

## Chapter Two: The Walk to Mama Ofile's

Thato Segaetsho was standing at the end of her road when Oteng came around the corner. She had messaged him saying she would walk to meet him halfway, which he had agreed to, and which he was now grateful for because it meant there would be conversation before the sitting, and he was better at conversation when he was moving.

She was twenty-four and she was wearing a yellow dress and flat shoes and her hair was natural and she looked, Oteng thought, as though she had put no effort into any of this and also as though she had put significant effort into all of it, which was the particular skill of certain people who will never explain how they do it.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," he said. "You look nice."

"Thank you." She looked at him. "You put a lot of cologne on."

"It spilled."

She looked at him in a way that did not fully accept this explanation but chose not to pursue it. They started walking.

The road they walked was the kind of road that every person from a Botswana village or ward knows without thinking about it: partly tarred and partly not, lined on one side by a stretch of fence where someone's chickens existed in a state of loud perpetual crisis, and on the other by a row of small houses painted in the colours that people paint houses when they have decided to be cheerful about it — cream and ochre and a particular shade of green that always looks good in the early morning and slightly different by afternoon.

Children were playing further up the road, kicking a ball made of plastic bags bound with twine. A grandmother sat in the shade of her veranda watching them with the detached authority of a referee who has seen everything and intervenes only when absolutely necessary. A man was washing a truck in front of a yard, the water dark with the red dust it was removing, running in channels through the sand toward the road.

They talked. First date talk, which has its own careful grammar. Where did you grow up. What do you do. How do you know the person who introduced you. It was not uncomfortable. Thato was easy to talk to in the sense that she did not require filling of silences and she asked questions that were interested rather than polite, and Oteng found himself saying things he had not planned to say and not minding.

Then Thato sneezed.

She sneezed twice, quickly, and pressed the back of her hand to her nose and blinked against the sudden watering of her eyes.

"Sorry," she said. She blinked again. "Is that cologne?"

"It spilled," Oteng said again.

"Why did you put so much?"

"I told you, it spilled. The bottle was almost empty. You cannot control how much comes out when the bottle is almost empty."

She sneezed a third time, sharp and involuntary, and pressed her lips together in the effort of not making a face. "Okay," she said, with the patience of a person assembling patience from limited materials. "Okay."

She shifted very slightly to the side, putting a fraction more distance between them, not enough to be obviously rude but enough that they both knew it had happened, and they continued walking with this small geography between them.

They were heading to Mama Ofile's, which was what everyone called it and which was written on no sign anywhere. What there was, on the wall of a small tuck shop at the end of the main road that served the surrounding wards, was a piece of cardboard with MAMA O. written in black permanent marker and taped above the ordering window. The building itself was small and block-built and painted a faded yellow that had once been a brighter yellow, with a hand-painted menu board propped against the outside wall listing the prices of things. Someone had added a cartoon of a smiling burger to the corner of the board at some point and it remained there, slightly faded, apparently permanent.

Outside the building were four plastic tables and a collection of chairs that did not match each other and had clearly been gathered from various sources over the years. The tables had umbrellas pushed through holes in their centres — one red, one white, and one that had been repaired with tape so many times it was now more tape than fabric. There was a large plastic cooler box under the serving window containing cold drinks and water and, on good days, mango juice in small cartons.

Mama Ofile herself was not a myth. She was a woman of approximately sixty who appeared in the ordering window when she felt like it and sent her granddaughter Kefilwe when she did not. She was very small and very fast and she made the best chips in the ward and she charged what she charged and did not negotiate.

It was not a restaurant in the formal sense of anything. There were no tablecloths. There were no menus to hold. You looked at the board and you said what you wanted and you sat down and waited, and the food came and it was good. That was the arrangement.

Oteng had been coming here since secondary school. He knew the board by memory. He knew that the burger came with extra onions unless you said otherwise. He knew that the chips were better at lunch than in the evening because Mama Ofile fried the first batch herself and delegated the later ones, and there was a difference you could taste.

"Have you been here before?" he asked Thato as they approached.

"Once," she said. She was still blinking occasionally, but the worst of it seemed to have passed with the fresh air of the open road. "The chips were very good."

"They are always very good."

They chose the table with the white umbrella, which gave the best shade at this time of afternoon. The chairs were mismatched — one was red plastic, one was white monobloc, and one was the kind of low folding chair meant for outdoor gatherings. Thato took the monobloc. Oteng took the red plastic. They looked at the board on the wall together.

"What are you having?" she asked.

"Chips and a hotdog," he said. "You?"

"A burger." She squinted slightly at the board. "And chips."

"Good choice."

He stood and went to the ordering window, where Kefilwe was standing, approximately fifteen years old, with the expression of someone who would rather be somewhere else but had accepted their position.

Oteng ordered. Kefilwe wrote it on a small pad. He said he would pay when the food came. She accepted this and he returned to the table.

The afternoon was doing what afternoons do in that season: the light was very clear and very direct, the shadows of the umbrella poles sharp on the pale ground, the air dry and carrying the faint smell of dust and something cooking — the oil from Mama Ofile's fryer, which was always running, which was always present in the air around the tuck shop like a soft announcement.

They resumed talking. The conversation had moved somewhere warmer now, somewhere less biographical. Thato told him about her cousin's graduation the previous month and how her aunt had cried the entire way through the ceremony and then denied it immediately afterward. She did an impression of the denial that was very accurate and very unkind in the affectionate way, and Oteng laughed, and for a moment the cologne and the walk and the sneezing were simply things that had happened, not things that were still happening.

He was doing well, he thought. He was doing quite well.

Then the food arrived.

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