Chapter One

*September 2010*

On the night before she left, Mama pulled me so close I could smell the onions on her, the scent clinging to each layer of her clothing. “I wish I could take you, Ma. But I’ll be gone all week and your father is already not happy about that.” I knew that. Baba hated it when Mama and I weren’t home. We missed so many local ceremonies it no longer occurred to me to want to go. This wedding was a miracle because it forced Baba to allow Mama to go. Her absence would not go unnoticed at a family ceremony and I knew he didn’t want to give anybody a reason to talk. That he would never let us both go gave me a week to show what sixteen years of woman training had taught me. I nodded absently at my mother.

If I wasn’t so excited about her leaving, I may have been upset at how excited she was to be leaving me. She would get to leave the dusty, brown roads that we walked on every day. For a week she would be free of our village and live like the fancy women in the township with their running water and neat houses in a row; the paved streets with street names, that didn’t turn to mud every time it rained. She could enjoy all that while I played her role here. I would look after my father and older brother, Sizwe, just as well as she would. My excitement left no room to be upset.

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Light flooded my once cave dark hut and a few seconds later Mama’s face peered through. Even at five o’clock in the morning, she smelled like onions. She was gone in the next instant, but the onions remained. She’d seen me see her and that counted as waking me up. I normally got up at six o’clock and if I was woken up even a minute earlier I was demonic, but that was in my youth. Today I graciously woke up an hour earlier because Mama was leaving and I had to show her I was ready. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and joined her in the big standalone flat that was the kitchen. It was the biggest flat in our household, even bigger than my parents’ which had a little lounge area where Baba always took his food. The smallest one belonged to my brother, and I nearly never went in there. Baba and Sizwe had been systematically replacing each of the huts with the more sophisticated flats so that now only two remained in the yard; mine and the guest hut. They were evidently in no hurry to get to mine, and I didn't mind. I'd heard the roar of the rain beating up on the tin roof, and on those days I knew they all missed the gentle way it fell on my thatched roof.

“I’ve already started the fire, the bad water’s in the kettle and the good water’s in the jug. Just boil the tea when he wakes up.” She shuffled across the kitchen, looking fancy in her town clothes. Fewer layers, long skirt hugging her hips, headscarf tied securely in the big dome-like way that made her look like a queen.

“Yes, Mama.” I wished she wouldn’t fuss, I knew how to do everything. The ‘bad’ water was the salty water we got from the pump which we used for bathing and washing, cooking too if hadn’t rained for a while and the storage tank was empty. The ‘good’ water was rainwater, reserved primarily for tea and cooking if we could manage it. I watched her scan the entire kitchen, if our household was Mama’s empire then the kitchen was her headquarters. Her scanning eyes found their way to me.

“Nana, if you can’t do two meals that’s fine. Just cook one big pot and serve it twice.” Like hell I would, if she cooked two meals a day then so would I. I nodded. “You should have enough water for-” she froze mid-sentence and wiped her hands on the checkered dishcloth hanging next to her. I’d heard it too, the bus was close and it was time to go. She pulled her bag over her shoulder and walked to the door where I was still standing. A pinch to my nose and a smile that made all her features soft conveyed all the things there was no time to say.

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I know, Mama, I’ll take care of them.”

With her free hand, she grabbed the plastic bag with the mealies sticking out. Mama didn’t believe in entering someone’s home empty-handed and since the only thing we had in abundance was land, our gift was always fresh produce. I watched her pause briefly at the door of their flat, I assumed to give a quick goodbye to my father before making her way to the gate. I waved until I could no longer see her through the small squares of the fence.

Sizwe always came to the kitchen in the morning and made his own tea when Mama was around, but I wasn’t sure if he expected special treatment in her absence. I hovered around the kitchen waiting to see if he would come. He walked in, all bare chest and sleepy eyes, yawning as he moved around the rectangular room. A grunt perfectly timed with a nod served as my greeting. I stared back at him, offering a shrug of my right shoulder in response. He made his tea and sandwich and I did the same. Sitting at the table, we ate in the comfortable silence of two people who had perfected the art of ignoring each other. He then poured his bathwater and left. I collected the dishes he’d left on the table, dumping them into the big plastic container with the rest of the dishes I was about to wash.

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On more than one occasion while she was gone, I wanted to fling myself into the wall. I had grossly underestimated just how much went into ‘taking care of them’ in my mother’s absence. With each new day waking up an hour earlier lost more of its luster and being responsible for cleaning all the dishes, all the time, took its toll. Our two huts and three flats became my enemies as I swept all of them, except for my brother’s, every day. By the second day, exhaustion bested my pride and I cooked one big pot of ‘every vegetable I can find’ stew. When I ate it, it tasted of defeat. When I served it to my father, I left before he could taste it. I didn’t want to see his disappointment that it tasted nothing like Mama’s food. No matter how hard I tried, I was still not a woman.

When Monday came I ran to school, happy for the escape. Every math problem made my heart dance. It forced me to not think about dishes, cooking and sweeping. The long end-of-school-day bell, twice as long as the end-of-break bell, signaled the end of my freedom and I made my way home, counting down the days until Mama’s return. She had left on Saturday and by the time Thursday came I was about to lose my mind. From the time I woke up, I was counting the hours. The six o'clock bus she would be on would arrive at around seven and it couldn't come fast enough. “Shesha,” *hurry up,* I hissed at my brother as we made our way to the bus stop. He turned to look at me before turning back to face the single-lane gravel road, putting his hands in his pocket for good measure. Sometimes my brother was a real nuisance, which was why I mostly ignored him. But today I was so happy not even his attitude could bring me down. No longer feeling like we had to make the walk together, I ran past him all the way to the bus stop, happy to carry out Baba’s instruction of “go fetch your mother.” I would have gone if nobody told me to.

My run was premature so that I still had to wait a few minutes for the bus to reach me and stop. I watched Sizwe approach, unlike me he would arrive just in time, having successfully avoided being a sweaty, heaving mess. We shared everything, a mother, a father, a home and we were only separated by four years, but whenever I looked at him I couldn’t imagine a person less connected to me. How could he act so cool when I *knew* he was as excited as I was to see her? When Mama stepped out of the bus I ran to cross the street that separated us, unashamedly. I reached her and just I stood there, smiling because that’s all I could think to do. She came bearing gifts. There was a parcel on her back, carried the same way she would a baby. Four plastic bags were distributed between her hands and a passenger still in the bus carried a large funny looking thing down to the ground for her, before helping her place it carefully on her head. He then got back on and the bus and was gone.

I sensed motion and turned to see Baba coming towards us, releasing her of the burden on her head. I didn’t know that he would be coming too, his presence giving me a minor, pleasant shock. His face was unreadable and I didn't look at it for too long. All he asked my mother was if she had traveled safely. My mother’s gentle nod before she lowered her eyes again was the only response she would give right now. Sizwe took the plastic bags from her, gave one to me and we all walked back home in silence. I stole a glance all around me, Mama and I in the center and Sizwe and Baba a little further back, at our sides. I imagined the neighbors spying on us through their windows as we passed and saying to each other in hushed voices, “what a handsome family, the Mthethwa’s.”

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I knew I would have to wait for my turn with Mama, but I wasn’t worried. Sizwe worked with my father who worked in the local court as an adviser, a job whose schedule was incredibly irregular because it centered around when people had disputes. Regardless, they were always gone on Saturdays. They could stay home all week but still have somewhere to go come Saturday. I would watch them through the kitchen window after they’d had their breakfast on Saturday mornings, bathed and sparkling as they walked out the gate dressed in their best clothes. My brother in his white shirt, that had once been for school, tucked into his black pants, silver buckle shining. My father in that day’s Madiba shirt, untucked, the crease of both their pants running perfectly down the middle, sharp enough to be a weapon. They would leave after breakfast and come back after lunch, most times. Tomorrow was Saturday so after breakfast I would have Mama all to myself and she could tell me all about her trip. Right now she belonged to my father. We all took the parcels first to their flat where everything new was received, stacking them neatly in the living room, later they would go to the kitchen. Sizwe and I were meticulous in our packing, every second meant information.

“What is it?”

We all knew Baba was talking about the funny looking thing, and we all leaned in closer to hear her answer.

“It’s an old potter’s wheel,” she said as she gently ran her hands over it. It wasn’t that big and it wasn’t that sophisticated if you just analysed the parts. However, it was confusing that those parts were arranged like *that*. There were three disks arranged in a straight line, joined by a rod that cut through each of their centers. The bottom disk was the smallest, a small distance above it was the biggest disk and a greater distance above that one was the middle-sized disk. Its height was such that if someone sat naturally with it between their legs, then their hands would fall comfortably on the top disk. Having never seen anything like it before, I willed my father to ask the question I was dying to know the answer to. *What is it for?* Instead, I could tell by my father’s reaction to what my mother had just said that he did, in fact, know what it was, now that she mentioned it. Maybe he just hadn’t seen it in a long time or he hadn’t seen one that looked like that, but he knew what it was for. Instead, he asked her what he was dying to know, “What are *you* going to do with it?”

“I’m going to learn to be a potter.” Something shifted in the room. So suddenly that a crack formed in our universe. My father looked at my mother for a long time but said nothing. Still, he wore his displeasure on the outside. Something shifted in me too. My heart swelled. The room shrunk and the air slowly got heavy. Something big was happening. Mama sat looking straight ahead, her head held high, her hand on the potter’s wheel. My father looked down at her from where he stood, his face in a scowl. My brother was alert, like me, taking it all in. I replayed it in my head, in her voice, how she said “I’m going to learn to be a potter,” and not “I would like to learn to be a potter.” There was no question. Her voice was soft, but it was firm. My brother and I locked eyes and I tried to find in his the admiration I knew was evident in mine, but his gaze was gone as quickly as it came. I thought my mother was the queen of the world. My father broke the silence by asking her a question I already knew the answer to.

“Who will teach you?”

“No one, the lady who gave it to me showed me how to use it. I just need practice now.” *Good Mama*. The air got thicker. I made a secret vow to be extra helpful to Mama, so that Baba never had reason to complain. If he was displeased he would blame it on the wheel and take it away. I gave my mother a silent smile that I hoped told her of my devotion and the moment passed only between us. My brother and I locked eyes again and this time it held, he felt it too, we had overstayed our welcome. There was an acute change in the air and we knew we were no longer wanted. I took the plastic bags to the kitchen to unpack the food. Sizwe made his way to his flat. I wished to be a fly on that wall.

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I opened the plastic bags and rejoiced because Mama had outdone herself. One plastic bag was solely dedicated to scones, and concealed within them in wrapping paper was what I assumed was once the wedding cake. The rest of the plastics had things I was equally as happy to see. Things I could tell were bought by a woman; dishwashing liquid, a set of new dishcloths, washing powder, a long bar of soap and fabric softener. Baba usually did the shopping, based on a list Mama compiled. Oftentimes the money didn’t stretch far enough to cover everything and the first things cut were those that Baba deemed ‘luxuries’, like fabric softener. He was right that it was a luxury, but how it made the clothes smell and feel was wonderful. It made Mama and I feel rich to smell like that, so rich we made it the official measure of our wealth. With fabric softener or without.

I finished by packing away another secret delight, beef stock cubes, feeling spoiled. I poked at the coals, rearranging the logs and twigs to reignite the fire. When I blew into it, it came alive at once. I walked their tea to them extra carefully, double-checking to see if my tray was perfect, knowing Mama would notice. The door was open and the room was cool and quiet. It was so quiet I heard myself walk in, I heard myself put the tray down. I received softened eyes and a gentle nod as means of gratitude before I heard myself walk out. It wasn’t clear whether they’d moved at all since Sizwe and I were last there.

I filled the kettle up, boiling enough tea for Sizwe and me, knowing he would be in the kitchen shortly to investigate the contents of the plastic bags. After tea I warmed up the food. If for nothing else, I knew that my father and brother were happy to have Mama home because it meant they didn’t have to eat my one dish a day anymore. They didn’t say they hated it, but I knew they did. When Mama finally walked into the kitchen, she was no longer dressed in her fancy town clothes. The floor-length maroon skirt that hugged her body once again replaced by her loose brown one. She was still tying her faded green pinafore over her waist as she looked around her kitchen. I missed seeing her sparkle and wished she could have kept her nice clothes on longer, but her old clothes brought comfort.

She stirred my pot of rather watery beef curry. I was still not perfect at doubling my proportions, and it showed. She removed the pot from the fire and emptied the contents into another dish before chopping up an onion and frying it in some oil. Next, she added some spice mix, before she threw my stew back into the pot. I watched transfixed as she worked with the efficiency of two people, now peeling and chopping a potato before throwing it in. Lastly, she added the magic, the beef stock. In just those easy steps she had corrected my stew from a sad, runny mess to absolute deliciousness. I watched in awe, a true woman at work. It was good to have Mama home.

I finally got my time with Mama the next day. After breakfast, the two of us went to stock up on more water. We went later than the morning group to avoid the traffic. I didn’t ask her questions, Mama didn’t like that. I was practically hopping from foot to foot as we walked, trying to urge her on, knowing it would do nothing. I would simply have to wait until *she* chose to share.

She waited until we got to the pump and her bucket was situated underneath the spout before my patience was rewarded. There was no detail she hadn’t absorbed and her words became pictures in my mind. “There’s this plant that grows there,” she said, pumping the water effortlessly with a vacant look in her eyes. “It’s like a giant mass of leaves. If it was smaller it could be a houseplant, but it grows big, outside. It’s everywhere.” She stopped pumping for a second, looking at my face and talking directly at me for the first time, “It’s beautiful, Ma. It’s maroon, or maybe red depending on the light.” She started pumping again, the spell broken. “I just love how it’s everywhere there, the place is littered with them, that’s the plant of Mshayazafe.”

Even years after her last visit, she still remembered where to get off. She made the short walk downhill, stopping right before the sharp corner the road made so she could secretly study the house before any of them saw her. I was pumping now, Mama done and standing off to the side, lost in her details. It was in a row of houses that looked just like it. Five rooms of government housing; kitchen, dining room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom, all connected by a short passage and all with running water and electricity. They had painted since she was last there, it had been a dull brown colour then. Now it was vivid in bright yellow, with red trimmings around the windows and doors that made it stand out.”It’s beautiful, Ma. There's a garden too, at the back of the house and a neat lawn in the front.” Her speech was steady, even as she helped me mount the twenty-litre bucket on my head, and even as she did her own.

Aunty Sli was Mama’s closest family outside of us, and I knew when she said they hugged for an eternity, she meant it. Mama was born the only girl with four brothers and Aunty Sli was born too late after her own sisters for any real sisterly bond. Really cousins, her and Mama were only a year apart and grew up as the sisters they each longed for. She’d come to visit us twice that I could remember and each time she was like a shot of life for my mother. I’d fall asleep to their laughter drifting in from the kitchen late at night. I could picture the two of them, fresh-faced and carefree before they were mothers and wives, giggling late into the night.

When Mama arrived, Aunty Sli had put her right to work-giving her an apron and making room for Mama by her side. The wedding they were preparing for was for Aunty Sli’s neighbors, who would soon welcome their new bride. They belonged to the same clan and had grown so close over the years, that they really treated each other like family. Every woman in the community was present, contributing in some way. Some chopped and peeled and others filled the silence with the stories they shouted and the songs they sang. I pushed the gate, holding it open so Mama could walk in first, bucket securely on her head. I could almost hear the high cackling laughs of the women, enjoying the excuse to be out of their homes after dark. “Your Aunty Sli and I were amongst the last to leave.” She stopped talking then, focused entirely on lowering her bucket. First down to her chest and then to the floor. I copied, adding an extra step on my knee before lowering mine to the ground.

I got started on the dishes while Mama prepared the kettle for tea, our reward for every task. She had spoken non stop all the way to the pump and all the way back. It was magic to me that she hadn’t noticed how out of character she was acting. Ordinarily, a complete sentence, unprompted, from my mother was worth celebrating. I shook my hand in the silky water, creating bubbles. Dishwashing liquid was so much better than the powdered soap we had to use sometimes.

“Should I pour for you, Ma?” she asked in response to the kettle whistling. She’d already pulled up the second cup by the time I nodded, the dishes weren’t going anywhere. “Your aunty had liquid milk because they have a fridge. Tea tastes so different with liquid milk.”

“Yes, but it tastes better with *Cremora*,” I added a second teaspoon of the powdered creamer to prove my point. Mama rewarded me with a smile from the other side of her cup. “Your cousins missed you, so I said next time we’ll come together.” If I believed her, I would have smiled from behind my own cup. Instead, I settled in and waited for her to continue. She’d shared a room with the two girls, one of them giving up her bed. Zinzi, at eleven, was two years younger than me, while her sister Zandi was fourteen, a year older than me. They had a two-year-old brother, Musa, that I still hadn’t met. “He’s the cutest little thing, but he won’t leave Sli’s side! I don’t remember you or Sizwe being like that.” I wanted to comment but I couldn’t think of anything. “Your Uncle Muzi, he’s a good, kind man.” She seemed to meditate on that sentence, her pause stretching. I vaguely remembered a kind face.

“And he can pray.” I looked up at her, involuntarily. I had been expecting to hear about the next thing, something I could comment on. I didn’t know anything about my uncle so I had nothing to say about this either. I waited. “They took me to their church, on Sunday, and I prayed for all of us.” She beamed in a way that told me that the church had been a highlight. I knew she missed it. We didn’t go to church. Still, I prayed sometimes like Mama had shown me, alone in my room.

“..poor thing, she was so scared,” Mama’s voice brought me back and I started to nod gently, hoping it would urge her on so I could figure out who she was talking about. “I guess I must have looked like her too on my wedding day,” I watched as her face went from lovingly remembering something to sadly remembering it. I should have been listening. I could have steered away from this. Sometimes I could tell what would make her sad and gently push her in a different direction. Sometimes it worked. I should have been paying attention.

“So that was Sunday? What did you do on Monday?” I prompted, sometimes this worked too, but I was too heavy-handed with the excitement and she knew what I was doing. She sipped her tea slowly, the cup rising and lowering, “the days were all pretty much the same after that.” It was her sad voice, the low one, lower and slower than her usual. I nodded. “Okay, Mama,” so this was it for the day. I shouldn’t complain, when she did speak she spoke plenty, and as we sat in silence I let my mind wander back to all the details she had offered me.

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As we prepared dinner, she seemed to remember that she hadn’t told me about her potter’s wheel and the knowledge shot sparks through her and she became animated again. Once again, my beloved storyteller. On the day before she came home, she went to say goodbye to the neighbors. She found the new husband’s mother outside, spinning some clay on the wheel. “I wasn’t sure what she was doing, nana, but she wasn’t doing it right,” Mama burst out laughing at her own joke and I burst out laughing at her, and with her. I loved when she called me ‘nana’ too, it reminded me I was her baby. I loved when she was like this.

When the older woman saw Mama and Aunty Sli she immediately got up to wash her hands as she greeted them. “What is that, Ma?” Mama asked her, instantly intrigued.

“It’s my late husband’s old potter’s wheel. Oh he loved to do this, he would lose entire days just creating the most beautiful pots,” she let the moment linger, pausing to watch the image in her head, before slowly coming back, “but I can’t even make a hole in the clay. It’s been in the outside house since he passed, I put a lot of his things there. But now I’ve been slowly clearing the space for uSandile and his new bride. This is one of the last things I have to decide what to do with. I thought maybe if I could figure it out then I would keep it, but there is just no chance in hell of that so I guess I’ll be throwing it away unless I can find someone to take it.”

“Maybe you must just keep it because Sandile may want that piece of his father one day?” Aunty Sli suggested.

“I’ve tried and given up on that one, he says it’s too messy for his taste. I tell you art is in some people and just not in others.”

“I’ll take it,” Mama said when she said that, she was more surprised than anybody else.

“Do you know how to use a potter’s wheel, dear?”

“Not a clue, but I’ll learn. If you mean what you said, then I’ll be happy to take it off your hands.”

The older woman hadn’t argued and by the time the three women finally parted they were all a mess from trying to figure it out. It turned out that even though MaZungu had always watched her husband do it, she really had no idea what he was doing. She did, however, describe to Mama what she had *seen* him do, and how he had dried and then baked his pots. She even gave her the paints that he used to decorate them.

“I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful, but I’m sure if you just give yourself the time you will figure it out. Good luck! It makes me so happy to know that someone will love one of his most prized possessions, it would have killed me to throw it away. Thank you.”

“No, Ma, thank you,” they shook dirty hands and parted ways.