

Chapter Five: The Road Home

The road back was the same road they had walked to get there, but roads are different in different directions. The light had shifted. The grandmother on the veranda was gone. The children with the plastic-bag ball were still there, but they had moved further up and their noise was coming from somewhere past a wall now, intermittent and distant.

Oteng and Thato walked with a careful distance between them. Not hostile, exactly. But measured.

They had gone perhaps a hundred metres before Thato said anything.

"You know what the worst part is," she said. She said it to the road rather than to him.

"Tell me."

"It is not the wallet. People forget wallets. I have forgotten a wallet before. I have forgotten my phone, I have forgotten to bring money when I went to the shops. That happens. I understand that."

"Okay," he said.

"The worst part is that when I said I was not going to pay, you looked at me like I was being unreasonable. Like I was the difficult one. Like the problem was my refusal and not your forgetting."

He opened his mouth. He closed it.

"You arranged this date," she said. "You suggested this place. You said we should go. And when the food arrived and there was no money, instead of being embarrassed and trying to find another way — going to get the wallet, calling someone, anything — your first move was to ask me to solve it for you. And when I said no, you made me feel like that was the strange choice."

"I did not mean to make you feel —"

"I know you did not mean to," she said. "That is not the same as not doing it."

They walked. A dog watched them from behind a fence with the suspicious neutrality of a dog who has seen many things and categorises humans into two groups: threat and non-threat.

"And then Tumo," she said.

"I know."

"At the table, before the food. I thought, okay, he is nervous, it is just nerves, he will let it go. And then it came back. At the empty table. After the food was taken. You decided that was the right moment to ask again."

"I did not decide," he said. "It came out. I have been carrying the question since you mentioned running into him. I should not have said it then and I know that."

"Why does it matter so much to you?" she said. She stopped walking. She turned to look at him fully. "Genuinely. Help me understand. What is it you are afraid of?"

He stopped too. He thought about the honest answer to that question, which was that he was afraid of being somewhere he had not been invited into, of being the replacement for something that had not actually ended, of wanting something that was still in the process of being released by someone else. But he could not find the clean version of all of that quickly enough.

"I just want to know where I stand," he said.

"You stand," she said, "exactly where you put yourself. Which today is outside a tuck shop with a wallet you forgot to bring and a question you should not have asked twice."

She started walking again.

He walked beside her.

After a while she said, quieter: "I am done with Tumo. Genuinely. You do not have to take my word for it right now, because we have known each other for very little time. But that is the truth."

He received this. He did not immediately respond, because he was learning, in real time, that responding immediately was one of his problems.

"Thank you," he said finally.

She glanced at him sideways.

"For telling me," he said. "You did not have to."

She looked at the road again. "No," she said. "I did not have to."

They walked the rest of the way in a quiet that was different from the earlier one. Less charged. More like two people who have had an argument and have landed somewhere on the other side of it and are still deciding what the other side looks like.

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