

Chapter Six: The Gate

Thato's gate was green. It was one of those gates that had been there long enough to develop its own history — you could see, in the places where the paint had peeled or been scratched back, the layers of previous decisions: a blue underneath the green, and something pale below the blue, the whole thing like a record of the people who had stood here before and found this colour insufficient and tried again.

They stopped in front of it.

The afternoon had begun its long slow shift toward evening. The light was lower now, coming in at a different angle, catching the dust in the air and making it visible. The ward was doing its late-afternoon things: the smell of cooking from three or four different compounds, the sound of a radio from somewhere up the road, a man walking past with a bucket and acknowledging them with a nod the way people acknowledge each other in places where they have been neighbours long enough not to need words.

"Thato," Oteng said.

She had her hand on the gate latch but had not yet opened it.

"I owe you more than an apology for the wallet," he said. "I owe you one for asking about Tumo the first time. And another for asking the second time. And a separate one for the cologne, even though that was technically an accident."

The corner of her mouth moved. Not much, but something.

"That is three and a half apologies," she said.

"I am prepared to make all of them if you will hear them."

"I heard them," she said. "Just now. Counts as made."

He nodded. "I was nervous today," he said. "That is not an excuse. But it is a reason for some of it. I do not always filter well when I am nervous. Things come out that should stay in."

"The cologne also?"

"That was genuine carelessness."

"Mmh."

The gate stood between them, not yet open, its green paint warm in the afternoon light.

"If there is a next time," Oteng said, "I will have the wallet. I will have checked it three times before I leave the house. I will not ask about anyone's past. And I will spray the cologne once, replace the cap, and put it down on the other side of the room."

"Once," she said.

"Once."

She looked at him for a moment. Really looked — the way you look at someone when you are running a kind of assessment that has nothing to do with their appearance.

"You know what your problem is," she said. It was not said unkindly.

"Several things," he said. "Which one specifically?"

"You ask questions you already know the answer to. The Tumo questions — you already knew, from what I had said, that there was nothing there. But you asked anyway. And asking was what made it a problem, not the thing you were asking about."

He considered this. "You are right," he said.

"I know," she said.

She looked at him for a moment. The gate was still between them, still green, still slightly warm from the afternoon.

"Oteng," she said. Her voice was not unkind. It was the voice of a person about to say something they have already decided. "I don't think this is going to work. I think we should stop this before it goes any further."

He received this. He did not argue with it. He looked at the gate and then at her and then at some point between the two.

"Okay," he said.

She opened the gate. It swung outward with a small sound — the sound of a hinge that had been oiled once and then forgotten, and had made peace with its condition. She stepped through it and onto the path.

"Good night, Oteng," she said.

"Good night."

The gate swung back. The latch caught. He stood on his side of it and listened to her footsteps on the path, fading toward the door of the house, and then the sound of the door, and then nothing.

He stood there for a moment longer than necessary.

Down the road, the old man who sat outside every evening had appeared in his chair and was watching the street with the professional contentment of a man who has made watching the street his vocation. He looked at Oteng. Oteng looked at him. The old man nodded very slowly, as if confirming something.

Oteng turned and began the walk home.

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