

## Chapter One: The Future Called

The heat that sat over Otse during the dry months was not the kind that arrived with drama. It did not announce itself. It simply appeared, sometime between the early morning cool and the full business of the day, pressing itself down onto the rooftops and the unpaved yards and the pale dust of the roads with the patience of something that has always been there and does not expect to be questioned. By early afternoon it had settled completely, and the birds had stopped making any unnecessary effort, and the goats that wandered the edges of the ward moved only as much as the search for shade required.

Oteng Modise was standing in front of the small mirror above his dresser and he was not thinking about the heat.

He was twenty-six years old and he was going on a first date, and the mirror was showing him a version of himself he was not entirely satisfied with. He had tried three shirts before settling on the navy one, not because it was obviously the best but because after three tries you start to lose your ability to judge and you have to commit to something. The navy one was acceptable. The collar sat right. He had pressed it himself that morning, running the iron along the seams slowly.

He picked up the small glass bottle of cologne from the dresser. It was a good one — dark cedar and something underneath it, something warm. He pressed the nozzle once, let the mist settle, pressed it again.

He set the bottle down.

His phone rang.

He picked it up without looking at the screen, expecting his friend Bame, who had been sending messages all morning about the date with the relentless interest of a person for whom the romantic complications of others were a primary form of entertainment.

"Hello?"

There was a pause. Not the pause of bad network. The pause of someone deciding how to say something.

"Oteng?"

He knew the voice immediately. He did not understand why he knew it or from where, but the knowing was the same knowing as when you hear your own name spoken by a

stranger and understand instantly that they mean you, not some other person with the same name. This voice was his. It was his and it was not his, in the same way that your reflection is you and also a reversal.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Who is this?"

"It is me," the voice said. "It is you. I am calling from the future."

Oteng held the phone away from his ear and looked at it. He looked at it for a full three seconds the way you look at something that has said something you did not expect. Then he raised it back.

"Okay," he said. "Who is this actually?"

"I know you are getting ready right now," the voice said. It sounded patient, but patient in the way of a person who has already exhausted a different emotion and landed on patience as the only remaining option. "I know you are wearing the navy shirt. You ate one mint and you are deciding whether to eat another."

Oteng looked at the packet of mints on the dresser. His hand had been moving toward it when the phone rang.

He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Let's say," he said carefully, "that I believe you. What do you want?"

"The cologne," the voice said immediately. "You have already sprayed it twice. Do not spray it again. Thato does not do well with strong scents. It will make her eyes water and she will cough the whole walk there and she will be irritated before you even sit down. Put the bottle down."

Oteng looked at the bottle. He had, in fact, been considering a third spray.

"Okay," he said. "What else?"

"Her ex. His name is Tumo. She lives in the same area as him, she still sees him around, there are relatives involved. It is not what you think it is. Do not ask about it. Whatever curiosity you have, swallow it. The moment you ask about Tumo is the moment everything goes wrong."

"They still talk?" Oteng said.

"Yes," the voice said. "But it is nothing. I am telling you it is nothing. Just do not ask."

"If it is nothing then why can't I ask?"

"Because the asking is the problem, not the answer. Trust me. I know."

Oteng thought about this. He did not entirely accept it. But he filed it somewhere.

"What else?" he said again.

There was a pause.

"The wallet," the voice said.

"What about the wallet?"

"Do not forget it."

Oteng's hand moved automatically to his back pocket. His jeans were not the jeans he was wearing. He had changed after work, and the wallet was still in the work jeans, which were on the chair in the corner under a shirt.

"And if I forget it," Oteng said, "what happens?"

A very long pause this time.

"What happens?" Oteng pressed. "Does Thato pay?"

"No," the voice said. "She does not pay."

Something arranged itself differently in Oteng's expression. "So the food just — they take it away?"

"Listen to me," the voice said, and there was a new urgency in it now. "This is not about the food. The food is a small thing. The problem is what happens after the food. Just put the wallet in your pocket before you leave the house. That is all I am asking. One thing. Put the wallet in your pocket."

"But wait," Oteng said. He stood up from the bed. The reasoning was assembling itself in him and he could feel it coming and he could not stop it. "If Thato would not cover fifty pula worth of food in an emergency — not because she is expected to, but because the man she came with forgot his money — if she would not do that small thing, then what does that tell me?"

"It tells you nothing," the voice said, with some force. "Because you are not going to be in that situation if you take the wallet."

"But hypothetically —"

"Hypothetically is not the problem. The wallet is the problem. Take the wallet."

"Fine," Oteng said. "But also — you are calling me now, before a date. Where were you when I was failing my exams? Where were you during all of those years when I actually needed someone to tell me what to do? You could not call then? You could not send a message, give me the answers, tell me what to study?"

The silence on the other end was a different kind of silence now.

"Oteng," the voice said finally, quietly. "Just take the wallet."

And then the call ended.

Oteng stood in the middle of his bedroom with the phone in his hand. The afternoon heat pressed down on the corrugated iron roof overhead and made the small sounds that metal makes when it is warm. Somewhere outside, a dog was having an opinion about something.

He looked at the cologne bottle.

He picked it up and sprayed it three more times. The nozzle on a nearly empty bottle is unreliable, and more came out than he intended. He coughed, waved his hand through the cloud, and set the bottle down.

He looked at the chair in the corner. The work jeans. The wallet.

He put on his jacket instead and went out the door.