

## Chapter Four: The Wallet

"Thato," he said.

She was chewing. She looked up.

"I forgot my wallet at home."

The chewing stopped.

She swallowed. She put the burger down. She looked at him the way you look at someone when you are deciding whether what they have just said is a joke and concluding that it is not.

"You forgot your wallet," she said.

"Yes."

"At home."

"Yes."

She looked at the food on the table. Her burger, half unwrapped. Oteng's hotdog, untouched. The chips, both plates, still steaming faintly in the dry air.

"So pay for the food," Oteng said. "I will pay you back. Next time, it is entirely on me. I will even come early and pay before the food arrives so there is no question."

"You are joking," she said.

"I am not joking. I forgot the wallet. It is at home on my work jeans. It is a genuine mistake."

"Oteng." She said his name with the specific precision of someone choosing words carefully. "This is our first date. You asked me here. You said we are going to eat. And you forgot your wallet."

"Yes. And I am asking you to help me out just this once because it is a genuine emergency."

"It is not an emergency," she said. "An emergency is something unexpected that you could not have prevented. You could have checked your pocket before you left your house."

"I forgot."

"I know you forgot. I am not arguing that you did not forget. I am saying: you should pay. You are the one who asked me here. That is how this works."

"I know how it works," he said. "That is why I am asking you to help me just this one time, so that we can eat the food that is already in front of us, and I will sort everything out afterward."

"I am not going to pay for our first date."

"It is fifty pula."

"It is not about the fifty pula."

"Then it should not be a problem to cover fifty pula."

"That is not how that logic works."

Oteng opened his hands on the table, a gesture of appeal, of please hear what I am saying. "Thato. Look at the food. It is right there. It smells good. We were having a good conversation. Let us just eat the food. I will handle everything else, I promise you."

"You will handle it with what money?" she said. "The money that is at home?"

"I will eWallet you the moment we are done eating."

"You do not have my number for eWallet."

"Then give it to me and I will send it right now."

"Oteng." Her voice dropped half a register. Not angry — something more controlled than angry. "I want you to hear me. I did not come here to pay. I came here because you asked me. You arranged this. You are supposed to take care of it. And I understand that you made a mistake, but that mistake is yours and I am not responsible for it."

"So you would rather sit here and not eat?"

"I would rather you figure out a solution that does not involve me handing over my money on the first date."

"There is no other solution available right now."

"Then that is very unfortunate," she said, and she picked up her burger again with a composure that Oteng found both impressive and deeply frustrating.

"And also," Oteng said, "I want to understand something. Who exactly came up with this rule? Who decided that on a first date the man must pay? Which meeting was that? Where was it held?"

Thato set the burger down. "Are you serious right now."

"I am asking a genuine question. You say that is how this works. I am asking who made it work that way. Because as far as I know, we both came here to eat. We both ordered food. And now somehow this has become my emergency and not our emergency."

"You asked me here," she said, very evenly. "That is the difference. You arranged this. That is not a rule someone invented. That is just what it means to arrange something."

He stared at her for a moment. Then he turned toward the ordering window.

Kefilwe was leaning against the wall of the tuck shop with the phone she was supposed to put away when customers were at the tables. She looked up when she saw him looking.

He raised his hand slightly, to get her attention.

She came over. She was still holding the phone, which she put in her apron pocket as she arrived.

"I need to be honest with you," Oteng said. He said it with the particular dignity of a man who has decided that honesty is the only remaining tool available to him. "I left my wallet at home. I cannot pay right now. But I will come back this evening and pay, without fail. Mama Ofile knows me. I have been coming here since secondary school."

Kefilwe looked at him. She looked at Thato. She looked at the food. Her eyes moved to Thato's burger, which was half unwrapped and had a clear bite taken out of it, and something shifted in her expression.

"She already ate," Kefilwe said. This was not a question.

"One bite," Oteng said.

"She ate the food," Kefilwe said, her voice going up slightly, "and now you want to tell me you don't have money?"

"I said I will come back this evening and pay. Mama Ofile knows me —"

"Mama Ofile says no credit," Kefilwe said. She was already moving toward the table. "She ate it, she must pay for it. Simple."

Thato had been watching this exchange with the stillness of a person waiting to hear her own name in a conversation she had not agreed to be part of. Now she looked at Kefilwe directly. "I beg your pardon?"

"You ate the food," Kefilwe said, pointing at the burger with the directness of someone who has decided that politeness is not the tool for this situation. "You must pay for it."

"Tell him to pay," Thato said. Her voice was very calm. "He is the one who brought me here. I am not paying for anything."

"He doesn't have money," Kefilwe said. "You do. You ate it."

"One bite," Thato said. "I took one bite. The food is right there. It is not inside me. I did not consume anything."

"You put it in your mouth," Kefilwe said. "That is consuming."

Oteng stood up. "Okay. Both of you. Let us just —"

Neither of them looked at him.

"I am not paying for food I did not finish," Thato said. She said it quietly, which was in its own way worse than if she had raised her voice. "That is the end of my position."

Kefilwe reached forward and grabbed the burger plate. Thato's hand came down on the other edge of it at the same moment. The two of them held opposite ends of the plate across the table, neither moving, neither releasing.

"Let go of the plate," Kefilwe said.

"Let go of my food," Thato said.

"It is not your food. You did not pay for it."

"Then I will pay for it and eat it."

"You just said you were not paying."

"I am not paying for him. If I pay for myself that is my choice."

Kefilwe pulled. Thato held. Oteng put both hands up between them and said, with a calm he absolutely did not feel: "Okay. Nobody pull. We are all adults here. Nobody pull."

The two men at the other table had stopped their conversation. A child who had been kicking something near the road had stopped kicking it. Mama Ofile's fryer continued its work, indifferent to human affairs.

There was a sound from the ordering window. A small, solid sound of someone setting down something heavy, or putting something down with deliberate intention. Then Mama Ofile was in the doorway.

She was very small and she stood very still and the two people holding a burger plate across a table and the man standing between them with both hands raised all became immediately, completely quiet.

"What is happening here," Mama Ofile said. It was not exactly a question. It was the tone of a person who has seen many things happen in front of their tuck shop and would like an accounting of this particular thing.

"They don't want to pay," Kefilwe said immediately. "They ordered the food and now they say they don't have money."

Mama Ofile looked at the table. She looked at Kefilwe. She looked at Thato, who released the burger plate and placed her hands in her lap with great dignity. Then her eyes found Oteng, and they stayed there.

"Oteng," she said.

"Mma." He straightened. "I left my wallet at home. It was a mistake. I will come back this evening and pay everything, I promise you. You know me. I have been coming here since secondary school. I have never once not paid."

Mama Ofile was quiet for a moment. She looked at Kefilwe, who had the expression of someone waiting for justice to be administered. She looked at Oteng again. Something moved behind her eyes — the calculation of a woman who has known people her entire life and has developed efficient systems for categorising them.

"This evening," she said to him.

"This evening. Before eight."

She nodded once, the way a person nods when a contract has been made. Then she looked at Kefilwe. "Leave them," she said. "Go back inside."

Kefilwe went. She went with the posture of someone who disagrees with a decision but understands that the decision is final. The ordering window received her.

Mama Ofile went back through the doorway. The fryer resumed its dominance of the soundscape.

The food was still on the table. The burger. The hotdog. The chips, which were no longer steaming. Oteng sat back down.

They ate.

Not with pleasure. Not with conversation. They ate with the careful concentration of two people who have decided that eating is preferable to talking, and who are using the food as a reason to look at something other than each other. The chips were good — they were always good — but Oteng tasted almost nothing. The hotdog was there and then it was not. Thato ate the burger without expression, looking at a point somewhere past his left shoulder.

Somewhere nearby a child was laughing. A car passed on the main road. The red umbrella shifted slightly in a small movement of air.

The afternoon continued around them. Mama Ofile's fryer made its sounds. Two men at the other table were sharing a packet of chips and talking about something that had nothing to do with any of this, which under the circumstances seemed like an almost unbearable luxury.

When they were done Thato folded the paper wrapper from her burger into a square, precisely, the way a person folds things when they are doing something with their hands because doing something with their hands is better than the alternative. She put it on the plate. She picked up her bag from the back of the chair.

"Let's go," she said.

He stood up.

After a moment, Oteng said: "You and Tumo — are you really done?"

Thato turned to look at him.

It was the kind of look that a person gives when they have been presented with something they cannot quite believe. When the situation has already given them enough and then one more thing has arrived.

"You are asking me that right now," she said. It was not a question.

"I have been thinking about it."

She looked at him for a long moment. Then she picked up her bag. "Let's go," she said.

They walked out of Mama Ofile's and into the afternoon, and the afternoon received them without comment, as it always does.

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