeance.

“Could you talk to Baba? I don’t want to see Buti jailed either. At this rate, he’ll kill Baba,” said Dora. Mercy watched Tim, thinking. She picked up her phone and phoned Albert’s mother.

“MaNdlovu, what can you possibly say that I’ll listen to?” asked MaBhengu.

“Do you want Tim jailed?”

“For what?”

“Killing your son.”

“What lies have you been feeding my grandson?”

“Your son and his wife might want to take his share of the business that Albert and Tim are partners in. If that happens, Tim has sworn vengeance. We all know what his anger’s like. If you want your son to stay alive, and your grandson to stay out of jail, talk to your son and his wife.” Mamazala cut the call.

“It’s up to your Gogo now. Let’s help your brother,” Mercy said to Dora. They stood, and started helping with the cooking. Tim’s phone rang, he answered it. Mercy became concerned as he became more and more agitated. The call ended.

“I’ll kill him, I’ll kill that man you were married to,” he roared.

“What’s he done?” asked Mercy.

“He’s embezzled money from our company.” He made several phone calls, and walked out of the kitchen. Dora and Mercy followed him and found him in his car.

“Bye, Mama,” said Dora, sprinting to the car before Tim could leave without her. Mercy watched her children drive off, and returned to her house. She finished cooking, but she could not eat. She phoned Dora and Tim several times, neither of them picked up their phones.

Several hours later, Dora phoned to say Tim had tracked Albert down, and confronted him about the embezzlement. They had screamed and shouted at each other, then Tim had jumped

into his car, and told Dora to take him away from there. Mercy was relieved that no one had gotten violent.

She spent most of the following day volunteering at a women's shelter. She had not done it in months. She arrived home just after four in the afternoon.

"Where have you been?" demanded Albert, who had climbed out of his car, and opened Mercy's car door.

"What's the problem now?" asked Mercy.

"I've been waiting here for ages."

"You could have phoned me."

"Your number's no longer in my phone, I never did know it off by heart." Alie climbed out of Albert's car and ran to hug Mercy. Mercy smiled, returning the embrace. She noticed three children behind Alie and greeted them. They looked to be between the ages of ten and three. Alie released Mercy, and introduced the children as Albert Jnr, Alex and Sonya, Baba's other children, then she introduced Mercy to them as her Mama. She told them to follow her, and they all ran off together, Mercy assumed that they were going to play.

"You're sad," said Albert.

"Why?" asked Mercy, with little interest.

"You divorced me, hoping to deny me a promotion, but I got married and got another promotion anyway."

"You should be happy."

"Having failed to deny me a promotion, you've sent your son to accuse me of theft. Theft, Mercy. I have no need to steal, from anyone."

"I've never meddled between you and Tim, and I won't start now. If you have a problem with him, take it up with him." Albert's passenger door opened, and the woman that had accused Mercy of stealing Albert, climbed out of the car. Albert turned to watch her, and she put on a slinky walk, which he very obviously appreciated. Mercy rolled her eyes, wanting to tell them to keep their sex games in their bedroom. The woman stopped beside Albert, and put a possessive arm round his waist. He put an arm round her shoulder, and kissed her as if he had not seen her in over a year. Mercy did not know where to look.

She turned to her car, took her handbag, locked the car, and started for the house, assuming that Albert was done talking to her.

"Mercy?" called Albert. Mercy stopped reluctantly, and forced herself to look at the couple. They still had their arms round each other, but at least they were no longer kissing.

"This is my wife, Hilda. Hilda, this is Mercy, Alie's mother," said Albert. Mercy greeted Hilda, Hilda ignored her.

"Thanks for bringing Alie back. I'm sure you can see yourselves off," said Mercy.

"Talk to your son, and get him to back off," said Albert.

"Now he's mine. Are you not the one who told me that the children belong to you? Talk to him yourself," said Mercy.

“Talk to him, Mercy. I don’t want him trying to rob my children of what belongs to them,” said Hilda. Mercy felt a wave of fury envelope her. How dared that home-wrecker tell her what to do with her children!

“Get your wife and children off my property, and tell your wife to stay away from me,” she said coldly to Albert.

“This is the first time you’re seeing her,” said Albert.

“She was here some weeks ago, because she couldn’t find you.” Albert looked at Hilda.

“I had to show her you’re done with her,” she said defensively.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay away from her?” demanded Albert.

“That was before we were married.”

“Stay away from her, no matter what. I’m the only one in this marriage that has the right to deal with Mercy. Do you understand me?”

“Fine!” said an irritated Hilda.

“Fetch the children, we’re leaving.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with her.”

“Go!”

“He’s mine, Mercy,” said Hilda, then she left to fetch her children.

“Albert, if you don’t want me to beat respect into your child bride, keep her away from me,” shouted Mercy.

“Talk to your son!” Albert shouted back, then he walked to his car. He met Hilda and their children there. They all climbed into the car, and Albert roared off. Mercy started for the front door.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” asked Alie. Mercy stopped, surprised that she was not alone. She did not know how to reply.

“Did you and Baba fight? Did he hit you?” continued Alie.

“No, he didn’t hit me, let’s go inside,” said Mercy. Alie walked beside her as they approached the door.

“Don’t you like my other mama?” asked Alie. Mercy stopped herself from calling Hilda an impolite name. She unlocked the door, thinking of a response.

“Don’t you like her, Mama?” insisted Alie.

“I don’t know her, Alie. If we spent time together, I’m sure we’d like each other.”

“She didn’t shout at me.”

“That’s good.”

“I liked playing with my brothers and sister.”

“That’s good.”

“Buti and Sisi came to visit yesterday. I was scared when Buti and Baba were shouting. I thought Baba would hit him.”

Tim visited Mercy the following evening, on the verge of tears. He could not even fake a smile for Alie, whom he adored. Alie was disappointed. Mercy said that Buti was tired, and needed her to go and watch TV while he talked to Mama. Alie hugged Tim and left.

“That man has ruined me,” said Tim.

“What are you talking about?”

“The business is broke, clean broke, as a result of my so-called business partner’s embezzling activities. And all this happens after I quit my job.”

“Oh!” gasped Mercy. She had not known that Tim had left his job.

“I won’t be able to pay the rent, pay the staff, pay the suppliers and financiers, or support my family. Sthabile left me.”

“Why?”

“She said she couldn’t have a failure as a husband.”

“You’re not a failure.”

“I can’t support my family! What man fails to support his family?”

“That’s as a result of someone else’s behaviour, not yours.”

“That’s immaterial,” said Tim, then he burst into tears. Mercy made to hug him and he turned away from her. She knew that things were really bad. The last time that she had seen him cry was on the first anniversary of Albert’s leaving home for the first time. He pulled himself together quickly, and wiped the tears off his cheeks.

“What am I going to do, Mama?” he asked. Mercy had no response.

“I want to kill him, I really do, but the children will have no one to look after them if I go to jail. Sthabile doesn’t want them. She’s prepared to pay maintenance, but she doesn’t want to live with them.”

“Oh. You can have your father arrested.”

“That won’t bring the money back.”

“It might make you feel better.” Tim stared at his mother, then he laughed.

“I would never have expected you, of all people, to suggest I have him arrested. You were always finding reasons for us to respect him” he said.

“Things change.”

“He really hurt you.”

“That’s over now. How bad is it, my child?”

“Bad, Mama. The kids will have to leave school.”

“No! Even with their mother paying maintenance?”

“She’s paid a pittance, so the maintenance she’ll pay won’t go far.”

“I can give you some help, but it’s not much.”

“I don’t expect help from you. You have your own problems.”

“I want to help. Everyone has hard times, my son. The thing is to make a plan and get through. You and the kids will be fine.”

“I’m going to report that man.” Mercy nodded.

“You have my support. Your Gogo will make a fuss, I’ll be on your side,” she said.

“Thank you, Mama,” said Tim. Mercy put her arms round him, and he held her tight, then he left. Later that evening, he phoned her to tell her that his Gogo was visiting him. Mercy assured him that she would be at his side, and advised him to have his lawyer present.

When she returned home from work the following evening, she found a guest on her doorstep. The guest stood.

“You witch!” she shouted. Mercy put down her work things and approached her, ready to solve the problem there and then.

“Not only did you not understand him, deny him sex, have him arrested for nothing, lie about your health, and divorce him for nothing, now, you’ve had him arrested again. When will you leave him alone?” continued Hilda. Mercy knew that she was going to give Hilda the beating of her life. The front door opened behind Hilda.

“Hi, Mama,” said Alie. Mercy stopped walking. She did not want Alie witnessing displays of violence.

“Hi, Mama,” Alie said to Hilda.

“Your mother’s a witch,” said Hilda, then she stormed off, kicking Mercy’s work things, before climbing into her car and roaring off.

Mercy looked at Alie, she was looking at her with some fear, as if she was looking for the marks of witch-hood.

“It’s alright, Alie, I’m not a witch,” she said. Alie nodded, relieved. Mercy went to pick up her belongings, breathing rapidly. She wanted to follow Hilda and beat her to within an inch of her life, for insulting her and for scaring Alie.

“What did Mama mean?” asked Alie. Mercy turned to her.

“She is not you Mama!” she snapped.

“Baba said I must call her...”

“You only have one Mama, and that’s me. Your father’s wife is your mamncane.”

“Mamncane?”

“Yes, like my sister.”

“She’s your sister?”

“No!”

“Then what do you mean?”

“She’s younger than me, and married to your father, so she’s called mamncane. Did you finish your homework?”

“No.”

“Go and finish it.” Mercy was glad that Alie went into the house without a fuss. She followed her, and was relieved that Gerty had already made dinner. Gerty left and Mercy dished up the food, and called Alie to eat. Neither of them had much of an appetite.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you, Alie. I had a bad day at work, but that’s no excuse to snap at you,” said Mercy. Alie melted immediately, and started eating, and chatting about her day at school.

That Saturday, Mercy took Alie to Dora, then she went to Tim’s home. His Gogo was there with three of her five sons, one of her brothers-in-law, and Hilda.

“What are you doing here?” Hilda demanded of Mercy. Mercy felt her blood boil.

“I’m here for my son, not you,” she said coldly.

“You had my husband arrested!”

“Shut that woman up, or get her out of my son’s house,” Mercy said to MaBhengu. MaBhengu turned to Hilda.

“Mother-of-Jnr, don’t talk. We’re here to do that for you,” she said. Hilda kissed her teeth. Mercy made to leap at her, and Tim put his hands on her waist, restraining her.

“This is not why you’re here, Mama,” he said. Mercy breathed deeply, and calmed herself, focusing on the need to defend her son. She sat down, making sure that Hilda was not in her line of vision.

Tim’s uncles demanded he tell them how he had the disrespect and effrontery to have his own father arrested. They detailed how Albert had raised him from the moment he was born until he finished university. Tim was challenged to defend himself, but he was too upset to respond.

“You’re wicked, just like your mother,” said Hilda.

Tim pointed out that his father had been gone from home most of his teen years, and he had been educated by bursaries, scholarships and his mother. The uncles said all that was immaterial. The important thing was for him to get his father out of jail.

“You owe him that,” said Hilda.

“Get out of my house, now,” said Tim as he stood, and lunged at Hilda. Mercy scrambled to hold him back.

“Mother-of-Jnr, go,” said MaBhengu. Hilda hurried out of the house.

“If that woman goes anywhere near my mother, I’ll kill her, after I’m done with her husband,” said Tim. Everyone gasped, and looked at Mercy accusingly.

“My mother has nothing to do with this. Your brother will only come out of jail after repaying the business. You can help him pay, or enjoy your visits to him in jail. Now, I need you all to leave,” continued Tim. The uncles complained that he was showing ill-breeding by sending away his elders. He told them that he had grown up without a father, and could not be expected to behave as if he had. No one had a response to that, and the guests all left.

Tim and Mercy drove to Dora’s to fetch their children. They all drove Dora to the airport as she was flying out of town on business. Mercy offered to take Tim’s children for the rest of the weekend, and he accepted gladly.

Alie loved having company, and she was sad when she and Mercy returned Tim's children, Abel, Loyd and Brent, to their home.

Albert took Alie for the weekend once over a three month period. He had permission to have her two weekends a month, but neither he nor his lawyer would phone Mercy about visits.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mercy reviewed her life after the divorce, and concluded that it was better than she had expected. She was free from Albert, she could come and go as she pleased, and she felt more secure about Alie's confidence, since Albert had stopped showing interest in her.

She took herself out to dinner one evening, wanting to relax, and treat herself. Someone stopped by her table. She looked up. It was Aaron Croucamp, the owner of the company that Albert worked for. Mercy had always thought him handsome, despite his seventy odd years. He stood at five foot ten, he had a full head of grey hair, his eyes were grey, and he was built big. Mercy had always wondered if he had been a rugby player in his youth.

They greeted each other and exchanged pleasantries, then Mercy invited him to sit down if he was not joining anyone. He accepted and sat down. They ordered their food, and looked at each other when the waiter left with their orders.

"May I be brutally honest?" asked Aaron.

"Yes," Mercy said cautiously.

"I want you."

"Excuse me?" frowned Mercy.

"I want you, in my life and in my bed, as my life partner."

"Oh!" gasped a shocked Mercy.

"I've wanted you since the moment I first saw you, when Albert brought you to the company Shareholders' party the year he started working for us."

"Oh!"

"You're the kind of woman men build empires for." Mercy did not know what to say to that.

"My marriage ended four years ago, and I haven't dated. When I heard you were divorced, I celebrated."

"Aaron!" gasped Mercy.

"You should have left that unappreciative and undeserving man years ago."

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Neither do I."

"Are you celebrating something? You're very festively dressed."

“I’ve come from a graduation ceremony. I was hungry, and decided to stop here on my way home.” The waiter returned and served them, very nervous of Aaron, then he left.

“Why was he so scared of you? Are you one of those customers who terrorise waitrons?” asked Mercy.

“I own this restaurant.”

“Oh! It’s very nice.”

“Thank you.” They talked about mundane subjects as they ate. When they were done, their dishes were cleared away. They sat watching each other. Mercy told herself that it was impolite to stare, but her eyes would not listen. She had always liked Aaron, and she wanted to enjoy looking at him while she had the chance.

“Let’s get married,” he said. Mercy’s jaw dropped in shock. Aaron continued to watch her. She closed her mouth, took a deep breath, and tried to tell herself that she had not heard right. The look in Aaron’s grey eyes told her that she had heard right.

“I can’t marry you,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because!” said Mercy, feeling cornered.

“Because what?”

“Because you’re Albert’s boss.”

“I own the company he works for, but I’m not his boss.”

“It boils down to the same thing.”

“Yes, it does, I want to marry you, and there’s no reason for you not to marry me.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I can’t marry you, because it would make things awkward between me and Albert.”

“You’re not married anymore, why should there be awkwardness between you?”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t. Are you in shock? Is that why you’re seeing the negatives only?”

“Of course I’m in shock.”

“You need time to think this over.”

“No, I do not need time!”

“So you’ll marry me?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Where do I begin? I don’t want to be married. I don’t know you. My kids and your kids will cause complications, and then there’s our exes. It would be one big, ugly mess.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. Adele...”

“Adele is my past, Albert is your past. They both remarried, so they can’t cause us problems. The children will adapt.”

“They won’t. Interracial relationships are hard enough without the complication of children.”

“They’ll adapt, Mercy. Two of yours are adults, both of mine are adults, and your little girl is young enough to not have too many issues.”

“This is crazy,” said Mercy, as she put money on the table, then she stood. Aaron picked it up, and put it in her hand.

“Mercy, at my age, I can’t afford to worry about what other people think. I don’t know how long I have to live, but I plan to live what life I have with someone I have good feelings about, and that’s you,” he said. Mercy sat down slowly.

“You mean it,” she said, shocked and upset by that realisation.

“Of course I do.”

“It can’t happen.”

“It will.” Mercy gave him a long look.

“I’m HIV positive,” she said.

“Oh!” said a shocked Aaron. Mercy was relieved. He was probably disgusted too, and not likely to ever speak to her again, she thought. She returned to the table the money that he had put in her hand, picked up her handbag, and left.

Over the next few days, she had to work very hard not to keep going over her talk with Aaron. She was not going to start liking a man, just so that she could be disappointed again. She was through with relationships that went nowhere.

She invited her two elder children to her home. Alie and Tim’s children were at his home, with a baby sitter. After dinner, her children looked at her expectantly.

“I don’t know how long I have to live,” she said.

“Don’t say that,” said Dora.

“I’m asking you both to look after your sister.”

“Mama...”

“I know it’s not fair, she’s not your child, but she has no one else to look after her. Your father...”

“I’ll look after her,” said Tim.

“We both will,” said Dora.

“Thank you, my children. I’ve made some investments, but they won’t amount to much. You can sell this house and...” said Mercy.

“Must we talk about it now?” asked Dora.

“I don’t want Natalie to be a street kid.”

“She will never be that!” said Tim. Mercy nodded, on the verge of tears.

“I should have planned things better,” she said.

“Mama...”

“I never expected to have another child. Once Alie was born, I should have managed my finances better. I should take her out of that private school, then I’ll have more money to invest for her future.”

“We’ll take care of Alie, Mama, please don’t cry,” said Tim.

“It was never my intention to die on my children and leave them to fend for themselves.”

“Alie’s not a baby, and she has us.”

“It shouldn’t be this way!” ranted Mercy.

“But it is, Mama, and we have to handle it. We *will* handle it.” Mercy nodded, and wiped the tears off her cheeks.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said. Tim put his arms round her, and she held him tight. Dora joined the hug.

“Thank you, Tim, thank you, Dora,” said Mercy. The doorbell rang, Tim went to open the door, and returned with the guest. Mercy stood, shocked.

“Aaron? What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Mercy, what’s upset you?” he returned, hastening to her.

“What are you doing here?”

“We need to talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Mercy said dismissively. Aaron greeted Dora by name, then he asked her and Tim to excuse him and Mercy.

“No!” said a panicked Mercy, looking at her children as if they were a life line.

“We need to talk,” insisted Aaron.

“You need to leave.”

“Mama! How can you be so rude!” gasped Dora.

“I’ll leave after we talk,” said Aaron.

“I’m in the middle of something with my children.”

“They could be ours.” Tim and Dora gasped.

“Tim, Dora, I’ve asked your mother to marry me,” said Aaron. Mercy saw her children look from him to her in shock. She looked at him with irritation.

“Is it true?” asked Tim.

“Yes,” replied Mercy.

“You didn’t even tell us you were dating!” accused Dora.

“We haven’t dated.”

“Then how did you come to talk of marriage?”

"I last saw your mother at the last company shareholders' party. The next time I saw her was last night, and that's when I asked her to marry me," said Aaron.

"Mama?" demanded Tim.

"I said no," said Mercy. Tim nodded, relieved.

"I'm going to do everything I can to change that no to a yes," said Aaron.

"No!" said Tim and Dora.

"I can make your mother happy. Don't you want her to be happy in the time she has left to live?"

"Aaron..." said Mercy. Aaron smiled at her, took her hand, and kissed it. She gasped, shocked and touched by his gesture. He looked at her lips, and her stomach flip-flopped. He kissed her hand again, and put an envelope in her hand.

"I took care of dinner last night," he said, then he made his goodbyes, and left. There was a stunned silence in the room. Mercy sat down, then her children sat down. She opened the envelope, it had money, she frowned, wondering why Aaron had given it to her, then she remembered that he had given her the money she had used to pay for their meal.

"Mama?" said Tim. Mercy looked at him.

"Do you want him?" asked Tim.

"I'm done with men," said Mercy, then she looked between her children. They were both watching her as if they were seeing a new side to her. Suddenly, Dora smiled.

"What is it?" asked Mercy.

"We should tell Baba," she said.

"Dora!" gasped Mercy.

"Can you imagine the look on his face?" Dora asked, with a mischievous look in her eyes. Mercy smiled, she had not seen that look on Dora in years.

"You should marry him," said Tim.

"Tim!" gasped Mercy.

"To feel better. Won't it make you feel better, after all that's happened?"

"Yes, but..."

"Or just get engaged. Baba will have a heart attack."

"Stop it, you two," smiled Mercy.

"We have to go, the babysitter will be leaving soon," said Tim. Mercy saw her children off. Later, she tossed and turned in her bed, wondering why Aaron had come to see her. He had to have been drunk or high. Sober people did not offer to marry people with the virus. Next morning, she fetched Alie from Tim's home and took her to school.

When she took Alie home in the afternoon, she found a bunch of flowers waiting for her. She read the card they came with.

"I'll call you about dinner. Aaron."

Mercy was shocked that even in the light of day, Aaron was still thinking about her. That evening, she could not eat. She was too tense, waiting for Aaron's call.

"Mama?" said Alie. Mercy looked at her.

"Do you have boyfriend?" asked Alie.

"What?" shouted a shocked Mercy.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No!"

"Then why were Buti and Sisi talking about your boyfriend?"

"Do you even know what a boyfriend is?"

"Someone you date and kiss. You can marry him, if you like."

"Natalie!"

"I want a Baba to live with." Mercy froze, shocked by Alie's words. It had never occurred to her that Alie felt that way.

"Does he shout?" asked Alie.

"I don't know."

"Does he hit you?"

"No!"

"When can I meet him?"

"Natalie! I don't have a boyfriend." Alie gave Mercy a look of disbelief. Mercy changed the subject.

The following evening, she was helping Alie to pack some toys to take to Albert's, when the doorbell rang. Mercy frowned, Albert was early. She went to open the door.

"Aaron?" she frowned.

"Hi, Mercy."

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to dinner."

"You said you'd call!"

"I've come in person. It's more effective."

"You need to leave."

"Who is it, Mama?" asked Alie, as she approached them.

"Hello, Alie," said Aaron. Alie stopped beside Mercy and looked at him.

"Hello," she said.

"I'm..."

"Are you Mama's boyfriend?"

"Natalie!" gasped Mercy. Aaron bent to Alie's level.

“I’m hoping to be her boyfriend. Will you mind?”

“As long as you don’t shout all the time, and you don’t hit her.”

“Alie!” gasped an embarrassed Mercy.

“I don’t shout all the time, and I will never hit you or your mother.”

“Okay, you can be her boyfriend,” said Alie. Mercy was too embarrassed to talk.

“Come in,” said Alie, taking Aaron’s hand. He smiled and straightened.

“Thank you,” he said, then he looked at Mercy, and followed Alie into the house. Mercy closed the door, then she went to make a snack. The doorbell rang again. She went to open the door.

“Why is Aaron’s car here?” asked Albert.

“Come in,” said Mercy.

“You haven’t answered my question.” Aaron came out of the lounge with his ringing phone in his hand.

“Excuse me, I have to take this,” he said. Albert moved out of the doorway, and Aaron left the house. Albert’s eyes had grown large on seeing Aaron, and now, he was staring after him. He looked at Mercy.

“Well?” he prompted. Alie came out of the lounge.

“Hi, Baba,” she said, hugging Albert. He patted her absently.

“What is he doing here, Mercy?” he asked.

“He’s Mama’s boyfriend,” said Alie. Albert looked down at her, shock written all over his face.

“Can we go now, Baba?” continued Alie.

“When did this happen? Is he the one that helped you move the divorce forward?” Albert demanded of Mercy.

“No!” said Mercy.

“What’s going on?”

“Hi, Albert. Alie tells me you’re spending the weekend together,” said Aaron, as he returned to the house.

“Aaron,” said Albert, looking at him. He was itching to ask questions, but he restrained himself.

“I’ll help Alie to get her things,” said Mercy, then she and Alie left the men. Alie finished packing, then she and her mother returned to the men.

“We’ll be off,” said Albert looking between Mercy and Aaron. Alie took his hand and led the way out of the house. Mercy followed them and hugged and kissed her, then she helped her into the car. Albert looked at Mercy, climbed into the car, and left.

Mercy looked at Aaron. He had followed her out of the house, and he was watching her.

“Were you ever happy with him?” he asked. Mercy frowned.

“That’s none of your business.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“I didn’t say no.”

“You didn’t say yes.”

“Excuse me, I have a pot on the stove,” said Mercy, walking past Aaron and into the house. She made to close the front door, and Aaron pushed it from the outside.

“Aaron!” she said, irritated. She wanted him to leave. He pushed the door open and looked at her.

“I’m here for dinner,” he said. Mercy opened her mouth to send him away, then she smelt burning soup. She ran to the kitchen and took the soup off the stove, then she attended to the roast and the pap. When she was done cooking, she turned to leave the kitchen, and gasped, noticing a man in the room with her.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Aaron.

“I want you to leave.”

“I will, after dinner.”

“What makes you think I’ll feed you?”

“I’m hoping.”

“What do you want, Aaron?”

“I want you to marry me.”

“I told you that I have...”

“I don’t care.”

“How can you not care? Aren’t you afraid I’ll make you sick?”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“That is stupid!”

“Not entirely. There’s such a thing as safe sex. Why didn’t you practise it, knowing what Albert was up to?”

“Aaron...”

“If I could, I’d have him fired.”

“Aaron! He has a family to support.”

“You were his family, did he support you?” Mercy looked away from him, then she sat down at the table. Aaron joined her.

“He used to support me. He was a wonderful husband and father until about thirteen years ago. That’s when he started spending weekends away, then weeknights. Eventually, he’d leave and come back when we’d almost forgotten he existed,” said Mercy.

“Didn’t you file a missing person’s report the first time it happened?”

“I didn’t have to. His mother told me with great delight, that he had left me for a woman worthy of him.”

“Why did you take him back when he returned, instead of divorcing him?”

“Everyone I spoke to about it said if we separated, he’d take the kids. Culturally, the kids belong to him. I didn’t want them abused or neglected by him or anyone else.”

“Why have you divorced him now?”

“I’ll be dead in a few years, and Alie will be an orphan, because of him. He hasn’t paid a cent for her upkeep, until after the divorce, when a garnishing order was put on his salary. He thinks of no one but himself. When I’m gone, even if he’s alive, Alie will be an orphan because he won’t look after her. All his money goes into supporting his girlfriends, and buying them cars and houses. The car I drive to take *his* child to and from places is unroadworthy, but his childless women have brand new cars. Why am I even talking about this? It changes nothing. I’ll get the food.” Aaron took her hand in his, and she looked at him.

“I’m sorry about the way Albert treated you,” he said.

“I should have left. Nothing can be done about it now.”

“I want to tell you about my marriage.”

“What’s the point? You and I will never happen.”

“Adele and I stopped having the same interests. Once the children left home, we had nothing to talk about. She asked for a divorce, and I saw no reason to refuse. She has a new husband now. We talk every now and then, but that’s it. She won’t have a problem with our marriage.”

“I’m not marrying you.”

“That will come with time.”

“I don’t want to, Aaron. I’m done being miserable over a man.”

“I won’t make you miserable.”

“I’ll bring the food.” Mercy could not eat, she wanted Aaron to leave.

“That was great, thank you,” he said, when he was done.

“You’re welcome. Thanks for dropping by.” Aaron smiled and stood. She walked him to the front door, and saw someone leaning on his car.

“Who’s that?” she asked.

“My driver.”

“Oh! Wait here,” said Mercy. She returned to the kitchen and packed food into a lunch box. She took it to Aaron and gave it to him. He looked at her enquiringly.

“It’s for your driver. If I’d known he was here, I’d have given it to him while it was still hot,” she said.

“Oh! Thank you.”

Mercy cleaned the kitchen after Aaron’s departure, going over her conversation with him. He had sounded genuine. He wants to get married, I’ll find him someone who wants the same

thing, she thought. She smiled, thinking of her colleague, April. She would appreciate him, and he would get the wife he wanted.

Albert brought Alie back on Sunday morning, when Mercy was expecting them in the late afternoon. Alie greeted her curtly, and walked into the house. Mercy stared after her, and looked at Albert, who was watching her a few steps from the front door.

“You need to teach your child manners,” he said. Mercy felt heat suffuse her.

“If she were mine alone, you wouldn’t have visiting rights to her. She’s ours, and we both need to teach her manners.”

“She shouted at my wife.”

“She would never do that!”

“My wife said...”

“Did you see her?”

“No, but...”

“She knows better than to raise her voice to an elder.”

“She needs to follow instructions and not make my children unmanageable.”

“Goodbye.”

“Aaron will not be raising my child!” Mercy closed the door on his face. He banged on it.

“Whatever you have with him, break it off, Mercy. Carrying on with him will make you look like a desperate whore. Do you want Alie behaving like a desperate whore?” Furious, Mercy opened the door.

“If she wants to be a whore, Hilda will be a better teacher for her!” she hissed. Albert drew back, shocked and outraged.

“Get off my property,” said Mercy.

“Hilda is not a whore! How dare you say that about her! What will people say when they see you with Aaron?”

“They’ll say he appreciates quality when you couldn’t.”

“I’ll be a laughing stock for being cuckolded by my boss.”

“What I do with him, or any other man, ceased to be your business the day the divorce was granted. Go away, Albert!” shouted Mercy, then she banged the door on him and stormed to the kitchen. She tried to wash the dishes, and failed because her hands were shaking too much. She went to look for Alie, and found her sitting on her bed.

“I’m never going back there,” she vowed. Mercy sat beside her, and said nothing, afraid that she would start calling Albert and his wife names if she said anything.

“That mama said I shouted her. I didn’t, Mama. I didn’t!”

“I know, Alie.”

“You believe me?”

“Of course.”

“Baba’s wife’s a liar.”

“We don’t call adults liars.”

“She said I did something I didn’t do.”

“She misunderstood.”

“But...”

“It’s over now, Alie, and you’re home. I missed you.” Alie looked for the truth in her eyes and nodded.

“I’m glad you’re my Mama,” she said.

“So am I,” said Mercy, hugging Alie.

The following day, she arranged to meet with April and Aaron for dinner that evening, then she arranged for Dora to have Alie for the night.

“Mama’s going to meet her boyfriend,” Alie said to her sister, when Mercy dropped her off at Dora’s. Dora looked at Mercy questioningly.

“I’m just going to dinner,” said Mercy.

“I like your boyfriend, Mama. When will you make him my Baba?” asked Alie. Dora and Mercy looked from her to each other. Mercy had no response.

“I have lots of things planned for us. Don’t you want to see what games I have?” asked Dora.

“Yeah, let’s go play. Bye, Mama,” said Alie as she hugged Mercy and ran into the house.

“What will you do about her wanting a father?” asked Dora.

“I don’t know. I need to go. I’ll fetch her for school in the morning.”

“I’ll take her.”

“Thank you.”

Mercy was glad that Aaron arrived before April at the restaurant. Her heart was thumping as he joined her. She looked at him in horror when he kissed her cheek, and presented her with a box of chocolates. He was not supposed to be giving her gifts. April joined them, and Mercy made the introductions.

Aaron looked from April to her with disappointment in his eyes, aware that she was setting him up. They sat talking for a while, then their food was brought to the table. They started eating, and continued to talk. Mercy was pleased that April and Aaron seemed to be getting on well. She let them talk and focused on eating. There was a silence. She looked up. Aaron was looking at her, April was looking between her and Aaron. The moment was awkward, and it stretched.

“I have to go,” said April.

“You haven’t finished eating,” said Mercy. April gathered her things, stood, and hastened from the table. Mercy followed her and stopped her at the door.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“How could you set me up with a man who already has a woman?” demanded April.

“Aaron doesn’t have a woman.”

“He has you!”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“He can’t keep his eyes off you.”

“He...”

“I can’t believe you’d be so cruel.”

“April...”

“Just leave me alone!” Mercy watched April walk away, then she returned to Aaron.

“Why did you do that?” he asked as she sat down.

“I wanted to help you to a good woman.”

“I have you!”

“I don’t want to be with you.”

“You’ve made that very clear. Goodnight,” he said, then he stood, and left. Mercy stared after him, disappointed by the way the meal had ended. She called for the bill, and was told that it had been taken care of. She was embarrassed that Aaron had paid for the disaster that she had organised.

When she arrived home, she took her shoes off, and decided to make herself a cup of tea. Her doorbell rang. She went to open the door, wondering who would visit her that late.

“Aaron?” she said. He entered her home uninvited.

“What are you doing here?” asked Mercy.

“What you did at the restaurant was rubbish,” he said.

“Then why are you here?”

“To tell you that you won’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Aaron...”

“I’m not very happy with you right now, but I still want you.”

“But...”

“Come on a date with me.”

“That won’t change my mind.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Aaron...”

“The only way to stop me pestering you is to come on a date with me. At the end of that, if you decide you still don’t want me, I’ll stay away from you.” Mercy gave him a long look.

“Alright. I’m free on Friday,” she said.

“I’m going out of the country. I’ll be back in time for the company annual shareholders’ party. Come with me to the party.” Mercy frowned, concerned about seeing Albert there.

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” continued Aaron.

“It will be awkward.”

“It won’t kill us, or anyone else. Will you come?”

“Okay, I’ll come.”

“I’ll call you about dates,” said Aaron. He kissed her cheek and left. Mercy held it, and stared at the closed front door that he had left through. She returned to the kitchen slowly. The man had guts, she would give him that. She would go on the date with him, and Albert would freak. It would be ugly. She would do her best to enjoy her time with Aaron, and then she would forget him, and focus on preparing for Alie’s future.

“How did your date go?” asked Dora.

“It wasn’t a date, I was just eating out,” said Mercy.

“I’ve never thought of you with anyone else, but why not?”

“Dora...”

“You’re beautiful, kind and strong. You and Mr Croukamp will be happy together.”

“Dora! I only called to find out if you and Alie were okay last night.”

“It was great.”

“Do you mind picking her up from school and taking her to my home?”

“No problem.”

“Thanks.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Mama? Can I have a birthday party?” asked Alie, as she and her mother dined that evening.

“We’ll see.”

“Please, Mama. I want to have all my friends here, and I want to get nice presents.”

“Okay, but you know your birthday is many months away.”

“How many months?”

“Six.”

“Can I send out invitations?”

“When we get closer to the day, you’ll take invitations to all your friends.”

“I’m so excited!” Mercy smiled.

Schools closed and Mercy was glad for holiday care. It kept Alie entertained, and she loved it.

Aaron phoned Mercy to arrange their date. Mercy arranged for Alie to spend that night at Tim's home. She drove her there, and returned home to dress. She had bought herself an expensive dress. She felt guilty about wasting money on it, but not guilty enough to return it. She had spent three hours having her hair dyed and styled. She put on her blue gown after her shower, and looked at herself in the mirror. She looked fantastic. The gown hugged her curves and made her look like an interesting and sexy woman of the world. She smiled at herself, and put her shoes on.

The doorbell rang, and the nerves returned. She opened the front door and watched as Aaron looked her over. He looked into her eyes.

"Hi, Aaron," she said.

"Hi, Mercy. You look fantastic."

"Thank you."

"Ready to go?"

"Yes, I'll just lock up." When she was done, Aaron offered her his arm, and led her to the car. His driver was standing beside the open back door. She greeted him, and he responded very warmly. Aaron helped Mercy into the car and climbed in beside her. The driver closed the door.

"I don't remember you introducing me to your driver," said Mercy.

"I didn't."

"Then why did he greet me like an old friend?"

"You sent him food when I visited you. No one else ever did that for him before."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, I have some calls to make."

"That's fine." Mercy was relieved that Aaron was on the phone all the way to their destination. Her heart was pounding as he led her to the door. The doorman greeted Aaron by name, and called her ma'am. She greeted him by name, and entered the dining room. The room was full. People greeted Aaron warmly, and greeted her cautiously. They were surprised when she asked them about things that a stranger would not know about them.

They took second looks at her, and most could not hide their surprise when they recognised her. In a short while, she knew that she was the talk of the party. People kept looking at her and whispering.

Aaron circulated with her, keeping a warm hand on the small of her back. She forced herself not to rub up against it as she wanted to. He included her in all conversations, and introduced her to the people that she did not know.

Dinner was announced, and everyone sat down. Mercy found herself sitting beside Aaron, who was at the head of the table of honour. She talked to the people around her. She looked up from her plate, and her eyes met Albert's. She was surprised by the desire in his eyes, then she saw him draw back in shock when he recognised her. He was sitting at the lower end of the table of honour. He had finally worked his way onto it. He had always wanted to sit beside Aaron. Aaron attracted Mercy's attention, and she broke eye contact with Albert.

Towards the end of the meal, everyone became uneasy as Albert tried to shush a noisy Hilda. She seemed to be drunk.

"I won't keep quiet about women who sleep their way to the top," she slurred.

"This is not the time or place," hissed Albert.

"It is exactly the place. Look at Mercy, looking all prim and proper, when we all know she slept her way out of a marriage to you, and into the bed of the company owner."

"Hilda!" gasped an embarrassed Albert.

"She slept with Croukamp so he could pull strings in her divorce, and now, look at her, smug as if she got the divorce on her own," continued Hilda. There was a stunned silence, then everyone looked at Mercy.

"I don't remember doing that," she said.

"That's because you didn't. I used my connections in the justice department," said James, a senior board member. Everyone looked at him, then they looked at Hilda.

"Why, James? That job was as good as mine," said Albert.

"This is not the place," said Moira, a senior company executive.

"The job was yours, Albert, but you were too careless to keep your wife. You'd done everything hard, keeping your wife should have been simple. I couldn't believe it when I heard your wife had filed for divorce. I realised then that you didn't want the job. I used my connections to get the divorce in a court as soon as possible, to make way for someone who wanted and deserved the job."

"You had no right to do that!" shouted Albert, close to tears in his fury. Someone tried to change the subject.

"Hilda, I believe you owe Mercy an apology," said Moira. Hilda snorted.

"Albert," prompted Moira. Albert stopped glaring at James and looked at Hilda.

"Sorry," Hilda said sulkily.

"Thank you," said Mercy, then she started talking about the latest financial scandal, and everyone jumped on the topic gratefully.

The meal ended, and speeches followed. Mercy sat watching the proceedings. It was the first company dinner that she had been to, and enjoyed. In the past when Albert had brought her, she had worried about him accusing her of embarrassing him, or feeling pressured to suck up to certain people to help him with his promotions.

Albert had worked there for twenty years, and he had taken Mercy to all of the parties. Even when he had been gone from home, he would fetch her for the party and drop her off at home afterwards, without seeing the children. That was one place he would never have risked taking another woman because the board of directors were big on family. Bringing another woman to the party would have caused him problems at work, and he did not want that because he loved the job, and it paid very well.

Aaron was called upon to speak, and he had everyone in stitches. Everyone clapped when he finished, and returned to his seat beside Mercy.

“That was a great speech,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Aaron. Mercy turned from him and listened to the other speakers. She could feel Aaron watching her. For a while she resisted looking at him, but eventually, she gave into the urge to look at him. His intent look frightened her. People around them clapped, and Mercy looked away from him, clapping as well. The speeches ended, and music started playing.

“Would you like to dance?” asked Aaron. Mercy looked at him. He stood and offered her his hand. She put hers in his, and he led her to the dance floor. He faced her, put a hand on her waist, held her other hand at shoulder level, and started dancing with her. She moved with him, her free hand on his shoulder. She felt self-conscious as they were the only couple on the dance floor.

Within minutes, other couples had joined them. Mercy gasped as Aaron drew her closer to his body. Her heart was thumping hard as she felt his chest against her breasts, and his leg between her legs. She was stiff with shock at first, then she relaxed. She noticed again that Aaron smelt fantastic. She also realised that she liked the feeling of his arms round her.

She lay her head on his shoulder. It was very comfortable, and Aaron did not seem to mind. She would just rest against him while she had the chance, then go back to supporting herself. Suddenly, she felt choked up and tried to stop the tears from falling, but they would not be stopped. She closed her eyes as her shoulders shook as she wept. He stopped dancing.

“Mercy?” he said, concerned.

“Don’t stop,” she said. Aaron started moving again. Mercy removed her hand from his, and joined her arms round his neck. Her tears stopped, and she used one of her hands to clean her face, using the hanky that Aaron handed her. Aaron stopped dancing and drew back to look at her.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why were you crying?” Mercy shook her head.

“Do you want to leave?” asked Aaron.

“Not yet.” Aaron put his arms round her, she put her arms round him, and they continued to shuffle on the spot. She closed her eyes, and enjoyed being held. After some time, he kissed her cheek.

“Can we go now?” he asked. Mercy nodded. Aaron took her hand in his, put his other hand on the small of her back and led her off the dance floor. He made his goodbyes to the remaining board members, and led Mercy out of the dining hall. He excused himself quickly whenever anyone tried to talk to him. He helped Mercy into his car, and joined her.

She thanked him when they arrived at her home. He insisted on seeing her into her home. She fumbled with the key at the front door, and stopped, too exhausted to continue. Aaron took the key and unlocked the door for her.

When she woke up, she tossed and turned for a while, keeping her eyes closed. Realising that she was done sleeping, she opened her eyes, and stretched.

“Hi,” said a male voice. She sat up, shocked. Aaron was sitting beside her, in the bed, watching her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I spent the night.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to leave you alone in your condition.”

“Oh!”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, thanks.” They watched each other in silence.

“If you want to shower, there’s a bathroom three doors on your left as you leave this room,” said Mercy. Aaron nodded, and left the room. Mercy rushed to her bathroom, freshened up quickly and dressed just as quickly. In a short time, she was making breakfast. Aaron joined her.

“Hi, sit down,” she said. He sat at the table, she joined him.

“Let’s eat,” she said. They ate in silence.

“What’s the matter?” asked Aaron. Mercy looked at him.

“You’re frowning, is something wrong?” continued Aaron.

“What do you know about investments?”

“I can give you a few pointers.”

“Great!”

“Over dinner.”

“I’m free now.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh.”

“I can meet you for dinner.” Mercy frowned.

“If you’re worried about finding a babysitter for Alie, I can meet you here,” said Aaron. Mercy nodded.

“Okay, fine,” she said.

In the afternoon, Mercy went to the river, then she went to fetch Alie. Tim asked if Alie could spend another night at his home, and Mercy agreed. She drove home, and started on dinner.

Dora phoned her.

“How was your date?” she asked. Mercy groaned.

“What happened?” asked Dora.

“Your father and his wife.”

“You took them on your date?”

“No, we went to the company party for our date, and your father and his drunk wife were there.”

“Was it ugly?”

“I thought so then, but looking back, it wasn’t that bad.”

“I’m glad you’re letting yourself move on.”

When Aaron arrived at Mercy’s home, he looked tired. He asked to use the bathroom, and Mercy went to finish preparing dinner. Her doorbell rang, she went to open the door.

“Albert? What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Where were you?”

“You have no right to ask me that.”

“I was here earlier, and you weren’t here.”

“What do you want?”

“How dare you embarrass me by going to my work party with my boss!”

“Go away, Albert.”

“Why, Mercy? Do you hate me that much? Do you know what people are saying?”

“I don’t care!”

“Of course not. You’re leaving me to deal with the consequences of your thoughtless behaviour.”

“Go away.”

“I’m not finished.”

“Alie’s not here, so you have no reason to be here.”

“I want you to stop dating Aaron.”

“She’s going to marry me,” said Aaron, standing behind Mercy. She gasped in shock, and looked from him to Albert. He looked as if he was going to have a heart attack.

“Whhhhaaaaaaat?” he shouted.

“Mercy and I are getting married,” replied Aaron.

“No!” shouted Albert.

“You need have no concerns about Alie, I’ll be a very good father to her.”

“No!” Albert shouted louder.

“If you’ll excuse us, we’re in the middle of something.”

“No!”

“We have a wedding to plan.”

“No!” Mercy almost smiled. Albert sounded like a broken record. He looked from Aaron to Mercy in shock.

“Do you need me to walk you to your car?” asked Aaron. Albert looked at him, and walked away. In seconds, he roared off. Mercy closed the door, and turned to Aaron.

“Why did you tell him we’re getting married?” she asked.

“I said what I thought would upset him the most.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to upset him for upsetting you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know. Something smells good.” Mercy led the way to the kitchen. They sat down.

“I’m sorry if what I said upset you, Mercy,” he said.

“It didn’t upset me.”

“But you’re worried?”

“Only because I don’t want you thinking it’s going to happen.”

“Don’t worry about me.” Mercy cleared the table when they were done eating, then she returned to the table.

“What do you want to know about investments?” asked Aaron.

“I want to grow every cent I have so Alie has resources when I die.”

“What kind of money are you talking about?”

“I can spare at least a thousand rand a month, and I know it won’t get me much, but I want to invest it, I don’t want to put it in a savings account.”

“Try unit trusts, but you have to invest for at least three to five years before the money starts working for you.”

“I want something that will give me meaty returns, Aaron.”

“Sell something.”

“What can I buy for that amount and sell?”

“Buy sweets and other things that children like, and have someone sell for you outside a school. It won’t give you one hundred percent profit, but at least, you’ll get returns.”

“That’s right.”

“I have more ideas.” The sun was rising when they finished talking. Mercy was surprised that they had been together that many hours.

“I’m sorry to have taken so much of your time,” she said.

“I enjoyed it. I’m grateful for every second I spend with you.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true.”

“I’m not young, slim, or beautiful, and I have children. How can you enjoy being with me?”

“You’re smart, sexy...” Mercy laughed derisively.

“You’re sexy,” insisted Aaron.

“Albert said...”

“He was talking rubbish. You’re the complete package.”

“The complete package?”

“Beautiful and brainy.” Mercy nodded as if she was humouring Aaron, and stood.

“I mean it, Mercy,” he said, stopping her with a hand on her forearm. She sat down and looked into his eyes. He was obviously trying to flatter her, but to what end? He held her look. She looked away from him, disconcerted by the fact that he was serious.

“I have to go,” he said.

“Thank you, for everything.”

“The pleasure’s mine, Mercy.” After seeing Aaron off, Mercy freshened up, then she opened her front door, wanting to get to her car.

“Have you no shame?” demanded Albert.

“What are you doing here?”

“How could you spend the night with Aaron?”

“Go away!”

“I’ll take Natalie away from you, because you’re a whore.” Mercy gasped in outrage.

“How dare you call me that!” she screamed.

“If the shoe fits.”

“You know nothing about me.”

“I know a whore when I see one.”

“Of course you do, seeing as you specialise in whoring.” Albert raised his hand, Mercy glared at him. He lowered his hand.

“I’m going to take Natalie, and there’s nothing you can do about it,” he said, then he climbed into his car, and left. Mercy took deep breaths, trying to calm herself. Albert is not going to take Alie, the court won’t allow it. I’m not going to upset myself over nothing, she told herself, then she climbed into her car, and went to fetch Alie.

Albert missed two visits with Alie, then he arrived to pick her up. She cried and knelt before Mercy, begging her not to let Albert take her. Albert screamed and shouted. Mercy offered to go with Alie, and Alie said if her mother was there, she would go to her father’s home. Albert threw a fit and threatened to bring the law down hard on Mercy. She decided to take the chance. Albert left.

The following week, Mercy took footage from her PI of Albert and Alie to Bryce, in case Albert filed for sole custody. Bryce assured her that Albert would not do that.

When month end came, Mercy bought stock and hired one of her nephews to sell it for her. Schools opened and the little business did well. She and her nephew had to increase stock every week as he always sold everything every day, leaving his customers hungry for more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She read in a paper that one of Aaron's sons had been hijacked, and her heart almost stopped. She felt very bad for Aaron, and phoned him.

"Croukamp," he said.

"Aaron, it's Mercy..."

"Hi, Mercy."

"I just read about Joseph. How is he?"

"The doctors won't say." Mercy got the details of the hospital where Joseph was. In the afternoon, she fetched Alie from school and told her that they were going to make a short stop at a hospital before going home.

"Are you sick, Mama?" asked Alie.

"No, I'm going to see the child of a friend."

"Do I know your friend?"

"Mr Croukamp."

"Your boyfriend? I like him, he's nice."

In the hospital, she held Alie's hand as they sought Aaron.

"There he is," said Alie as she freed her hand from Mercy's and ran off. Mercy hurried after her, not wanting to lose her. She found her standing before a haggard looking Aaron, who was seated alone in a waiting room. Alie was talking animatedly, and Aaron was smiling indulgently at her.

"Where's your Mama?" he asked.

"She's coming. Is your child dead?" asked Alie.

"Alie!" gasped Mercy. Aaron looked up at her, then he looked at Alie.

"I hope not," he said.

"Will he be my brother when you marry Mama?" Mercy gasped, Aaron laughed and hugged Alie. Alie returned the hug warmly.

"Can I see him? What's his name?" she asked, drawing back to look at Aaron.

"Joseph," he replied.

"Can I see buti Joseph?"

"The doctors will tell us when we can see him."

"Alie, go and get yourself a cold drink. Here's some money, and there's a vending machine," said Mercy, holding out money. Alie turned to her, took the money and ran off. Mercy sat beside Aaron.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. Thank you for being here," said Aaron.

“This must be terrible for you. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m hopeful.” Wanting to make him feel better, Mercy hugged him tight. When she released him, he held tight onto one of her hands. She looked towards the vending machine, wanting to be sure that Alie was safe. That gave her time to get used to how good having her hand held felt. Alie was talking to Hilda. Mercy stiffened.

“What’s the matter?” asked Aaron. Mercy looked at him, then she looked at Alie. She was running back to her. Mercy held out a hand to her. Alie went past her, and sat on the other side of Aaron. Hilda joined them. Alie seemed to want to meld into Aaron. He greeted Hilda.

“Alie tells me her brother’s here. Is Tim ill?” she asked.

“My son Joseph was hijacked,” said Aaron.

“Why did Alie call him her brother? Mercy, you need to get your child to stop lying.”

“I’m not lying,” said Alie.

“I know,” said Aaron, turning to her.

“She called your son her brother. He’s not her brother,” said Hilda.

“He will be, when I marry her mother.”

“Oh! Oh,” said Hilda, looking from Aaron to Mercy.

“Here comes Joe’s doctor. Please excuse us,” said Aaron. Hilda left. The doctor approached and looked at Mercy uneasily.

“This is my wife, and this is our daughter,” said Aaron. The doctor relaxed and greeted them all, then he said that the operation had been successful, and that the rest was up to Joe. When Aaron asked if they could see him the doctor told them that he was unconscious, but they could see him.

Aaron stood, Mercy and Alie stood with him and followed him to Joe’s room. Mercy gasped in shock. Joe was lying still and pale, hooked up to machines. Mercy stopped, Aaron drew on her hand, and they stopped beside Joe’s bed. Aaron had tears on his cheeks. Mercy squeezed his hand. Alie climbed onto the bed beside Joe.

“Alie!” said Mercy, making to help her off the bed. Aaron stayed her. Alie looked at Joe, then she looked at Aaron.

“He looks like you,” she said, then she looked at Joe again.

“Hi, I’m Alie, your new baby sister. Can you hurry and get well? I want another big brother. The one I have is nice, and you can be my other one. Buti says I’m a nice little sister. You’ll like me,” she said to him. He did not respond.

“Can he hear me?” she asked Aaron. He nodded and drew closer to the bed. He leaned down, and kissed Joe’s cheek. As he straightened, Alie kissed Joe too. Aaron started talking to Joe. Mercy freed her hand, and brought him a chair. She helped him into it, and helped Alie off the bed. She touched Aaron’s shoulder, he looked at her, she waved. He waved back and waved at Alie, then Mercy led her out of the room. She noticed that Alie was thoughtful as they left the hospital.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I liked it when Mr Croukamp said I was his child. Can I call him Baba now?” Mercy stopped walking, shocked by her child’s words. It always shocked her to realise how badly Alie wanted a father figure.

“Alie, I might not marry him,” she said.

“But you like him, don’t you?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I want him to be my baba.”

“I know.”

“So you’ll marry him?”

“We’ll see.”

“I want...”

“I heard you. I have to take you home now, and get back to work.”

Mercy was exhausted when she returned home in the evening. Alie met her at the front door.

“Mama, we have to go and see buti Joe,” she said.

“We’ll see him tomorrow.”

“We have to go now. I want to read him a story.”

“The doctor said he needs to rest.”

“If I read to him...”

“Alie...”

“Please, Mama.” Alie looked so earnest that Mercy could not say no.

“I’ll shower, then we’ll go. Visiting hours might be over when we get there.”

“That’s fine.”

Alie walked into Joe’s room ahead of Mercy, and stopped abruptly. Mercy bumped into her, and held onto her shoulders to stop them both from falling. She looked at Alie, she was not looking so sure of herself, as she looked about the room. Mercy looked up, and noticed the doctor with Aaron’s ex-wife Adele and Joe’s brother.

“Hello, Adele, hello Edward, hello Doctor,” she greeted. The doctor returned her greeting.

“Adele, I’m so sorry about what happened to Joe,” continued Mercy.

“Mercy?” said Adele. Mercy took Alie’s hand and drew her into the room.

“What are you doing here?” asked Adele.

“She’s Mrs Croukamp,” said the doctor.

“What?” said Adele and Edward.

“When did this happen?” demanded Edward.

“How is Joe?” Mercy asked the doctor.

“You have no right to ask that, you’re not his family,” said Edward.

“She obviously needs to tell you father. We haven’t seen him since we got here,” said Adele.

“He should have told us about this,” said Edward.

“Are you buti Joe’s brother?” asked Alie.

“What?”

“If you’re buti Joe’s brother, then you’re my brother too.”

“I am not your brother!” Alie’s face fell, then she looked at Joe. She left Mercy’s side and climbed onto the bed.

“Get her off there,” said Edward. Alie kissed Joe’s cheek.

“What’s she doing? Make her stop!” shouted Edward. Joe opened his eyes, and looked straight at Alie. He blinked.

“Hi,” said Alie.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m your sister, Alie.”

“Alie.”

“I visited you earlier, with our Baba.”

“Baba?”

“Our dad.” Joe frowned.

“She confusing him, she’s not his sister,” said Edward. Joe turned his head, and looked at him.

“Leave her alone,” he said. Everyone gasped.

“I’m your brother!” said Edward in consternation.

“Only by blood, otherwise, you’re my worst enemy.”

“How dare you say that! Edward is your brother!” said Adele.

“He’s never been my brother. He’s always saying hurtful things and trying to keep me out of the family business. Edward, get out.”

“But...” said Edward.

“I want you out of here!”

“Calm down, Mr Croukamp,” said the doctor.

“Get him out.”

“I’m going,” said Edward. He was at the door when Joe called his name. He looked at him.

“Leave my sister alone,” said Joe.

“She is not your sister!”

“I’d rather have her as a sister, than have you as a brother.”

“You’re a fool,” said Edward, then he left. The doctor checked Joe’s vitals as Joe closed his eyes, breathing deeply. Alie kissed his cheek and climbed off the bed. The doctor then told

Joe that he would be fine. He would be kept in the hospital for two days, then he would be released. The doctor made his goodbyes, and left.

Adele moved to the bed, and kissed Joe's cheek.

"Don't cry, Ma. I'm fine, as you see," he said.

"I'm so glad, I couldn't bear to lose you," said Adele.

"You won't. Did you adopt my sister?"

"No, she came with your father's new wife."

"Pa remarried? Who did he marry?" Adele looked at Mercy. Mercy noticed Joe looking at her.

"Mrs Ngema?" he said, astounded to see her.

"Hello, Joe," she said.

"When did you and Pa..."

"Does that matter?" asked Adele.

"She's married to Mr Ngema!"

"She wouldn't be married to your father if that was the case." Joe gave Mercy a long look, then he looked at Alie.

"I'm glad you've woken up. Can I read to you?" said Alie.

"Alie, Joe needs to rest," said Mercy. Joe was watching Alie as if he was fascinated by her.

"Yes, you can read to me," he said. Alie smiled and took her back pack off her back. She searched in it, brought out a book, then she sat beside Joe on the bed, and started reading. Adele and Mercy each sat on a chair. After some minutes, Mercy stopped Alie, reminding her that she had school, and that Joe needed to sleep. Alie promised to return the following day, and read to Joe again. Mercy made her goodbyes, then she and Alie left.

Once Alie was asleep at home, Mercy phoned Aaron. He sounded tired. She briefed him about Joe, and he said that Edward had briefed him and then interrogated him about his marriage to her. She wanted to suggest that they correct the lie, then she decided that it could be straightened out when Aaron was not so stressed.

Next afternoon, Alie insisted that they visit Joe again.

"We'll go now, but we can't go in the evening," said Mercy.

"Why not?"

"Because we need an early night, and Joe needs time with his family."

"We're his family."

"He needs time with his parents."

"But..."

"You'll see him another time."

They found Joe with his parents. Greetings were exchanged, and then Alie climbed on the bed to kiss Joe. He hugged her warmly. Alie climbed off the bed, hugged Aaron, and sat

beside him next to Joe's bed. Mercy stood at the foot of the bed. Joe was watching her steadily, and that made her nervous.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Surprised."

"Surprised?"

"That you're my stepmother."

"Oh, I..."

"Of all the women in the world, you're the last one I'd have expected Pa to marry."

"Why?"

"Because you were so very married to Mr Ngema. All sorts of rumours flew about him, but you stayed with him. Everyone was convinced that only death would separate you from him."

"He hit her," said Alie.

"Alie!" said Mercy, deeply embarrassed. Everyone else gasped.

"He was arrested. He hit me too. I never want to see him again." Everyone looked from Alie to Mercy. She was frowning at Alie, wondering when Albert had hit her, and why she had never brought it up before.

"There'll be no more hitting, of anyone," Aaron said firmly.

"Buti Joe, Mama says we won't come and see you tonight. She says you need time with your Baba and your Mama," said Alie.

"Oh," said Joe.

"I wanted to read you a bedtime story tonight."

"You can do it another time," said Mercy.

"When?" Mercy had no response.

"We'll arrange something," said Aaron. Mercy gave him a grateful look.

"We need to leave, Alie, I have to get to work," she said.

After work, she was surprised to find Aaron in her home.

"Is everything alright?" she asked.

"Joe wants to see Alie."

"Oh?"

"I'll take you both to see him, then you can spend the night in my home, it's closer to the hospital. Joe really wants to see her, he says she's his only non-stress-inducing visitor." Even though she was tired, Mercy agreed. She said that she would freshen up, then they could all leave.

In Joe's room, she sat on a chair, watching him with Alie. She felt a kiss on her cheek, and opened her eyes, she had not realised that she had fallen asleep.

“Alie?” she said, looking at the person beside her. It was Aaron who had kissed her, he was bent beside her, looking at her.

“Let’s go,” he said. She looked behind him. Alie, Joe, Adele, and her husband Chris, were all watching her. Aaron took her hand and straightened. She stood, made her goodbyes, then Aaron led her out of the room. Alie quickly attached her hand to his other hand, and Mercy listened to them talking like old friends.

Alie fell asleep in the car, leaning against Aaron as if she had done it all her life. He made her comfortable, as if he too had done it all her life. At his home, Mercy carried Alie to the room that Aaron showed her to. She changed her into her pyjamas, and tucked her into bed. Mercy stood from the bed, and became aware of Aaron, watching her. She approached him, he took her hand in his and led her to another bedroom. He released her hand, and she looked about. She was embarrassed when she noticed that he was getting undressed.

“If you show me to my room...” she said.

“You’ll sleep here, with me,” he said matter-of-factly.

“But...”

“In your home, I slept with you in your bed, in my home, you’ll sleep with me in my bed.” Mercy picked up her bag, and went to change in the bathroom. When she joined Aaron, he was in bed, in his pyjamas. She climbed into bed, and lay down. She moved about, trying to find a comfortable position. She finally settled, then she gasped as Aaron moved on the bed. She gasped again as he kissed her cheek, then he lay down. Despite her misgivings about being in his bed, she fell asleep.

When she woke up, she knew it was late. She looked at the time, and gasped, it was going on nine. She was alone in the bedroom. She climbed out of bed, grabbed her morning gown, put it on, and rushed to Alie’s room. It was empty. Her heart seemed to stop. She ran back to the room she had slept in, and phoned Aaron.

“Hi, Mercy,” he said.

“Hi, I’m looking for Alie.”

“I took her to school.”

“Oh! Thank you.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thanks, but now I’m late.”

“My driver’s at your disposal for the day.”

“I was going to take a cab.”

“Use the driver. I’ll see you later.”

Mercy freshened up, and Aaron’s driver took her to work. When he fetched her to fetch Alie from school, Aaron was in the car. He said that he and Alie would drop Mercy at work, and go and see Joe.

“Let’s take her home,” said Mercy.

“Joe wants to see her,” said Aaron.

“She can see him this evening.”

“She’ll see him both times.”

“Take her home so you can get on with your day.”

“She’ll come with me as I finish the rest of my day.”

“Looking after kids isn’t easy. She has homework, and...”

“I know how to help with homework. Don’t worry Mercy, she and I will be fine.” Alie was pleased to see Mercy and Aaron.

At the end of the day, Aaron and Alie were driven to fetch Mercy, then they went to Aaron’s home. Joe had been discharged and that was where he had gone. Alie ran to look for him. Mercy followed her and greeted him. She watched him with Alie for a short while, then she went to look for Aaron.

She found him in the lounge, ending a call. She sat down.

“Thank you for having us. Alie and I need to go home now,” she said. Aaron nodded.

“Thank you for being here. My driver will take you.” Alie was very unhappy to be leaving.

Next afternoon after school, Alie wanted to visit Joe. Mercy said no. Alie burst into tears. Mercy was so shocked by that, she stopped the car and watched her in disbelief.

“Why are you crying?” she asked.

“I want to see my brother.”

“He’s not your brother.”

“He will be, if you give me Pa.”

“You have a Baba.”

“I don’t want the one that hits me, I want buti Joe’s Pa.”

“You can’t have him!”

“I can if you marry him.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

“Mama, please,” said Alie, looking at Mercy out of beseeching, tear-stained eyes. Mercy turned away, pierced by that look. She could hear Alie sniffing as she cried quietly.

“Stop that, now, Alie,” she said.

“Please!” whispered Alie. Mercy closed her eyes and took several deep breaths to stop herself from crying as well. She opened her eyes and drove Alie home. Images of Alie crying made it difficult for her to focus at work.

In the evening, she took Alie to see Joe. She was tense as she waited in the lounge for Aaron who had not yet returned. She stood when he joined her.

“Mercy? Hi. Is something wrong? Why do you look like that?” he asked.

“Alie wants you to be her father.”

“I know.”

“I’ll marry you, for her sake.” He gave her a long look.

“Oh.”

“I’m only doing it for her sake. I don’t want to be married, but I’ll marry to give Alie what she needs. It’s the least I can do since I’ll be abandoning her when I die.”

“No,” said Aaron.

“Excuse me?” Mercy said in disbelief.

“I can’t be an effective father to Alie if I don’t have a relationship with her mother.”

“She’s the only one you need a relationship with.”

“If I marry you, I want it to be because we both want it. I won’t marry you for Alie’s sake, or any reason other than our desire to be together.”

“Aaron...”

“I want to be Alie’s father. I wasn’t much of a father to Eddie and Joe because I was always working. Alie’s giving me a chance to be hands on, and I want that chance. But I won’t take it if it comes with another meaningless marriage.”

“I don’t have the energy to work on a marriage.”

“Then find Natalie another father.”

“She wants you! This afternoon, she cried as if her heart had been broken when I said I wouldn’t marry you. Please marry me.”

“I want to, Mercy, you know that, but I want a full marriage with you, not a pretend marriage.” Mercy sat down. Aaron sat beside her. Alie came into the room.

“Pa, you’re back,” she said, going to hug him. Aaron returned her embrace and asked about her day. She talked enthusiastically. Mercy watched them, and realised that Alie’s biological father did not show her half the affection that Aaron was showing her. The housekeeper came into the room and announced dinner.

“Go and call Joe to dinner,” Mercy said to Alie. Alie ran out of the room.

“I’ll marry you, Aaron,” said Mercy.

“And you’ll work on the marriage with me?” he said.

“Yes, I’ll work on the marriage with you.”

“Which of your family members do I talk to about lobola?” Mercy drew back, surprised.

“Won’t your family expect lobola?” asked Aaron.

“I guess.”

“I want to do this the right way. Tell me who to talk to about that, and tell me when you’re free to go and register to marry. I want to do this as soon as possible. We don’t know how much time we have.”

“Yes.”

“I want to adopt Alie.”

“You do?”

“I want her to be my daughter, not my stepdaughter.”

“I see.”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, but Albert might.”

“Him I can handle. I’m trusting that Alie won’t have a problem with it, but I’ll talk to her about it. Let’s go eat.”

After dinner, Aaron walked Mercy and Alie to Mercy’s car and kissed them each on the cheek.

Mercy tossed and turned most of the night. She knew she was doing the right thing for Alie, but was she doing the right thing for her and Aaron?

Her phone rang just before the close of business the following day.

“What’s your problem?” demanded a man.

“Albert?”

“Not only do you embarrass me by dating Croukamp, now you’ve made him ask me if he can adopt Natalie. I’ll never let him do that. Never! She’s my child and no one else will have her. I’m her father, and no matter what other man you have, he’ll never replace me as that child’s father.” Mercy cut the call.

In the evening, she took Alie to see Joe. He was sitting in the gazebo when they arrived. Alie ran ahead of Mercy, and hugged him. Mercy reached them and greeted Joe. He returned her greeting and asked Alie to fetch an album for him in his room. Alie ran off. Mercy was undecided whether to sit with Joe or leave.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For what?”

“Giving Pa a reason to live.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He’s been alone and so lonely. You and Alie are giving him a new lease on life.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, uncertain of the correct response.

“I don’t mind you being part of the family, but watch out for Ed. He’s...you’ll find out soon enough. Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you. I’ll do my best to be a good wife and stepmother.”

“Alie says you’re not my stepmother. I have to call you Mama, like her, and she’ll call my mother Ma, just like me.”

“Thank you for being kind to her.”

“She makes it easy. When are you moving in with Pa? I thought married people lived together.”

“We’ll get round to it,” Mercy said uneasily. Alie returned with a photo album. Mercy left and went to wait in the house. After an hour, she went to the gazebo, ready to tell Alie that it was time to leave.

She found Alie and Joe poring over his photo album. They did not hear her. She stood watching them. A phone rang, she looked behind her. Aaron was coming towards them, talking on his phone. Mercy turned back to Alie and Joe. Alie ran past her, and hugged Aaron. His call had ended, and he hugged her.

“Come, Pa, come and see what buti Joe got up to in Kenya,” she said, drawing on his hand. He kissed Mercy’s cheek as he walked past her, and stopped beside Joe. Alie turned the album on Joe’s lap and showed Aaron a few pictures, as she explained them. Mercy watched them, then she looked at Joe, he was watching her. She looked back at Alie.

“We have to go now, Alie,” she said. The excitement left Alie’s face.

“You’ll see Joe next time,” continued Mercy. She made her goodbyes to Joe and took Alie’s hand as she turned away. Alie released her hand and held onto Aaron’s. Mercy led the way to the car. Aaron hugged and kissed Alie and helped her into the car, then he closed the car door. He turned to Mercy.

“I spoke to your brother about meeting him for lobola talks,” he said.

“That was quick.”

“I also spoke to Albert about adopting Alie.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t sound happy.”

“I know I’m doing the right thing for Alie, but I’m afraid I’ll break your heart.”

“That’s a chance I’m willing to take. Can you come with me to register to marry tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“We need to plan the wedding this weekend. On Monday, I’m flying out to Singapore.”

“Do you travel a lot?”

“I have been, but I’ll cut down. I have a wife and daughter who need me now.”

“Don’t put yourself out.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, kissing her cheek.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aaron phoned her every day. She enjoyed talking to him. Every day, Alie asked why they were not going to visit buti Joe. Mercy told her that she would spend all of Saturday with him. On Friday afternoon, Aaron invited Mercy and Alie to spend the weekend in his home.

They arrived on Saturday for breakfast. Joe told Alie that he had to leave. She was disappointed, but the fact that she had the whole weekend at Aaron's house made it easy for her to accept the situation.

Mercy and Aaron spent just over an hour discussing venues, guests and menus, then it was time to take Alie to Tim, before going to meet the wedding planner.

The meeting went well, then they went to buy rings. Mercy felt as if everything was moving too fast. She and Aaron fetched Alie and returned to Aaron's home for a late lunch. Afterwards, Mercy helped the staff to make dinner. The staff set the table and took in the food. Mercy went to find Alie. She was in her room, reading.

The two of them joined Aaron and Joe in the dining room. Mercy was disconcerted to find Edward there. She greeted him and sat down. She could feel his eyes on her. She turned to see if Alie had settled. Alie was delighted to be sitting between Aaron and Joe. Mercy looked at Edward again.

"Last time I saw you, you were having a graduation party," she said. He smiled.

"Those were the good old days. Now though, things are different," he said, as his smile disappeared. Mercy looked about the room.

"Let's eat," she said. Everyone started eating.

"So, Mercy, are you planning on taking every penny that Pa has?" asked Edward. Mercy stopped chewing, shocked by the question.

"No!" she replied.

"I'm not going to let you steal from him." Mercy gave him a long look, wondering why he was so suspicious. She had not once thought about Aaron's money. Stealing from him had not occurred to her, and it was never going to be on her to-do list. She looked at her food and played with it, her appetite gone.

"Buti Edward?" said Alie. Mercy looked at her, and at Edward. He was glaring at Alie.

"Why don't you like Mama?" asked Alie. Edward looked at Mercy.

"I don't trust her," he said. Alie frowned.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I think she wants to steal our money."

"She has her own money!" Alie said in consternation.

"That's right. Ed, what brings you here?" asked Aaron.

"We need to talk," replied Edward.

"About what?"

"Business."

"Do you need more money?"

"Can we talk in private?"

"Why? When you were accusing Mercy of gold-digging, you didn't need privacy."

“I’m not a woman married to you under false pretences.”

“It’s gold digging either way. How much do you want, and what’s it for?”

“Pa!”

“This is the last time you address Mercy with disrespect. If I hear that you so much as gave her a dirty look, I’ll...”

“You’ll what?”

“I’ll have auditors look into your various ventures.” Edward paled.

“How much money do you want?” Edward mentioned an amount and Mercy choked on her food, amazed that a person could ask for that kind of money.

“I know you have it, Pa,” continued Ed.

“Why should I give it to you?” asked Aaron.

“Because I can’t finish my project without it.” Everyone watched Aaron as he ate, deliberately keeping Edward waiting.

“Talk to the bank,” he said.

“What?” shouted an outraged Edward.

“Talk to the bank. I think your ventures fail because you never have to pay the money back.”

“That’s not true!”

“Once you have something at stake, I’m sure you’ll up your game and make your ventures successful.”

“Why won’t you give me the money?”

“Giving it to you is a bad business decision.”

“No, it isn’t.” Aaron ate, ignoring Edward.

“I’m telling Ma,” he said petulantly. Joe changed the subject, and everyone followed his lead.

Mercy and Alie left Aaron’s home on Sunday afternoon and went to the home of her brother Nkanda. His wife was excited to see Mercy as she had not visited them in a long time. Alie was happy to play with the grandchildren that her uncle and aunt were raising for their parents, who were working in other cities. Mercy and Nkanda were left alone.

“I’m getting married,” she said.

“So I’ve heard.”

“I wanted to tell you before Aaron talked to you.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“What’s the rush, Mercy? You’ve just got rid of one husband and now you’re getting another one.”

“I’m dying, I don’t have time to observe respectable time frames.”

“You’re the youngest in the family, you’re the one who’ll live longest.”

“I told you when you visited me and Albert that he gave the HIV virus.”

“Don’t say that! How can you be proud to say those words?”

“I...”

“Nobody needs to know.” Mercy looked down, understanding Buti’s fear of being regarded as a pariah for being related to someone with the HIV virus. Younger people were not as afraid as the older generation was, and he was definitely a member of the older generation.

“What’s the rush?” he asked.

“Alie needs a father.”

“She already has one.”

“He doesn’t live with her.”

“And this one will? Your former husband was hardly ever home.”

“I hope Aaron will be home.” Nkanda gave her a long look.

“You did the right thing staying with the father of your children,” he said.

“Did I?”

“Yes! You showed all women how to be patient with their husbands. You were a good wife. Be a good wife this time round as well.”

“I hope you won’t charge Aaron too much.”

“We won’t. We’re all surprised that you’re marrying again. Did you ask him to talk to us?”

“No, it was his initiative.”

“Really? Even though it’s not part of his culture? He must have strong feelings for you. At your age, Sisi, we can’t charge much. You’re past child-bearing, and you’re not a virgin. Don’t tell him about being sick, he may decide not to marry you, and his negotiators may decide to pay very little because of the illness.”

“I’ve already told him.”

“Mercy!”

“He still wants to marry me.”

“He’s a brave man. You’re not going to cheat on this one as you did on your first husband, are you?”

“I never cheated on Albert!”

“He said...”

“I was thinking of it...”

“Sisi!”

“...but I didn’t do it. The divorce happened before I found a lover.”

“Don’t cheat on your husband.”

“I won’t!”

“Good luck, my sister.”

“Thank you, Buti.”

That evening, Mercy invited Dora and Tim to her home. They all had dinner, then Mercy announced that she was marrying Aaron. Alie cheered. Dora and Tim looked from Mercy to each other. Mercy asked Alie to go and get drinks for her siblings. Alie left. Mercy asked Dora and Tim what they were thinking.

“Good luck, Mama, I hope this marriage works out better for you than the other one,” said Dora.

“Thank you,” said Mercy.

“I don’t like it,” said Tim.

“Why not?”

“What makes you think he won’t cheat on you, or treat you the way Baba did?”

“I don’t know that he won’t. I’m hoping he won’t.”

“Why take the chance? Why are you marrying him at all?”

“Because Alie wants him to be her father.”

“Please, Mama, tell me that’s not the only reason,” said Dora.

“What other reason could there be?”

“That you like him?”

“I do like him, I always have.”

“So you’re marrying him as much for you, as for Alie?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then don’t marry him,” said Tim.

“The wheels have already been set in motion.”

“You can stop them.”

“I don’t want to.” Tim gave her a long look.

“You *do* want to marry him,” he said. Mercy did not respond. Alie returned with the drinks. Tim was upset, and said that he had to leave. Dora decided to leave too.

Mercy and Aaron saw the wedding planner several times, and sent out invitations. Mercy bought herself a wedding gown, and bought Alie a flower girl dress. Alie was very excited about the wedding.

Most evenings, she would ask if she could phone Aaron. Mercy often had to force her off the phone when she was talking to him.

She and Aaron had agreed that she and Alie would move into his home after the wedding. Mercy could not decide what to do with her house. In the end, she decided to have her nephew house sit for a short while.

Some days before the wedding, Edward visited Mercy in her home.

“Are you looking for your father? He’s not here,” said Mercy.

“I know. I came to see you.”

“Why?”

“We need to talk. Can I come in?” Even though she felt uneasy, Mercy let him into her home and asked him to sit down.

“I don’t want problems,” said Edward.

“Neither do I.”

“Good. Promise not to rob my father, and all will be well.” Mercy could not believe what he had said. How dare he speak to her that way!

“Well, Mercy?” he said.

“You don’t get to call me that,” she said coldly.

“That’s your name.”

“Yes, and it’s disrespectful of you to use it, because you’re younger than me, and because I’m your father’s wife. You call me Mama or MaNdlovu, but never by my name.”

“Fine! Will you promise not to rob my father?”

“This conversation is over. There’s the door, get out,” she said.

“You haven’t promised...”

“Go!” Edward smiled derisively and stood. Mercy wanted to smack him. She went to open the front door for him to leave.

“Hi, Mercy,” said Aaron. Mercy was surprised to see him on her doorstep.

“Are you alright?” asked Aaron. Edward greeted his father, and started asking about his trip.

“We’ll talk later Ed,” he said. Edward left.

“What’s the matter?” asked Aaron as he entered the house. He kissed Mercy’s cheek. She closed the door.

“Edward...Edward just asked me to promise not to rob you.”

“What did you say?”

“I sent him away.”

“Good, I hope you don’t mind that I sent Tim away.”

“Tim?”

“He came to tell me how to be a husband. I sent him away.”

“I didn’t ask him to.”

“I know, and I didn’t send Ed to you.”

“I know. Are you sure about this?”

“Of course. Are you having second thoughts?”

“I don’t want to cause problems between you and your children.”

“You won’t. Where’s Alie?”

“In her bedroom.”

“I’ll go and find her.” He kissed her cheek and left. In seconds, she heard Alie squealing with excitement, and smiled. She put dinner on the table and went to look for Aaron and Alie.

They were sitting on the floor in Alie’s room, playing cards.

“It’s time to eat,” she said. They both looked up, wearing the same surprised expression.

CHAPTER NINE

On her wedding day, Mercy was a nervous wreck. She felt bad about Alie missing school, but Alie would not hear of not being at the wedding. There were about sixty guests. Dora stood up with Mercy, Aaron’s lawyer, Sasha, stood up with him. After the ceremony, they all went to lunch at Aaron’s restaurant. Mercy was glad that Edward, Tim and Joseph had attended the wedding.

After lunch, Mercy and Aaron were driven to the airport as they were going on their honeymoon. Mercy hoped that Dora and Joe would get on as they were staying with Alie in Aaron’s home.

Mercy and Aaron were exhausted when they arrived in Las Vegas. They freshened up and slept.

When Mercy awoke, she was alone in the bed. She freshened up and realised that she was starving. She decided to go and eat in the dining room. Most of the tables were empty. She was going to an empty table, when she heard Aaron’s voice. She looked about, he was sitting with several men, and they were talking loudly and laughing uproariously.

She approached the group and stood beside Aaron. Everyone looked at her. She gave a general greeting. Aaron pushed his chair back, kissed her cheek and introduced her as his wife, telling her that the group consisted of businessmen who were there for a conference. Everyone gave Mercy a second look, clearly shocked that she was Aaron’s wife. He excused himself, and led her away.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said.

“Thank you for rescuing me. I’m here to be with you, not to talk business. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks, and you?” Aaron helped her into a seat, and sat beside her. They had brunch, then they went on a guided tour. They returned to the hotel in time to freshen up and go for dinner. They took in a show afterwards, and returned to their suite. Mercy had time to look about the suite.

“This is a great view,” she said, looking out of the windows.

“Yes, it is,” said Aaron. She turned to look at him, he was sitting on a couch, watching her. Mercy looked out at the skyline, and decided to take pictures to show Alie. She took her

phone out of her pocket and photographed the skyline and other interesting things that she saw. She turned, and took a picture of Aaron as well.

“That camera’s been working a lot today,” he teased.

“I’ve never been out of South Africa.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, it never came up.”

“Did you want to?”

“Once I found out about my status, I wished I’d been to all the places I’d dreamed of visiting.”

“Such as?”

“Paris, Lusaka, Moscow, Addis Ababa. Some people who were in the struggle used to talk about those places, and they sounded fabulous.”

“When were you planning to go?”

“I had no time frame. I looked at my finances and knew it wouldn’t be any time soon. I might never get the chance to go to those places,” she said, as she sat beside Aaron.

“Thank you for this,” she continued.

“If money was no problem, when would you want to go?”

“Hmm. It would have to be during holidays so Alie could come too. If money was no object, I’d like to take all my children and grandchildren on holiday somewhere nice and sunny.”

“Could I come too?”

“Of course. Maybe Edward and Joe could come too.”

The next morning, Aaron suggested that they have breakfast in their suite. When the food arrived, he sat staring at it, instead of eating.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mercy.

“I want you to get tested.”

“Tested?”

“To see if you really are HIV positive.”

“I am.”

“Get a second opinion.”

“I had five opinions, and they were all the same.”

“Get another opinion. What can it hurt? Maybe you have more years ahead of you than you’ve been led to believe.”

“I don’t.”

“Don’t you want to see Alie into adulthood?”

“You know I do.”

"I'm glad to hear that. If you're up to it, I've arranged for you to get tested and to join some clinical trials instead of succumbing without a fight." Mercy stared at Aaron in shock, then she put down her eating utensils.

"They've had results that give hope. It's risky, of course, but anything worth having is risky. These doctors are..." said Aaron.

"Excuse me," said Mercy. She stood, left the suite, then she left the hotel. She walked about, not really seeing anything. When she tired, she realised that she did not where she was. She felt panicked for a while, then she flagged down a cab. She patted herself down after giving the name of her hotel. She did not have any money on her. At the hotel, she asked the cab driver to come into the hotel with her to get money. He started to shout her.

"Hey! I'm from out of the country and I'm dying, mister. Give me a break!" she shouted. He stared at her, surprised.

"Are you coming in for your money, or is this ride on the house?" she asked.

"I'll come in."

"I'm sorry for shouting at you."

"You're not the only one with problems, lady."

"I know." In the hotel lobby, she phoned her suite, hoping Aaron was there.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Please come down and pay my cab driver, then you can shout at me."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes."

"I'm coming." Aaron looked Mercy over, then he asked how much money she needed, the cab driver answered. Aaron gave him money, and told him to keep the change. The driver thanked him and left.

"I was worried about you," said Aaron.

"I realise that now. Sorry I was gone so long. I need a shower."

When she was dressed, she found Aaron waiting for her in their lounge. She sat opposite him.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes. I've never thought of going on clinical trials."

"Will you think about it now?"

"Yes, but I don't promise anything. I don't think there's much point in going for testing, but if it will put your mind at ease, I'll go for them."

"Don't do them for me, do them for you."

"Hmm. I'm hungry, do you want to come eat in the dining room with me?"

"No, go ahead." Mercy enjoyed her food, she had decided not give herself hope in case she was disappointed, and not to worry. She would just enjoy her honeymoon and take everything one moment at a time.

She found Aaron on the phone. He made several long calls. Mercy phoned home to find out how Alie was doing. She was fine, and she could not wait for Mama and Pa to come back home.

When Mercy's call ended, Aaron was off the phone, watching her.

"I couldn't sleep last night," he said.

"Why?"

"It dawned on me that the virus might take you from me before I'm ready for us be parted. If it was human, I'd throw everything I have at it."

"Aaron..."

"If we have to go all over the world looking for a cure, that's what we'll do."

"But..."

"We leave tomorrow morning for the clinic. It's in another state, so we'll fly. It will likely be an all-day event."

"Don't raise your hopes, Aaron."

"I..."

"I've accepted my situation, I suggest you accept it too."

"Don't accept it! Don't let the doctors decide how long you live."

"I..."

"Why didn't you protect yourself?"

"I was being a good wife."

"Damn being a good wife!" Mercy watched Aaron, he was upset, genuinely upset. She went to sit beside him, and put her arms round him. He held her tight.

He released her. She watched as he paced the floor. He needs a distraction, she thought.

"Let's go to a casino," she said.

"You go."

"I want to do something with you. Isn't a honeymoon about doing things together?" He stopped and looked at her.

"Yes, we should be getting to know each other." They did not enjoy their stint at the gaming tables. Mercy was worried about Aaron and he was worried about her. She cajoled him into eating a little dinner, then it was time to sleep. She fell asleep immediately.

They left early the next morning for the clinic. The tests confirmed that she was HIV positive. Aaron wanted to know exactly how long Mercy had to live. The doctors tried not to be specific, but he pushed, and they ended up saying maybe five years. Mercy was calm throughout, and tried to calm Aaron but he would not be calmed. He asked about the trials, and the doctors talked about them at length, focusing on Aaron, who had the questions.

Mercy listened half-heartedly. She was more interested in what was not being said, than in what was being said. Aaron told the doctors to enrol Mercy for the trials, and she said no.

Everyone looked at her as if they had forgotten that she was there. The doctors talked about the possibilities, Mercy raised a hand. The doctors stopped talking.

“Thank you for your time, everyone. We’ll be off now,” she said.

“Mercy!” said Aaron. She stood and left the office. She could hear Aaron hastening after her. He stopped in front of her.

“Don’t you want to give yourself a chance to live longer?” he asked.

“These are trials, Aaron, there are no guarantees.”

“I know, but at least you’re trying to live longer.”

“I could also be trying to live a shorter life.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Depending on how my body reacts, I could live longer, or shorter. I’m not prepared to take the chance.”

“These doctors know what they’re doing. They want to succeed. They want to cure you.”

“When the cure is certain, I’ll take the medicine, otherwise, I’ll take my chances as I am.”

“Mercy...”

“This is my body, and my mind. I think positive, eat healthy and I’m trying to reduce stress. That’s the best I can do. I refuse to live on pills or to be a guinea pig.”

“You’ll be saving your life.”

“I’ve made my decision, Aaron.” They shared a long look, then Aaron moved out of Mercy’s way. She left the clinic building and went to the hired car. Aaron joined her almost an hour later. They were silent all the way back to their hotel suite. After freshening up, they went to the dining room for dinner. Mercy ate. Aaron sat opposite her, ignoring her and the food. The businessmen that Mercy had met invited him to join them and he accepted with gladness. Mercy watched him walk away, and finished her meal.

Afterwards, she returned to their suite and watched TV. She was woken by hearing her name called, she opened her eyes, she had fallen asleep on the sofa.

“You should have gone to bed. Come, I’ll tuck you in,” said Aaron, helping her to sit. She resisted when he tried to help her to her feet.

“I’m worried about us,” she said.

“We’ll be fine.”

“You were very upset with me for not wanting to go on the trials.”

“Yes.”

“Are you still upset?”

“I don’t understand why you refuse to fight.”

“I don’t see it that way. Those are trials, Aaron. I have a young child, I can’t afford to try something that may or may not work. I need a sure thing. The fact that I’m not using

medicine doesn't mean I'm succumbing. As I said, I have Alie, and I want to be with her as long as I can. Don't feel bad about this, it changes nothing." Aaron sat down.

"I still don't get it, but I'll accept your decision. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why is there such a big age difference between Dora and Alie?"

"She was a surprise. I had decided to divorce Albert when he came back home, he had been gone six years. He was there for a month, then he left. A short while later, I found out I was pregnant. I was shocked and furious. I was on the verge of being rid of that man, and the pregnancy put paid to that."

"Why didn't you have an abortion?"

"It never occurred to me. Once Alie was born, I was glad to have her, but who'll look after her when I'm gone?"

"Me, or her siblings."

"Doesn't the colour difference bother you?"

"No."

"Why not? We were both raised during apartheid."

"Yes, but I was in the struggle with people of all races and tribes. I learned that character is more important than colour. Does the colour difference bother you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid of being looked down on. I feel as if I have prove my worth because of my sex and my colour."

"Free your mind from that and just be you. You don't know how long you have to live, fill your mind with thoughts that make you feel good."

"That's great advice."

"Why did you marry me if colour bothers you?"

"I like you."

"Oh, yes?"

"You know that everybody likes you."

"I'm more interested in you liking me."

"I do, a lot."

"I like you too, and I'm in love with you."

"Oh!"

"Why does that surprise you?"

"We haven't known each other long, Aaron."

"I know."

“I don’t know if I feel the same way about you.”

“I don’t care.”

“Why not?”

“You like me, you’re with me, you’re faithful, we have Alie, and you said you’d work on our marriage with me. You’ll fall in love with me. You have no choice because I’ll spend as much time with you as I can.”

“You’re very arrogant, Mr Croukamp.”

“I’m hopeful, Mrs Croukamp. I’m hungry. Let’s go eat somewhere.”

“It’s late.”

“I know a place that’s open late.”

“Okay.”

The restaurant was very upmarket. Mercy did not eat much, as she was still full from dinner. Aaron ate well.

“Thank you for this, I’ve never been on a honeymoon,” said Mercy.

“Why not?”

“It’s not part of our culture.”

“What did you do after your marriage to Albert?”

“We went to Albert’s parents’ home and I cleaned it from top to bottom, then we went to town so Albert could get back to work. I thought myself very lucky because he didn’t leave me with his parents. A lot of women in my age group were left with their in-laws, then, when their husbands returned years later, they brought their town wives. Polygamy is part of our culture, but I always wanted to be the only wife.”

“Were you working?”

“No, I’d just finished high school. Once Dora was in school, Albert paid for my first year of university. All the other years were financed by bursaries.”

“So he did do something right by you?”

“The first fifteen years with him were wonderful. I don’t know why he felt he had to look for excitement elsewhere.”

“You’re all the excitement I want and need.” Mercy smiled. Aaron picked up her hand and kissed it fervently, looking into her eyes. She felt giddy with excitement.

Someone stopped at their table. They looked up at him. Aaron dropped Mercy’s hand and stood to hug the man beside them. They held each other, crying, then they released each other and wiped away their tears, looking each other over. Mercy cleared her throat. Aaron looked at her, and introduced her to the man before him as his brother Theo, and told Theo that Mercy was his wife. She stood to shake his hand as he stared at her in shock, and shook her hand mechanically. When Aaron prompted him, he introduced her and Aaron to the young woman beside him, Elize, his companion. Aaron asked Mercy if she minded having Theo and Elize at the table, explaining that they had not seen each other in over twenty years, when Theo had moved to the USA. The four of them sat down.

When Aaron asked Theo if Elize was his new wife, Theo said that she was his companion, his wife was at home. Mercy felt sick to her stomach, and the polite smile on her face disappeared instantly. The brothers started talking about things only they knew about, and the women looked at each other. Elize smiled, Mercy excused herself from the table and went to the bathroom. She took several deep breaths, telling herself to calm down. Elize joined her.

“What did I do to you that makes you hate me so much?” she asked.

“You’re stealing another woman’s husband,” spat Mercy.

“Stealing? I’m not stealing anything or anyone.”

“That man’s married!”

“He chased me, I didn’t chase him.”

“You should respect his marriage vows.”

“Why, when he doesn’t?” Mercy drew back in shock.

“Are you going to stand here, and justify your whoring?” she demanded.

“I love Theo, I’m not with him for his money.”

“Find a single man.”

“Theo’s who I want.”

“He’s married! Leave him alone!”

“No!” They glared at each other, then Elize left. A woman came out of a cubicle and washed her hands.

“You have no right to judge her,” she said.

“She’s a husband thief,” said Mercy.

“You can’t steal a husband unless he wants to be stolen.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“It’s not right, but you should be mad at the husband she stole. He’s the one disrespecting his wife and the vows they took. That young woman has no contract of fidelity to his wife.”

“She’s in the wrong!”

“So is he,” said the woman, then she left. Mercy returned to the table. She was glad that Elize was gone, but she was sorry that Theo had left too.

“Did you and Elize fight? She came back to the table in a foul mood and insisted that she and Theo leave immediately,” said Aaron, as Mercy sat down.

“We argued.”

“About what?”

“Husband thieves.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I know what it’s like to have my husband stolen. It hurts. Badly.”

“Don’t get involved in things that don’t concern you.”

Mercy stared out of the cab window as they were driven back to their hotel.

“Mercy,” said Aaron. Mercy looked at him.

“Let’s make it a policy never to fight with each other about things that don’t concern us,” he continued.

“But...”

“Elize, Theo and his wife Marge are not our concern. You’re angry about their affair. It has nothing to do with us, and I refuse to let either of us jeopardise our marriage over things that have nothing to do with us. If I was cheating on you, I’d understand your being upset, but I’m not cheating on you. Drop this, now.” Mercy looked away from him.

“I mean it,” said Aaron.

“I know.”

“Then why am I still getting the cold shoulder?”

“What she’s doing is wrong.”

“I didn’t make Theo get together with Elize.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you punishing me?”

“I’m not punishing you.”

“You’re not talking to me, and this is our honeymoon.” Mercy gave Aaron a long look.

“I was upset,” she said.

“Get over it! I’m not Albert, and I refuse to be punished for what he did.” Mercy turned in her seat to face him. He was angry, very angry. She felt an urge to kiss the anger away, and leaned into him. She kissed him lightly. He did not respond. She nibbled on his upper lip, then on his lower lip.

He opened his mouth and she gently ran her tongue on the edge of his teeth, before slowly caressing it across his tongue. She felt his hands on her cheeks as he thrust his tongue into her mouth and kissed her deeply. Heat pooled in her lower belly and she felt wetness flood her cave of desire. Startled, she drew back from the kiss. Aaron followed her mouth and continued to kiss her. They broke the kiss, and sat forehead to forehead, as they caught their breaths.

“I wasn’t punishing you,” panted Mercy.

“Are you going to react that way every time you see a cheating man? I forbid it.”

“Aaron!”

“If you ever...”

“I won’t. You’re right, it’s only my business if my husband’s cheating on me. If you ever cheat on me, Aaron Croukamp...”

“I will never, ever, cheat on you.”

“Good.”

Mercy walked into their suite ahead of Aaron. He joined her in their bedroom as she took off her shoes. He took off his jacket and tie, approached her, and kissed her hungrily, his arms round her waist. She opened her mouth and kissed him just as hungrily. She moaned, feeling his hands caressing her bare shoulders. They broke the kiss and undressed each other frantically, kissing and caressing the skin they were exposing.

Mercy could not believe how very excited she was.

“You’re so sexy,” panted Aaron.

“So are you.”

“I have to have you, now.”

“Me too.” They shared a frantic kiss, then Aaron led Mercy to the bed. They kissed again, then they climbed onto the bed and lay facing each other, and caressing each other. The excitement between them grew. Mercy gasped, feeling Aaron’s hand between her legs. She lay back, and made room for his hand. She could feel the excitement in her body spiralling out of control.

“Aaron,” she panted, caressing between his legs. He was hard and ready for action.

“Take your hand off me,” he said between clenched teeth.

“But...”

“Mercy!” she released him and he continued to caress her wet centre. She gasped when one of his fingers touched a spot above her centre, exciting her wildly. She bucked her hips once, twice, then she shuddered with pleasure. Her eyes were closed and she could hear herself panting. She opened her eyes and looked at Aaron. He looked pained.

She sat up and caressed his manhood.

“I don’t have condoms, I don’t even know what to do with one if I have it.”

“I do, and I have them here,” said Aaron, getting one from the drawer beside him. Mercy watched him rip one open and cover himself with it. She looked from his manhood to his eyes. He wanted her. She leaned down to kiss him, then she straddled his lap. She had never done it before, but it felt right with Aaron. She caressed his condom-covered masculinity, then she took him slowly into her body. He moaned when he was all in. Mercy smiled, then she started moving her hips slowly up, and slowly down.

Aaron put a hand on her hips and hastened her movements. Watching his face, she moved to his speed, then she quickened her movements. She could feel herself becoming more excited. Out of the blue, a wave of pleasure swamped her body, making her shudder and close her eyes.

She opened her eyes afterwards. Aaron had been watching her. She moved faster. Aaron closed his eyes tight and shuddered with pleasure. Mercy leaned down to plant kisses all over his face. He held her head still and kissed her. Exhausted, she slid off him and lay beside him.

After some time, she went to freshen up, then she slept in his arms, exhausted.

When she woke up, Aaron was packing. She greeted him, freshened up, and packed her things. They checked out and a car took them to the airport.

CHAPTER TEN

When they arrived home, Aaron's driver met them and took them to Aaron's home. Alie met them at the car, jumping up and down with excitement, asking what they had brought her.

"Don't we get hugs?" asked Aaron. Alie hugged him, then she hugged Mercy.

"What did you bring me?" she repeated.

"Help us with our bags, then you'll see," said Mercy. Alie picked up two small packages and hurried into the house.

Mercy followed her to the main bedroom.

"Where are Joe and Dora?" she asked.

"Sisi's at work and buti Joe went out. What did you bring me?" Mercy opened her suitcase, dug into it and brought out a gift. Alie grabbed it and ripped it open. She took out the chocolates and doll reverently, then she raised her eyes to Mercy.

"Thank you, Mama," she said.

"You're welcome," said Mercy as she kissed her cheek. Aaron joined them.

"Look what Mama brought me," said Alie, showing him her gifts.

"That's great. Do you want to see what I brought you?"

"You brought me something?"

"Of course."

"Where is it?" Aaron took something out of his hand luggage and gave it to her. She ripped the package open. It contained a bison that was a piggy bank, chocolates, and some clothes.

"This is great. Thank you, Pa," she said.

"You're welcome. We'll talk about your piggy bank later."

"Okay. I'm taking my things to my room."

When Alie was gone, Aaron closed the door and looked at Mercy.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Thank you for bringing her gifts."

"I'm her father, I'm allowed, aren't I?"

"Of course."

"Then why are you upset?"

"I'm not upset. I'm happy. She's never had a father do that for her before."

"She has me now." Mercy nodded. Aaron went to shower while Mercy unpacked for them both. Afterwards, she went to check on Alie. She was fine. Mercy freshened up and went to help the housekeeper with dinner. The housekeeper sent her away. She went to the lounge.

“Adele? What’s the matter?” she asked. Adele was the last person she was expecting to see. Adele hid her face and tried to stifle her sobs. Mercy sat beside her and handed her a tissue. Adele took it and cleaned her face.

“Do you want to talk?” asked Mercy.

“It’s Chris.”

“What about him?”

“He’s seeing another woman.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“What do you want to do about it?”

“I want to kill him!”

“What do you need me to help you with?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I wanted to talk to Joe, but now that Aaron’s back...”

“No.”

“But...”

“I’ve been cheated on before, and I’m not allowing for risky situations.”

“He’s my friend!”

“Anything you have to say to him, you say in my presence.” Adele gave Mercy a searching look.

“I never knew you were so possessive,” she said. Neither did I, thought Mercy.

“Can I see Aaron?” asked Adele.

“He should be joining us soon. How are you otherwise?”

“Fine, and you?”

“Good.”

“Congratulations on your marriage.”

“Thank you.” Aaron joined the women.

“Adele, is everything alright?” he asked, as he sat beside Mercy. Adele told him about Chris.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he said.

“Decide what you want. If you want your marriage to work, find out from him if he wants that too, and start fixing things together. If you want out, talk to a divorce lawyer,” said Mercy.

“I don’t want a divorce,” said Adele.

“Then find out what Chris wants.” Adele nodded.

“This is our first night home, would you excuse us?” said Aaron. Adele thanked them for their time and left.

“I’m sorry,” said Mercy.

“For what?”

“I told Adele she can never see you or talk to you, unless I’m there.”

“Mercy!”

“I don’t want you getting back together.”

“We won’t.”

“I’m not taking chances.”

“Your attitude gives me hope.”

“Hope?”

“That very soon, you’ll love me as I love you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t be so possessive if you didn’t feel anything for me.”

“I told you I like you.”

“If Adele can’t talk to me without your sanction, the same must apply to Albert.”

“I’d like nothing better, but maybe I’m being unreasonable. If he comes to my office and you’re in Ethiopia, and we need to talk about the children, we won’t be able to wait for you. The same applies to you and Adele. Let’s just promise to tell each other about encounters with our exes.”

“Okay. Adele often uses my shoulder to cry on. I didn’t mind before, but now...”

“Send her to me, and I’ll send Albert to you.”

Dinner was lively, Dora, Joe and Alie were vying to tell Mercy and Aaron what they had been up to, and they were curious about what their parents had seen and done in Las Vegas. Alie was sent to bed as she had school the following day, Aaron went to the study, and Mercy joined Joe and Dora in the lounge. They were both surprised and delighted that she had brought them each a gift. They opened the gifts and thanked her. She sat back watching them interact. They had established a good rapport. I hope Tim and Edward establish as good a rapport, thought Mercy. She went to sleep shortly afterwards.

Aaron returned to work the following day. Mercy was still on leave. She took Alie to school, then she went to her own home. She listed what to take to her new home, what to sell and what to give away. She thanked her nephew for housesitting and asked him to continue until she decided what to do. She fetched Alie from school and took her home. She left her there, and went to the river. She came away re-energised.

Aaron phoned her to say that he would be home late. She frowned, feeling fear. She knew from experience that infidelity began that way. She took several deep breaths, and decided that she was not going to stress about what he was up to. She had married him for Alie, what he did in his spare time was not her concern.

She dined with Dora and Alie as Joe was out too. Dora then said that she would be leaving the following day. Mercy thanked her for staying with Alie. They both tucked Alie in, then Dora invited Mercy to her room.

“What’s the matter, Mama?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t eat. Is Mr Croukamp giving you problems? Mama?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“He phoned to say he’d be home late.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? He didn’t leave you hanging and wondering where he is.”

“Maybe he’s with another woman.”

“Mama! That’s a sick thought, and you’ll make yourself sick with it. He’s not like Baba. I spoke to Joe and he says his father was never unfaithful. Why would he start this late in his life?”

“He’s a man.”

“A man who’s besotted with you. Trust him, Mama, and trust yourself to hold his attention.”

Aaron returned just after midnight. Mercy was lying in bed, listening for him. She closed her eyes when he came into the room. Her heart quickened as he approached her side of the bed. There was a silence as he stood beside her. She had to work hard not to open her eyes to see what he was doing. He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“I love you,” he whispered. She frowned, taken by surprise. Surreptitiously, she drew in a breath, trying to smell the other woman on him, she could only smell him. He went into the dressing room. She relaxed, and opened her eyes. I said I don’t care, she reminded herself, but she knew now that she cared a whole lot. Aaron joined her in the bed and was asleep in seconds. Mercy sat up, and watched him sleep. She laid down a while later, but she could not sleep.

Next morning, she took Alie to school and returned to her home to start packing, but she could not focus. She went to the river, but that did not work as well as it usually did. She was miserable over the following days and realised that her family was worried about her. She could feel Alie following her with her eyes, Joe watched her, and Aaron tried to talk to her several times, and she found excuses not to talk to him.

It occurred to her that in ignoring him, she was encouraging him to find another woman and that made her more miserable. She followed him to work one morning. He spent most of his time at his holding company, not at the company where Albert worked. She sat almost an hour in her car, then she went to reception and asked to see him. She had no appointment and the gate keeper asked her to leave. She phoned Aaron and he told his gatekeeper to let her in.

She found him with several people, they were obviously in a meeting.

“I’m sorry,” she said, rebuking herself for not thinking things through.

“Is something wrong, Mercy?” asked Aaron. He was on his feet.

“It...it can wait,” she said.

“Carry on, everyone, I’ll be back when I can,” said Aaron as he approached Mercy. He took her hand and led her to an office, it had his name on the door. He closed it and looked at her.

“I shouldn’t have come,” she said.

“But you did.”

“I...”

“You what?”

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“Driving you into the arms of another woman.”

“What are you talking about?” frowned Aaron.

“Every time you come home late, I wonder if you’ve been with another woman.” Aaron drew back, unable to believe what he had heard.

“I know you aren’t, or I want to think you aren’t, but I can’t seem to help myself,” continued Mercy. The look on Aaron’s face was showing her that the visit had been a very bad idea. He did not say a word, he just looked at her as if she disgusted him.

“Look, let’s...I’ll try not care, I tried it, but it didn’t work. I care about you, and I care that I not mess this up. I don’t know what to do,” she said. He did not seem to know what to do either. Mercy did not know whether to cry or apologise. Aaron was no longer looking at her. He had a forbidding expression on his face. Mercy wanted to hold him and make him smile at her again, but she dared not.

“I don’t mean to hurt you,” she said. His face seemed to harden further. She was obviously making things worse.

“Aaron?” He did not so much as acknowledge her.

“I have to go to work. I’ll see you later,” she said. She left, feeling cold. Everything was ruined, and she had done it herself. She could not focus at work. Just after eleven, a woman called Alice phoned to say that Mr Croukamp had asked her to tell Mrs Croukamp that he would fetch their daughter from school. Mercy did not know what that meant. She decided not to worry. The evening would tell her soon enough what was going on.

She arrived home and went to look for Alie. She was not in her room, Mercy called her, she did not respond. She asked the housekeeper, she said Mr Croukamp and Alie had returned briefly in the afternoon, and left again. Mercy phoned Aaron.

“Natalie’s spending the night with her sister, you and I need to talk,” he said curtly, and cut the call. She freshened up, and dressed well. If Aaron was going to be screaming and shouting at her, she needed to look good, to boost her confidence.

She was seated on their bed when he arrived. He greeted her and asked her to wait for him in his study. She left the bedroom and went to the study. Time seemed to drag as she waited. He joined her, she assumed that he had been freshening up. He sat down and looked at her. She tried to smile, but it felt awkward and Aaron did not seem to notice.

“You think I’m cheating,” he said.

“I...you...yes.”

“Why? What evidence do you have?”

“Evidence?”

“Evidence. I must have done or said something that made you come to that conclusion. Well?” Mercy had no response.

“So, based on nothing, you accuse me of something despicable, and expect me to be okay with it?”

“No, I don’t expect you to be okay with it.”

“How do you expect me to feel?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“I’ve never cheated. I never cheated on Adele, or the women I was with before her. I haven’t cheated on you and I’ll never cheat on you. I told you that before, but you obviously didn’t believe me. The thing you have to ask yourself is, what do I want? Do I want to be miserable, suspecting Aaron every second of every day, or, do I want to leave him...”

“No!”

“...and be done with it?”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Fine, what do you want to do about your insecurity?”

“What can I do?”

“You can drop it, and decide to trust me.”

“I do.”

“Really?”

“Yes! I don’t trust the women you meet.”

“What do they have to do with anything? Are you in a relationship with any of them?”

“Of course not!”

“Then they’re none of your business. I’m your business, and I don’t care what those women look like, or what they do. You’re the only woman I’m interested in. I know what I’m doing about our relationship, what are you going to do about it?” Mercy had no response.

“What will make you stop worrying? Do you need to quit your job and accompany me everywhere?” asked Aaron.

“No!”

“Then what are we going to do? I want this marriage. I thought you did too, but maybe you need time out to be sure about what you want.”

“I don’t need time out.”

“And I don’t need my wife to be miserable about something I’ll never do to her. I’m starving, can we eat?” Mercy could not eat. Aaron ate quickly and excused himself from the table.

When Mercy went to the bedroom some time later, he was reading in bed. He took off his glasses, put his book away, and watched her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.”

“I’m going to change.”

“Don’t. Take your clothes off and join me.”

“What?”

“I’m going to make love to you until you understand that I haven’t spent my energy on any other woman,” continued Aaron.

“I believe you.”

“Words are obviously not enough, so I’m backing them up with actions,” said Aaron as he climbed out of bed. He was stark naked as he approached her. He put his hands on her cheeks and kissed her deeply. She was panting when he broke the kiss. He started undoing her blouse buttons. She undid the zip of her skirt, pushed it down and stepped out of it when it pooled at her feet. She kissed Aaron as his hands caressed the blouse off her shoulders.

She felt his hands on her breasts, as he fondled them through her bra. She ran her hands on his chest, down to his belly, to his manhood. She fondled and caressed him and he hardened for her. She planted kisses on his chest and knelt down, to look at the sign of his desire.

She kissed his manhood, then she licked it. She caressed his tip as she licked and kissed his stalk. He groaned when she took him into her mouth. She moved her mouth up and down his stalk several times, then he put a hand on her chin, and raised her face.

“Stop,” he croaked.

“Don’t you like it?”

“I might give you a disease.”

“What?”

“I should have got tested with you.”

“You’re healthy.”

“We don’t know that. Come,” he said, helping her to her feet. He kissed her and led her to the bed.

“Can I help you with the condom?” she asked. He picked it up and handed it to her. She fumbled with it until she ripped the cover, then she took the condom out. He showed her how to hold it and how to put it on him. She kissed him after sheathing him. They lay beside each other, kissing frantically. Aaron caressed her between the legs, making her more and more excited.

“I want you,” she panted. He raised himself above her, moved his legs between hers, and pushed into her body. She squeezed him, then he withdrew, and thrust back in. She kissed him, very excited. He put a hand between them, and caressed a point just above where they were joined. Mercy felt pleasure swamp her, then she shuddered as the pleasure took complete control of her body.

Afterwards, she opened her eyes and watched as Aaron shuddered and shivered with pleasure above her. He collapsed on her, panting. She put her arms round him and kissed his shoulder. He rolled to his side, then he climbed out of the bed. He took her hand and led her to the shower. She opened the water, and seconds later, he joined her without the condom. They soaped each other, showered, and went to sleep with their arms round each other.

Mercy was woken by a kiss. Aaron was leaning on an elbow, watching her.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, thanks, and you?”

“I’m good. I have to get to work.”

“So do I.”

After her shower, Mercy went to prepare breakfast. Aaron ate everything she put before him, then he kissed her and left. She left home feeling great, and things went well at work. She arrived at Alie’s school, and someone knocked on her passenger car window. She unlocked the door, and Aaron climbed in beside her. He kissed her cheek and greeted her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I’ve come to fetch our daughter. We have to go to admin so you can tell them that you give me permission to fetch her. Yesterday I was only allowed to take her because I know the principal’s father. Will you give me permission to fetch her?”

“Of course.” They gave Aaron’s particulars to the admin people, then they returned to Mercy’s car.

“Do you mind if I bring her to school and fetch her home most days?” asked Aaron.

“No, I don’t mind, but your schedule is more hectic than mine.”

“The difference is that I’m my own boss. I’m better able to reschedule on most days.” The bell rang, Mercy and Aaron went to look for Alie. She was delighted to see them both and called her friends over to meet her Pa. Mercy smiled, Alie was showing Aaron off as he if he was a trophy. He did not seem to mind. He told her that he would take her home and she skipped ahead of him to his car.

“I’ll see you later,” said Aaron. Mercy kissed his cheek, when she drew back from him, she was glad to see that he had liked having her kiss him.

Having time on her hands, she went to the river for a short while, then she returned to work. Aaron was home in the evenings the rest of the week. The following week, he phoned on Monday to say that he would be home late. Mercy told herself that all was well, and checked Alie’s homework after dinner. Tired after tucking Alie in, she went to sleep.

She met Aaron in the dining room for breakfast. She kissed his cheek and kissed Alie's cheek before sitting down. Alie ate quickly.

"Alie, from now on, I'll take you to school and bring you home on most days," said Aaron.

"Okay, Pa," she said. She took her plates to the kitchen.

"I spoke to Albert last night," said Aaron.

"Why?"

"I asked him to let me adopt Alie. He signed the papers."

"Wow! How did you get him to do that?"

"That's not important. Are you alright with me adopting her?"

"Of course. Thank you for caring enough to adopt her. Do you mind if we tell her together?"

"I don't mind. Tell me where and when and I'll be there."

The following evening, Edward and Joe joined the family for dinner. Edward seemed to be high. He was full of hurtful jokes that no one but him, found funny.

"Please address others kindly, or say nothing at all," said Mercy. Edward stared at her as if he could not believe what he had heard.

"This is my father's house, and..." he said.

"All the more reason for you to mind your manners." They glared at each other, then Edward apologised. After the meal, Edward and Aaron went to the study. Joe left, Mercy spent time with Alie, then she tucked her into bed.

She watched TV, then she made tea for Aaron and Edward and took it to the study. Aaron thanked her. As she turned to leave, he took her hand and asked her to sit down. She looked at Edward uneasily. He was looking into his teacup. Mercy sat down. Aaron and Edward continued to talk. Mercy watched Edward. He was a handsome young man. With firm handling and guidance, he would come into his own. Mercy decided that it was time for all the children to meet. She was going to invite them all for a braai that Sunday.

She went to her bedroom and brought Edward the gift that she had bought for him in Las Vegas. When he made his goodbyes, she gave it to him. He gave her a long look before taking it and giving her a half-hearted thank you.

The following evening Mercy told Aaron that she and Alie would not be home for dinner as they were going to see Tim for a short while. Tim and his children were delighted to see them. The children were noisy during dinner, then Tim sent them to play in one of the bedrooms.

"How are you?" asked Mercy.

"Fine. How's your husband treating you?"

"Fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. How are you and the children really doing?"

"We're surviving, Mama, it's not as if we have a choice."

“Have you found a job? Are things better at the company?”

“No, we’re living on the maintenance Sthabile sends, and on my pension. It won’t last for much longer though.” Mercy nodded and said that she and Alie had to leave. He called the children into the lounge. Mercy gave them all the gifts that she had brought for them, then she and Alie left.

“Is everything alright?” asked Aaron when they arrived home.

“Yes,” said Mercy, as she carried Alie to bed. Aaron followed her and watched her. When she was done, he took her hand and led her to their bedroom.

“I think we should invite the children for a braai on Sunday. Will you be in town?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I think we should try to ease them into being a family.”

“That’s a good idea.” Mercy phoned all the children the following day, inviting them to the braai. Edward sounded suspicious and asked if Joe would be there. When Mercy said yes, he said that he would attend too.

All the children arrived on time. The men helped Aaron to braai the meat, while Dora helped Mercy with everything else. When everyone sat down to eat in the gazebo, Mercy noticed tension between Edward and Tim. They sniped at each other and seemed to find fault with everything. Mercy was puzzled at first, then she realised that they were trying to establish a pecking order.

“Timothy, Edward, neither of you has to prove a thing to any of us. Stop that nonsense right now,” she barked. They looked at her stern countenance and backed down. The rest of the meal progressed well. The children all left after the meal, except Alie. She was tired and took a nap.

“Thank you for organising lunch,” said Aaron.

“We all have a long way before we’re comfortable as a family.”

“Yes. You’re very sexy when you’re laying down the law. You can lay down the law for me anytime, and I’ll always say yes ma’am and do as I’m told.” Mercy smiled.

“I foresee a very successful marriage if you stick to that,” she said. Aaron kissed her. The kiss deepened and Mercy felt Aaron’s erection digging into her belly. She put a hand between their bodies and fondled it.

“What are you doing?” asked Alie. Mercy broke the kiss and released Aaron instantly. Aaron kept his arms round her, refusing to release her when she pushed against him. She looked at Alie, she was watching them.

“I’m kissing Mama,” said Aaron.

“Oh. I thought people only did that on TV.”

“They do it in real life too.”

“I never saw Mama doing that with Baba.”

“She only does it with me,” said Aaron, looking at Mercy. She smiled, gave him a quick kiss, and announced that she was going to start on dinner. Aaron released her.

She was surprised by a visit from Hilda in her office the following day. She stood.

“Get out,” she said.

“I need advice,” said Hilda.

“Get out!”

“Do you know where Albert is?”

“Leave! Now!”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care!”

“Please, help me to find him.”

“I’ll never ever do that.”

“Please, Mercy.”

“If you were dying and I had the last half litre of water needed to save your life, I’d water the grass than give you a single droplet.”

“Mercy!”

“You stole my husband, and now that he’s been stolen from you, you expect me to help you? Go to hell!” Hilda left in tears. Mercy sat down, feeling mean and guilty. She picked up her phone to call Hilda, and changed her mind. The more distance she kept between Albert and herself, the better things would be all round.

Later in the day, Albert arrived in her office.

“What did Hilda want?” he demanded.

“Fortunately for both of us, I no longer have to answer any of your questions.”

“I have a right to know what...”

“You have a right to talk to your wife and to leave my office, right now, otherwise, I’m calling security to remove you.”

“You’re a vindictive bitch,” he said as he turned away from her.

“Albert?” called Mercy. He turned to look at her.

“If you ever insult me again, I’ll help Hilda to get a great divorce lawyer and take you for everything you have,” she said.

“She wants a divorce? I’ll be left with nothing if she divorces me.”

“Then start making nice to her and stay away from me. If she decides to divorce you, I’ll help take your mother’s homestead and every last thing you ever bought your extra-marital entertainers.” Albert left. She took several deep breaths and told herself to calm down. Albert is no longer a factor in my life. I refuse to continue to give him power by having feelings for him. Mercy then told security never to allow him or Hilda into the building.

“Hi,” said Aaron.

“Hi. What are you doing here?” asked Mercy.

“I’ve come to fetch you home.”

“That’s so nice. I haven’t been fetched home in...forever.”

“Are you ready to go?”

“I’ll just get my handbag, then we can go.” Aaron took her hand when she was ready. She introduced him to her boss and the people at reception. In the car, Aaron put an arm round her shoulder, she put her head on his shoulder and sighed, feeling cherished.

Some evenings later, she found Aaron at home with guests. She greeted them and Aaron made the introductions. Mercy excused herself, showered and went to supervise dinner. She fed Alie, and when Alie was done eating, she insisted on going to say goodnight to Pa. She returned to the kitchen to say goodnight to Mercy. Mercy saw her to bed, and Aaron joined them. He helped to tuck Alie in and kissed her after Mercy. The adults left the room and closed the door.

“Dinner will be ready soon,” said Mercy.

“We’re done, everyone’s leaving,” said Aaron.

“No. Come,” said Mercy, taking Aaron’s hand. She sat beside him with the guests.

“Aaron tells me you’re done with your meeting, dinner will be ready in a few minutes,” she said. The guests protested, she insisted and out-argued them. In the end, they accepted her invitation to stay for dinner.

The meal went very well, and the guests ate every last morsel of food. After the meal, they thanked her and complimented her. She and Aaron saw them off, and she went to bed. Aaron joined her minutes later.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Now?” she yawned.

“It can wait.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Next morning after preparing for work, Aaron asked her to join him in the study. She sat down and watched as he sat down.

“Ed’s in jail,” he said.

“What?”

“He embezzled funds, and the law caught up with him.”

“What can we do?”

“Visit him, and let the law take its course.”

“Can’t we get him off?” Aaron did not reply. He looked heart broken. She went to kneel before him and put her arms round him. He held onto her.

“I failed him,” he said.

“You did the best you could.”

“I should have gone to watch him play sports, and I should have spent time with him.”

“The past can’t be changed, but we can do something now.”

“What am I going to do?”

“Visit him, get him the best lawyer, and tell him that you love him.” Aaron withdrew from the embrace and stood.

“When can we visit him?” asked Mercy as he helped her to her feet.

“Tomorrow. Today, I think he needs his mother and me.”

“Whatever you decide to do, you have my support,” said Mercy as she kissed his cheek. Aaron nodded.

“Do you want me to take Alie to school?” asked Mercy.

“Yes, I have to leave now. I won’t be able to fetch her today,” said Aaron, then he left. Mercy phoned him several times throughout the day, he did not answer his phone. She left several messages.

Towards the end of the day, he phoned her.

“He’s fine, and he isn’t as upset as I thought he would be,” he said.

“I’m glad.”

“You know, I think he’s relieved to have been made to account.”

“That must make you feel better.”

“No! It makes me feel worse.”

“Why?”

“I went against my instincts when I overlooked all the monies he owed me, and all the time, he wanted me to call him to order and make him take responsibility.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about the past.”

“I failed him.”

“Don’t talk like that. I’ll see you at home, I have to go to a meeting.”

She found Aaron helping Alie with her homework at home. They were very engrossed as Aaron explained something. Mercy kissed Aaron’s cheek, and he looked at her, surprised. She kissed Alie’s cheek, greeted them and went to freshen up. After her shower, she found them in the study. Aaron was explaining the advantages of saving money. When they were done, he told Alie to wash up before dinner. She gave Mercy a quick hug on her way out.

“If everyone had saving explained to them that way, we’d all be saving as much as we can,” she said. Aaron closed his eyes and sat back in his seat. Mercy sat on the arm of his chair, and kissed his cheek, then she put her arms round him.

“You’re a great father,” she said.

“Not to Ed I wasn’t.”

“You’re great now, and Joe’s not in trouble, you must have done something right with him. Was Adele there to see Ed?”

“She blames me.” Mercy kissed his cheek. He turned his head and rested it on her bosom, sighing.

“It’s nice to know you and Alie don’t judge me. Ed doesn’t want me to pay for a lawyer, he wants to go with a state appointed lawyer,” he said.

“Is that wise?”

“It’s what he wants.”

“He’s giving himself a better chance of rotting in jail for years.”

“Maybe that’s what he wants.” Alie called them to dinner. They hardly ate, then they tucked Alie into bed. They tossed and turned the whole night. In the morning, Aaron said that he would take Alie to and from school.

Mercy went to work for a short while, then she went to see Ed.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Why do you want to spend most of your life in jail?”

“That’s my business.”

“Is it because you think you should be punished for taking the money you took, or is it because you think you’re a failure and you’re tired of trying not to be, and failing?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Think about this. You can get a lawyer who has the time and resources to do proper research and defend you to the best of his ability, and get you out. You can then get a job and pay back the money you owe, proving to yourself and your father that you’re a man. The alternative is to go to jail and pay the money back by sleeping with other men for protection. Which option would prove your manhood and make you proud of yourself?” Ed stood and left.

Mercy closed her eyes and cursed herself for meddling. She had probably helped Ed cement his desire to go to jail. She would have to tell Aaron what she had done and apologise profusely for making things worse.

He was in her office at the end of the business day.

“Hi,” he said. She looked up with a pounding heart.

“Hi,” she said, getting to her feet.

“You look at me as if you’re afraid of me.”

“I did something stupid.”

“What did you do?”

“I went to see Ed and made things worse.”

“How?”

“I goaded him, when all I wanted to do was reason with him.”

“I’ve just been to see him. He’s changed his mind and wants me to get him a lawyer.”

“Really?”

“He wants to work in the company, and pay back every cent.”

“That’s great!”

“Yes, it is, and I have a feeling I have you to thank for that.” Relieved, Mercy sat down abruptly. Aaron approached her, and kissed her.

“Let’s go home,” he said.

That Saturday, Mercy asked her children and grandchildren to help her to pack everything out of her home. They started just after six in the morning, and finished after eight in the evening. They had takeaways delivered for all meals, and sat exhausted after dinner. Alie and Tim’s children were asleep on a blanket on the floor as everything had been given away or taken to the auctioneers.

Mercy then thanked the nephew that had been house sitting for her, and he left.

“I’ve been thinking about you and how I can help you,” Mercy said to Tim and Dora. They looked from her to each other and back.

“Would it help you not to pay for accommodation?” she asked.

“You know it would,” said Tim.

“This house is paid up and I own the title deed. I think you and the children should move in here, Tim. Dora, you can move into the cottage. You don’t have to see each other unless you want to. The cottage does have a private entrance.” Tim and Dora looked at her as if she had given them blessings from the ancestors. They looked at each other and stood together to put their arms round her together. Dora kissed her cheek over and over again. She smiled, putting an arm round each of them. They released her and looked at her.

“I take it you like my idea?” she said.

“You know we do, Mama. Thank you,” said Tim.

“I’m happy to help. This should enable you to keep the kids at school, and Dora, you can do that post grad degree you’ve wanted for so long.”

“Thank you, Mama. The kids and I will move in next weekend,” said Tim.

“So will I,” said Dora.

Aaron went away for a few days. When he returned, Mercy and Alie met him at the airport.

“Pa!Pa!” shouted Alie as she jumped up and down with excitement. Several men turned to look at her, then Aaron looked at her and his face lit up like a bulb after a power cut. Mercy smiled, glad that she and Alie had come. Aaron hastened to them. Alie ran to him, he bent down and hugged her as tightly as she was hugging him. He took her hand, and greeted the driver, who then took his trolley. Mercy watched as Alie brought Aaron to her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” he returned.

“Aren’t you going to hug him, Mama?” asked Alie. Mercy glanced at her and looked back at Aaron. She stepped closer to him and put her arms round him. He held her tight. Unable to resist, she raised her head from his shoulder and kissed him. She broke the kiss when she

became aware of cat calls. She looked about, some people were smiling and pointing at her and Aaron, others were looking at her as if she should know better. She released Aaron and looked at Alie. She was smiling at them benevolently.

“Let’s go home,” panted Mercy. Alie took one of her hands in hers and one of Aaron’s hands in her other hand, and they walked to the car. Alie climbed in. Aaron took Mercy’s hand and helped her into the car and climbed in after her. Alie sat between them. They watched each other most of the way home.

They saw Alie to bed, then they went to their own bedroom. As soon as Aaron closed the door, Mercy kissed him, and pushed him back against the door. He kissed her just as keenly, and started fondling her breasts. She drew back from him and started undoing his shirt buttons. She kissed the skin that she had uncovered, then she undid his belt and lowered his trouser zip. Aaron kissed her, and raised her top, caressing her belly as his hands rose to her breasts. He pushed her bra up, and fondled her breasts. She drew back from the kiss, desperate for him.

She pushed his shirt and jacket off his shoulders, down his arms and onto the floor. She ran her hands on his chest and belly, then she lowered his trousers past his hips, onto the floor. She put her hands on his boxers, and lowered them too. She knelt at his feet and took off his shoes and socks, then she helped him to step out of his trousers and boxers. She ran her hands up his legs to his erect manhood. She ran her hand up and down it, excited by his excited panting.

He put his hand on hers, removed it from him and drew her to her feet. He kissed her and removed her top and bra. She lowered her skirt and panties and stepped out of them as her top and bra landed on the floor. She kissed Aaron and led him to the bed. She kicked her shoes off and climbed onto the bed beside him as he finished donning the condom. She kissed him. He pushed against her chest and she landed on her back.

She caressed between his legs and felt him caress between hers. She twisted on the bed, wanting Aaron badly. He lay between her legs and joined his body to hers. She sighed with relief, but in seconds, the relief was replaced by need. She squeezed and released Aaron with her internal muscles.

“Stop, Mercy. I won’t last if you do that,” he said. She kissed him and felt him pumping desperately into her body. She felt her body climbing the spiral of pleasure, then she threw her head back as she peaked and shuddered. The shudders stopped and she became aware of Aaron shuddering too. She squeezed him intimately and he seemed to go into a frenzy of pleasure. Finally, he stopped shuddering and collapsed on her, panting. She caressed his head, and noticed how silky his hair was. She kissed his cheek, he lay beside her and kissed her forehead.

“I love you,” he said, looking deep into her eyes. She felt warm and cherished, seeing the truth of his words in his eyes.

“Welcome home,” she said. He looked deep into her eyes, then he sat up.

“Is there something I can eat?” he asked.

“Yes.”

"I'll just take a shower, then I'll be ready to eat," he said, climbing out of the bed, and going to the bathroom. Mercy picked up their clothes, and went to freshen up in another bathroom. She and Aaron arrived in the kitchen at the same time. Mercy looked at his mouth then into his eyes. He had liked her looking at him there, she approached him and kissed him deeply. When he broke the kiss, she panted on his shoulder and realised that his arms were round her waist, and hers were round his shoulders.

"I'll get the food for you, sit down," she said, releasing him. She heard a chair scrape as she took his food out to the oven and put it in the microwave. Feeling his eyes on her, she turned to look at him. He was looking at her buttocks, then he looked into her eyes. Her heart pounded with excitement.

"Do you have the energy to do what your eyes are saying?" she panted.

"Maybe. Come here and I'll show you." The microwave pinged. Mercy turned to it, and took the food out. She put the plate before Aaron. He held onto her hand, kissed it and started eating. She brought his favourite juice to the table and sat beside him.

"Do you want to join me?" he offered.

"No, thanks, Alie and I had a big meal."

"Thank you for fetching me. I wasn't expecting you."

"We missed you, we couldn't wait to see you." Aaron looked deep into her eyes, then he kissed her. She sat panting as he continued with his meal.

That Saturday, Mercy and Alie went to help Tim and Dora to move into their new home. Mercy had packed two picnic baskets and everyone was glad to have home cooked food. They finished just after four in the afternoon, and sat exhausted in Tim's lounge.

They were all very pleasantly surprised when Aaron and Joe arrived, bringing food. They had been discussing who would cook, because they were all too exhausted to move. Joe dished up the food, and passed out plates that were received with great appreciation. Someone else came into the room.

"Ed!" said a surprised Mercy. She stood and put her arms round him, very glad that he was out of jail. He was stiff with surprise at first, then he returned her embrace. Tim's children took his hands, and drew him into the group as everyone greeted him. He was not expecting the warm reception that he received, especially from Tim, who helped Joe to prepare his food.

After the meal, Tim asked if Alie could spend the night with his children and Mercy agreed. Joe said that he would stay with Dora on the first night in her new home, and she thanked him. Mercy, Aaron and Ed were driven home.

"When did you get out?" asked Mercy.

"Yesterday afternoon," replied Ed.

"You lost weight."

"I'm never going back there."

"I'm glad."

“I need a place to stay, can I please stay with you?” Mercy looked at Aaron, he shrugged. She looked back at Eddie.

“Yes, you can stay with us, but you have to behave better around Alie. She’s very uncomfortable around you.”

“I’m not mad anymore. Thank you for letting me stay with you.”

“How are things with the divorce?” asked Aaron.

“It’s a divorce, Pa.”

When Alie returned home, Mercy was afraid that she would be upset to find Ed there, but within minutes, Alie and Ed were talking as if there had never been any awkwardness between them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Aaron visited Mercy in her office.

“Albert gave me permission to adopt Alie, now, I need you to sign these papers that will let me adopt her. I need permission from both parents,” he said.

“Whose surname will she use?”

“The one she uses now, or she could have a double barrel surname, or she could use mine.”

“Which do you prefer?”

“I prefer her to use my surname.”

“Did you talk to Albert about that?”

“Yes, and he doesn’t care, he has bigger problems. Hilda wants a divorce. Just to be on the safe side, I had him sign a paper giving me permission to change Alie’s surname to mine. What surname do you want her to use?”

“Yours. You’ve been more of a father to her in these few months than her biological father was in her entire life.”

“Can we talk to her about it tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Here are the papers, look them over, sign them and return them to me as soon as possible.”

When Alie was told about the adoption, she was very excited, and said that she wanted to use Pa’s surname. Mercy decided to use Albert’s surname as a second name for Alie in case she had to explain her biological origins when she married.

The following evening, Ed, Joe, Tim and Dora came for dinner. After the meal, Alie went to sleep. Aaron then explained to Ed, Joe, Albert and Dora that he was in the process of adopting Alie. They all looked from him to Mercy.

“It’s fine with me, and your father agreed to it,” she said to Tim and Dora.

“Alie’s a minor, and since we don’t know how long your mother has, I think it best to do this now, so if your mother passes before me, I’ll have the right to look after Alie,” said Aaron.

“You’re dying?” asked Ed of Mercy.

“I’m HIV positive,” she replied. Ed and Joe paled and looked at Aaron in shock.

“I knew about it before we married, and we’re taking every precaution,” he said. His sons looked at him as if he was talking nonsense.

“Has Alie been tested?” asked Dora.

“Yes, she doesn’t have the virus or Aids,” replied Mercy. Joe excused himself and left the room. Ed followed seconds later, then two cars were heard leaving. Mercy looked at Aaron apologetically.

“We’ll handle whatever happens,” he said. Ed did not return that night or the next, or the next.

Mercy kept a close eye on Aaron, hoping that he would tell her that he and his sons had spoken. That did not happen. Mercy cursed herself for contracting the virus. If she had not done so, Aaron would not be in the process of losing his sons. She thought of phoning them and decided against it, they could ignore the calls, or cut them before she had had her say. She thought of divorcing Aaron in order to save his relationship with his sons and discarded the thought immediately. She would have to find another way to get Aaron and his sons to relate again.

Almost two weeks later, she went to see Joe in his office.

“Get out,” he said.

“Give me five minutes, please Joe, then I’ll leave,” she said. He looked away from her. She sat down.

“You told me that I give your father a reason to live.”

“That was before I discovered that you want to kill him.”

“I’m not going to kill him. I don’t want to kill him. Anyway, killing him wouldn’t help me or Alie. She needs him as much as you do. Don’t distance yourself from him because of my health. I’ll be out of your lives in a short while, he’ll need you then. He loves you and you love him. Please don’t punish him for my stupidity. My first husband cheated on me and left home on several occasions. Whenever he returned, I didn’t use condoms.”

“I don’t want to hear the details!”

“In hind sight, I realise I should have insisted on condoms or refused to sleep with him, but I didn’t. Your father had nothing to do with that. Please don’t punish him by not talking to him. If you can’t stand the sight of me, I’ll leave when you visit him, and when he visits you, I won’t come with him.” Joe did not respond.

“Please, Joe, please,” begged Mercy. Joe started fussing with papers on his desk.

“Thank you for your time,” said Mercy, then she left.

She cursed as she drove back to work. I should have been more persuasive. I have to do better with Ed, she thought. After work, she went to Joe's home to look for Ed as she assumed that he would be there. If he was not in Joe's home, she would find Adele and ask her if she knew where he was.

She knocked on Joe's front door, and waited. After some time, she knocked again. The door opened, and Ed looked at her.

"Please don't ignore your father because of me," she said. He continued to watch her without expression, but he did not close the door. Mercy was grateful for that.

"I was careless with my health, but..." she continued.

"I lost the love of my life to Aids," he said.

"I'm so sorry."

"Hearing that you're HIV positive brought it all back to me. I thought I was over it, but..."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not ostracising Dad. It's just that seeing you..."

"Oh."

"He and I *have* spoken since you told us your status."

"I'm so glad."

"You must love him a lot." Mercy stepped back, surprised by those words.

"You spoke to Joe, and now you're talking to me, because you don't want Dad to be hurt. That can only be done by someone who really loves him. I hope this marriage works for both of you. I'll help him cope when the time comes," said Ed. Mercy hugged him tight, then she released him. He continued to hold onto her. She felt his shoulders heaving and realised that he was crying. She put her arms round him again, he withdrew from her and closed the door. She looked at it, unsure whether to knock or just open the door and follow Ed.

She heard footsteps and turned. Joe was behind her. He stretched a hand past her and opened the door. She stepped aside, he stepped into the doorway.

"Ed..." she said.

"He's my brother, I'll take care of him," he said, then he entered the house and closed the door. Mercy went home.

Alie told her that Pa had phoned to say that he would be home late. She talked all through dinner, then she noticed that Mercy was not eating.

"Why are you sad?" she asked.

"I'm not sad, I'm worried about something."

"Can I fix it?"

"No."

"Can Pa fix it?"

"No."

“Who can?”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s go and write your birthday party invitations.”

“Really?”

“Do you still want a party?”

“Yes.”

“Your birthday’s in two weeks. We’ll write the invitations and send them out on Monday. That will give everyone time to prepare.”

“Yaay!”

Mercy was woken by a kiss on her cheek. She opened her eyes, Aaron was sitting beside her, watching her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.”

“I had dinner with Joe and Ed.”

“That’s great,” said Mercy, sitting up.

“They say you talked to them.”

“Yes.”

“You were worried about me.”

“Yes.” He kissed her gently.

“Thank you for caring,” he said, then he helped her to lay down. When he joined her, they slept with their arms round each other.

The day of Alie’s party arrived with many children. Mercy had not realised that so many people had been invited. She was glad to have her brothers’ wives and Dora helping her. Tim and his children had come too. He and two other adults supervised the children as they played games. They then served a junk food lunch, the cake was cut, then it was time for Alie to open her gifts. She was excited about each and every single one, and looked at each giver with pleasure. Mercy was touched that Joe and Ed had sent gifts.

All the guests left after the party. Mercy, Dora and Tim did the cleaning and sat down exhausted.

“What should we do about food? Every last morsel of food in the house was eaten,” said Dora. Aaron walked into the room just then and said that they would all go to dinner at his restaurant.

Joe and Ed joined them there for the meal. Afterwards, the waiters brought a cake to the table and sang happy birthday to Alie.

“I’ve had two cakes today. This is the best birthday ever,” she said. She fell asleep in the car on the way home. Aaron carried her to her bed and tucked her in. He and Mercy kissed her and went to their bedroom.

“Thank you for today,” she said.

“You don’t have to thank me for looking after our child.” Mercy kissed him. The kiss heated as they made their way slowly to their bed. They broke the kiss and hastened to disrobe. They shared a frantic kiss, then they climbed onto the bed. They kissed and caressed each other, trying to touch every part of each other. They panted, looking into each other’s eyes as Mercy caressed Aaron’s erection and as he caressed the dewy petals between her legs.

Aaron kissed Mercy, then he took his hands off her and put on a condom. He lay on his back.

“Ride me,” he said. Mercy sat astride him, caressed him a last time then she sank onto his hard manhood. She could feel how full he filled her. She started moving up and down his stalk, then he rolled, and pumped frantically into her body. As she started to shudder with pleasure, she was aware of him also shuddering with pleasure.

When the shudders died away, he raised his head, looked into her eyes, kissed her and rolled onto his side beside her. They held each other for a while.

“I’m going to shower,” she said. After her shower, she found him climbing into bed, his hair was wet, she assumed that he had showered too. She joined him, he put his arms round her and held her close.

She kissed his cheek.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too, Mrs Croukamp,” said Aaron. Mercy put an arm round his waist, and fell asleep with a smile.

END

Glossary

Baba – Father

Gogo – Grandmother

Mamncane – Aunt, mother’s younger sister, or wife of father’s younger brother

Sisi – Sister

If you enjoyed reading my book please send me a quick message via the [Feedback link](#) on my obooko.com download page. I will be delighted to hear from you.



This is a legally distributed free edition from
www.obooko.com

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form.