

# INNOCENCE BETRAYED

SIFISO MZOBE

corruption  
watch



## INTRODUCTION

---

*Since her mother died, Zinhle has had to be the adult in her house. She is struggling to cope, so when a teacher offers her work to help pay the bills she jumps at the chance, little knowing what she is getting herself into...*

## Chapter

# 1

.....

Zinhle lets out a sigh of frustration as the teacher yells, "Pens down! Time is up!"

She makes her way out of the school gates in a daze. She has hardly slept since the first term tests began; she hardly ever sleeps peacefully, anyway, because she is the head of a household at just sixteen years of age.

Her friend, Mbali, walking at her side, talks and jokes about last night's episode of the popular soap opera, Uzalo. Zinhle remains quiet. She hardly hears a word her friend is saying. She has heard pastors and her late mother say it is a sin to envy other people's lives. I gladly commit this sin every day, Zinhle thinks.

Every day I wish I still had parents, running electricity in our shack, enough time to study, enough clothes to wear, a new skirt for my school uniform, new school shoes for my

siblings and enough food to eat. I envy all my schoolmates who have these things. I just want to be a normal teenager and not have a care in the world.

Mbali is animated; she waves her hands around as she talks, and she laughs often.

“So what did you think of last night’s episode?” Mbali asks.

Zinhle doesn’t hear her. Her thoughts are elsewhere. There is no food at home and she fears she has run out of places to ask for help.

The wind picks up clouds of dust in the distance.

“Zinhle?” Mbali asks.

“What?” says Zinhle, distractedly.

“What did you think of yesterday’s Uzalo episode? Wasn’t it funny when –”

“I didn’t see it,” Zinhle snaps at Mbali. “I was already asleep.”

Mbali's face falls. "Oh," she says, quietly. "How did you find the maths test? I think I passed."

Zinhle says nothing. She knows that she hasn't done well in the maths test, but she can't afford to think about this now. She doesn't know what she will cook for her younger siblings for supper. Worse still, there is no money left to buy food. Her head begins to throb.

"Zinhle," says Mbali. She can see from Zinhle's face that something is wrong.

"I'm sorry, Mbali," says Zinhle. "I just have too many worries on my mind right now. The situation at home is really bad. You were saying?"

"How did you find the maths test?" says Mbali.

"I don't know. But I doubt I passed because I didn't get enough time to study."

"Shame, man. You should come to our study group," says Mbali. "My physics and maths marks have really improved since I joined. It's just us students. You get people who are

good in that subject to help you. And some are very good; they explain better than the teachers sometimes.”

“I wish I could join you guys,” says Zinhle, with a sigh. “But I have my sister and brothers to look after, and the household. It’s all just too much to handle. But I’ll have to make the time because I’m struggling with maths. I won’t pass Grade 10 if I carry on like this.”

Mbali looks at her friend. She doesn’t know what to say.

They are at the gate of the primary school where Zinhle is picking up two of her younger siblings, the twins, Mondli and Sbongile. Suddenly Mbali’s face breaks into a smile. Zinhle turns in the direction of her gaze and sees a group of boys and girls from her class approaching. She knows that Mbali’s boyfriend must be in the group.

“My bae Jabu is here,” says Mbali. “He is with his friend, Sizwe. Sizwe really likes you, you know. It wouldn’t hurt to smile when he says hi. He is a good guy.”

Zinhle takes a quick glance at the group and notices that Sizwe is smiling sheepishly. She looks back towards the primary school gate.

"I have no time for a boyfriend, Mbali. You know how my life is," she says.

Mbali shakes her head. She and Zinhle are friends, but being around her can sometimes suck the life out of a happy moment, like now. Mbali wants to talk about soapies, music, boys and fashion - fun things. Zinhle is always so serious.

Mbali's boyfriend motions for her to come over.

"See you later, Zinhle," says Mbali as she strolls over to join him.

"Hi, Zinhle!" shouts Sizwe from the other side of the road.

Zinhle doesn't hear him because the bell rings and primary school children flood out of the school gates.

**Tell us:** *Can you relate to Zinhle's struggle?*



## Chapter 2

---

Zinhle waits for a few minutes at the primary school gates for Mondli and Sbongile. She can hear Mbali's laughter as she entertains her classmates. Zinhle sometimes wishes she could blend in with the cliques at school, like Mbali. But it is hard for her because she comes from the shacks, while most of her schoolmates live in the better areas.

With the nine-year-old twins in tow, she picks up her youngest brother, Bongani, from the crèche further down the road. They all head home.

"Everyone, change quickly before it rains!" Zinhle commands.

All the children know the drill. They quickly get out of their uniforms and leave them in a bundle on the kitchen floor in front of Zinhle. Uniforms are washed every day because these are the only sets they have. Zinhle

washes the uniforms at the back of the shack while the children play. This is the only time Zinhle has on her own. She sits on the small bench behind their shack, catching her breath before she sinks her hands into the soapy water.

Hardly five minutes have passed before Sbongile walks up to her. Confusion covers her face.

“What’s wrong, Sbo?” asks Zinhle.

“Can you help me with a few sums?” says Sbongile. She shows Zinhle the sums in the maths textbook she is holding.

The sums are simple division, but Zinhle’s mind goes blank. She looks at Sbongile’s large, innocent eyes. She knows her sister is not only confused, but hungry too. They have all made peace with the fact that they don’t have electricity: they study by candle light, cook on the small paraffin stove and bathe in cold water. Their young bodies have adapted to that. But having no food – nobody, no matter how used to hardship, can ever adapt to hunger.

"So the ones that are giving me a problem are number four and seven," says S bongile. Zinhle tries to clear her mind and focus on the page. But she cannot even see the numbers now. She looks at her beautiful younger sister and wonders what crime they have committed to suffer such hardship. Zinhle stares at the textbook again, but she cannot focus. She knows it is the food problem and not the maths problem that has to be solved right now.

"I'll help you later, Sbo. I have to go find what we will eat for supper," says Zinhle. "I'll help you with the sums when I come back."

"It's just these two sums, Zinhle, and I'll be done," says S bongile.

"Don't you listen?" Zinhle says sternly. "I said I'll help you when I come back!"

S bongile is taken aback by her sister's sudden outburst.

"And please cook rice while I'm out," Zinhle adds. "Only two cups, not more. The rice has to last us for the rest of the month!"

S bongile's face falls into a sulk.

"What now?" Zinhle shouts.

"I wanted to finish my homework so I can also play with my friends," says Sbongile, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

"I know," Zinhle says in a softer tone. "But you need to cook and look after your brothers while I find us some food. I'll help you when I get back."

The child looks into Zinhle's eyes and nods in understanding.

**Tell us:** *How do you think Zinhle can get more support?*

## Chapter

# 3

.....

Zinhle makes her way to the spaza shop. She stands at a distance and waits for twenty minutes until the many people who are buying are gone. In those twenty minutes the sun sets. In the distance, Zinhle can see lights in the windows of her school. It must be the members of the study group that her friend, Mbali, was talking about. If only I had time I'd also be there, Zinhle thinks.

She forces a smile as she approaches the counter.

"Hello, Ma Sibiya!" she says, trying her best to sound cheerful.

"Hello, Zinhle," says Ma Sibiya. "How are you, my girl?"

"I'm well, Ma. Is Prudence around?"

Prudence is Ma Sibiya's daughter. Zinhle is asking about Prudence just to break the ice with Ma Sibiya. Zinhle doesn't get along with

Prudence because she dishes the dirt on everyone who buys on credit from her mom's spaza shop. Her nastiest comments are reserved for those who struggle with payments. And Zinhle takes the prize for that.

"Prudence is at school with her study group," says Ma Sibiya. "Shouldn't you be there as well, Zinhle?"

"I should, Ma. But you know how it is with me. By the time I finish helping my siblings, and cooking, I'm sure the study group would have finished."

"God will bless you for how well you look after those kids. Believe that, my child," says Ma Sibiya.

Zinhle sees Ma Sibiya break into a compassionate smile. She pounces.

"Ma. I'm sorry to trouble you, but we are a bit short. Can you spare mince or chicken? And onions?"

Ma Sibiya shrugs her shoulders. Zinhle notices the empty shelves in the spaza shop.

"Sorry, Zinhle," says Ma Sibiya. "But things are really bad for me as well this month. I had

to pay the mechanic for fixing the van I use to order stock. The only thing I have now is money to order stock for tomorrow. I'm out of meat and vegetables."

Zinhle does some quick thinking. She can see a few dried goods on the upper shelves. If she gets a packet of soup, they can fill up on bread.

"I know. Things are bad for everyone, Ma. Is it possible to get soup, some paraffin and two candles?"

Ma Sibiya nods. She pumps a bit of paraffin into a bottle.

"Thanks, Ma," says Zinhle.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you," says Ma Sibiya.

"No problem, Ma. This is better than nothing," says Zinhle, taking the paraffin, candles and packet of soup.

Zinhle is approaching her shack when she sees the lights come on in Ma Mdluli's house. Ma Mdluli has been her unofficial guardian ever since her mother passed away two years ago.

"Auntie," Zinhle greets through the open lounge door.

"Hello, Zinhle. How are you? What are you doing walking around alone at night?"

"I was at the spaza getting a few things, Auntie," Zinhle says, taking a seat next to Ma Mdluli on the sofa.

Ma Mdluli has lived in the shack section for years. She recently demolished her shack and built a proper house with concrete blocks. She used to work as a seamstress in a clothing firm, but she recently retired and was able to build the small house with the money she had saved over the years. She survives on her government pension grant. The money Ma Mdluli earns is not much, but she helps Zinhle when she can.

Ma Mdluli gets up to go to the toilet and Zinhle tidies up in the kitchen.

"No! Not today, Zinhle," says Ma Mdluli when she returns from the toilet. "You are writing tests. Go study. And I cooked enough food to last all of us for a couple of days!"



She dishes the chicken curry into a large ice-cream container and hands it to Zinhle.

"Thanks very much, Ma. Let me go study for tomorrow's test," says Zinhle.

Relief is evident on her young face.

"What are you writing?" asks Ma Mdluli.

"English," Zinhle answers.

"Good luck, my child," says Ma Mdluli.

Zinhle smiles back at Ma Mdluli, repeats her thanks, and rushes into the night to her siblings.

**Tell us:** *Why is Ma Mdluli so important in Zinhle's life?*

## Chapter

# 4

.....

Zinhle does much better in the English test, but her marks are still much worse than Mbali's. She rushes home as soon as the school day is over. She stays in the yard and watches her siblings playing for the rest of the afternoon. Today, Thursday, is the start of the Easter holiday. Zinhle doesn't want to be around people because everyone wants to talk about their plans for the holiday.

On Saturday she wakes up early, bathes and cooks porridge for her siblings. She is swallowing the last spoonful of her porridge when she hears a car stop in front of their shack. Zinhle peeks through the window. It looks like her teacher, Mr Hlophe's car. He is very important at school and is HOD of Maths. Who could Mr Hlophe be visiting in this area, Zinhle wonders.

That thought is quickly gone from her mind as she gets up to wash dishes.

Sbongile rushes into the shack. "There is someone here to see you," she says, catching her breath.

Zinhle looks through the open door, but sees no one.

"Where is that someone, Sbo?"

"In the car outside," says Sbongile.

"Who is it, Sbo?"

"It is Mr Hlophe, from your school."

Thoughts race through Zinhle's mind. Every teacher knows her plight. Maybe Mr Hlophe is here to help her, or maybe he is here to warn her because her marks are dropping and she might fail the year.

Zinhle quickly gets out of her tattered shorts and into a pair of jeans. She walks up to the car. It really is Mr Hlophe.

"Sir," says Zinhle. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Zinhle."

"Can I help you, Sir?"

"Yes," says Mr Hlophe. "I need someone to help me in my business. You know, I'm not just a teacher. I also have a business on the side. Do you need work?"

Zinhle can't believe her luck. She needs all the money she can get.

"Yes, Sir," she says, her face lighting up. "I need all the help I can get, Sir. When can I start?"

"You can start right now, if you are free," says Mr Hlophe.

Zinhle contemplates for less than two seconds. She doesn't even stop to ask Mr Hlophe what his business is.

"I'll get ready, Sir. Please give me a minute," she says.

She rushes into the shack and quickly gets into a better T-shirt and sneakers.

"Sbongile!" Zinhle calls out to her sister.

Sbongile comes rushing in.

"Sbo, I have to go. I've just found some work. Look after your brothers for me."

Sbongile smiles and nods. She is young, but she knows that work means food.

“Cook two cups of rice for lunch and have it with the leftover chicken curry. If I am gone until late, make sure you don’t let your brothers near burning candles. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Tell Ma Mdluli I’ve gone to work for Mr Hlophe.”

Sbongile gives her older sister a thumbs-up and waves goodbye.

**Tell us:** *Do you think Zinhle’s luck is about to change?*

## Chapter

# 5

.....

Zinhle runs out of the house towards Mr Hlophe's car.

She is about to open the back door when Mr Hlophe says, "No, Zinhle. Come sit in the front."

Zinhle opens the front door and sits. Mr Hlophe is on his cellphone for most of the ten-kilometre drive to his house.

"The family have gone to Durban for the Easter holiday," he says when the call ends.

Zinhle can only nod. She has the utmost respect for Mr Hlophe. He may seem strict at times, but he gets good results. She tells herself that she needs to work harder and concentrate in his class, even though her mind is on where their next meal is coming from.

They soon arrive at his house. Mr Hlophe presses the remote control and the gate

glides open to reveal a large house and a big yard with green grass.

Mr Hlophe opens the front door of the house and gestures to Zinhle to sit on the sofa in the lounge. When she is seated he walks over and stands directly in front of her. Zinhle casts her eyes to the floor. She knows not to look elders in the eye. She is curious to ask about the job that Mr Hlophe wants her to do, but out of respect she waits for him to explain.

“Well, like I said, the family is away. Can you help me to clean up in the kitchen, Zinhle?” Mr Hlophe asks, flashing a smile. “I am terrible at housework.”

“Yes, Sir, of course,” says Zinhle.

The kitchen is not in that much of a mess. Zinhle washes the few dishes in the sink and sweeps the floor.

“Zinhle!” Mr Hlophe calls out from somewhere beyond the lounge.

“Coming, Sir,” she says.

She can see him standing in the passage, at the door to one of the bedrooms.

"Ah, there you are! I want to show you around the house," he says.

So this is all about domestic work, Zinhle thinks to herself. She is disappointed that there isn't more interesting work to do for Mr Hlophe, but at least it's better than nothing. She follows him down the passage.

"This is my son's bedroom," he says, pointing to another door. "And this is the room you and your siblings can use when you come to visit."

Zinhle looks at Mr Hlophe. She is surprised by what he has just said. Mr Hlophe notices the confusion in her eyes.

"I know how hard it is for you and your sister and brothers," Mr Hlophe places a hand on Zinhle's shoulder. "I'm willing to help where I can, even if it means having you guys come stay with us on weekends."

I didn't know Mr Hlophe was such a caring man, Zinhle thinks.

Zinhle looks inside this room. It has two bunk beds, a TV and video games. Zinhle imagines



the fun she would have with her siblings in there.

Mr Hlophe walks on down the passage.

Zinhle follows him.

Now they are standing at the door to another room.

“Take those off,” says Mr Hlophe, pointing at her sneakers.

Zinhle quickly takes off her sneakers. She believes this is the *umsamo* of the Hlophe household: the room where most African families pray to their ancestors. Shoes are a definite no-no in the *umsamo*.

Zinhle follows Mr Hlophe into the room. She is looking at the floor, but she can sense Mr Hlophe’s eyes on her. She looks up and sees a strange expression on his face.

“Now take off your clothes,” says Mr Hlophe.

These words are so sudden and unexpected that Zinhle wonders if Mr Hlophe has actually said them. There is a horrible glint in his eyes now. It makes her think of a greedy man impatient for a meal.

“Why do I need to take off my clothes?”

Zinhle asks.

“You will be working. And where you will be working, you will only need your underwear on,” says Mr Hlophe.

**Tell us:** *What kind of work do you think Mr Hlophe is talking about?*

## Chapter

# 6

---

“No, Sir. I won’t take off my clothes! Why must I take off my clothes?” says Zinhle, taking a step away from him.

She is deeply confused. Work with only panties on?

The hungry look disappears from Mr Hlophe’s face. He flashes a smile, then abruptly leaves the room, leaving Zinhle even more confused.

“Get your sneakers on. I want to take you home!” Mr Hlophe shouts from the lounge.

Zinhle puts her sneakers on. She stands in the room for a few seconds, taking deep breaths, then walks to the lounge. Mr Hlophe is nowhere to be seen.

Her confusion turns into fear now.

She hears an engine starting up. She runs outside and finds Mr Hlophe in the car.

Zinhle gets into the back seat and closes the door. Mr Hlophe is looking straight ahead. He puts the car in first gear and they are away. As they pick up speed he turns on the radio and hums to a gospel song.

It's as if nothing had happened.

Zinhle begins to question her own sanity. Did he really ask me to take my clothes off? Yes, he did. I'm sure he did.

Suddenly his hand is waving something in front of her face. A hundred rand note.

"I have something for you," he says, without turning to look at her. "I thought you might need this."

Reluctantly, Zinhle takes the note, fearing the consequences if she refuses it.

They are driving past a row of shops. Mr Hlophe slows down the car.

"I just need to get some supplies here. There is a Spar over there if you want to spend your money," he says.

She nods her head and Mr Hlophe pulls up outside the store.

"I'll be back in ten minutes," he says. "Don't be long."

Zinhle walks into the supermarket and picks up a few basic items: a small packet of sugar, tins of sardines and baked beans, onions, curry powder and teabags. She gets to the counter and fishes in her pocket. The note is not there. She checks all her pockets. The money is not in any of them. A sense of dread overwhelms her.

She runs outside. The wind has picked up.

What if the money has been blown away by the wind, she thinks? She grows frantic.

Mr Hlophe's car pulls up while she is searching for the note on the grassy edge of the road.

"I'm sorry Mr Hlophe, can I just check in the car for the money? I can't find it anywhere, Sir." Mr Hlophe nods and Zinhle searches on the back seat and on the floor.

"Oh no, Sir, it's not here," she says. "I can't buy the food."

"Eish! I've already bought stock with all my money. I have nothing now. I'll give you

another hundred rand when we get back to my house," says Mr Hlophe.

"Back to your house? But I thought you were taking me home?" says Zinhle, her voice shaking.

Zinhle doesn't want to be around Mr Hlophe anymore. She is about to tell him so, but he speaks first.

"No, Zinhle. I have changed my mind. There's a job you need to do for me. And if you don't do it, mark my words, nobody at school will respect you anymore..."

**Tell us:** *Why do you think Mr Hlophe has changed his mind about taking Zinhle home?*

## Chapter

# 7

.....

Zinhle feels sick hearing Mr Hlophe saying these horrible words. Hot tears well up in her eyes.

She wonders why he has suddenly changed from being such a sweet man less than an hour ago.

He turns up the gospel music on the radio and hums loudly. The car pulls into the driveway and Mr Hlophe gets out and opens the car door for her.

“Come with me,” he says.

They enter the house. It is gloomy inside. She realises that the curtains in the lounge are drawn. It seems strange to have closed curtains in the middle of the day.

Mr Hlophe heads down the passage. Not wanting to follow, Zinhle waits in the lounge. She casts her eyes around hoping to see a telephone. At times like this she wishes she

had a working cell phone, with a stored number for Emergencies.

“Zinhle!” he calls out impatiently.

Zinhle still does not move.

He returns and takes her by the arm, then pulls her forcefully down the passage to the bedroom.

“No, Sir, this is not right!” she shouts as she tries desperately to free herself. His grip is strong. The door closes behind her.

The ugly, hungry look that was on his face before is back now. He grabs Zinhle and pulls her close, forcing his tongue into her mouth and fondling her breasts under her T-shirt before pulling it over her head. Then he pulls down the zip of her jeans and she feels his hand fumbling between her legs.

For a moment Zinhle is paralysed with fear. But then her survival instincts kick in. She fights him off, screaming in rage and disgust: “Get away from me!”

She thinks of her sister and brothers, and how she has taught them to stand up for



themselves. Her own teachings motivate her now as she squares up to Mr Hlophe.

“Shhh, Zinhle. Relax,” he says.

Zinhle screams even louder, loud enough to burst Mr Hlophe’s eardrum. Then, feeling a strength she has never felt before, she plants her knee into his crotch.

The smirk on his face turns to shock. He takes a step back.

“No! No! I said no! I want to leave right now! Right now!” Her eyes are red with rage.

The anger in Zinhle’s eyes has unsettled Mr Hlophe.

“Please relax,” he says.

“I’m leaving!” she screams at him, pulling on her T-shirt.

“Wait,” he says. “I’ll take you home. Just calm down.”

He tries to sweet-talk her but Zinhle is already out of the room. She runs to the lounge and opens the front door. She looks around. The gate is closed. He has the

remote control. The walls are high and electrified.

Mr Hlophe staggers up behind her.

“If you try anything I will scream so loud that all your neighbours will hear me! I would rather scale this wall and get electrocuted than be your victim!” she says.

“Relax, Zinhle. Let me take you home,” he says.

Reluctantly, Zinhle gets into the back seat of the car. She wishes she could call the police. She rolls down her window and is ready to scream if the car takes her in the wrong direction.

The car stops a few shacks away from hers. Mr Hlophe takes a two hundred rand note from his pocket. He turns to hand the money to Zinhle, but she is already out of the car and running.

She runs full tilt until she gets to Ma Mdluli’s house. She sees Ma Mdluli’s kind face and only now does she allow herself to cry.

“What’s wrong, Zinhle?” asks Ma Mdluli.

“Mr Hlophe,” says Zinhle.

Ma Mdluli has known Zinhle since she was born. She knows all about the young girl's suffering. Ma Mdluli also knows that she has never seen Zinhle this upset.

"What did he do? What did he do to you?"

"He touched me, kissed me, forced himself –"

Ma Mdluli gasps. "What? Mr Hlophe? We are going to the police right now, Zinhle!" she says. "We need to do something. Too many children are too scared to report abuse. I will be here for you. You need to be brave."

**Tell us:** *What do you think of what Zinhle did? What does it tell us about her character?*

## Chapter

# 8

.....

They enter the police station in a hurry. There is only one police constable at the charge office. He is busy taking a statement from two complainants. He looks up at Ma Mdluli and Zinhle and points them to the bench in the waiting area.

“I’ll be with you when I finish here,” the constable says.

Zinhle stares into a void while they wait.

Ma Mdluli puts her arms around her shoulder. “Everything will be alright, my girl,” she whispers to Zinhle.

They wait for thirty minutes. Ma Mdluli loses patience. She walks up to the constable.

“Sorry, is there anyone else who can help us?” she asks.

The constable glances at her. “Just wait for your turn, lady,” he says.

"I understand," says Ma Mdluli. "It's just that we have come to report a serious matter. We need help right now."

"Everyone comes here to report a serious matter. Like I said, wait for your turn," says the constable, without looking up.

Ma Mdluli can hear other officers talking loudly and laughing in the offices beyond the charge office.

"And what about those police officers I hear making jokes in the offices over there?" says Ma Mdluli, pointing.

"Can they not stop with the jokes and come help us?"

"Just sit down, lady. You will be helped," says the constable. His voice is full of irritation.

Ma Mdluli sits back on the bench next to Zinhle. She is fuming. She puts her arm around Zinhle's shoulder again and tries to calm down.

"Don't worry, Zinhle," says Ma Mdluli. "You will get justice for what that monster did to you. The police will sort him out."

Zinhle looks at the floor and nods.

Finally the complainants leave. Ma Mdluli and Zinhle stand up to approach the desk, but the constable rises fast and disappears into the room beyond the charge office. Several minutes pass while Ma Mdluli and Zinhle wait at his desk.

Finally Ma Mdluli takes matters into her own hands. She heads straight through the charge office and through the same door used by the constable. She finds him joking with his colleagues.

“Help us, please!” Ma Mdluli shouts.

“Lady, I’ll be with you shortly,” the constable says. “And you are trespassing; no one is allowed in these offices except police officers.”

“We need your help, Constable. Right now, please,” Ma Mdluli pleads.

“I said I’ll be with you shortly. Wait at my desk. I am coming.”

The constable gets back to his desk ten minutes later. Zinhle tells her story. She does so bravely, step by step, detail by minute detail.

The constable looks into her eyes without an ounce of compassion.

“This is a powerful man that you are talking about, he is HOD and close to the principal and everyone knows and respects him in the community. These are damaging allegations,” says the constable. He looks straight into Zinhle’s eyes and continues, “I don’t think it is wise to open a case when in truth nothing happened.”

“What!?” Ma Mdluli screams. “A man forces himself on a child and you say nothing happened. This is a child, damn you!”

The constable looks at Ma Mdluli and says, “Doing things in anger is problematic. I suggest you come back tomorrow when you are calm and we can discuss this again.”

Ma Mdluli and Zinhle can’t believe what they are hearing.

“This can’t be the correct way to serve people,” says Ma Mdluli, shaking her head.

She is about to give the constable a piece of her mind when she feels Zinhle’s hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t get stressed, Auntie,” Zinhle says. “Let’s do as he says.”

Zinhle turns to the constable. She is coolness personified. “Just know that we will be here again tomorrow and the next day and the next, telling the same story until you open a case against the man who sexually assaulted me.”

They walk away.

Mbali is out of breath as she knocks at the door of Ma Mdluli’s house. She knew when she got the call from Zinhle that something terrible happened. She sensed the hurt in Zinhle’s voice. She ran all the way and now, as Zinhle tells her what happened, she feels a sickening ball of anger well up inside her chest.

“I’m so sorry that this happened to you, my friend,” Mbali says, hugging and sobbing with Zinhle. “These things have gone on too long in schools all over the country. These monsters do whatever they want with us and nothing is done to punish them.”



They hug for a long time.

“What did we ever do to deserve this hatred?” Mbali wails.

\*\*\*

Zinhle and Ma Mdluli are back at the police station the following day. Zinhle tells the same story to a female constable.

“I am sorry to hear about this,” she says. She takes down her statement and promises to open a case against Mr Hlophe and assign a social worker to support Zinhle and her family.

When school opens after the Easter holiday, Zinhle tells a teacher about what happened with Mr Hlophe. Miss Nkabinde, her Life Orientation teacher, is someone she feels she can trust.

“There will definitely be an enquiry into this matter. Rest assured, Mr Hlophe will be suspended,” Miss Nkabinde says. “I will tell the principal he needs to do something.”

**Tell us:** *What do you think of the way the policemen treat Zinhle?*



## Chapter

# 9

---

Months pass. Mr Hlophe is still at her school. Every day at school Zinhle sees and hears the man who sexually assaulted her. Teachers who are on Mr Hlophe's side look at Zinhle with disgust.

But Zinhle remains strong; she keeps her head up. It helps that Mbali proves to be a true friend. Mbali is always by her side when Zinhle needs her.

One day, Zinhle is coming out of the toilet and walking back to class. She is staring at the dust on her shoes. When she looks up she sees Mr Hlophe watching her with that same crooked smile from the end of the classroom block. He looks like he has won, like Zinhle is no threat to him.

Zinhle's stomach tightens. Her legs feel weak. She turns and runs out of the school grounds. At home she falls onto her bed,

shaking uncontrollably. I'm not going back to school, she says to herself. I just can't do it anymore. Not as long as he's there.

A few days later, Miss Nkabinde visits her.

"I came to see you because nothing seems to be happening with your case. The principal has done nothing. It isn't right. Has a social worker even been to visit you and your family?"

"No, not yet," says Zinhle.

"I now worry that you will leave school. I have seen how stressed you are. It must be terrible to have to sit in Mr Hlophe's class knowing what he has done. I think there is a way I can help you," says Miss Nkabinde.

"How can you possibly help me, Miss? Don't you see that everything is against me? Even the principal doesn't believe my story. And some of the teachers look at me with disgust, like I am rubbish. I don't know what Mr Hlophe has told them to protect himself. What can you do?"

"I know of an organisation called Vice Catchers. They deal with cases like yours.

They will follow up on all the complaints you have until something is done. But I need to get the go-ahead from your guardian before I contact them, Zinhle."

"Yes, of course," says Zinhle.

Miss Nkabinde can see a tiny spark of hope in Zinhle's eyes.

"Mr Hlophe doesn't deserve to be around students, Miss," says Zinhle. "I wouldn't want anyone else to experience what I did. He must be stopped."

"Good," says Miss Nkabinde. "I'll make the call."

It is late when Zinhle hears the knock on her door.

"It's me, open the door!" Mbali shouts before Zinhle can ask who it is.

"Are you not scared of being in the shacks so late at night?" Zinhle asks when she opens the door.

"Who? Me? Scared? Never!" says Mbali. "All jokes aside, I have protection. My brothers are with me," she points to two men standing outside Zinhle's shack.

Mbali's face brims with excitement as Zinhle tells her about the call Miss Nkabinde made to Vice Catchers. She is going to visit them the next day with Ma Mdluli.

\*\*\*

After the meeting with Vice Catchers Zinhle and Ma Mdluli walk to the taxi rank together. Ma Mdluli puts her arm around Zinhle and gives her a squeeze. Zinhle feels lighter, like a load has been lifted off her shoulders. The lady at Vice Catchers gave them tea and biscuits and really listened to Zinhle and Ma Mdluli. Zinhle trusted her when she assured them that Vice Catchers would follow up Zinhle's case until Mr Hlophe would be charged in court.

In the taxi back home Ma Mdluli turns to Zinhle. "It's been forever since I've seen that beautiful smile of yours, Zinhle," she says taking Zinhle's hand in hers.

"I know, Auntie. I'm just relieved, more than anything. I am so grateful to Miss Nkabinde for putting me in contact with the people at

Vice Catchers. They have brought hope into my heart again. I had given up, Auntie," says Zinhle.

**Tell us:** *How do you think Zinhle feels now?*

## Chapter 10

---

The next day a social worker from social services comes to visit Zinhle and speaks to her. She tells her the case will go to the regional branch of the National Prosecuting Authority. "What Mr Hlophe did was a crime," the social worker says. "He must be tried in court."

Zinhle knows that Vice Catchers have been doing what they promised. At last things are happening.

At school Miss Nkabinde takes Zinhle aside and tells her that she, herself, has reported what happened to the Education Department. She couldn't do nothing thinking that every day Mr Hlophe might be doing the same thing to another student. She says the Education Department promise they will look into it. And now with Vice Catchers on the case, it can't just disappear.



"You are a brave girl. And you are not alone now," Miss Nkabinde tells Zinhle.

Zinhle can't wait for the day she doesn't have to look at Mr Hlophe again.

Back at home Zinhle tells Ma Mdluli the news.

"God is great, Zinhle!" says Ma Mdluli. Tears of joy stream down her face.

"There is still a long way to go until the end, Auntie, but it is happening and Mr Hlophe will get what he deserves."

"And another thing," says Zinhle after a while.

"What is it?"

"Well, Auntie, the social worker who took on my case says that Sbongile, Mondli, Bongani and I will be moved to places of safety while the investigation is going on. In case Mr Hlophe tries to threaten us. He won't be able to find us."

"Oh," says Ma Mdluli. She lifts her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Don't cry, Auntie. You are going to make me cry now," says Zinhle, her voice quivering.

"Don't mind me, my child. I am sad you will be leaving, but I'm also happy that you will be in a safer place. You will be provided with food and good shelter. You will be a child again," says Ma Mdluli.

"I'll be in a separate home from the rest of my siblings because I'm older, but the places are not far apart," says Zinhle.

"When your case goes to trial, I will be there for you every day, Zinhle. Every single day. And if you ever need anything, just call me. Mr Hlophe must be brought to justice before he can hurt any other children."

"I'll keep in touch, Auntie. I promise," says Zinhle.

"I know," says Ma Mdluli, reaching out her arms. "God bless you, my beautiful girl."

As Zinhle walks out of Ma Mdluli's yard she sees a car parked outside. The front passenger window rolls down. It is Mbali, in her brother's car. She gets out.

"I just had to come and say goodbye, my friend," Mbali says.

They stand for a while looking at the dim lights of the shacks in front of them.

“Thank you for being there for me through everything,” Zinhle says softly.

“I’ll come visit you at the place of safety every week. We will hit the books and talk about life, and soapies and clothes!”

They laugh, hug and cry. Zinhle, with her sister and her brothers, stay at Ma Mdluli’s house for the night.

The car taking them to their places of safety arrives in the morning. Before they leave they ask to go to their shack for one last time.

“We want to see if we collected everything,” Zinhle tells the social worker.

They make their way down and stand inside their shack for a while. They make sure all the windows are properly shut, and lock the door.

“Zinhle, we forgot to take the paraffin and candles,” says Sbongile as they leave the yard.

"It's alright, Sbo, leave it," says Zinhle. "We will use the paraffin and candles to light our home when we return. Life will be better and safer for us then."

**THE END**

**Tell us:** *Why is it so important to have organisations like Vice Catchers?*

Vice Catchers is a fictional organisation but there is an organisation called Corruption Watch that is like Vice Catchers and can intervene on behalf of people in situations like Zinhle's to hold wrongdoers to account.