

REPUTATION THIEVES

MAIRE FISHER

corruption
watch



INTRODUCTION

Lizo is a brilliant artist. When he forms the Township Artists' Life Collective it looks like they're set for the big time - if only they can get funding to take them to New York! When their funding application is turned down Lizo doesn't give up hope, but he then learns he is being investigated for the misappropriation of funds - funds he never received...

Chapter

1

.....

Hey, Lals. <3 RU free after school?

Sure.

Good. Really need to talk.

Everything okay, babe?

Tell you when I see you.

Bhutana sent the message and leaned back against the tree. He didn't need to tell Laula where to meet him. This was their special tree. It had watched over their first kiss, listened as Bhuti and Laula shared all their secrets: how all they both wanted was to get good marks and to get to university, Bhuti heading for Electrical Engineering, Laula's heart set on the School of Music where she wanted to study opera.

"Keep your head down and work as hard as you can." That's what Bhuti's older brother, Lizo, kept telling him. "Look after your family, help your friends. See what you can do for

your neighbours. Help Mama around the house, be ready with a cup of hot sweet tea when she gets home. Help the little ones with their homework. Be a good man, Bhuti.” He never once said, “Be like me.” But that’s what Lizo was, a good man. A great guy. He never complained about giving Mama money at the end of the month. He encouraged his younger siblings to share the laughter and the sorrows of their day, and always managed to find a little extra money for small treats. Bright red ribbons for Lindi’s hair, a second-hand battery charger so that Phakamile could recharge his batteries and read his books late into the night.

Not every young boy can help to fill his father’s shoes, but that’s just what Lizo did when Dad died. Somehow he helped Mama, kept things going, even managed to make Mama smile when it seemed she would never smile again.

On top of all that, he’d kept up with his studies, an all-round A student, Mr Dlodlo called Lizo when he helped him to fill in the

miles and miles of forms the university needed when he applied for financial aid.

Four years of hard work, top of the Dean's List three years in a row, and then, as soon as he finished his Fine Arts degree, off to work.

But he didn't finish studying. No, not Lizo. He made a deal with the university, which was only too happy to let one of its brightest stars work on his Master's part time. And after that, no doubt, his doctorate.

But that wasn't enough for Lizo. He was the sort of dude who looked around him to see where he could make a difference, to pull others in to share the spotlight with him. That's why he started TALC, the Township Artists' Life Collective.

TALC were a group of five young artists whose ambition was to document the everyday, in the lives of the people around them, from women washing clothes at a communal tap, to that same washing strung on lines between corrugated-iron shacks, to children: walking home from school, playing

soccer on a dusty field, studying by the light of a candle late at night.

Lizo was a photographer. He took pictures of what was happening around him. They were so vivid that you could almost hear and see what he saw when he took the photographs: the zing of an electric clipper shaving patterns into hair in a barber shop, umngqusho and runaways grilling over an outdoor fire, the sound of a skipping rope flicking the uneven ground while a group of little girls chanted "Nolitje dobi ilitje, o li beke phansi".

"Papa would be so proud," Mama said often. "So proud."

Mama was a quiet woman who kept her thoughts to herself, trusting her children to make the right decisions, do the right thing. When Bhuti was small and he had a problem and went to her for help, she would say, "Well now, little Bhuti, what does your heart tell you to do? Listen to your heart first and then use your clever brain to work the rest out."

It was true about Dad, Bhuti thought. He would have loved to see how his oldest son had kept at it, even when times were tough. And he'd specially loved to have seen Lizo's face when he opened the envelope that told him TALC had been selected to exhibit their work at YAWP, the Young Artists to Watch Programme, an initiative of MOMA, The Museum of Modern Art In New York. "All these initials," Mama had said, "and they all mean such wonderful things!"

Dad would be so proud of his wife too, the firm, solid woman who quietly allowed her children to grow and learn for themselves.

"Ah yes," said Mr Dlodlo when Lizo and Bhuti went to tell him all about it. He furrowed his brow for a second and the two boys knew he was delving. That's what he called it when he was searching for one of his quotes. Mr Dlodlo struck a pose and proclaimed in ringing tones:

"I too am not a bit tamed - I too am untranslatable;

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

“From Leaves of Grass, Lizo, a collection of poems by one of the great American poets, Walt Whitman. Yawp ... is that not a magnificent word? And see,” Mr Dlodlo was getting excited now, “see how well the two work together. Lizo, your group TALCs, talks – don’t you see, the exhibition listens as young artists YAWP?” Mr Dlodlo was fully carried away, but that’s how he always was, why he was such an inspiring teacher.

“A quote for every occasion, that’s our Mr Dlodlo,” Bhuti said that evening at supper. Mama scolded him gently, “And a fine brain that holds so many words and knows when to use them. You could try being a little more like him, Bhuti.”

Lizo was filled with pride that TALC had been selected. But now they needed to find the funding to get there.

Tell us: *Do you think it is difficult for Bhutana to follow in Lizo's footsteps? Do you think Mama is right when she says you should first listen to your heart?*

Chapter 2

It was time for planning how to get to New York. There was much laughter around the table as one by one the members of the collective arrived and the small room was filled with excited chatter.

“But how will we get there?” Cikizwa asked. She was their youngest member, still at university. Her sculptures were tiny. They showed the difference between the haves and the have-nots: those who were rich living next to the poor, but unaware of their needs: a tiny sports car driven by a bejewelled woman could be found nestled inside a rusting hubcap; a scrawny, minute child, exquisitely modelled, left crying with hunger on a scrap of paper advertising exotic and very expensive food.

“Mr Dlodlo says he’ll help us,” said Lizo.
“We’ll need to apply for funding from the

Department of Sport, Arts, Culture and Recreation.”

“We’ll never get it,” said Thandisizwe glumly. “Everyone knows all the money goes to the sciences. ‘That’s where the future lies ...’” he sighed. “If I hear my father say that one more time ...”

“Well it’s not where our future lies,” said Zandile brightly. “Cheer up, Thandi, this is amazing news. Let’s just enjoy it for a while before we start stressing about funding.”

Thandi painted gloomy oil paintings in dark shades of grey and rusty brown, Zandile’s – delicate porcelain story pots – burst with light and colour.

“This is my life,” she said of her work in an interview with the Big Issue, “and I am determined that it will shine.”

“The Big Issue – that article must be where MOMA learned about you guys,” said Bhuti. “Remember the photographer said he had overseas connections?”

“It’s wonderful,” said Dumisa quietly.

"Oh, Dumi," Zandile hugged him tight.
"Imagine Teatime with Mma Tshabangu, and all your other sculptures exhibited in MOMA! Do you know how big this is, guys? Something like this can make us as artists. You think we'll get funding, Lizo?"

"Well, Mr Dlodlo seemed pretty sure of it. In fact," Lizo laughed gently, and puffed out his chest, Dlodlo-style, "'In the words of the great Jesse Owens, a man who took adversity in his stride - literally in his stride, Lizo and don't you forget it: We all have dreams. But in order to make dreams come into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline, and effort.' And we've got plenty of all of those qualities."

"Ahh," said Zandi happily, "where would we all be without our dear Mr Dlodlo?"

"So anyway," said Lizo, "I've made an appointment with the Department of Sport, Arts, Culture and Recreation. The question is, should I go alone, or should we all go and present our case as a group?"

“On your own, Lizo,” said Dumi, “at least at first, and then if they want to see all of us we can go together. In the meantime we can get a portfolio together, be ready when they call us.”

“All agreed?”

Lizo looked around the group and Bhuti’s heart swelled with pride. What a natural leader his brother was, respectful of others in the group, never pushing himself forward, yet always the one they all turned to when a decision had to be made, action taken.

“Okay,” said Lizo. “I’ll go. But we need to work out how much funding to ask for.”

“There’s air tickets,” said Ciwi.

“Yes, and also framing,” said Thandi. “Or will we do that there? My pieces will have to be packed really carefully.”

“I’m not sure,” said Lizo. “That’s something we’ll need to ask the organisers.”

“Best thing is to make a list,” said Zandi, clapping her hands. “Work out our approximate expenses.”

"Right," said Lizo. He smiled at his younger brother. "Bhuti, you're the maths genius around here - you can do the sums."

Bhuti smiled happily and gave a mock salute.

"Yes, sir, Mr Artist, sir! At your command."

Tell us: *What do you think it takes to make your dreams a reality?*

Chapter

3

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That was such a happy evening, Bhuti thought. Who would have thought TALC's story would have such a depressing ending? He stared down the street. In the three weeks since Lizo had gone to find out about applying for funding, the look of the street had changed. Lampposts still sprang from broken sidewalks, but now they were festooned with the faces of all the ward councillors who wanted people's votes in the coming municipal elections. ANC, DA, EFF, independent candidates ... All the posters saying

Pick me

Choose me

I'm the best

We're the best

We can help you

We can make your life better

We're the only party in the world who can set things to rights

A better future

A better life ...

One of the candidates even used to go to their school. Mcebisi Nyathi. His family still owned property near Bhuti's house, even though they hadn't lived there for ages. The moment Mcebisi's father had started to climb the political ladder the whole family had moved to a much better suburb, one with high walls and electric gates, the grounds big enough to fit twenty of Bhuti's house inside them.

By the time the TALC members had finished discussing their list of absolute necessities, the total they needed came to R255 000. That included airfares, airfreight for their work, hotel accommodation in a budget hotel close to the Museum of Modern Art, and a small daily allowance.

"We must not tear the ring out of this," Dumi said seriously. "So no money for fancy food

and American gear, but we can allow some for sightseeing trips and visits to art galleries and the like.”

Ciki’s eyes lit up. “Oh,” she said happily, “does that mean that we get to go to the Met?”

“And the Guggenheim,” Thandi said, a rare smile lightening his face. “I’d give anything to visit there. Manet, Picasso and Chagall ...” his face was dreamy with yearning. “And Kandinsky, what I would give to see a real live Kandinsky!”

There was a sudden babble of voices.

“Whitney Museum of American Art—”

“All those Georgia O’Keeffes—”

“Egyptian collection at The Brooklyn Museum—

– and they have an African gallery!”

“The Frick Collection—

Vermeer, Renoir ... oh my god ...

Rembrandt...

“The Museum of Art and Design—”

"Yes! Do you know you can actually watch artists at work there? How amazing is that?"

"Forget food," said Zandi, giddy with delighted laughter, "let's spend all our allowance on art."

"Okay, okay," laughed Lizo, "even starving artists need a little bit of money to buy a crust of bread."

Lizo took the figures to Mr Dlodlo and together they scrutinised the list.

"Better round your total up to R300 000," Mr Dlodlo advised him. "It's good to have some emergency money."

"Okay," Lizo had agreed, "but any money we don't use, we give straight back." He paused. "That's if we're lucky enough to get funding."

Poor Lizo. Bhuti pounded a heel into the dirt.

"It's so unfair," he said aloud to the grinning poster face of Mcebisi Nyathi. "I bet you wouldn't have had any problem getting money to go to New York. Daddy would just open his wallet and say, 'Help yourself, son.'" Not that Mcebisi would ever have been invited to exhibit anything, or attend any

event that required a show of talent or brains. According to the people who'd been at school with him back in the day, Mcebisi Nyathi hadn't exactly been the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Mr Dlodlo and Lizo had sweated for hours over the application forms, and then Lizo had delivered them personally to the office of the Sport, Art, Culture and Recreation. All the way into the city, to the Houses of Parliament. From there up to the offices where Lizo hoped that a face-to-face meeting would help him to state his case.

Bhuti sighed as he remembered how excited his brother had been. "We'll be given an amazing amount of space," Lizo said.

"Nothing cramped or cramped. And, Bhuti, we'll be allowed to sell our work too!

Apparently a lot of really influential patrons of the arts will be there, the sort who keep an eye out for promising young artists and buy their work as an investment. I'm hoping my rooftop series will go down well."

Bhuti smiled as he remembered his brother balancing precariously on the roofs of

various shacks, his camera poised, watching people as they moved below him, eye clicking as they walked.

“And there are prizes in several categories. American dollars, Bhuti. We could come home with enough money to allow us to make art and not have to keep our day jobs ... We could put money into our studio space, start those weekend art lessons for the kids.”

“Dream big.” That was Lizo’s mantra, one that had kept him going all through the hard times. And that’s what he’d encouraged his brothers and sisters to do as well. “Don’t let people tell you what you can’t do. Tell yourself what you can do, and figure out a way. Don’t take no for an answer.”

He had come home from the Department of Sport, Arts, Culture and Recreation, with his eyes shining. “New York, here we come, Bhuti,” he’d said, grinning. “Mr Nyathi said I should hear back from them within a week.”

“Nyathi?”

“Yes, can you believe it? The father of ward councillor Mcebisi Nyathi. He said it warmed his heart to see local artists doing well. He’s going to do everything in his power to help us on our way to New York.”

Lizo had grinned then, his wide happy smile. Even when he was reading or watching TV it looked like he was ready to smile. The sort of guy who brightens up a room, Laula called him, and Bhuti agreed. His brother was such a good man. It was great to think that he was going to get the break he deserved. Not that Lizo would ever talk about payback, but Bhuti was happy that his brother would be getting back some of the goodness he spent his whole life spreading around.

Tell us: *How can seeing famous artists’ work inspire you?*

Chapter

4

One week passed, and then another and another.

Bhuti sighed again.

"Hey, Bhu, what's with the long face?" Laula flopped down on the grass next to him.

"Sorry I'm late. I thought rehearsals would never end."

Bhuti leaned down to give her a kiss. No matter how tough a day he was having, seeing Laula always made him smile.

"It's Lizo," he said. "You know that funding he applied for?"

Bhuti's sad face told the rest of the story.

"Don't tell me. He didn't get it?"

"No."

"But why? Everyone thought—"

"I know. His lecturers are shocked. Mr Dlodlo can't understand it. None of us can."

"Oh, man. That's just so sad. Did they give a reason?"

"Apparently their budget allocation for the year has been used up. Sorry, but ..."

"That's it?"

"That's it. No congratulations on being invited to participate in the exhibition. Nothing."

"That's terrible. Poor Lizo. How's he taking it?"

"Oh, you know my big brother. He's upset, naturally, but he's not going to let it get him down. First thing he did was to call the members of TALC together and encourage them to work even harder. So there's a big work party planned for this weekend to do up the studio. They'll go ahead with the weekend art lessons for kids, anyway. By the time Lizo had finished talking to them, they were so excited about the new project they'd almost forgotten the disappointment of losing out on the funding. Even Thandi was smiling."

“Thandi?” Laula’s face was filled with mock amazement. “Thandi never smiles. It’s against his principles.”

But Bhuti was still worried. “I felt so bad for Lizo, Lals. He gives so much and he works so hard. He managed to hide it from the others pretty well, but I could see how badly this whole thing affected him. He really set his hopes on it; he had such dreams for TALC.”

“It would’ve been so great, Bhuti,” Lizo had said the night before, after the others had gone. “I wish I knew why ...”

“Me too,” Bhuti said miserably. “Maybe you should go and ask?”

“I don’t think that will do any good. It’s not as if they don’t appreciate our work. Remember how full of praise Mr Nyathi was? He said we’d be great South African ambassadors, that he’d do everything in his power to help us on our way. Remember we all thought he was such a snob, Mama. Looking down on us little people when he starting moving up? Well, he wasn’t like that at all.”

"Hmmm," Mama said. "He saw how talented you were, Lizo. A chance for him to shine because of you."

"Mama!" Bhuti and Lizo looked at their mother in amazement. Mama never said a cruel or critical word about anyone.

"I'm sorry, my child." Mama's eyes filled with tears. "But I hate to see you so disappointed, after all your hard work. Not to mention your talent."

"Oh ho, talent!" said Bhuti, desperate to make his mother smile. "I have a Dlodloism for that. He stood up and thrust out his chest.

"Genius is one per cent inspiration, ninety nine per cent perspiration." He wagged a finger at Lizo. "Thomas Edison, my boy. One of the great American inventors of all time."

"Yes, sir," Lizo said, playing along. "You mean the inventor of the early record player and the motion-picture camera?"

"That's right, clever boy." Bhuti raised his arms high. "Not to forget the wondrous electric light bulb."

Lizo looked around the small room, the stubs of candles on the table where everyone ate and did homework. "Ah yes, the lightbulb ... We could do with a few of those around here."

He went to where his mother was standing at the sink and hugged her hard. "Anyway, Mama, it's easy to be discouraged when things don't work out, but we're not going to let that happen. We'll start the art classes, and work from there."

Mama said nothing more. She just made Lizo a cup of tea, rooibos with a spoonful of honey, and stood behind him rubbing the nape of his neck while he drank it.

Tell us: *How would you describe Lizo's character?*

Chapter

5

"It's just not fair," Bhuti said to Laula. "They're all so good. Artists like TALC help people to see the world differently, Lals. They don't try to make things all pretty and perfect, but they don't ask for pity either. They just say, here we are and this is what we do."

He settled back against her shoulder and stared at the leafy canopy overhead. "I just can't understand how they couldn't find the money. TALC's the sort of thing that makes you proud to be a South African. Even that Nyathi guy said they would have been good ambassadors for our country."

"So where's Lizo now?" Laula asked. "Should we go and find him, see if he's okay? I'd be so depressed if it was me."

Bhuti laughed. "You know my brother, babe. Where do you think he is? Wednesday afternoon. 4 p.m."

"Of course." Laula jumped to her feet.

"Soccer practice."

"Yep, he wouldn't dream of letting the kids down. Plus he's planning on roping them into art classes next weekend."

And that's where they found Lizo ten minutes later. Standing on the side of a dusty field, calling instructions to the eight- and nine-year-olds who were chasing an old ball.

"Guys, guys," he was laughing. "Try to remember to stay in place if you're a defender. You don't all have to chase the ball."

He saw Bhuti and Laula and waved, a huge grin on his face. "Come and give these kids an idea of how it's done, Bhuti," he called.

"You too, Laula."

"That brother of yours," Laula said as they ran onto the field. "He's such a hero. He doesn't need a cape, or superpowers."

17 APRIL 2016

Hi Babe

Hey Lu

Everything okay with Lizo?

Not really.

Can't understand this whole mess.

Me neither.

Saw Mr Dlodlo. He says we have to get to the bottom of it.

For sure.

Lizo, of all people.

I know. If I get my hands on the people who did this ...

See you later, Bhu. Love you.

Love you too, angel.

Bhuti slipped his phone back into his pocket. He touched his swollen nose tenderly and flinched. Laula was going to have a fit when she saw his face. He was pretty sure his nose was broken, not to mention that he could hardly see out of his right eye. And all because of the letter Lizo had received the day before.

Everyone was talking about it.

"So, Mama, where's this letter?" Lizo had said when he got home from work that evening.

"There it is, my boy." Mama was at the sink, peeling vegetables for the big pot of soup that she always made on a Wednesday. Bhuti was standing next to her, chopping them into small pieces, ready to put in the pot.

A thick white envelope sat on the table, the letter that had been hand delivered earlier that afternoon.

"I wonder who it's from," Lizo said.

"It says the Office of the Auditor General," his mother replied.

"That's weird," Lizo said. "They must have the wrong address."

He slit the envelope with the blade of a kitchen knife and scanned the first page.

"So, what is it, Lizo?" Mama asked.

There was no reply.

"Lizo?"

Bhuti turned to see his brother standing dead still in the middle of their small kitchen-come-dining-room-come-sitting-room, his face grey.

Mama rushed to his side. "What is it, Lizo? What is the matter, my child?"

"I'm being investigated," Lizo said dully.

"Investigated?"

"Yes. For misappropriation of funds. Mismanagement of a grant for travel."

"What? What could you possibly have wasted? We don't have enough money to waste on anything."

"It's all there, Mama."

Mama sat down at the table and pulled the letter towards her. Later that evening when Laula arrived to join them for supper, she told her she had been scared to touch it.

"How could such a small packet carry such bad news?"

Tell us: *How can Lizo be investigated for funds he never received? What is going on?*

Chapter 6

And yet it did. According to the Auditor General, not only had TALC been given funding to attend the exhibition in New York, Lizo and the group had spent R970 000 on the trip. As group leader, they now wanted him to explain a gross misuse of funds.

It was all there: dates, times, reasons for the funding. Everything - right down to the details of the bank account into which the funds had been deposited, an account in Lizo's name.

Only thing was ...

... Lizo had been nowhere near New York, and this wasn't his account. The account numbers were different, and as for the bank—
"I've never even been inside that bank," said Lizo. "And now someone's making me out to be a crook."

It was messed up. Someone had stolen Lizo's identity, and then they'd used that stolen identity to open an account and implicate Lizo and the other members of TALC in a huge lie.

"The only question is," Lizo said, his face angrier and sterner than Bhuti had ever seen it, "the big question is: who? Who did this to me?"

Bhuti gazed down the street. The posters were still there, the candidates' faces a little faded, party slogans still promising the world.

"Bhuti!" Laula was standing in front of him, her face frozen in shock.

Bhuti looked up. "Hey, babe." He tried to smile but doing so only reminded him that his lip was split as well. His face was a mess.

"What the—? Who—?"

Laula dropped her bag and sank to the ground next to him.

"Who did this to you? What happened?"

"The usual suspects," Bhuti said ruefully.

"Odwa, Velile, Ntando. I could have taken on one maybe, but not three."

They'd been waiting for him when he came out of the changing rooms. The boys who messed around during lessons, never listened to the teacher, said school was a waste of time. The ones who said Bhuti was teacher's pet, who stood on the sidelines jeering at Lizo as he coached his young team.

"Oh Bhuuuuuti? Beautiful Bhuuuuuti."

Odwa's voice was alive with glee. "Not so high and mighty now, are you?"

Bhuti had walked past them, Lizo's words loud in his ears. "Take no notice of them, Bhuti. They want you to react. They want to drag you down to their level."

"I tried to ignore him," he said to Laula. "But then he said, 'So how's your brother, Bhuti? How's Lizo? Sounds like he make quite a killing? Lizo the lawbreaker, that's what my father says. Taxpayers' money. He didn't just

rob the Department - he robbed every single one of us.'

"I shouldn't have responded, I know I shouldn't," Bhuti said miserably. "But when he spoke about Lizo like that ..." Bhuti's fists clenched. "Let's just say, I'm not the only one who's going to have a black eye tomorrow."

"Good!" Laula stroked his face gently. "I mean, I know we're supposed to turn the other cheek and all that, but sometimes ... I wish I'd been there, Bhu! I'd have made sure he had two black eyes!"

Bhuti laughed, then winced. "I bet you would."

"What happened then?" Laula asked.

"Well, then Ntando and Velile held my arms behind my back while Odwa went to town on my face." Bhuti shifted and groaned. "Oh, and a few good punches and kicks to my stomach. I think he broke a rib or two as well."

"That's so wrong, Bhu." Laula was furious. "You need to tell the principal. They should be punished."

“What’s the point, babe? It’s not going to change anything. There are always going to be some people who think my brother is a thief and a fraud. That’s the worst of this whole thing.”

“No smoke without a fire?” Laula said sadly.

“Exactly,” said Bhuti. “Only this time the person who started the fire isn’t going to be caught. Lizo, all the TALC members really, they have to pay for someone else’s crime. Even if they manage to clear their name ...”

“And how are they supposed to do that?” Laula asked, her voice as miserable as Bhuti felt.

“It all falls on Lizo. He’s the founder member, he signed the forms. He has to present himself at the Auditor General’s office as soon as possible. With his ID number and his passport AND an affidavit.”

“An affidavit? What’s that for?”

“He has to go to a police station. Lizo’s never been inside one before, Laula. And now ... now he has to get them to stamp a document saying that he is who he says he

is, that he has no knowledge of this bank account or the funds that went into it. Someone else caused all this mess and now Lizo has to scramble around, trying to prove himself. And while he's doing that, people like Odwa Nondlwana and his father are free to go around spreading rumours, making his name mud ..."

Bhuti swallowed hard.

"I know, babe, I know. It's hectic. So unfair."

Tell us: *What do you think Lizo should do? Have you heard of cases of identity theft?*

Chapter

7

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That's all anyone seemed to be able to say. How unfair it was, how Lizo of all people shouldn't have to go through this.

A tear trickled down Bhuti's cheek. "I feel so helpless. I wish I could do something to help him."

Bhuti and Laula sat in silence, watched by the faces of all the councillors who promised to make their world a better place to live in.

Bhuti's phone beeped and he pulled it out of the inside pocket of his blazer.

"It's Lizo," he said. "He's back."

By the time Bhuti and Laula got home, a crowd had started to gather outside the house. Mothers of the kids who played soccer with Lizo, friends of the family, men who used to work with Lizo's dad on construction sites all over the city. His teachers. Lizo's classmates from schooldays.

“You see, babe?” Laula said. “You see? Forget Odwa and his brutes. These are the people who matter. The ones who love Lizo.”

Lizo was standing on the doorstep chatting to Mr Dlodlo. Ciki, Thandisizwe, Zandile and Dumisa were standing around him, and to Bhuti they looked like warriors standing tall and ready to defend their leader.

Lizo caught Bhuti’s eye and waved. “Hey, Bhu!” he called out. “Your criminal brother’s not in the clear yet.”

Bhuti and Laula made their way to the front of the crowd.

“Whoa! Bhu, what happened to your face, man?”

Mothers clucked their tongues in dismay as they saw Bhuti’s bruises, the blood on his collar.

“Never mind—” Bhuti said.

“Odwa Nondlwana and that whole gang,” Laula said at the same time and there was an angry rustle among the people gathered behind her.

"Don't worry about him," Bhuti said impatiently. "What do you mean, criminal?"

Lizo laughed again, but his eyes were strained and worried. "I got the affidavit from the police. I provided a copy of my ID and my passport to prove that I am who I've always been. I ticked all their boxes," Lizo laughed, "but now they're going to 'investigate' the problem more thoroughly. Until they do, I have to wait."

The voices in the crowd grew louder.

"Who did this?"

"This is so not right."

"Lizo, of all people!" Mma Tshabangu's voice rose above the rest. "My little Mdu, he's so upset. 'How can they be so mean to Lizo, Mama?' That's what he's asking me every minute. That's what I want to know too. How can they do this to our Lizo?"

"Something must be done!"

"We cannot let this happen."

Mr Dlodlo stepped forward and raised his hand. "We are all very upset," he said, "but now is the time for calm, clear-headed

thinking. Obviously Lizo had absolutely nothing to do with this nonsense. But he and I have spoken seriously about this and we have agreed. We cannot react with anger, no matter what some people might be saying." He looked directly at Bhuti as he spoke, and smiled. "Even when they are trying to provoke us, make us less than who we are."

Bhuti ducked his head. Still, no matter what Mr Dlodlo said, it felt good to have landed at least one punch before Odwa laid into him.

Mr Dlodlo wasn't finished with his mini lecture. "No matter how unfair this all seems, we must wait to see what the Auditor General's office reveals. And we must wait patiently and peacefully." He took a deep breath and a ripple of fond amusement ran through the crowd. Mr Dlodlo's eyes twinkled. "Yes, yes, I know," he put up a hand and smiled wryly. "Mr Quote-for-every-occasion Dlodlo, that's me. But these are the words of one of the greatest men of all."

He took a deep breath and his chest swelled. "The American leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.,

said, 'Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.'" Mr Dlodlo's voice trembled with emotion. "Like Ghandi, he believed in non-violence. 'At the centre of non-violence stands the principle of love.' That's what Ghandi said and that is what we must hold onto."

"Mr Dlodlo," Bhuti said under his breath to Laula, "you gotta love the guy."

"It's working, though," Laula said. "People are settling down."

Tell us: *What do you think of Martin Luther King's quote? Do you think it's true?*

Chapter

8

.....

“So we wait?” a voice called from the back of the crowd? “How long until the names of these young people are cleared?”

“Who knows, bru,” Dumi called back. “Unless we can find a way of proving that we had nothing to do with all of this, we have to wait until the investigation is complete. I don’t know how long that will be.”

“However” said Mr Dlodlo, “we have had a little bit of luck. You remember my daughter, Songezwa?”

There were nods of recognition from the crowd.

“I phoned her last night. Now, as you all know, she works for a very worthy organisation: Fight Corruption. She told her superiors about Lizo and they are very interested. They want this to be investigated properly. It seems this isn’t the first time that

this has happened; they have several other cases flagged. They've been hard to follow up on though.

Whoever is doing this – the person or people – have been very clever. They haven't left any clues, nothing to trace them with. But there is hope. Songezwa tells me Lizo's case is unusual because this is the biggest sum that has been illegally deposited so far."

"Yes, yes," Mma Tshabangu again. "If they know they can get away with it, they keep doing it."

"You are so right, Kholeka," another neighbour agreed, "but then they get greedy."

"Oh yes," Zandile called out. "In the words of the great Lisa from The Simpsons ..." – the crowd laughed with delight then murmured their agreement as Zandi finished – "... 'Dad, why is the world such a cesspool of corruption?'"

Mr Dlodlo smiled. "A good one, Zandile, very good ..."

"We've got to do everything we can to find this thief," Thandi said heatedly. "People like this, they always want more. Next time they'll set their target even higher, and they'll ruin more people's hopes and dreams. Steal their lives ... A little is never enough for them."

"Well, for me, enough is enough!" Mma Tshabangu said. "It's enough for all of us. We are now at zero, Fuzile Dlodlo. What's it they say? We have reached ground zero and we have had enough! You tell your Songezwa that. Tell her we are relying on her to get to the bottom of all of this."

"She will do her best, Kholeka," Mr Dlodlo said. "One thing you can be sure of, the people at Fight Corruption are like terriers with a bone. Once they start on a case they don't let go. If anything, they'll make sure it gets pushed up the queue, not left at the bottom of the pile."

There was a murmur of satisfaction from everyone.

"But it takes time," Mr Dlodlo said. "They have to gather evidence, investigate

discreetly. They cannot risk making any sort of mistake. They are taking on big players - often big corporations, or high-ranking government officials. It's delicate, dangerous, very tricky. Their cases have to be absolutely watertight."

"How long?" a voice called out.

"Anything up to a year," said Mr Dlodlo.

Again the crowd hummed with dissatisfaction.

"And meantime," another said loudly, "these young artists have to suffer, with people calling them thieves and frauds?"

"We must give them all our support," Mr Dlodlo answered. "We must squash rumours the moment we hear anyone speaking ill of them. But we must never," he looked at Bhuti's face and sighed, "we must never, ever resort to violence. Violence is for thugs and bullies."

"Thanks, Mr Dlodlo," Lizo said. He looked out over the crowd, then linked arms with Ciki, Dumisa, Thandi and Zandile. "Thank you all! With you all in our corner, we'll get to the

bottom of all this. In the meantime, don't forget, weekend art classes start next Saturday. We're thinking of calling it All Children are Artists. So see you at ACA!"

"Sjoe - as long as a year?" Bhuti was still trying to absorb the news. "That's not so cool."

"I wish we could do something right now," said Laula. "Get it sorted out without having to wait."

"Me too," Lizo said. "Me too, Laula."

Bhuti felt his fists clenching again. There had to be something he could do for his brother. But what?

"Hey, hey, hey," a voice from the crowd said, "what's this?"

A shiny car drew up in the narrow street, pushing people off the road, up against rickety fences.

"Careful, careful!" Lizo called as it drew to a halt, the nose of the bumper nudging up against the people at the back of the crowd.

A driver in a navy-blue uniform leapt out and opened the passenger door with a flourish.

Out from the back seat clambered a very short, very fat man. His jowls cascaded over the tight gleaming white collar of his shirt, his paunch pushed hard against the buttons of his tailor-made suit.

"Mcebisi Nyathi. What the hell's he doing here?" Bhuti muttered to Laula.

It soon became abundantly clear.

"My people," the councillor called out. "My people, my people."

"Who's your people?" A boy from Bhuti's class called out. "Not me, that's for sure. We'll be your people when we have electricity in our shack."

"I hear you, my brother," said Mcebisi Nyathi. His face was sad, concerned. "But for now, we have to think of these poor young artists. My people, I have heard of this terrible injustice. My father and I are very concerned that such a thing should happen on our watch. We want to let you know that we are doing everything, and we mean every little thing we can, to make sure that we unearth the perpetrator of this terrible fraud."

He waddled up to TALC and grabbed Lizo and Dumisa by the hand. "We are here for you, my friends. We will not rest until your names are cleared. We will leave no stone unturned. Our mission is to help every member of our constituency. Our mission is to make your future brighter. Our mission is to—"

"—eat every last cake on the table," Lindi called out and the crowd laughed.

Mcebisi Nyathi frowned, his eyes darting from side to side. "Who said that?" he said. "Who dared to say that?"

There was silence. Mcebisi Nyathi breathed in deeply then turned back to Lizo. "We will find the culprit," he said, insincerity oozing greasily from every word. "We will bring this person to justice."

"And then will you fix our roads?" a voice called from the crowd.

"Our potholes?" called another.

"Perhaps you can come and pick us all up in your fancy car and take us to see you in your fancy new house?"

"Yes," called another. "The house where you really live - not the slum you're renting out to people who don't have money for food, for too much money."

This time it was Lizo who held up a hand, quieting the angry voices. "Thank you, Mr Nyathi," he said formally. "And please thank your father. We would appreciate your doing everything you can."

"Yes, yes," said Mcebisi Nyathi. "So, as you can see there will be no need to call upon other agencies to sort this problem out. Your ward councillor and your government official will work tirelessly on your behalf."

"Other agencies?" Bhuti muttered.

"He must mean Fight Corruption," Laula whispered back.

"How the hell did he know about Mr Dlodlo's daughter?"

"I don't know." Laula was frowning. "There are people here who probably keep him in the know about everything."

Tell us: *Why do you think Mcebisi Nyathi is getting involved in the case?*

Chapter

9

.....

Lizo looked squarely at Mcebisi Nyathi. "If by other agencies, you mean Fight Corruption, then - if it's all the same to you, sir - we are grateful to anyone who wants to help us, Miss Dlodlo included."

"Yes, well ..." Mcebisi Nyathi huffed. "I'll leave you with one thought then. A vote for my party is a vote for progress. If we win this seat I will do everything in my power to ensure that such disgusting violations never happen again."

He wobbled back to his car and snapped his fingers. His driver straightened up and cut short the conversation he'd been having with Boniswa, the prettiest girl in Bhuti's class.

"Hop to it, man."

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir." The driver opened the passenger door once again, closed it gently, tipped his hat at Boniswa and got behind the

wheel. The shiny black car slid away without making a sound.

“Mercedes-Benz E-Class.” Lizo whistled.

“That’s a lot of car.”

“Probably one of Daddy’s spares,” Bhuti said angrily.

“Let’s not waste our thoughts on him,” said Lizo. “Who knows, maybe he meant what he said. Maybe his father will help to get this sorted out.”

“Pity he couldn’t have helped you in the first place,” Bhuti said.

“Like I said, I’m open to all offers,” said Lizo.

“I’ll send Mr Nyathi an email tonight, tell him we appreciate his concern.”

No matter what Lizo said, Bhuti was still boiling with anger at what was happening to his brother. What if no one could help Lizo? What if he was left with this cloud hanging over him for the rest of his life?

Laula looked at him, his set face, his shoulders tight and tense. “I don’t feel like going straight home, babe,” she said. “Why don’t we take a walk?”

Bhuti smiled. She knew him so well. He needed time to calm down, talk through the anger that was bubbling through him.

They linked hands and made their way slowly to their tree. But when they got there, someone else was sitting in their spot.

Three someone elses. Odwa, Ntando and Velile.

They stood as Bhuti and Laula drew near.

"Bhuti, Bhuti," Odwa said. "We have a message for your brother."

"Oh yes?"

Laula held tight to Bhuti's arm. "Don't, Bhu," she said. "They're not worth it."

"Not worth it? Oh, I think you'll find we are. Very worth it." Odwa strolled forward, his henchmen close on his heels.

"Listen, Bhuti. I've been paid a nice little stash of money to make sure your brother stops this investigation. And that stupid old man, Dlodlo. Tell them from us they'd better be careful."

"Oh yeah?" said Bhuti. "Or what? You'll come after them with your superior brain power? Like that's going to do any good."

"Just tell him and that bunch of wannabes that they're heading for trouble if Fight Corruption gets involved. Big trouble."

He moved a little closer and Bhuti saw with satisfaction that one eye was also swollen shut. He had landed a good punch.

Odwa looked Laula up and down slowly.

"Such a pretty girlfriend," he said.

"Mmmhmm. Tasty. Very tasty."

"You—"

Bhuti leapt forward, but Ntando and Velile were too quick for him. They pinned him against the tree and held him there while Odwa walked away.

"Watch your step, Bhuti," he called back over his shoulder, "and tell your brother and his friends to watch theirs."

Ntando and Velile sprinted off, leaving Bhuti shaking with rage.

“How can Mr Dlodlo even think about not responding to scum like that? Wait. Just wait till I—”

“Let’s go home, babe,” Laula said gently.

“You have to let Lizo and the others know about this.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking ... It must be Nyathi,” Bhuthi said suddenly. “It must be! He’s the one behind this. His arrival this afternoon? It was all too well timed.”

“Nyathi?” Laula asked, her eyes wide.

“Yes. Who else? And his father too probably,” said Bhuthi.

“But what are we going to do? We have to handle this carefully,” said Laula. “For starters, we have no proof. Right, Bhuti? They didn’t mention any names.”

“No,” said Bhuti. “They just said not to get Fight Corruption involved. And then they threatened Lizo, threatened all of us. The thing is, they meant it too. Those guys, they’re capable of anything. The way they looked at you, Laula.”

Laula shuddered and drew closer to Bhuti. "We have to take them seriously. They're the sort who will sell their souls for money," she said. "And we have to tell Lizo."

Bhuthi sighed. "Okay," he said. "Give me a minute. I need to think this through carefully."

Tell us: *Do you think it is Mr Nyathi?*

Chapter 10

Back at the house, when Bhuthi and Laula spelled it all out for Lizo and the others, Mama spoke up.

“Lizo, children.” She looked at them all seriously. “I know this type. I know the Nyathi father from many years back. He’s a snake. Slippery and sly. Just when you think you have him, he will wriggle away, leaving you holding nothing. And then, some way or another, he will make you pay.

My advice is to do nothing to make him suspicious. Don’t make any sudden moves. Like Mr Dlodlo said, move slowly, gather evidence, and whatever you do, don’t let him know you’re onto him. You can even pretend you have been frightened off by his thugs.”

“But, Mam—”

“Yes, my Bhuti, I know. Those boys, they don’t deserve to get away with it. But sometimes

we have to be prudent. Go for the big prize, not the little one. Patience, my son.”

She smiled at them all. “I am sure Mr Dlodlo would have just the right words here, but I have some of my own: ‘Ngumpa wezala.’ This man, Nyaniso Nyathi, he is worthless, a cob stripped of maize in an ashpit. His time will come. Forget those other worthless boys for now. Tread carefully around them. When we go into battle, it will be against the Nyathis, father and son.”

Mama’s eyes burned brightly and her voice was firm. “They will not get away with this theft. Money is one thing, oh yes, but to try to steal the good name of my son and his friends? That is a far worse crime. So listen to your mother, children. We will play their game, these Nyathis. We will be very grateful to them for their offers of help. We will step carefully around them, but all the while we will be carrying a net. And when the time is right ...” Mama jerked her fists apart as if she was closing the drawstring of a bag. “Then they will see who has won.”

She spoke the last words grimly and sat.

There was silence in the room, then Lizo went up to his mother and hugged her gently. "You are so wise, Mama. Thank you." "So," he looked around the group. "What's the first thing we have to do?"

"Swallow our pride," said Dumi "and send Nyathi that email, thanking him for his offer of help."

"Ewww! And ewww again," Zandile grimaced. "I can think of better ways to spend an evening."

"Okay, let's get this done." Lizo had fired up his laptop. "What do you think I should say, Bhuti? Hang on. Let me just find the email to me, that's got his address. Ah, there it is. Okay. Here goes. Dear Mr Nyathi ..."

"Dear Mr Nyathi," Ciki said bitterly. "Why are you such a thieving pig?"

Lizo smiled briefly. "I wish. No seriously, guys, what should I say?"

"Hang on," Bhuti said slowly. "Lizo, scroll down."

"I don't need to Bhuti, I have his address."

"No, Lizo. Scroll a bit. It looks like there's another email there."

And sure enough, there at the bottom, half cut off by the edge of the screen, was another email. Subject: Re: Get Packing. And below that a few lines:

Nyaniso, my darling. My clever, clever Mr Nyathi. I can't believe you've managed to pull this off. What a treat. What a joy. To finally be away with you. On our own. Without your wife peering around every corner. Without your son on the phone all the time. Two whole weeks. Two glorious weeks of love and luxury. Oh I am such a lucky girl.

Bhuti felt his stomach tighten. "Scroll, Lizo," he said. "There's something funny going on here."

Lizo dragged the mouse down further.

Re: Get Packing.

It's taken some doing, my little sweetie. Yes indeed, some doing. But I told you I'd

manage it, didn't I? So, yes, it's you me and Paris for 10 long days. Sure there's some sort of ridiculous art exhibition, but my wife doesn't need to know I'm not actually attending ... It's not New York and it's not a Museum of Art ... Just you and me, and the lights of Paris.

"More," said Bhuti.

"I don't need to read more," said Lizo.

"Oh yes, you do," said Bhuti, "but before you go any further, let's call Mr Dlodlo to come over. I think his daughter is going to be very interested in these mails."

Tell us: *What do you think of the emails? What kind of people are Mr Nyathi and his 'blessee'?*

Chapter

11

Mr Dlodlo pushed his chair back. "I can't believe this," he said. "I just can't believe it. The man has left a trail a mile wide. And I can certify to the fact that this is the first time any of us have seen these mails. Songweza has a forensic team. They'll verify that nothing here has been tampered with or adjusted. You say this is the first you have seen of these?"

"Yes, sir," said Lizo. "I never needed to read any further than his mail to me. The one that told me when I could apply again for funding."

"Yes, I saw that. Right down at the very bottom of all of this correspondence," said Mr Dlodlo. "For some reason he forwarded his mail to you to this woman, whoever she is." He paced the room. "Right. Let's handle this properly. We don't want anyone pointing

fingers and saying we have manipulated evidence. Give me a moment, please.”

He pulled out his phone.

“Songezwa? How are you my little one?”

—

“Yes, I know it’s late.”

—

“No, no, I’m fine. Nothing at all to worry about.”

—

“Listen, my girl, we have a situation here and I think it must be carefully managed.”

“Yes, Lizo’s case. That charge from the Auditor General. Yes, well there’s been a new development and I’m not too sure how we should handle it.”

He filled his daughter in briefly and then listened intently.

“Right,” he said. “Thank you, Wezi. We’ll see you shortly.”

Mr Dlodlo rubbed his hands together and turned to face the room. “We’re in luck,” he said. “Songweza’s just around the corner, visiting my sister. She’s going to call one of

her colleagues and he's going to get here as fast as he can. They're bringing a backup hard-drive for you, Lizo, and a spare computer. And then they're going to take yours. Into custody, if you will. Get it to cough up all Mr Nyathi's secrets. We'll just have to wait a while for them to get here."

"I can't get my head around this," Lizo said.

"Why would Nyathi do something so stupid? He was just begging to be caught."

"Showing off," said Mama bitterly. "He wanted to show off to his pretty little woman, show her that he was the big man who could provide for her every wish. And what better way to do it than show her how he had hoodwinked my son and his friends, used their application for funding to siphon off money for their little jaunt and who knows what else ..."

Mama was on her feet now, stalking the room, a lioness defending her cubs, tooth and claw. "The misery that man has caused! He's too good for us, but not when his son needs to come smarming around here looking for votes. He doesn't have the

decency to maintain his house properly for his tenants. He sits there in his government office making more money in a year than I will see in my lifetime - and, no, even that is not enough. No! He takes chances away from these talented, wonderful young people. He steals my son's identity. And while he's about it, he doesn't care that he smashes my Lizo's reputation to pieces.

"And then ... And then! He sends his son back here to do his dirty work for him. Mcebisi must come and clean up for him.

"I wonder what he told his son? I remember when that little boy played in this street, outside my house, way before his father wormed his way into that 'important' job. He wasn't a bad little boy. A bit of a whiner, but then again he was an only child. And now? Look at him. Driven around like king of the country. Pretending to be our friend. Pretending to want to help. Ruined. Ruined by his father."

"Never you mind, Esihle," Mr Dlodlo said gently. "This is all the ammunition Songezwa needs. She'll make sure that Nyathi is

brought to task. And his son too. They won't get away with this."

Mama laughed. "Oh, Fuzile, I wish I could believe you. I wish we could know beyond a shadow of any doubt that Nyaniso Nyathi will be held accountable. But, really, can we hope for this? The taste this corruption leaves behind is terrible. It makes my food sour in my mouth. It infects my dreams. If I knew we could cut it out so that it would never return, then I could eat and sleep. But can we? Can we ever?"

She buried her face in her hands, and sat quietly.

Bhuti and Lizo looked at each other wide-eyed. Mama was talking so much today. She never said so much, not about anything.

"You're right, Mama," Lizo said quietly, "he probably won't get what he deserves. We can't do anything about that. But it doesn't mean that we mustn't try. And we have to keep on trying. One small step at a time." He looked at Mr Dlodlo. "You know that thing

you used to say in class, sir. About the triumph of evil?"

"Ah, yes," said Mr Dlodlo. He did the usual deep breath, ready for the dramatic delivery.

"'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.' Some people say Edmund Burke, the Irish politician and statesman, said this. Some say it was the English political philosopher and economist, John Stuart Mill." He winked. "You know how these politicians are, stealing each others' words ..."

"Stealing my children's future," Mama said quietly. "But, yes, Lizo," she managed a smile, "we have to keep trying."

"As it says in 2 Timothy 4:7, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have—"

A loud rap on the door interrupted Mr Dlodlo and Bhuti sighed in relief. Mr Dlodlo was a really good guy, but once he got started on his words of wisdom, it was hard to stop him.

Lizo went to answer the door and stepped back to allow a bundle of energy into the room.

Tell us: *Do you think Mr Nyathi will be held accountable?*

Chapter 12

Songweza Dlodlo. Talking a mile to the dozen, her face flashing between compassion, anger and laughter as she was regaled with the whole saga.

“So that’s what happened to your face, Bhuti?”

“Yes, I know I—”

“Like your girlfriend says, if I’d been there the guy would have had two black eyes ... But the thing is, the sooner we can stop these nasty little shi—” Songweza stopped. “Sorry, Mrs Mabasa. My mouth runs away with me sometimes.”

“Don’t apologise,” said Mama. “I have to agree. If I had been there too the boy would have had three black eyes.”

“Four,” chimed in Laula and everyone laughed.

Everyone but Lizo. He was staring at Songezwa, his mouth open.

"You're the girl from school. The one who started the Clean Toilets project."

"Yes," Songezwa laughed. "And the Clean Yard campaign and the new school books protests."

"Yes," Lizo mumbled. "Yes, I thought so."

"But tell us, my girl," Mr Dlodlo said, "you say you know how the money could have been funnelled into this illegal account?"

"Oh," said Songezwa breezily, "it's quite simple, Papa. Not that it's easy to track down, of course, which is why these emails are like gold for us." She glanced at Bhuti. "I hear you're the one who spotted them?"

Bhuti nodded.

"Well done. Really, really well done. You've made our work a million per cent easier."

Bhuti shuffled his feet, blushing. A smile started on his face. It didn't matter that the lip Odwa had split cracked open slightly. Nothing was going to stop the grin from spreading.

“So what—” Lizo’s voice was squeaky and he cleared his throat. “So what do they do? To get their hands on the money, I mean.”

“First step,” Songezwa held up a finger, “would be to apply for the funding in Lizo’s name, probably with a strong recommendation that it be granted. The next step,” a second finger went up. He didn’t tell you the funding had been approved and that it was sitting there waiting to be used.

Anyway, once that little fraud was nicely set up, Lizo being the approved recipient of funding, Nyathi went to work,” she held up another finger, “creating a false bank account. He had every detail he needed from you, Lizo, all neatly written down on your application form. Right down to your signature. Next,” another finger, “he would have authorised the money - as an expense to his department. Once he received the go-ahead, the money comes in and then goes straight out again, to ‘your’ account. The bogus one. And guess who has signing powers on that?”

“Nyathi,” Zandile said slowly.

“And guess who’s the only one who knows it exists?”

“Nyathi,” Dumi said again.

“And ... guess who wants to impress his little blessee?”

“Mr Nyathi – Blesser deluxe.” Lizo’s face mirrored what they all felt. Shock, outrage, disbelief.

“And everything is hunky-dory, until the Auditor-General comes along and wants to know, ‘Hey, who’s been spending all this money? On one conference. Surely not.’ He smells a very fishy fish and starts digging. And whose name pops up?”

“Mine,” Lizo said, shaking his head.

“Yep,” Songezwa said, “you’re the fall guy, Lizo. And Nyathi’s sitting pretty. He’s covered his tracks. If you accuse him of opening a false account, he can say that you lied - about everything.”

She shrugged. “What can anyone do? Report it? Sure. Ask our organisation to investigate? Sure. But these guys are clever. And very, very slippery. Until ...” she held up all five

fingers, "until they make a mistake. And then - thanks to you and Bhuti's incredibly sharp eyes - and of course, Mr Nyathi's unbelievable sloppiness," her fingers snapped shut in a fist, "Gotcha!"

Songezwa pumped her arm up and down like a prize fighter after the knockout bell has sounded. "It's not over, not by a long shot, but this evidence is going to speed things up. You'll have to stay quiet, live with this hanging over your heads for a while, but nothing like as long as it would have taken us without these emails. Lizo, I can't tell you how happy you've made me. There's going to be such celebrating in the office tomorrow. Here too, I'm sure."

Lizo managed a smile. "Yes," he said, "here too."

Songezwa looked at him seriously. "I know this has been hard. But believe me, we'll get him. Nyathi isn't going to be able to wriggle off this hook. And also, I'll do everything in my power to make sure that your names are cleared completely. I promise."

"Thank you, Songezwa," Lizo said quietly.

"That would be good."

"Now all we have to do is wait for my colleague to get here with his camera and the evidence bags and we'll take your computer. Just for a few days. I promise."

"Tea? Anyone?" Mama was up and bustling, happy to have something to do, her step light, her face glowing.

"No thanks, Mama," Bhuti said. "I'd better see Laula home. School tomorrow."

Songweza laughed. "You Mabasa boys. Another one with his head in his books, eh? Just like his big brother. No time for anything but study-study-study." She flashed a grin at Lizo, then leaned back in her chair. "Yes please, Mrs Mabasa, a cup of tea would be lovely. Rooibos if you have it. Black."

"A spoonful of honey?" Mama asked.

"Oh, perfect," Songezwa said.

Bhuti couldn't sleep. Sure, they now had irrefutable evidence that Lizo had nothing to do with the false bank account. But somehow, the bad taste Mama had described still lingered. Songezwa had said she would try her best to clear Lizo's name, but could that ever really happen? Not to mention the chance TALC had missed because they had been sabotaged by an old blesser who had wanted a young girl to think he still had what it took.

"Lizo?" he whispered.

"Yes?" His brother's voiced reached sleepily into the night.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Seriously, Bhu. Don't worry, it's all good."

Yes, but ..."

"But what?"

"Even if you're found completely innocent, some people—"

"Ja, Bhuti. There's always going to be 'some people', though. I just have to make like a

duck and let them slide right off." Lizo laughed. "Go to sleep, little bro."

Bhuti rolled over, careful to avoid getting Lizo's feet in his face.

"Bhuti?"

"Yes, Lizo?"

"What do you think she meant - heads in our books?"

Bhuti laughed quietly. "That's what Laula said to me, Lizo - she was surprised that I lifted my head long enough to even see her, let alone ask her out."

Lizo laughed quietly. "She's quite something."

"Who? Laula?" Bhuti asked innocently.

"No ... I mean, yes, Laula's wonderful, just wonderful."

Bhuti laughed again. "Pulling your leg, Lizo. Yes, Miss Dlodlo is quite something."

Not only was Miss Dlodlo something, she was also true to her word. It took some time, but it was worth every second of the wait.

Tell us: *What do you think Songezwa and Lizo have in common?*

Chapter 13

Four months after the Great Email Scandal, Lizo received a phone call. Even from where they were sitting on the other side of the room, Bhuti and Laula could hear the bubbling happiness of Songezwa's voice. Lizo stood listening, nodding, saying the occasional 'yes', or 'okay' or 'sure'. Then he put down his phone, and stood quietly.

"Lizo, Mama asked, "what is it, my boy?"

"Nothing but the Truth - Mondli Makwena's investigative TV show."

"Yes?" Mama said. "What about it?"

"Songezwa. She's organised for us ... We're going to be on Nothing but the Truth. All the members of TALC. Mondli says we have a perfect case. Songezwa says they've finished with everything, the forensics on the emails, all the leads those brought up, not just on Nyathi, but his son too. They've got more

than enough to get them. That will be part of Nothing but the Truth too.”

“Oh wow!” Laula said. “That’s huge, Lizo. I love that show. I follow Mondli on Facebook and Twitter.”

“Me too,” Bhuti said. “Even if we can’t watch the show on TV, it’s great to hear what they have to say about all sorts of things.” He felt a weight lifting. Now the whole of South Africa could hear about how his brother had been falsely accused. Not that Bhuti and his family would be able to watch it, not at home, but Mma Tshabangu had DStv - she’d let them watch at her house.

They all crammed into Mma Tshabangu’s small sitting room. Mr Dlodlo was there, and Songezwa. Mama was given pride of place. The only people who weren’t there were Lizo and the members of TALC. They were sitting across a desk from Mondli Makwena,

nodding quietly, giving their side of the story.

"I hear the MEC for Finance is getting involved too?" said Mondli.

"Yes," said Lizo, "and the office of the Public Protector."

"Good. Good. It sounds like this is a story that won't be buried."

"No, I don't think it will," Dumisa said. "This sort of thing's happening too often. And it's affecting people really badly. Little guys like us. All we wanted was to go to an exhibition."

"And that would have been good for you and your career?" Mondli said sympathetically.

"So good," Zandile said, "I can't tell you. But," she shrugged, "it's just something we have to put behind us. Keep going, you know ..."

"Wait for the next big chance?"

Lizo sighed. "If there is one. If not, we'll keep working, keep making art."

"And keep on with art classes for the community?"

"Oh," said Thandi, "you know about those?"

"We do," said Mondli. "We hear the children love them so much that now their parents want classes too?"

Lizo smiled. "Yes. It looks like TALC's going to be getting some really fantastic new members soon."

"You know something, you guys?" Mondli asked. "You're an inspiration. And I'm not the only one who thinks so. Look at this: Twitter's going mad. It seems your story has struck a real chord. We've just checked in and the tweets are coming in thick and fast."

And sure enough, when Laula opened Mondli's Twitter page the notifications were buzzing in.

"Phew, Bhuti, TALC's trending," she said in awe. "Can you believe it?"

"Great!" said Songezwa. "That's just what we were hoping for."

"So Lizo, Ciki, Dumisa, Thandi, Zandile," Mondli was asking, "now that you've shaken this scandal off, maybe you can tell us more

about the work you were all going to take to New York?"

"Sure," Ciki said.

"Actually," said Mondli "I have a better idea ..."

He turned to a screen and there they were: Lizo's photographs, Dumi's sculptures, Ciki's miniature installations, Thandi's gloomy skies and the bright happiness of Zandile's story pots.

"That's all we need to see," said Mondli. "A picture is worth a thousand words, not so?"

The members of TALC burst out laughing.

"Hey, hey, share the joke," said Mondli's.

"It's good to have a bit of Mr Dlodlo here with us, that's all," said Lizo.

"Ah yes, Mr Dlodlo," said Mondli "your teacher. Great man. I had the pleasure of talking—"

He stopped, listened intently to his earpiece, then said, "Lizo, TALC ... it would appear that there's someone else who likes the sound of what you're doing."

A tweet rolled up on the screen.

“Do you see what I see, TALC?” Mondli asked, his voice jubilant.

And there they were, the tweets that would change their lives:

Museum of Modern Art

@MuseumModernArt

So sorry TALC could not be part of YAWP.

Think they need their own exhibition.

Followed by another tweet:

Museum of Modern Art

@MuseumModernArt

TALC we will be in touch asap. Thinking of organising an American tour.

And then another:

TateVerified account

@Tate

Art galleries in UK; Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool & Tate St Ives.

Let's TALK TALC. New York, London? Come on European Galleries! The world needs to see TALC ... Such Talent from Africa.

And finally,

Bauhaus Museum

@Bauhaus_Museum Weimar, Germany

@MuseumModernArt @Tate *Anonymous donor, very wealthy patron, will do everything needed for TALC.*

Bauhaus Museum

@Bauhaus_Museum Weimar, Germany

@MuseumModernArt @Tate *Let's get TALC on the road to recognition.*

Bhuti leapt to his feet and pulled Laula up with him. "That's my brother!" he shouted. "That's Lizo. That's TALC. What a team, babe, what a team."

"Oh my word." Songezwa looked stunned. "Seven hundred likes in the last three minutes. Oh my. I have to phone the office. TALC has all the phones ringing. Seems there are many, many more Nyathi-type stories like theirs out there."

She stopped at the door, her eyes shining, and her voice soft. "He's quite something, that boy of yours, Mrs Mabasa. Quite something."

"He is!" Bhuti was still delirious with happiness. "And you know what? I think you should phone him and tell him that, Songezwa."

The young woman smiled and then blushed. "Yes, yes. Good idea, but for now ..." she stumbled slightly on the doorstep. "My phone, you know ... messages. Office."

Bhuti laughed. "I'm so happy, Lals," he said. "I can't tell you."

Laula kissed his cheek. "Like I said, babe. Superhero. No cape required."

THE END