

THE WHISTLE BLOWERS

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corruption
watch



INTRODUCTION

Thola, a conscientious university student, overhears a teacher making inappropriate remarks about a guy in her class - the same guy who asked to borrow her assignment to use to write his own, because it was due the next day and he'd done no work. She refused, but he still got high marks! Thola puts two and two together, and realises she has to do something. But the guy is dating her best friend, and the situation brings back painful memories of her own schoolgirl experience with a teacher who took advantage of her.

Chapter

1

It was summer on campus and the cafeteria was muggy in the late afternoon heat. Most of the wooden benches were full, girls in light cotton dresses, guys in T-shirts and shorts. The Kaff was a meeting place for everyone, the dweebs, the jocks, the hipsters, the geeks, the fashionistas, the nerds. Even a few hardcore punks looking like throwbacks from when Thola's parents were young.

Talk hummed lazily in the hot air. Thola sat on her own, watching it all. It felt like forever since she'd had the time to be here, her workload was killing, but she'd just finished working on her English essay and needed a break. Well, sort of a break. Time to sit down with her laptop and work on her timetable for the next three assignments. Sometimes it felt like it would never end - the research, writing up, checking

bibliographies, but Thola loved it. There was nowhere she would rather be than on campus, lucky enough to be a student at university, with everything at her fingertips. "Thola! Just the person I was hoping to see."

"Me?" Thola looked up in surprise. There was Max, Desray's boyfriend grinning down at her.

He slid into the bench opposite her and smiled. He was a real alpha, one of those guys who girls swooned over and guys wanted to be like. Incredibly good looking, charming, quick with a smile or a compliment. And yet, there was something about him ... He made her hackles rise, set her antennae quivering on full alert. Maybe it was because he was too quick to smile, too aware of the effect he had on girls. Maybe it was because Desray was besotted with him. Since the day he had asked her out, Desray had said to Thola at least ten times a day that she didn't know why he had chosen her when there were so many beautiful girls on campus.

Or ... maybe it was because he reminded her too much of Mr Nyoka.

The clatter and the rattle of the student cafeteria dulled to a low hum as Thola remembered her matric year. "Call me Tebogo," he'd said, but Thola couldn't do that. If she called him Mr Nyoka, that kept him in his correct place in her mind. A teacher. An adult, older than her by at least fifteen years. Someone who should know better, but didn't. Mr Nyoka was a Mister, with a wife and a family. Three small kids. Thola had seen them when his wife came to pick him up. She'd seen the way he smiled at his wife, with eyes only for her.

The way Max was smiling at her now.

Mr Nyoka and Max didn't look at all like each other, but there was something about them. The way they could make you feel as if you were the only person in the room, the way they beamed their full attention on you, made you feel special and desirable and beautiful.

For a while.

And by the time you noticed that that was what they did to everyone, it was too late. It was all part of their charm offensive, but their charm was a thin layer, a tissue of vanity and self-admiration. Scratch that glossy, smiling surface and there was nothing underneath. Nothing that could possibly make you want to stay with them. But that didn't matter, because once you had served their purpose, they threw you away like a dirty rag. So dirty that no amount of washing could ever make it come clean again. People like Mr Nyoka were users, and Thola was pretty sure that he and Max came from the same mould. Max was using Desray, but she was so love-struck she couldn't see it. And once he was tired of her she'd be on the rubbish pile too, feeling ashamed and dirty and worthless.

"Thola?" Max's voice broke in on her thoughts.

"Uh, sorry, I was thinking. What were you saying?"

Max looked puzzled and Thola smiled faintly. Guys like him were used to having women hanging on their every word, aching to have

them pay them some attention. They certainly weren't used to girls not listening to them.

Max smiled at her again and this time Thola felt her skin crawl. What did he want from her?

"I was asking you if you've finished your English assignment yet."

Max and Thola were in the same tutorial group, and their assignments were due at the end of the week.

Thola patted the folder on the table in front of them.

"Just printed it out now," she said. "Ready to hand it in to Miss Kunene. It took me forever, no wonder it's such a large chunk of our year mark. But I loved doing it. Especially the research on English Lit in a 21st-century world. It made me realise how much there is to learn, what I want to discover."

"Uh, yeah, right." Max leaned a little closer and smiled at Thola again. "The thing is, I've had a few problems over the last few weeks."

“Really?” Thola was surprised. “Desray didn’t say anything to me.” And believe me she wanted to add, Desray fills me in on every little detail of the Wonderful World of Marvellous Max.

“Uh, yeah, well ...” Max paused and Thola could almost see his brain steaming. “The thing is, I don’t tell her everything, you know. It’s like. Well, you know.” He lowered his voice and leaned even further over the table, like he was inviting Thola into his world, creating a special space for just the two of them. “Some things are really personal. Like my dad, for instance. I don’t tell Desray about him.”

No, thought Thola, you probably don’t. You tell Desray what she needs to know and nothing more. Guys like you aren’t into sharing, revealing too much about themselves. If you did that, you’d find it hard to keep the magic alive.

“So you see, the thing is, I’ve been having a really tough time with my dad lately. And it’s been, you know, like really difficult to keep

up with work and stuff. Especially this assignment. Which is a real bummer.”

Thola said nothing.

“Seeing as it counts for so many marks,” Max continued.

He smiled his special smile again and in her mind Thola flashed to Mr Nyoka, saw him leaning towards her, one hand on either side of her head, the classroom wall rough on her back and Mr Nyoka’s breath on her neck and his whispered words, delivered with his special smile. “This can be our secret, Thola. A big girl like you knows how to keep a secret. And if you do, I promise never to say a word about Bandile -”

Thola pushed the memory of Mr Nyoka away and focused on Max.

“Yes ...?” she said. She could see where this was heading, but she wasn’t going to give Max any help. If he wanted something from her, he was going to have to ask. No hidden meanings, no innuendo. If there was one thing she had learned from Mr Nyoka it was to make sure that everyone knew exactly

what was going on, in words that were plain and simple with no room for misunderstanding.

But that didn't mean that she had to let Max know that she'd seen him out and about. Just a few days ago, as she was on her way back to res from the library, she'd seen him with a bunch of his buddies, staggering home, singing at the top of his voice. Another time she'd seen him getting out of the varsity shuttle bus, and leaning back in to say something to a very pretty girl sitting near the entrance. Stunning her with his smile, leaving her gazing after him with hope and love in her eyes. For someone who was struggling -

Max didn't look like he was battling with personal problems, he seemed to have plenty of time to go out jolling, while

people like her were in the library, taking notes, writing an essay, rewriting it, checking her bibliography and making sure all her quotes were referenced properly.

No, if Max wanted something from her, he could lose the smarmy grin and come out with it straight.

He was trying that now. "You know how it is," he was saying, "when something gets into your head so you can't concentrate? That's how it is with my dad. So my problem is, I haven't had enough time to get all my research for this paper finished."

"And?" Thola raised an eyebrow.

"So, I was wondering, do you think I could just have a quick look at your notes? To make sure I'm on the right track?"

Thola smiled then, her own special smile, just for Max. "I tell you what, Max, why don't you show me what you've got so far and I'll tell you if you're on the right track."

"Ja, well," said Max, "that would be cool." He slid his hand over hers and squeezed slightly. "Only I don't have anything on me right now. Maybe if I could copy your notes for now and then show you everything?"

"Oh, Max." Thola slipped her hand out from under his. "I don't think so."

Chapter

2

“Shit, man!” Max’s silken veneer slipped for a moment and she saw the snarl under the grin. “I don’t have time—” He recovered himself quickly. “The thing is—”

“The thing is, you don’t have time Max, certainly not to research a term paper and write a 3 000 word essay. Certainly not before four p.m., the day after tomorrow.”

She stood up and gathered her books together. She closed her laptop and slid it into its case. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to get to Miss Kunene’s office and drop my essay off.”

“Wait, Thola.” Max leaned over and grabbed her hand. “Don’t you want to help your friend’s boyfriend? Do it for Desray.”

Once again Thola slid free of him. “Sorry Max. Not for Desray, or you, or anyone. You’ll have to find some other sucker; I’m sure

there are plenty of girls who'd be only too willing to help you out. Just not this one."

"Come on Thola," Mr Nyoka's voice was in her head again. "Come on, baby girl. Do it for Bandile. Otherwise, you know what's going to happen ..."

She walked away from Max, her heart pounding, her head filled with the images she was trying so hard to work through.

Max stared after Thola, his cheeks burning. He looked around quickly. No one had seen her blowing him off. The little bitch. Who did she think she was, all high and mighty, holier than thou? He sat for a while, his fingers drumming on the wooden table. That certainly hadn't worked. And he thought she'd be easy, a pushover. Girls like her usually were.

Like Desray, with her poor wardrobe and bad hairstyle, only too happy to help a guy like him out. He'd had Desray typing up all his papers for the last semester, not to mention letting her make the odd correction here and

there, or do the extra research he needed to pad out his sketchy notes. For a BSc student she was pretty good at patching essays together too. All he had to say was “Thanks babe” and smile and tell her he didn’t know what he’d do without her and she’d light up like a Christmas tree, and wag her little puppy-dog tail and fall over herself and try to please him even more. And, when he needed a break from her fawning desire to be with him, he could give another girl a call. Someone sexy, who knew how to give him what he needed.

So Desray was fine for helping him get through his other courses, but this English assignment was a real ball-breaker. Winging it on a few rough notes wasn’t going to be good enough for this one. He needed to do really well, get at least 70% if he stood any chance of making it through. Because as his father had pointed out to him: “I’m saying this in no uncertain terms, Max”, if he didn’t pass this year, he would be out on his ear. “If you think I’m going to pay for you to waste a second year at university, you’ve got another

think coming my boy. How do you think I made it to where I am today? Certainly not by lounging around outside lecture rooms never bothering to go in and learn something worthwhile.”

And Max would zone out while his father droned on and on, always the same lecture with the same message: Max didn't know how good he had it; Max was wasting all his chances; Max's father had worked his way up, from the salesroom floor to where he was today, the owner of a chain of hardware stores that stretched from coast to coast. “I earn every single penny I spend my boy, every single one of them, and you think you can swan through life, dipping into my wallet whenever you need cash, scared of doing an honest day's work.”

Yadda yadda yadda, whinge, whinge, whinge, and Max had to sit there until his mom came in and got the old man to shut up. As least Max could twist her around his little finger. “My Maxie,” she called him, “my baby boy.”

But this time, she'd come to him looking serious. "I can't make Daddy change his mind darling. He's determined on this one. He's prepared to give you one last chance. If you fail one subject, that's it, he says. Your university days are over."

Max had stared at her in horror. "One course?"

"I'm sorry darling," his mother really did look upset. "He's adamant. He says it's about time you learned what life was like in the real world."

Well, as far as Max was concerned, the real world was going to have to wait a few more years until he was out there and in it. He intended to make the most of his time at university. Cool chicks, plenty of beer, a bit of weed to mellow things out a little, hanging with the guys and watching the odd game here and there ... this was what Max had planned for the next three years at least, and some prim and proper little bitch like Tholakele Sibaya wasn't going to spoil it for him. It was time to put Plan B into action.

“Hey Noli,” Max practised the name, a small smile on his lips. “Hey there Nolitha ... Noli, Noli baby.”

There was a slight knock on the door. Nolitha Kunene looked up.

“Mr Cooper. To what do I owe this honour?”

The young man in front of her ducked his head and smiled. That charmer’s grin. Nolitha had seen him use it often enough on the girls in the tutorial group, seen how they melted under his crooked smile, seen how their eyes slid over his body. If he were an ice cream on a stick they’d all be there, fighting to get a taste of him. All except that funny little thing. What was her name? Oh yes, Tholakele Sibaya. She didn’t fall for his tricks. And nor did Noli. She knew Max and guys like him only too well. The ones that skated in on their charm and good looks and had all the girls falling over them, dying to please. Oh yes, she knew Max Cooper’s game alright, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t prepared to play it with him for a little while.

Noli Kunene looked up at Max. Her eyes slid to his torso. He knew just the right sort of T-shirt to wear. Gleaming white and a little too tight. All the better to show off his abs and his honey-gold tan. And then the jeans, slipping a little too low on his hips ...

If Noli could have, she'd have licked her lips right there and then. Instead she took off her glasses and waved him to a seat. "So, Mr Cooper. What exactly can I do for you?"

"It's my English assignment, ma'am."

"Your assignment? You mean the one that's due three days from now?"

"Yes, ma'am." His voice held just the right touch of deference, he kept his eyes firmly on her face.

Noli smiled. She knew she was looking hot today. Like Max, she knew how to make the most of herself, to show off her curves without being too obvious, to let the fringe of her copper brown wig fall just over her eyes so that when she looked at people, men in particular, she had to flick her eyes up. Flirty, but demure. Those were two of the

weapons in Noli's armoury and she knew how to use them. Just like Max knew that the last thing he should do, at this stage of the proceedings, was to look anywhere but directly into her eyes.

"I was hoping ..." Max let his voice trail off.

"Yes, Mr Cooper?"

"Well, ma'am, you see, I don't know if I've managed to research the topic correctly."

"I see."

"Yes. And well ... I thought maybe you'd be prepared to help me?"

"Hmmm. It's a little late in the day for that, isn't it Mr Cooper?"

"It is, ma'am. I know it is, but you see ..."

"Yes?" Noli waited. She knew what was coming next. The bumbling explanation. The laying of blame at someone else's" door. Or something else's. Max was the kid in the class who had the dog who ate his homework, he was the one whose rucksack was stolen during a burglary, he was the one whose computer crashed with all his work on it. And now, he was the one, standing in her

office - looking truly delectable, definitely good enough to eat - and asking for her help.

"You see, ma'am, I've been having personal problems. With my dad. He and I have never been close, but lately he's been trying to make up for that. The only thing is, he keeps phoning me at all hours. Crying. Saying he's sorry. My mom ..."

Max paused and swallowed. Noli had to admire his acting skills. Nothing bumbling about this boy, he had the whole pull-at-your-heartstrings thing off pat.

Chapter

3

“My mom says it’s his drinking.” Max tossed his father under the bus as casually as if he was throwing a banana skin into a bin. “It’s been getting worse lately. My mom says that when he’s had too much, he starts crying. About how he should have been a better father, how he’s wasted all these years. And then he decides he has to call me, even if it’s the middle of the night.”

Max looked at her, his eyes wide and pleading. “I don’t know what to do Miss Kunene. It’s affecting my studies. And I’m scared, really scared. I have to pass.” He buried his face in his hands. “I really need your help, ma’am.”

“Hmmm.” Noli looked him over. “Yes, Mr Cooper. I can see that. And you know what? I think I might be able to sort something out for you. Do you have a car?”

"Yes, ma'am, I do."

Well then, Mr Cooper," Noli scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Max, "I think we need to discuss this assignment further, when we both have a little more time. Here's my address. Bring your ... research over to my house this evening. Shall we say at about eight? And let's see what we can do about putting all the pieces together. I'm sure we'll be able to come up with something satisfactory. Something that, ahm, pleases both of us." Max got to his feet. He smiled at Noli Kunene and this time his grin was wider, more confident.

"I'm sure we can, ma'am. I think you'll find it all very satisfactory." He moved to the door.

"Oh and Mr Cooper. Your car?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I hope it isn't a Mini Cooper?"

Max looked back over his shoulder. "No, ma'am. Certainly not. Nothing mini about it."

He closed the door behind him and Noli stretched back in her chair. Until ten minutes

before all she'd had to look forward to was an afternoon spent grading second year assignments and an evening working on her lectures for summer school. Suddenly the idea of getting home and sinking into a slow, cool bath was very, very appealing.

"Right, class, here are your assignments. I have to say, I was pleasantly surprised. Most of you have worked well, and deserve the grades you've been given."

Miss Kunene put a stack of papers on the table in front of her. You may come up and collect them at the end of this lecture. And remember, just because this assignment is over, doesn't mean that the year is finished. You still have plenty of work to do, and other assignments due in soon. And, of course, a few quick pop quizzes to make sure that your studying is up to speed."

There was a groan from the students packed into the auditorium and she smiled. "Nobody said university was going to be easy, kids. But keep at it and soon you'll be where I am:

teaching a bunch of bright-eyed first years like you lot.”

Another groan and this time she laughed. “And I expect to see you all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed first thing on Monday morning.”

Thola made her way to the front of the auditorium, to the pile of essays marked P-T. As she passed the first pile, A-D, she saw the paper on top. Max Cooper. 72%. She looked down in confusion. 72? How was that even possible? A tanned hand grabbed the paper and she looked up to see Max grinning at her. “I decided to take your advice, Thola. Pulled a few midnight sessions, sweated my guts out, worked like a maniac.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Good hard work, Thola. You were right. It really does pay off.”

P-T. There hers was. Tholakele Sibaya. 77%. She felt a small jolt of disappointment. She’d really worked for this. And she knew she had a good argument, well supported, watertight logic. So why hadn’t she cracked a first? And how come Max Cooper had only got five per cent less than her?

The next few weeks were no different. Thola worked all hours in the library, poring over reference books, balancing her findings, shaping them into solid, well written work. And her marks reflected her hard work. An 85% aggregate for History 1. 89% for Psych, 82% for Film and Television Studies. All the sort of marks she was expecting. Except for English. Sure, she was getting in the 70s, but she should be doing better. And all the while Max Cooper was doing consistently well. High 60s and low 70s.

"I'm sorry Dez," Thola said to her roommate, the afternoon she got the result of her last assignment. "I don't mean to diss your boyfriend, but seriously, how has he managed to pull it together so well? I know, and you know, he was failing only a couple of months ago."

"I know." Desray's face was alight with happiness. "Do you know what it is, Thola?"

Thola looked over at her enquiringly.

"It's me," Desray said simply.

"You?"

"Yes! He says it's my good influence. I've shown him that hard work is nothing to be afraid of. He says he slaved for hours over those last English assignments, put every drop of effort that he could into them. And now, he says, he can see that hard work really does pay off."

"Okay then." Thola smiled at her friend. "I suppose I have to admit it. Miracles really can happen."

Desray laughed and looked so happy that Thola couldn't bear to disillusion her. Really though, if Max was working as hard as he claimed, he must be the miracle worker. Otherwise how was he managing to study, write good assignments and continue to live it up with his friends? She hadn't noticed any changes in his lifestyle.

Whatever Max's story was, Thola knew she had to get hers sorted out. She was obviously doing something wrong and if she

wanted to get onto the Dean's List and be eligible for good bursaries for her second year, she had to do something to bring her English marks up.

"I must be doing something wrong," she said to Desray. "She obviously wants a different approach; I just don't know what it is."

"Well, Thols, I reckon the best thing would be to ask her," Desray said. "Max says she's a real sweetie. Always happy to help a student, especially those ones who are prepared to put in the extra effort."

"You're right, Dezzy!" Thola leaped up from her bed. "The best thing to do is face a problem head-on instead of whinging about it." She gathered up her English papers and grinned at her friend. "See ya!"

A few minutes later she was outside Miss Kunene's door. It was slightly ajar and as she raised her hand to knock she heard her tutor's voice.

"Listen Anushka, when I tell you this boy is beautiful, I mean he is beautiful. In every way possible."

Anushka. There was only one person Miss Kunene could be talking to, Anushka Petrov, junior lecturer in Russian Studies, a tall, beautiful woman given to striding around campus in boots with wickedly high heels, trailing vibrantly coloured scarves and fringed wraps behind her, leaving the boys on campus gawking, round-eyed and salivating.

A low chuckle from Miss Kunene and Thola stepped back a little. She couldn't interrupt this conversation. She'd come back later. But just as she was about to leave, she heard Miss Kunene laugh again. "Okay, okay. I'll tell you his name. It's not like he's likely to do one of your courses. Max. His name is Max. And I have to tell you Anya, he's one of the best so far. Better than your Xolo from last year, and that's saying a lot!"

Another rich chuckle "Okay, okay, let's call it quits and say as good as! I've gotta say girl, we know how to pick them ..."

Thola inched a step backwards. Miss Kunene couldn't find her there. She had to make a getaway, silently and soon.

Chapter

4

Thola reached the end of the corridor and turned and ran. All she could hear as she ran were Desray's words, innocent and happy: "Always happy to help a student, especially those ones who are prepared to put in the extra effort." All she could feel were Mr Nyoka's hands, hot and hungry on her body.

"Come on, Thola, you've got to try a little harder, girl. Give me a little more. Do it for Bandile, Thola. Do it for your brother."

She walked slowly back to her room, fighting to squash down the anger that was rising inside her. It was Miss Kunene's laugh that had done it, more than anything else. It was all a game to her, and to Miss Petrov too, by the sound of it. Just like it had been with Mr Nyoka. A power game that left people like Thola defenceless and at risk, and they didn't care. As long as they won, got what they

wanted. Thola clenched her fists. If Max were here right now she'd smack that slimy grin off his smug face. If Mr Nyoka were here, she'd pull him close and then whisper in his ear: "I saw your wife last night, Mr Nyoka, and she looked so happy. I was going to say hello to her, tell her all about our afternoons in a deserted classroom ..." She was wiser now, she'd never again let a man like him take advantage of her youth and fear.

The last memory of that terrible time slid into focus.

Late afternoon, the sun is slanting across the back row of desks. And lying across one of them is a young girl, her uniform crumpled, her school shirt gaping wide. A man is standing above her. Laughing, mocking, saying, "Next week, Thola. Same time same place. Don't be late."

And then, a voice from the door of the classroom, and the principal, Mr Gcaba, is saying.

“Late for what, Nyoka? What is going on here?”

Mr Nyoka’s face loses its satisfied sneer. He crumples and begs, and Mr Gcaba walks closer. He takes Thola by the arm, saying, “It’s all right now, Tholakele, it’s all right. Why don’t you straighten yourself up?” He turns away, to give her some privacy. The girl pulls at her skirt and buttons her shirt.

Mr Nyoka laughs, trying to make a joke, saying “Oh come on, Gcaba, you know what these girls are like. Little sluts, putting out for who—”

Only he cannot finish his sentence because Mr Gcaba pulls back his hand and hits Mr Nyoka in the mouth. Mr Nyoka doesn’t laugh any more.

“How dare you?” says Mr Gcaba. “How dare you, you coward. You keep those words inside your mouth. And start thinking about what job you’re going to get now, because I’m going to make sure that you never teach at this school, at any school, ever again.”

The girl's parents are called in to the headmaster. They all talk for a long time and Mr Gcaba asks the girl what she wants to do. If she testifies, tells what Mr Nyoka has done, how he has forced her and threatened her brother, then Mr Nyoka will lose his job. If she doesn't, then it will be very difficult to fire him. "But remember," Mr Gcaba says to her, "if you speak up, everyone will know what this man has done to you, Thola. And that could be very difficult indeed. For you." And the girl, her head down, watches as tears plop straight from her eyes and onto the floor. Two little puddles of her tears at her feet.

The girl's mother whimpers and her father rises from his chair, his fists clenched. "Let me speak to him. I'll make sure he never touches a young girl again."

Mr Gcaba puts his hand firmly his hand on the father's arm, saying, "Believe me, I know," showing his hand, the knuckles scraped raw. "I've already stopped his tongue once. But really, it is not up to us, this question of what to do. It is up to Tholakele. This is her life."

The girl feels her head lifting. She remembers what her father said to her the night before.

“And you did this for your brother? To protect him? To protect us?” Bandile, her brother, then saying, “But Thols, I never cheated. I would never cheat. He was lying to you, Thola. He’s a liar and a cheat, and he pulled my name through the mud and he tricked you and shamed you.”

Bandile wants to find Mr Nyoka and show him what it is like to be humiliated and degraded.

And all the while the girl can’t find the words to say what happened to her and what he said to her and how worthless he made her feel.

But now, standing in Mr Gcaba’s office, she thinks of Mr Nyoka. She thinks of him getting away with it, pulling the same stunt on another young, naïve girl. Her shoulders straighten and she speaks. At first her voice is rusty as if it has been closed inside her for a long time. As she speaks, it grows stronger and she says, “This man must never teach in

a school again. He must never be allowed to hurt his children, or fool his wife into thinking he is a good family man."

"Thola." The father's voice is concerned. "Are you sure? This won't be easy."

"None of it has been easy, Dad, don't you see? But if I run away and hide, then he's won. I can't let him do that to me." The father's hand is on her shoulder and the mother is standing close to her and Mr Gcaba is smiling and saying, "We need brave girls like you, Thola. Perhaps your bravery will show other girls that it is okay to come forward and speak out and stop men like this taking advantage of their position."

"He made me into a victim, Mr Gcaba," the girl says. "He made me into a frightened child. If I don't speak up, he's won. Tell me what to say and who to say it to."

And then, as she leaves the study, she sees two of the girls in her class looking curiously at her. The girls who always know everything about everyone. Looking at her, giggling behind their hands.

She walks up to them saying, "You know Mr Nyoka?" They nod. "Well, he raped me." She watches their faces, sees the shock, the shame, the embarrassment. "He raped me and I am going to press charges. That way he won't be able to do it again, to me, or to anyone else."

The girls look at her, too stunned to say a word and she leans close to them and says, "It's the truth. Every word is the truth and what I want you to do is tell everyone you know. Spread the word. Tell the whole school that Mr Nyoka raped Tholakele Sibaya. Tell them he's a coward who picks on girls who are scared and young."

She flings her head back, fixing those girls with eyes that bore right into them. "Tell them what he did. I want everyone to know!"

And on those last words, her head, held so bravely high, drops and her shoulders fall and her voice breaks and the tears are back again, streaming down her face and she is crying, huge ragged gasps that came from the bottom of the misery she has been hiding for so long. Her parents are right

beside her, patting her back and her father's face is shiny with tears and he's muttering under his breath - all the things he would do if he ever saw Nyoka.

"Mr Nyoka," the girl says then. Loud and clear. "Mister. He's a grown man with a wife and children. He's an adult. He should have known better."

And then Mr Gcaba is running after them with a piece of paper in his hand saying, "Take this number. Phone her. She's a good counsellor. She'll give Tholakele the space she needs to work through all of this."

Chapter

5

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Thola saw Miss Hadebe, the psychologist, all the way through to the end of her Matric year, all the way through her exams. She's still seeing her now, eighteen months after Mr Gcaba came into the classroom and caught Mr Nyoka buckling his belt. Soon, she thinks, she'll be able to go longer and longer without thinking of him, the way he leered at her, sneered at her, his hot breath coming in short gasps, his hands hard on her body.

And now, like a bad dream returning, Thola heard Miss Kunene's rich chuckle. Miss Kunene and Max. More people breaking the rules for their own pleasure. And this time, there's no victim. Max is a willing partner, he's getting what he wants from Miss Kunene and she's getting exactly what he wants from him. Are they both going to get away with it?

And, even more importantly, what's she going to say to Desray about her sleazeball of a boyfriend?

Thola reached the door of her room, and opened the door. There was Desray, crying her heart out. Thola rushed to her bed.

"Dezzie. What's wrong? What happened?"

"Oh, Thols," Desray wept. "It's Max. He's broken up with me."

"I'm not surprised," Desray said in a small voice. "I mean, Thola, he could have got any girl he wanted. I knew I wasn't good enough for him. I mean, look at me. I'm not pretty, I'm shy, I need to lose some weight."

Thola stared at her friend, torn. Should she tell Desray or not?

"I never could understand why he chose me." Desray started to cry again. "Maybe I did something wrong, Thola. Maybe that's it. But what? What did I do? If I can figure that out, tell him I'm sorry, maybe he'll take me back. Do you think he will, Thola? Take me back?"

Thola patted Desray on the back. "I hope not Dez," she said quietly. "I hope you never have to see that guy again."

"What do you mean?" Desray's face was confused, her eyes slightly hostile.

"Come on." Thola tugged her friend's hand. "Let's go to the pub. I've got something to tell you, Dez, and I reckon you'll need a drink."

Three glasses of wine later, Desray was staring at Thola.

"You're serious, Thola. He really did that? Swapped sex for marks?"

"Yep." Thola leaned over and hugged Desray. "I'm sorry Dezy. I didn't know whether to tell you or not."

"No, no. You did the right thing." Desray still sounded stunned. "It's all a bit much to take in. So what it means is that he was sleeping with her, is sleeping with her, while he and I

were ...?" Her voice trailed off. "Geez, Thola. How could I have been so blind? So stupid."

"Don't beat yourself up, Dez," Thola said.

"There are people out there who will do whatever they want, take whatever they want."

"Well Max certainly helped himself with me."

Desray laughed bitterly. "When I think of how much time I spent helping him do his shitty assignments! All that typing up, all that research. And I don't even take History."

The two girls laughed.

"Listen, Dez, if it's any help at all, you're not alone. I've also had a guy take advantage of me. Big time."

"Really?"

Thola took a swig of wine and continued.

"You know I see my therapist once every two weeks?"

"Yes." Desray's face filled with concern. "I've never wanted to ask you about it."

"You're so sweet Dez, I appreciate your tact I really do. But I don't mind talking about it."

There was a time when I was seeing her twice a week. Let me tell you the story."

An hour later, Thola finished, saying, "So you see Dez, we all have our share of awful people to deal with - the question is, how we are going to let it affect us?" She smiled at Desray.

"That's what we have to sleep on tonight. Right?"

"I don't need to sleep on it." Desray's voice was fierce. "We can't let them get away with this, Thols. We have to figure out a way of sorting them out once and for all. Like your Mr Gcaba did. They can't be allowed to stay in a place where good hard working students like us slog away only to have them make it all into a farce."

The next morning, Thola was woken by Desray bouncing on the edge of her bed. "Wake up Thols. Wake up!"

She lifted a bleary eyelid. "Ohhh. My head," she groaned.

"Yes, yes, never mind about that, Thola."

Desay looked so much happier than she had the night before. "I know what we're going to do, Thola. I know how we're going after Max and Kunene. There's a chance it won't work, but I've got to know Max pretty well in the last few months, and I think it's going to be easy."

She leaned back against the wall and outlined her plan.

"Dez," said Thola when she'd finished. "It's brilliant. Not 100% legal, but brilliant."

A couple of weeks later, Desray had collected all the evidence she needed.

"Are you sure you want to give him the benefit of the doubt, though, Desray? We don't want to waste all your hard work."

"We have to give him one chance, Thola. If he doesn't take it, then we bust him."

"Okay." Thola was still dubious.

"Now remember, we only tell him about the conversation with Kunene, nothing else. We don't want to overplay our hand."

"Okay Dez." Thola grinned. "You know, you're wasted in Computer Science. You'd make a great detective."

Desray grinned back. "Okay," she said. "He should be schmoozing around the Kaff round about now. Let's do this."

The two girls looked at each other solemnly. Their footsteps sounded hard and loud as they marched down the corridor, out into the open air, across the quad and into the Kaff where Max liked to hang out.

"There he is Dez, look."

"Hmmm." Desray looked over at her ex-boyfriend. There were two girls sitting opposite him, leaning over the wooden table. As Desray and Thola approached, one of them burst into laughter. "Oh Max. You're so naughty!"

"Same old, same old," Desray muttered to Thola. "How does he do it so easily?" Her

voice was hard, but Thola could see she was upset.

"You okay, Dez?" she asked.

"Fine." Desray was still muttering. "I'm fine. Let's do this, Thola."

They walked up to the bench where Max was sitting and Thola had a chance to observe him closely again. Smooth clean good looks. Blond hair, deep green eyes. A great body. But now that she knew him better she noticed the slight weakness to his chin, the way his smile was quick and tight, flashing on and off. Also, the way his eyes were scanning the room, always on the lookout for someone better to be with, someone more impressive to impress. Instead, they rested on Desray and Thola.

"Max." Desray's voice was a bit shaky and Thola looked at her quickly. Was Dez going to be able to do this?

"Max," she said again and this time her voice was louder, more firm.

"I'm sorry, babe," he drawled. "I'm a bit busy here."

"First of all, I'm not your babe. And secondly I think you'll want to hear what we have to say."

"Not now, Dez," Max said, turning back to the two girls. "So, as I was saying ..."

Thola stepped forward. "You know that little deal you wanted me to be part of, Max?" He looked confused and she continued. "You know, when we were sitting right here and you asked me about—"

"Okay, okay." Max cut her off before she could finish. "I'm sorry." He nodded briefly to the two girls. "Later, okay?"

"But Max ..." one of them whined.

"I said later."

Chapter 6

Max, Thola and Desray sat in silence while the two girls gathered their belongings and slid out of their seats.

“Okay Max,” Desray said, “Thola wants to tell you about something she overheard.”

“I’m all ears,” he drawled.

“I think you will be, said Thola, “when I say I overheard Miss Kunene talking to one of her friends.”

Max straightened at the sound of Miss Kunene’s name.

“It seems they share the same interest,” Thola said. “They both like taking their students to bed. And in return, they make sure that their new ‘partners’ get good grades. Like your sudden improvement in English, Max. We wondered how that had happened.”

“You’re talking crap,” Max said.

"I know what I heard, Max," Thola said. "This is your chance to come clean, confess before you're exposed and the dean might show you some leniency."

Max laughed. "That's it? You overheard some conversation between tutors in which my name was mentioned and you think can threaten me with that?"

"Like I said, Max," Desray said. "One chance to come clean or we go to the dean ourselves."

"With that as evidence?" Max jeered. "Good luck is all I can say, bitches. You're going to need it when the dean laughs you out of his office. Oh, no. Hang on..." He paused for a second. "That would be after my father has finished filing a suit against you for defamation of character, libel, slander and suing your little asses right across the country. I reckon we can get you on all sorts of counts."

"So that's it, Max?" Desray looked hard at him. "You do realise we've just been incredibly generous to you?"

"Yeah well, why don't you get your generous little ass off that bench and make space for a real woman."

Max's face was set in a snarl and Thola noticed something else about him. His eyes might be big and green and sparkly, but they were also close set, and shifty. Yes, especially now, when he was looking at anything but them. Definitely shifty.

"So," Desray said to Thola as they walked away from Max's table. "Plan B?"

"I'd say so," said Thola. "He leaves us no choice."

But before they could say much more to each other, Desray's phone buzzed.

She slid her finger across the screen and Max's face appeared.

"Oh look, Thola. He's changed his mind. He's going to come clean."

But as she listened, her face paled.

"What is it, Dez?" Thola asked. "What's the problem?"

"Miss Kunene," Desray said, her voice scared.
"She wants us in her office. Now."

The two girls stood opposite Miss Kunene.
The young lecturer said nothing. Just looked
them up and down, a small smile on her lips.

"So, Miss Sibaya. Miss...?"

"Willemse," Desray said. Desray Willemse."

"Yes, well. Max Cooper has just spoken to
me, and he told me something very
disturbing."

And how did Max Cooper have your number
on his phone? Thola wanted to ask, but she
and Desray said nothing.

"What, girls? Nothing to say. Don't you want
to know what Max had to say?" Still they
stood there silently. "No? Well let me fill you
in. Apparently two very silly little girls have
decided to threaten him. Apparently they
heard, or found out somehow, that Max had
been a naughty boy, that he'd been sleeping
with one of his lecturers, exchanging sex for
good marks."

Her mouth twisted. "Now doesn't that sound awful?" she said. "Can you imagine that anyone would be so stupid as to jeopardise her whole career, by doing something so ridiculously risky? And equally, can you believe that anyone could be so twisted, so petty as to make up this sort of ludicrous story? And all because she was jealous of another student? His good looks. His popularity. His marks. Some little two-bit piece of nothing who thought she was the one who should be getting the good marks. When in all reality, she was an average student at best, mediocre if one wanted to be brutally honest."

Thola's cheeks were burning, but she held her head high. And this time, instead of Mr Nyoka's jeering voice, she heard Mr Gcaba and her parents. All telling her how proud they were of her for fighting back.

But now was not the time to fight with Miss Kunene.

Now it was time to bite down on quick answers and wait to put Plan B into action.

"So, are you silly little bird-brains going to let this all blow over?" asked Miss Kunene. "This whole ridiculous mess. That would be my advice Miss Sibaya." She stared at Thola, long and hard. "Because, you see, if you don't, there's a strong chance that your final exam result just won't be very good. Average maybe. Mediocre probably. It might be time for that slippery slide into the sixties and for me to be telling the other lecturers that you're like so many other students here. A flash in the pan to start off with, and then, nothing but insipid, weak little fizzes."

"Now, girls. Max told me that you had said he had one chance. To come clean, you said. So, I'm going to be generous. You get one chance too. To keep your absurd story to yourselves, or ... risk getting even lower marks, Miss Sibaya. I don't take kindly to threats. I can ruin you girls. I can make sure that you'll never study at a university again. I can get into the system, I can change marks. I can start a smear campaign - one so bad you'll never want to come back onto campus."

"I'm warning you girls. Don't cross me. Now get out."

Thola and Desray stood outside Miss Kunene's office.

"Whew," said Desray. "Remind me not to run into her in a dark alley."

"Or even a brightly lit corridor," Thola laughed weakly. "That's one vicious lady. Did you get all that?"

Desray patted her pocket. "Loud and clear, I reckon. And now, Plan B?"

"Plan B," said Thola.

Two hours later the girls were in a different office, waiting nervously to hear what the tall thin man behind the desk was going to say to them.

He looked down at a pile of papers. "I have to know how you got hold of these," he said to them.

"Well sir," Desray cleared her throat. "It was easy. 15 June 1995."

The dean raised his eyebrows. Black and bushy, sprouting up and over the rims of his glasses.

"Max's birthday," she said. "I knew his password had to be an easy one, because he's so lazy, he wouldn't bother with a difficult one. After that it was just a case of looking for correspondence between him and Miss Kunene. And it was all there, sir. Emails. Facebook notifications of private messages between the two of them. They even had conversations about pulling Thola's marks down a notch or two, to serve her right for being a snooty little bitch."

"If they hadn't done that, they probably wouldn't have been caught," said Thola. "All I wanted was to ask Miss Kunene what I was doing wrong, why my English grades were slipping, and that's when I heard them."

“Heard them?” The dean raised those bushy eyebrows again. “Go on, Miss Sibaya, I’m listening.”

And so the girls filled him in on the last part of the story. Ending with Miss Kunene’s words, recorded on Desray’s phone: “I’m warning you girls. Don’t cross me. Now get out.”

Chapter 7

“We had to come to you directly, sir,” Thola said. “We were thinking about just slipping the papers under your door anonymously, but that felt like a cowardly thing to do. And we’re not cowards, sir.”

“You certainly aren’t,” said Dean Dubazana. “Now I want you both to wait outside. I have more to say to you later.”

As Thola and Desray left the room, they heard him speaking on his phone.

“Miss Ellison, get hold of Miss Kunene please. Tell her I want to see her in my office immediately. And Mr Cooper, Max Cooper. Call him on his phone and tell him I want to see him at once. If you don’t have his number, the two young ladies who were in here a while ago will be able to help you. Oh, and before I forget, please make an

appointment for Miss Petrov to see me later this afternoon.”

Fifteen minutes later Miss Kunene came storming in. “What’s this?” she was saying loudly. “I demand an explanation immediately.” And then she saw Thola and Desray. “You two! I thought I’d warned you to back off.”

“Yes, so these two young women have told me.” She turned to see Dean Dubazana standing in the doorway of his office. “Come in please, Miss Kunene.”

The door closed behind them and all Thola and Desray could hear was the dean’s calm rumble followed by Miss Kunene’s higher pitched, gabbling whine.

“Geesh, she sounds like she’s going to explode any minute,” said Desray. But before Miss Kunene could detonate, Max slouched into view. The dean opened the door of his office.

“Ah, Mr Cooper. I’d welcome your input here,” he said.

Desray and Thola looked at each other.

"First time I've seen him that he hasn't had that arrogant grin on his face," said Thola.

"First time I've seen him and haven't thought that he's stunningly good looking," said Desray.

"Bit of a weak chin?" Thola asked, and her friend laughed.

"Nothing like as weak as what's on the inside."

The two girls sat quietly then, trying to make out what was being said inside Dean Dubazana's office. Finally his door opened and he called them inside.

"Miss Sibaya, Miss Kunene has something she would like to say to you," said Dean Dubazana.

Miss Kunene's face was furious. "I'm sorry," she said. Nobody said anything. She spoke again. "I'm sorry for tampering with your marks and for giving another student an unfair advantage despite the fact that he had done no work."

Dean Dubazana nodded. "And now you, Mr Cooper."

"I'm sorry," Max said to Thola. "I should not have asked Miss Kunene to lower your mark. She said to me that you are an A-plus student."

"Right," said the dean. "Now that that's over. Miss Kunene, clear your desk immediately please. Security is waiting in your office to escort you off the premises. The same with you Mr Cooper. Clear your room of all belongings please. Security will wait at the gates with you until your father arrives to collect you."

Both Max and Miss Kunene tried to talk at once but Dean Dubazana's raised hand stopped them. "There is no further discussion. Not at this moment. If you have anything else to say, you may take it up with our legal counsel team. I think you will find that we have some of the finest legal minds in the country working on our behalf. Furthermore, Miss Kunene, I would suggest that you don't waste any time applying for posts at other universities. I intend to make sure that every tertiary institution I know of is made aware of your behaviour. The same

goes for you, Mr Cooper. No university will accept a cheat and a liar. Now, if the two of you would kindly leave. I have something to say to these young women."

"Miss Willemse, Miss Kunene. May I offer you tea?" The girls nodded and he lifted his phone. "Tea please Miss Ellison. For three. And some of that rather lovely fruitcake to go with it please."

Max and Miss Kunene shuffled to the door. Max bent his head to say something and Miss Kunene swatted him away like a troublesome fly. The door swung shut behind them.

"Right," said the dean, "that's that rather unpleasant business out of the way. Now to decide what to do with the two of you."

"Sir?" Desray's eyes were wide and questioning.

"Ah yes, Miss Willemse, Miss Sibabya. You see, much as I am very glad of the outcome of this unpleasant situation, the fact remains that you obtained this information illegally. You should have come to me with your

suspicious and I would have taken the matter further.”

“Yes sir.” Thola and Desray spoke together, their voices tiny.

“Now let me think.”

Miss Ellison arrived carrying a tray with a teapot and three cups on it. And several thick slices of fruitcake. Then she slipped out of the room.

“Miss Willemse, Miss Sibaya, would you do the honours please?” Thola poured the tea, while Desray placed a slice of cake and a cake fork on a plate.

“University service,” Dean Dubazana said as Desray placed his cup in front of him. “Does that sound fair to you? Six hours a week for the next three months. I am sure Miss Willemse’s excellent computer skills can be put to good use, helping the students who are struggling. And the same applies to Miss Sibaya. The two of you can report to the Dean of Students first thing on Monday to be given your duties.”

“Yes sir!” The two girls grinned. “Thank you.”

“Right then, off with you.”

“Oh, and Thola, Desray,” he said as they reached the door. “I can’t imagine you’ll have much free time between now and exams. I expect to see both of your names on the Dean’s List. Don’t disappoint me.”

“No, sir.” Thola smiled over her shoulder and closed the door behind her.

Thola and Desray stood on the other side of the door.

“How do you feel, Thola?” Desray asked.

“Like I did after Mr Gcaba dealt with Mr Nyoka. Cleaner somehow, like something tacky and sleazy has been steam-cleaned right of my life.”

Desray wandered over to the window. “Look, Thola!”

There was Miss Kunene, being bundled unceremoniously into a minivan taxi. It took off with a jerk and Thola imagined her bumping her head, setting her expensive

wig away. Max was there too, flanked by two burly campus security men.

Shortly after that, a long and very expensive looking car pulled up. Max slunk over to it, all his swagger and easy charm gone. An older version of Max stepped out of the car, followed by a slight fluttery woman. The man waved his arms in the air, his face beetroot red. The fluttery lady fluttered. Max didn't raise his head once. He let himself into the car and it pulled away.

Both girls let out a deep sigh.

"We did the right thing, Dez," Thola said.

"Yep." Desray grinned widely. "But the sad thing is, those two will land on their feet somewhere else. They'll find some way of massaging the system, making it work for them."

"But not here, and not at any other university either." said Thola. "They'll always be Cooper and Kunene free."

"Willemse and Sibaya, Steam Cleaners Deluxe," Desray laughed.

“No job too tacky or too sleazy,” Thola added. She linked arms with her friend and together they walked out into the fresh air.

THE END