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by I_am_mindwalking

Summary

The blood drains from Nadine Ross' face and she freezes. The sounds from the street fades.

She slips her phone back into the pocket of her beige cargo pants. “I've got to go,” her thoughts are a mess and she can't make eye contact with Chloe.

“Something wrong?” Chloe queries, frowning.

“My Ma’s in the hospital.”

Or

The story of Chloe following Nadine home to South Africa
Tuesday, May, 15

Alexandria, Egypt, 5:45 pm local time

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She slips her phone back into the pocket of her beige cargo pants. “I've got to go,” her thoughts are a mess and she can't make eye contact with Chloe.

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“My Ma’s in the hospital.”

Wednesday, May 16

Alexandria airport, Egypt, 0:55 am local time

“You could have just dropped me off at the airport, you know.” Nadine stuffs their bags in the overhead compartments. The red eye flight out of Alexandria to Johannesburg is uncrowded, so there’s space for their luggage and they could book seats together.

Glancing at her partner, it occurs to Chloe that she doesn't have a good reason to be sitting here. This was a family thing. So why did I book two tickets? What am I doing here?

They have spoken little since Nadine had received the call from her aunt.

For outsiders, Nadine’s posture is calm and collect. But she’s also been staring at the same page of the inflight catalog for the last fifteen minutes.

Spontaneous isn’t a word Chloe would use to describe Nadine. And having her drop everything in the middle of a scouting mission?
Nadine liked to plan. Her backup plans had backup plans. Chloe, on the other hand, loves to divert from a plan, just to make things interesting. It drove Nadine nuts.

That call had thrown her off her game.

Chloe reaches across. Nadine's hand is cold. She rubs her thumb over the back of Nadine's hand before pulling back. It's a small gesture, a reminder she isn't alone.

Nadine seems to appreciate not getting a lame “it's going to be okay” speech.

“My aunt said Ma fell from a ladder. Something about trying to fix the porch light,” Nadine rolls her eyes and slips the catalog back.

Nadine bites her fingernails, something Chloe has never seen her do before. She gets the distinct impression that Nadine is holding something back. But she will not press the issue. They have over ten hours of flight ahead of them.

If Nadine wants to share something with her, there'll be plenty of time.

**Wednesday, May 16**

**Inflight to Dubai**

The older couple next to Chloe has fallen asleep. They were snoring even before the crew had dimmed the cabin lights.

“Do you mind?” Chloe’s voice is low as she puts her pillow between them.

“Go ahead,” Nadine's tone is indifferent.

With all her thoughts running rampage, she isn't getting any sleep, anyway. Which doesn't mean Chloe can't get rest? They've been up and about for 18 hours. Getting comfortable in an airplane seat is an art. One Chloe has mastered.
She pulls her legs up and leans against Nadine, glancing at her, as if waiting for her partner to shrug her off. But Nadine doesn't. She takes a long breath, taking in the vanilla scent of Chloe's shampoo. It doesn't have the soothing effect she's used to.

She replays the last conversation she had with her mother a few weeks back. They had fought about Nadine teaming up with Chloe.

“Treasure hunting?” Her mother sounded disappointed, her South African accent thick when she spoke English. “Why don't you come home? You've got more than enough serious job offers here.”

Nadine had remained silent. How could she explain it to her mother? Explain the thrill she’d experiences when she is on a chase with Chloe? She wasn't good with words that was Chloe's strength.

“Nadine, please be reasonable.” Her mother had urged.

“Ma, I'm good at this!”

“This isn't a job,” her mother had started but Nadine cut her off.

“Enough! I'm not coming back home. There's nothing left for me there.”

“Nadine!”

“No, Ma! For the first time I'm happy where I am. I'm not giving that up.”

“She's a thief. I've asked around and your new partner has quite the reputation.”

“She doesn’t care about that and neither am I.”

*Wednesday, May 16*
Not being able to sleep, Nadine uses the onboard WiFi to check her cell phone for new messages. Her aunt has written saying she is at the hospital but still waiting to talk to a doctor.

Rubbing her forehead with her free hand, she feels a headache spreading through her skull.

She envies Chloe for her ability to sleep almost everywhere. She could pass out as soon as her head rests on a pillow. Or anything resembling a pillow. Nevertheless, Nadine dozes off a while later, too.

The vibration of her phone startles her awake. Fishing it from her pocket, Nadine unlocks it and reads the message. Her body stiffens, and she scoots back in her seat. The movement stirs Chloe, who blinks awake.

“What is it?” Chloe stretches her arms and legs as much as the seat in front of her allows her.

“Ma’s been- she’s been put in a medically induced coma?” Nadine manages. She slowly types and sends a reply, then stares at her phone’s screen.

“I’m so sorry. What happened?” Chloe moves a strand of hair out of her eyes and sits up, putting an assuring hand on Nadine's arm.

“Not sure.”

Chloe squeezes Nadine's tense forearm.

She studies Nadine for a while, her squirreling leg and the rubbing of her fingers. It was one of Nadine’s tells. One when she was mulling over a problem she didn't want to talk about. Others bit their nails, Nadine rubbed her thumb over the tips of her fingers. *What if Ma’s not waking up?*

“Wanna talk?” Mild turbulences have woken up most of the other passengers.

“About what?”
“Nothing, I'm just bored.” Chloe shrugs, ignoring the tone which Nadine used to brush her off, “thought you might entertain me.”

Another air hole is shaking the cabin up. Some people grip their seats, some even yelp. Nadine is as unfazed as Chloe. And she knows Chloe's not just bored. It's her way of checking up on her. Nadine knows her long enough to know the difference. If she was actually bored, she’d be chatting up a steward or stewardess or someone from first class to get better drinks and food.

But here she is, diverting me from going down the rabbit hole, Nadine chuckles at the absurdity.
Nadine is pacing in front of the intensive care unit when Chloe finds her. It had taken her forever to find a parking spot. They’d taken a rental from the airport and drove straight to the hospital.

“What are you doing out here?” Chloe asks puzzled.

“Visiting hours are over,” Nadine points at the large sign next to the two winged door.

“They won’t let you in?” Chloe notices the built up frustration in her partner. The muscles in her arms taunt and she’s grinding her teeth.

“Ja. Said they send a doctor as soon as one’s available.”

“Where’s your aunt?”

Nadine holds her cell phone up. “They went home. Will be back tomorrow morning for visiting hours.”

Chloe is concerned Nadine might do something erratic, so she takes matters into her own hands.

Ten minutes later, Nadine is standing next to her mother’s bed, holding her hand. Chloe had found a nurse and sweet-talked her into letting Nadine in. Chloe could charm her way in almost anywhere.

Nadine lightly squeezes her mother’s hand. It’s limp and cold and Nadine feels sick. Her mother has always been so strong. She’d run the household with a dozen employees on the estate while her husband ran Shoreline. Nadine can’t remember a single day she’s been sick.

“I’m sorry, Ma.”
“What did the doctors say?” Chloe pushes off the wall and falls in step beside Nadine when she exits the ICU.

“The coma was a miscommunication. It was the pain medication knocking her out. She’s got a concussion and two fractured ribs. Doctor said not to worry. Anyway, they promised to call when there are any changes.”

The sun is already setting, the air a bit cooler when they walk to the parking lot.

“So, that's good, right?” Chloe inquires tentatively.

“Ja,” Nadine sinks heavily into the car seat. “Let's stay at my Ma’s place tonight.”

“What about your place?”

“My flat’s in Durban, that's a six hour drive. Not really a choice.”

Chloe is a little surprised. She didn't know where Nadine lived. They haven't shared this kind of personal informations with each other yet.

“I could go to a hotel,” Chloe offers.

“That's a waste of money,” Nadine sounds tired.

“Your mom’s place it is then.” Chloe pulls out of the parking lot and Nadine gives her directions.
They stay mostly silent until they arrive at Nadine's mother's house half an hour later. Chloe pulls the rental to a stop in front of the gate to a cute little house in the suburbs of Pretoria.

“You've got keys or do we have to get creative?” Chloe tips the picklock she always keeps in her hair.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I've got this,” Nadine gets out of the car and opens a box to a keypad. Pushing the code, the gate clicks and Nadine pushes it open.

It is dark outside by the time Nadine shows Chloe the house. It's a two-bedroom bungalow with a big, open kitchen and a cozy living room, decorated with traditional South African art and very few family photos.

They take turns in the bathroom, washing away the sweat and grime from their travel.

Chloe stands in front of the bathroom mirror, taking a long look at herself. The old white INXS T-shirt has seen better days, the print almost washed off completely. She brushes her hair and pulls it into a loose ponytail before joining Nadine in the kitchen.

She was still sporting a white tank top but had changed her cargo pants for gray shorts.

*Someone hasn’t skipped leg days*, Chloe muses and lets her gaze travel up toned calves and bites her lips. She knows she’s staring but Nadine doesn’t notice.

Nadine’s far too deep in thoughts. Wondering how bizarre the whole setting is. She’s casually standing in her mother’s kitchen. With Chloe Frazer, a woman she only met a couple of weeks ago. The woman she’s had a fight over with her mother. And now she didn’t know whether she should still be mad at her mother or if her mother was still mad at her.

“Kak!” Nadine grumbles and leans onto the counter with both hands. Life can change so fast.

“Your mom got anything to drink here?” Chloe doesn’t let her sulk and peaks into the fridge, delighted to find beer.
Grabbing two bottles, she ushers Nadine into the living room.

“Do you visit your mom often?” Chloe asks and sits on the armchair, glancing over to Nadine on the couch.

Nadine doesn't reply right away and Chloe wonders if she's over stepped. They hadn't quite figured out their relationship yet. The lines between business partners and friends were blurry.

“Not as much as I should,” Nadine shrugs.

“You okay?” Chloe tries again after a while. Nadine is even quieter than usual. Something was definitely bugging her and Chloe has a sense it isn't just the fact her mother is in the hospital.

Licking her lips, Nadine draws in a long breath and lets it out in a slow sigh. “I,” she starts. “We had a big fight when we last spoke.”

“About?”

“My new occupation.”

“She doesn't approve.” Chloe raises her eyebrows.

“Ma wanted me to come back home, get a real job.” Nadine peels the sticker off her bottle, throwing tiny paper balls onto the table.

“She doesn't think very highly of the treasure hunting business?”

At that, Nadine chuckles, a sound like a snort. She leans her elbows onto her knees and puts her face into her hand. A gesture of frustration rather than tiredness.

“I said some pretty awful things to her.”
“And you can apologize and work it all out once she's better,” Chloe doesn't push any further. A tear rolls down Nadine's cheek, and it breaks her heart. Nadine wipes it away with the back of her hand.

“Is it okay if I come over and sit with you?” Chloe asks cautiously.

Nadine nods.

Permission granted, Chloe gets up and crossed over to the couch. Sitting down, Chloe nudges Nadine to scoot. When she does, Chloe puts a comforting arm around her.

Nadine is exhausted from worrying, she can barely keep her eyes open. She takes a long, deep breath and exhaled slowly. Chloe's gently guides Nadine's head to rest in the crook of her neck. Closing her eyes, Nadine is fast asleep within minutes.

Chloe wakes a while later. Nadine has slumped and her head is now comfortably resting on Chloe's chest. Her warm hand is gripping the soft cotton of Chloe's T-shirt.

The temperature’s dropped since sunset and Chloe's feet are cold. She nudges Nadine and they scuffle until they're laying next to each other on the couch.

Chloe nestles against Nadine's back, enjoying the warmth. Nadine lifts her head and Chloe slips her arm around her. She caresses Nadine's wild curls from tickling her face.

This isn't how Chloe has pictured their first time sleeping together. And she'd imagined it quite often.

Strangely, she's not disappointed. Having Nadine sigh and relax in her arms, is so intimate, it sends a tingling through Chloe's body. She can't remember the last time she felt so connected to someone.

*Thursday, May 17,*

*Pretoria, Nadine's mother's house, 2:55 am*
Nadine wakes a bit later from the cold. Turning around, she hears the bathroom door open and remembers where she is. And with whom.

She had fallen asleep on the couch with Chloe.

The room is dark, except for the light from the street lamp shining past the curtains.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you,” Chloe whispers, reclaiming her earlier spot. She resists the urge to press a kiss on Nadine's forehead.

“S’alright,” Nadine mumbles, melting back into the warmth of her body. Sleep is claiming her once again.

Dogs are barking in the neighborhood.

Sleep isn't coming quite as easily now for Chloe. She is suddenly aware of every curve pressed tightly into her. The warmth of Nadine's skin burning through the thin fabric of her T-shirt, goosebumps raising on her skin.

Chloe bites her lower lip, wondering about the tight feeling in her chest.

*Thursday, May 17,*

*Pretoria, 7:22 am*

Nadine almost shoves Chloe off the couch when her phone starts ringing.

“Ja!” She grabs it from the coffee table.

Chloe blinks sleep away and sits up groggily. She watches Nadine get up and pace around the living room, replying to her caller in a steady stream of Afrikaans. Chloe doesn't understand a word.
“That was the hospital. Ma’s awake.” Nadine elaborates after hanging up.

“That's great. Let's get ready,”

“You go first, I'll call my aunt.” Nadine shoves Chloe towards the bathroom.

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Thursday, May 17,

Pretoria East Hospital, 11:45 am

“How's she?” Chloe looks up from her phone. She'd been waiting outside the ICU for quite a while. But she made good use of her time, checking a few sources and staying up to date with the latest heists and treasure rumors.

“Pretty out of it. But we talked a bit. She was tired though and fell asleep on me.”

“How rude,” Chloe chuckles, glad to be able to raise a smile on Nadine’s lips.

“Right?”

“Could you talk to a doctor yet?”

“No, there was an emergency. The nurse suggested coming back this afternoon or try to call later.”

“We'll be back later, then.” Chloe pats Nadine's shoulder and smiled warmly at her.

“Let's get something to eat, I'm starving.”
Chapter 3

Thursday, May 17

Pretoria East Hospital Parking Lot, 5 pm

“Ma’s getting transferred out of intensive care tomorrow!” Nadine sighs. It’s been a long time waiting. Being stuck in a hospital with her aunt and uncle had been exhausting. And despite wanting to be there for her Ma, Nadine feels guilty for wanting nothing more than leave the hospital as fast as possible.

The smell, the noise and the atmosphere were straining her nerves. She could jump head first into a combat scenario, but hospitals scared her. Because she was helpless. Nothing she could plan or act does help in here. She relied on the doctors on the staff to do their best.

“That’s quick.” Chloe’s voice pull her from dark thoughts.

“Ja, apparently her condition isn't as bad as they made it sound earlier.”

“Go on.”

“It really is just a concussion and the ribs aren’t fractured but bruised,” Nadine leans on the roof of the rental with both arms.

She might never admit it, but deep down she knows she’s more than happy Chloe is there. What she can’t get is why. She didn’t peg Chloe for the caring type. But then again, maybe she’s all wrong about the treasure huntress.

“Guess we both know all about how that feels.” Nadine tilts her head.

“I have some experience. And I don't recommend it.”

“Ja. Anyway, the doctor said all tests look good. They keep her at the ICU one more night and move her to a regular room tomorrow.”
“That calls for a celebration!” Chloe thumps the roof.


Thursday, May 17,

Pretoria, grill & bar, 8:42 pm

They had opted for dinner and drinks at a nice little bar near her mother’s place. She and her mother would drop by this place whenever Nadine was in town. For a Thursdays night, it was busy but not too packed. Nadine promised they had the best Cape Malay curry in town and Chloe gladly obliges the recommendation.

With each fork full of tasty curry, Nadine can feel the pent up nervous energy slowly leave her body. Her thoughts slowly started to become more organized and less chaotic. This tastes like home.

“Why is there Indian curry from Cape Malay?” Chloe asks and Nadine gladly provides her with a brief lesson of South African history.

“That’s quite fascinating.” Chloe hangs on every word and soaks all the informations up like she’s gonna be quizzed later on.

Taking a sip of wine, Nadine glances over the rim at Chloe. And then it dawns on her that her partner had absolutely no plausible reason to be here. None other than lending moral support and - being nice.

“What is it, China?” Chloe's gray eyes are fixated on her.

“Just thinking.” Nadine finishes her dish and puts the cutlery on her plate.

“About?” Chloe crooks her neck looking up from loose bangs.

“You,” Nadine wants to say but bites her tongue. “Nothing.”
“Hm,” Chloe nods like she can read her mind. She’d finished ahead of Nadine and was watching her, musing about what they should get for dessert.

Chloe turns heads everywhere they go. It's that compelling mix of beauty and confidence that Nadine is aware of as well.

Now that they aren't working a job, Chloe's whole attention is focused on Nadine. Who finds it a bit overwhelming, being the center of Chloe's attention. Because it is unsettling. Not necessarily in a bad way.

Normally she observes how Chloe works her magic on a mark or, like getting into the ICU earlier, just to get something they need.

Being honest with herself, Nadine likes the way Chloe treats her. Everyone else would get a boot up their butt.

*But god, the way Chloe looks at me.* Nadine drowns the rest of her wine at once, trying to get her imagination under control.

“How about we get out of here?” Nadine offers and then realizes how it sounded.

“Why, Nadine Ross, what are you proposing?” Chloe leans forward smirking, not wasting an opportunity like that.

“Not what you're thinking, you perv,” Nadine tries to sound annoyed. “I'm tired and want to get an early start tomorrow.”

“You're no fun,” Chloe pouts and Nadine rolls her eyes. Pulling cash from her pockets, she leaves enough to cover their table plus a nice tip.

Holding the door open for Chloe, Nadine holds her gaze when she walks past, grinning.
They'd always play this game. Chloe would flirt and Nadine would act annoyed.

_Damn, thinks Nadine, I forgot the reason why I should be irritated. But is Chloe serious after all?

_Thursday, May 17_

_Pretoria, Nadine's mothers house, 9:35 pm_

“I have an appointment at the hospital at 10 am. I'll get up at 6.30 am for a run. If you like, we can have breakfast together at 8 am. With morning traffic, I should leave here at 9.15 am.” Nadine is back to her old self, rattling off her plan for the after day.

“Want some company at the hospital?” Chloe isn't exactly sure where she'd fit in.

“You don't have to come to,” Nadine locks the front door and goes to close the blinds around the house. She gestures at rooms, “you can have the guest room, I'll take the couch.”

“I don't mind sharing.” Chloe stands in the threshold, grinning smugly. “I promise I'll be at my best behavior.”

Nadine hates the way Chloe looks up through her bangs. Her ability to say no disappears every goddamn time she does that.

“You always steal my pillow and blanket,” Nadine musters her last bit of resistance.

“I do not,” Chloe huffs. “But fine, you take the bed, I'll take the couch. You might look like Wonder Woman, but you still need sleep like us mere mortals.”

“Fine, we'll share.” Nadine was too tired to argue. She knew she'd lose, anyway.

Neither of them has yet mentioned last nights sleeping arrangements.
Nadine took off her sweat shirt and was about to take off her tank top when she heard Chloe chuckle from the doorway.

“Don’t let me stop you.”

Nadine grabbed a clean tank top and shorts and padded into the bathroom barefoot. When she excited showered and ready for bed, Chloe was sitting on top of the covers, staring at her - yet again. And it was most definitely not just an appreciative look, she was flat out leering.

Then she got up - and walked right past Nadine into the bathroom.

Thursday, May 17,

Pretoria, Nadine's mother's house, guest room, 11:56 pm

“Do you mean it?” Nadine asks when they are laying side by side in the dark. She’d unsuccessfully tried to fall asleep for over an hour. But this was bugging the shit out of her.

“Mean what, love?” Chloe is half asleep.

“When you *compliment* my looks.” Nadine bites her lips.

“Are we actually having this conversation while you're laying half naked next to me?”

Nadine starts to objects, but Chloe cuts her off. “Those skimpy shorts and that tank top leave *nothing* to my imagination, love.”

Silence.

“I do mean everything I said.” Chloe looks over. Her eyes take a moment to adjust. The only light in the room is shining from the street lights through the cracks of the blinds. “Why?”
Chloe was a little surprised Nadine brought it up now. She had thought she was too preoccupied with her mother and all.

“So you don't think I'm too buff?” Nadine turns her head to look at her.

At that Chloe laughs wholeheartedly, making the mattress shake. She rolls onto her side, facing Nadine.

“If you let me, I'll show you just how gorgeous I think you are,” Chloe whispers into her ear, sending a shiver down her spine and she clenches her thighs together.

Nadine doesn't move and Chloe sighs. “Sorry, I promised I'd behave—” Chloe starts. This time she's cut off by Nadine leaning over, pressing her warm lips to hers.

When Nadine pulls back, Chloe's afraid she might see regret when she opens her eyes.

Instead, she sees shock and thrill in Nadine's eyes. And a touch of lust. Chloe's baffled. But she is ready when Nadine leans in again and captures her lips like it is the first spontaneous thing she has ever done in her life.

She squeezes tighter around Nadine's waist, drawing sighs from both their lips.

Chloe's letting Nadine set the pace, surprised how attentive and gentle she is. She's taking her time kissing her, taking turns nibbling on her upper and lower lip. And the slow strokes of her tongue drive Chloe crazy.

Nadine pulls back reluctantly and rolls onto her side. “Sweet dreams.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Chloe pants.

“Early start tomorrow, remember?”

“Rude!” She grins and bites her lip. “Sweet dreams, love.”
Friday, May 18,

Pretoria, Nadine's mother's house, guest room, 6:26 am

The sun is just rising when Chloe wakes. She gazes at Nadine who is stirring awake next to her, stretching luxuriously.

“Good Morning, gorgeous,” Chloe drawls, licking her lips at the sight.

“Morning,” Nadine blinks sleep away and focuses on Chloe's face. Chloe's smile and the memories from the previous night spread arousal through her body like wildfire.

Chloe recognizes the look. She leans in. Nadine grips the back of her head and meets her lips halfway. Her other hand encircles Chloe's waist and pulls Chloe on top of her, deepening the kiss.

The alarm on Nadine's phone chimes loudly.

“We can ignore that, right?” Chloe mumbles against her lips while Nadine grabs blindly for her phone.

Of course they can't.

Friday, May 18,

Pretoria, Hospital Parking lot, 9:56 am

Chloe’s phone pings a couple of times during the drive to the hospital, but she shows a restraint that impresses Nadine and doesn’t check her messages until they’re on the grounds of the hospital, car in park.
As Nadine moves to head into the hospital, Chloe puts a hand in Nadine's arm to stop her from getting out.

“What?” Nadine removes her hand from the door handle.

“We have an interested party for the Raja Raja Gold Kahavanu and the Editsatavahana hourglass.” Chloe keeps reading.

“And?”

“They're offering a nice price.”

“What's the catch?” Nadine's suspicious.

“I'll have to fly to Madrid today.”

Nadine bites her lips. “I - can't leave.” Chloe had found the Raja Raja treasure right after their encounter with the trapped elephant. Nadine chuckles. She’d called Chloe a selfish dickhead. Good times. She wished she could be there for the sale.

“S’alright, love. I can do this.”

“Is it safe to go by yourself?” Does Chloe sound too chipper? Nadine wonders.

“As safe as it can be in this line of work.”

“Chloe, I'm serious.” Nadine weighed her options, but came to the conclusion she just couldn’t leave her mother like that.

“I'm a big girl, I can handle a simple transaction.”
“I don't like you going alone.”

Now Chloe's insulted. “I can take care of myself.”

Nadine's brooding. Of course Chloe is capable. But that's beside the point.

“Why don't you go see your mom and I'll look for a flight to Spain.”

“Fine.” Nadine gets out of the car and throws the door shut.

Doesn't sound fine.

Friday, May 18,

Pretoria East Hospital, ICU, 11:37 am

Nadine and her mother are waiting for Susan to be cleared to transfer to a regular room. Nadine had just mentioned that Chloe is with her.

“She's here?” Susan's surprised.

“She's in the lobby.”

“Why don't you ask her to join us?”

“They only let family into the ICU,” Nadine shrugs, glad for the plausible excuse.

She wasn't sure she'd actually want Chloe and her mother to meet. She had already pictured a dozen ways that meeting could go wrong and was glad her mother let it go.
Nadine had a bad feeling about Chloe taking off. What if she realizes she rather works alone? And why the hell does it bother me so much?

“Are you alright, dear?”

“Ja.”

“Want to talk about it? I've got nothing but time.” Susan folds her hands on her stomach.

“I'm good.”

“Sure you are. And your fingers aren't leaving marks on your arm from gripping so tight.”

Friday, May 18,
Johannesburg airport, South Africa, 6:22 pm

“You're running late.” Nadine parks the car at the airport.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Chloe is in no hurry.

“There's nothing to talk about.” Nadine looks over challenging.

“Are you trying to get rid of me, China?”

“I'm not the one running off to Spain.” At that, Chloe frowns.
“I'm just going to collect some money.” She's hot when she's angry, Chloe bits her bottom lip to keep from smirking.

“Then you better watch your back. I'm not there to save your butt this time.”

Nadine's gaze dances from Chloe's eyes to her lips, and Chloe feels the heat of her stare and then of her kiss.
Saturday, May 19,

Pretoria And Madrid, 7:15 am

Nadine's phone buzzes. Chloe has sent a selfie of herself at Madrid-Barajas airport.

*Good morning*, the next text bubble appears. *Made it.*

*Good morning*, Nadine types back.

*Did I wake you?*

*Nope. Been out from a run.*

*At 7 am? Are you mad, China?*

They keep texting until Chloe's cab arrives at the hotel.

There was plenty of time until the sale in the evening.

*What have you planned for today?* Chloe asks after unpacking. She flops onto the hotel bed, already missing the company.

*I'm invited at my cousins for braai.*

*Braai?*

*Barbecue, South African Style*
Sounds good! You have fun! Don't get into trouble.

Saturday, May 19,

Pretoria, Nadine's cousins house, 6:53 pm

“You call this a small party?” Nadine walked up to her cousin, André. There are at least twenty people gathered around a big grill in the middle of his backyard.

“Yeah, a few of my friends couldn't come.” He laughs and hugs her tightly. André and Nadine were close in age and grew up together. While Nadine was short and fit, he was lanky and tall. She'd beat his butt all the time when they were kids.

They're just catching up when Nadine's phone buzzes.

Chloe's sending pictures of the location where the exchange would take place. Nadine had insisted on this specific spot in the park of the Crystal Palace. It was a highly frequented tourist attraction which meant there were security cameras and police presence. That would make it as safe as possible for Chloe.

She'd prefer to be there herself, but this would have to do.

Her phone rings, announcing a video call.

“How's the party?” Chloe asks.

“Okay. Looking good there, lots of tourists, police. You still need to keep your guard up.”

“I will. Not my first rodeo, remember?” Chloe is still on the fence whether she liked Nadine fussing over her safety or be annoyed. “How's your Ma?”

“It took us until 1 pm until she was finally transferred,” Nadine sighs. “She's doing much better
though. Cranky because she missed lunch.”

“Can't blame her.”

“They're running a few more tests and she might even get released tomorrow.”

“That sounds great, I'm glad.”

“Who. Is. This?” André, Nadine's cousin, grins into the camera from behind her. “Hi, I'm André, her cousin.”

“My partner,” Nadine shoves André away, but he circles right back, “I'm working.”

“Hi there, I'm Chloe. Nice to meet you,” She addresses André and then Nadine. “Go enjoy the party! I'm good, promise.” Chloe insists. “Talk to you later.” She ends the chat.

“Uh. She's hot!” Nadine pushes him off, but he grabs her shoulders to keep his balance. “What exactly do you two do? Your Ma's been so cryptic about your new job!”

Nadine isn't surprised.

“We find lost stuff.”

“You find - stuff? Like what?”

“Anything from stolen art to lost artifacts.”

“Cool.” André nods approvingly. “Will I get a chance to meet Chloe?” He grins.

*Saturday, May 19,*
Pretoria, South Africa, 10:21 pm

All done. On my way back to the hotel. Chloe texts Nadine.

She doesn’t get a reply and assumes Nadine’s busy. So she tosses the phone on the bed and takes her shoes off and kicks off her pants.

Tossing her shirt on the ground, Chloe walks into the bathroom to fill the tub. A hot bath might help relax the tired back. Endless hours on a plane were more exhausting than climbing ancient statues.

She’s just checking the water temperature when her cell rings. Shaking the water from her hands quickly, Chloe runs to the bed and puts her cell on speaker.

“All good?” Nadine was on the other end and Chloe grins.

“Absolutely! Smooth transaction.” Chloe hears loud laughing in the background. “Sounds like quite the party?”

“Half the neighborhood showed up,” Nadine walks away from the crowd to have some privacy. “How are you? Is that running water?”

“I was just about to have a bath, actually.” Chloe mentions casually, dipping her toes into the water.

“Am I keeping you?” Nadine swallows. The thought of Chloe butt naked in a tub speeds up her pulse.

“I don’t mind,” Chloe’s voice certainly sounds surly. “Want to video chat?” She puts the phone down and sinks into the welcoming bubble bath.

“No!” Nadine shouts, having quite a few heads turn in her direction. “You’re enjoying this, eh?”

“You bet I do,” Chloe chuckles.
Sunday, May 20,

Pretoria 1:09 am, Madrid, 0:09 am

You still awake? Chloe texts.

Ja, reading, Nadine writes back.

Anything interesting?

Did you know that over 1,000 rhinos were poached last year in South Africa?

That many? That's awful.

Ja. They have an army of 400 rangers for 20,000 square kilometer park, but that just doesn't cut it.

Are you thinking of becoming a ranger? Chloe frowns.

I've been talking to a friend of my cousins last night. He's a ranger.

Tough job?

He told us some horrible stories. Showed me pictures that made me want to throw up.

So, that's why you're not asleep yet.

Ja.... I've seen my share of cruelty. But defenseless animal… makes me sick to my stomach.
It's tough...

Someone took this earlier. Nadine changes the topic by sending a picture of herself and other people sitting by the fire.

A smile unconsciously tugging at Chloe's lips. She zooms in on the picture and takes in the lightning. The fire paints Nadine's skin in warm colors. She looks breathtakingly marvelous.

Looks cozy, she texts back.

Chloe can see that Nadine is typing and erase several times. The final message coming through and Chloe grins.

I missed you there.

It takes them another twenty minutes before they finally text their good nights.

When Chloe wakes the following morning, she's disoriented. She's had the nicest dream, the feel of the kisses still burning. Touching her fingers to her lips the memories are coming back.

Chloe luxuriously stretches and reflects on the last couple of weeks. Teaming up with Nadine wasn't the worst idea after all. Their combined stubbornness didn't hinder them becoming a well attuned team.

She checks her phone for new messages. There's one from Elena with family pictures. Chloe smiles and send some hearts and kissing emojis back. One message is a request for a retrieval. She marks that for later. No text from Nadine. She tries to ignore the pang of sadness in her chest.

Probably out for a run, Chloe ponders. When did I become so clingy? They've been texting just a few hours ago.

And then it hits her like a freight train. I'm missing her. Like, really missing her.
“When the fuck did this happen?”

Chloe licks her lips and thinks back to the night they arrived in Pretoria. And the other night, the one where they made out. God, how she missed those firm hands and gentle fingers on her body.

Monday, May 21

In flight, 8:27 am local time

Another 8 hours, Chloe sighs. She’d collected quite the bonus miles in the last couple of days.

She was on the first flight out of Madrid Monday morning and was scheduled to arrive in Johannesburg at 4:25 pm.

Thanks to onboard WiFi, she could kill time by texting.

She’d gotten updates from Sam’s latest adventure and was glad they hadn’t joined. Turned out it was a total disaster. No treasure and he barely escaped jail time in Yemen.

Chloe had sent a good morning message but Nadine hadn’t written back yet. Chloe wondered what she was up to.

Finally back from the hospital. Just got home with Ma. A text arrived from Nadine.

She good? Chloe writes back.

Ja, gotta take it easy for a while though.

It took forever to finish the release paperwork : ( could have used your charm ; )
Chapter 5

Monday, May 21,

Johannesburg airport, South Africa, 5:31 pm

Chloe exits the baggage claim area and is surprised to find Nadine and her mother waiting for her.

“If this isn't a sight for sore eyes,” drops her bag to the floor, and throwing her arms around Nadine’s neck. Nadine hugs her back briefly before untangling herself.

“Ma, this is Chloe,” she doesn't quite know where to put her hands and gestures between them.

“Nice to meet you, Misses Ross,” Chloe puts on her most charming smile and holds out her hand.

“Likewise,” Susan Ross cautiously watches her while they shake hands. Her grip is strong, and she holds her hand longer than necessary.

Chloe can see the resemblance between mother and daughter. Susan Ross stands taller than her daughter and is much slimmer. They share the same eyes and cheekbones. Susan used a bright coloured scarf to tie back her hair and hide a palm sized bandage on the side of her forehead. She’s definitely not looking old enough to be Nadine's mother.

“So you're the one who offered my daughter a job.” It wasn't a question.

“It was more of a mutual agreement, we're partners.” Chloe leans in, making it look like she’s telling a secret.

“I thought I keep Nadine company,” Susan nods, changing the subject and they make their way through the crowd towards the exit.

“My sister’s having us all over for dinner tonight,” Susan says when they reach their car. “Would you like to join us, Miss Frazer?”
“Please call me Chloe. And absolutely.”

“Only if you're not too tired,” Nadine offers her an exit plan.

“I'm good,” Chloe grins. “But I'd really like to freshen up before we go.”

*Monday, May 21,*

*Pretoria, Susan Ross’s house, 7 pm*

“Nadine!” Chloe shouts from the guest room, “Did I leave my bag out there?”

“Ja! Want me to bring it?”

“Be a dear.”

“Here you go,” Nadine enters the guest room moments later with a duffel bag in hand.

“Thanks, love.” Chloe puts it on the floor. Taking Nadine by the hand, she closes the door and leans onto it, looking Nadine up and down. “I don't *actually* need it.”

“Really?” Nadine lets Chloe pull her closer and lean in, whispering, “It was a ruse.”

“Outrageous,” Nadine searches Chloe's gray eyes. Her hands coming to rest onto her partners waist.

Chloe gently cups Nadine's face in her palms and closes the distance. She's crushing their lips together. The kiss isn't gentle, it's frenzied and full. And escalates quickly with Nadine pinning Chloe to the door. Which earns her a loud groan from Chloe.

“We'll be late,” Nadine mumbles while she trials kisses down Chloe's neck.
Chloe sighs dramatically, pressing the back of her head to the door. “We'll pick this up later,” she playfully shoves Nadine away and starts undressing on her way into the bathroom.

“Right,” Nadine stares after her and waits for her pulse to slow down. She then touches up her make-up and changes into a light blue blouse and black jeans before joining her mother back in the kitchen.

“Look at you! You changed into something nice,” Susan acknowledges surprised.

“It's a party, right?” Nadine makes it sound like it's not a big deal.

“Sure,” Susan doesn't even try to hide her laugh.

Monday, May 21,

Pretoria, Backyard of Nadine’s aunt’s house, 7:55 pm

“Nadine,” Chloe nods for her to step away from the crowd so she can take a call. They end up in the dimly lit corner of the backyard. She's holding her phone between them so Nadine can listen in. It's someone with an offer to buy one of the treasures they collected in India.

Chloe turns her back to the other guests and tilts her head. She's eye to eye with Nadine now who steps closer than she probably needs to. Not that Chloe minds. She can feel the heat radiating from her partner.

Nadine's staying silent, her arms crossed. She's enjoying the skillful way Chloe negotiates.

Before Chloe seals the deal, she locks eyes with Nadine, silently asking for her agreement. When Nadine licks her lips and nods, Chloe grins and takes hold of Nadine's forearm.

“Excellent, it's a deal then. I'll contact you next week with a location for the transaction,” Chloe has that glint in her eyes when she hangs up. She leans closer to Nadine as she puts her phone in her back pocket. They breathe hotly together for a moment. When she bites her beautiful lips, Nadine
wants to ravage her right there.

Nadine sucks in a deep breath as Chloe presses into her and brings their lips barely an inch apart. Their noses brush together as Nadine breathes heavily against Chloe’s lips and mutters to herself, just loud enough for Chloe to hear it. “I want you so bad right now.”

“Everybody!” Someone calls out from the fireplace and breaks the spell. “We’re ready! I hope you’re hungry!”

Nadine steps back, ready to kick some butt. Chloe puts a hand on her arm. “What a killjoy!” she laughs. “Let's eat.”

An hour later, Chloe is sure she will combust if she eats one more piece of delicious, grilled meat. She takes a swing of her beer but it’s empty.

“Do you want another one?” Chloe dusts off her pants and collects Nadine’s empty bottle.

“Sure, thanks!” Chloe can feel Nadine’s eyes following her as she makes her way up the steps to the patio. The narcissistic part of her had always loved being the center of all attention. Tonight though, she didn’t even notice anyone else but Nadine’s attention.

Chloe was still lost in thoughts when she closed the fridge, two cold bottles of Lager in hand.

“I heard about you, Chloe.” Someone said from behind her and Chloe almost dropped the bottles. “But I don't believe everything people say and like to make-up my own mind,” Susan Ross stood right beside the fridge.

Chloe uses every bit of self restraint keep herself from giving a witty remark.

“I've watched you with my daughter,” Susan holds her arm to her bruised side. “Your occupation might be questionable. But, I like your influence on my daughter,” Susan pauses for a moment, “Nadine seems more herself.”

“So,” Chloe tries to process what she just heard.
“Treat my daughter well. If anything happens to her, I'll find you.”

“Fair enough, Misses Ross.” Chloe nods. She likes Nadine’s mother. She also knows she is dead serious in what she implied. And Chloe respects that.

“Call me Susan.” she extends her hand.

“Susan,” Chloe whips her hand, wet from the evaporation on the beer bottle off on her pants and takes the offered hand, shaking it.

Nadine walks up to them when they exit the kitchen. “There you are.” she looks puzzled, seeing her mother and Chloe chatting and laughing.

She hadn’t expected her mother to get along with Chloe.

Tuesday, May 22,

Pretoria, 0:05 am

“You do know my Ma's on the other side of the hallway?” Nadine holds onto Chloe's hips when they move towards the bed.

“You want me to stop?” Chloe kisses the skin below the ear and then moves back to lush lips.

“No,” Nadine wraps her arms around Chloe's waist and pulls her closer. She opens her mouth, just enough to wrap more fully around Chloe's bottom lip. When she teases with her tongue, Chloe moans.

She opens her mouth and kisses Chloe fully and deeply, her hands slipping up from soft cheeks to thick hair. Her fingers tangle in the silky strands and scratch at Chloe's scalp, and Chloe releases a throaty whine against Nadine’s lips.
Chloe’s hands touch the warm flesh of Nadine’s strong back and Nadine bows forward at the touch and it makes Chloe throb between her legs. She slides her hands from Nadine's back and around over her slim waist before slowly opening one button after another of Nadine's shirt. Nadine gasps against her lips, her stomach twitching against her fingertips in response.

Chloe pushes the thin fabric gently off her shoulders and lets it fall to the floor.

Her gaze drops to absorb the newly revealed flesh and muscles. Nadine is marked with dozens of scars. Some of them old, some recent. And Chloe traces them all with her fingertips.

She feels Nadine's hands move to her waist, feels strong fingers tug at the hem of her shirt.

She lifts her arms up as Nadine pulls her shirt from her body. She's stepping in further and wrapping her body around Nadine's. When their skin touches and rubs together, Chloe lets out a shaky sigh.

She runs her hands down Nadine's back and buries her face in the crook of her soft neck.

Nadine’s reaching between them and pulls Chloe's belt buckle open. She licks her lips before saying, “That okay?”

“Very.” Chloe's stomach flips and a wave of warmth rolls out from the base of her spine when Nadine pulls down her jeans. Chloe steps out of them and Nadine picks her up easily, easing them both onto the soft mattress.

“Wait,” Chloe says, and Nadine freezes. Chloe seizes the opportunity and twists their bodies so that Nadine is suddenly laying beneath her, her waist pinned between Chloe's legs.

She chuckles in delight against Nadine's lips by the way Nadine's body tightens in surprise. She's much more comfortable straddling someone, instead of the other way around. It's a control thing.

Nadine answers with a sharp bite to her lower lip. Chloe knows that Nadine is much stronger than her and could have easily resisted. Instead Nadine soothes the skin she nearly broke through with a kiss.
Chloe moves her hands to the soft skin from neck to her chest, cupping full breast with warm hands and squeezing them thoroughly. Nadine releases a low, soft moan of need.

Chloe finds herself with her lips on Nadine's bare stomach, inches below her bra, kissing and licking over lean muscles. “I've wanted to do this since the first time I saw your abs,” Chloe mumbles between kisses.

They sit up, pulling off first Nadine's bra, then Chloe's, trying to keep kissing. Nadine chuckles, her fingers stroking through black hair with slow, deliberate movements and Chloe's heart is hammering. She releases a breathy sigh and reaches between them to open the buttons of Nadine's jeans.

They are landing on the floor next to the rest of their clothes.

Chloe hooks her fingers into Nadine's white underwear and pulls. Nadine helps to kick them off and Chloe grins with pleasure when her fingers hit the newly bare skin.

Nadine's skin is on fire when Chloe trails her hand over her chest down her stomach and between her tights.

The rhythm’s slow that’s starting to build between Chloe's fingers and Nadine's hips.

As she moves faster, she feels Nadine's strength when she arches up off of the bed. Her hand curls around the back of Chloe's neck and pulls her down for a bruising kiss.

“Chloe,” she breathes before her hips start to roll and Chloe pushes her over the edge.

Chloe will never forget the way Nadine tells her name and how she holds onto her lower back. With skilled fingers, Chloe guides Nadine as she slowly comes down. She's placing soft kisses on the underside of her jaw and below her ear.

Chloe rolls onto her back once Nadine's breathing slows beneath her and releases a heavy sigh.
“Did you enjoy that, love?” Chloe grins cockily. She knows exactly what the answer should be. She just wants to hear it. Nadine doesn’t respond with words. She swings a leg over Chloe’s waist to straddle her.

“That’s a yes, isn’t it?”

There is no uncertainty in the warm brown eyes that look down at her. Nadine runs her hands up and down Chloe’s ribcage, cupping full breast with firm hands and makes Chloe moan.

She studies Chloe precisely. The way her breathing quickens when Nadine kisses down between her breasts, the way her back arches up when Nadine sucks on her nipple and moans deep and low when Nadine bites down.

Chloe can’t look away from the staggering sight of Nadine between her legs, her hands on Chloe’s hip bones, the spectacular shoulder muscles shifting. It’s almost too much. She wasn’t supposed to give away so much control. Chloe closes her eyes and clutch the sheets, trying to maintain some of that control.

And fails spectacularly when pleasure rolls through her body and she comes undone completely.

“How was that?” Nadine whispers in a teasing voice after she settles in next to Chloe, pulling her close.

*Tuesday, May 22,*

*Pretoria, 6:12 am*

They’re laying entwined when the sun is rising. Chloe’s comfortably resting on top of Nadine who runs her hand in lazy circles over Chloe’s naked back.

Breathing in the familiar, comforting scent, Chloe nuzzles her nose against a naked swell of flesh. “Sleepy?”
Nadine can do little more than grunt, her body spent and on the verge of falling back asleep. Chloe’s body is so soft and warm. She doesn’t want to move.

Chloe kisses her chest, her voice muffled against warm skin as she mumbles, “Didn’t get much sleep last night?”

Nadine chuckles. When the silence settles in again, she sighs and says, “Why did you come?”

Chloe licks her lips and clears her throat. “I thought that was quite obvious, love.” she begins.


Their gazes lock and Nadine thinks she has never seen Chloe more baffled than she is in this moment. She knows why. She caught the eloquent Chloe Frazer off guard.

Chloe’s lips part and her eyes widen slightly. She seems almost speechless for a moment before she in a barely audible whisper says “I don't know.”

“I'm glad you're here,” Nadine slips a hand around her neck and pulls her in for a searing kiss.

They'd figure it out.
Wednesday, May 23,

Pretoria, Susan Ross's kitchen, 7:30 am

“Good Morning, honey!” Susan greets her daughter, her voice just a tad too chipper. “Want some coffee?”

“Good Morning, Ma,” Nadine averts her eyes and pours herself a cup.

“Did you sleep well?” Susan peels an orange and laughed at the sight of Nadine's spilling coffee all over the counter.

She threw her a dish towel. “André called. It sounded quite urgent. Can you please call him back?”

“Sure.” I'll take any kind of diversion I can get. Nadine mopped the hot, dark stains from the counter.

“Good Morning,” Chloe strolls into the kitchen.

She’s smirking, Nadine groans internally. Can she please look less smug?

“Hello, Chloe!” Susan takes the pot from Nadine and pours a cup for Chloe.

“How are you, Susan? How’s the head and the ribs?”

“Much better, dear! Slept like a rock.”

Did my mother just wink at me? Nadine wants the ground to open up and swallow her whole.
“I better call André back,” Nadine fumbles for her phone in her pocket and walks out on the porch.

_Wednesday, May 23,_

_Pretoria, on the road, 8:43 am_

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you couldn't get out of there fast enough.” Chloe fumbles with the radio until settles for a rock station, hard guitar riffs of some 70s song tormenting the cheap speakers of the car audio system.

Nadine huffs and turns down the volume. “You're awfully relaxed. Aren't you antsy to get back to treasure hunting?”

“I'm good, actually.” Chloe's lips twitch upwards and into a full smile. _I am pretty good, _she ponders. “Let's hear what your cousin wants. Maybe he's got something for us.”

And, surprise, surprise, he does.

His friend, the ranger asks for their help. Someone stole over a ton of confiscate rhino horn that's was scheduled to be burnt.

So, Chloe and Nadine hunt the thieves down. They kick butt and take names. And break bones and shoot a few bad guys.

They retrieve the precious cargo and watch it get burnt a few days after that in a big public event.

Not long after, they go on their next treasure hunt. Together.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, what a ride! I’ve started this months ago, but then life happened and it took me forever to edit and finally post.
Hope you enjoyed reading as much as I enjoyed writing!

Thank you, Dee, for all your help!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!