



CHAPTER 1

THE TRAGIC LOSS

Sipho's sleep was interrupted by the loud ringing of his phone. As he answered it, he was overcome by a feeling of fear – a premonition of the devastating news he was about to hear.

"Hello?" Sipho's voice trembled, his heart pounding.

"Sipho, it's me. Themba...he's dead." The caller sobbed, "He's dead, Sipho. Themba is dead."

Sipho's world collapsed. His best friend and business partner had taken his own life. Themba, the vibrant, ambitious young man who was always full of life, was now dead, overtaken by darkness.

Tears streamed down Sipho's face as he curled up in bed and dropped the phone. Everything around him became a blur as he was filled with overwhelming pain. Sipho's life felt pointless, lost and empty. The meaning and purpose he had once had, seemed unattainable, and he doubted his existence.

Themba and Sipho had been inseparable since their days growing up in Soweto. They had met at primary school, two boys with big dreams and even bigger imaginations. Sipho came from a middle-class family; his parents were hard-working, loving and supportive.

His sister Thando had always been a model child – academic, disciplined and ambitious. She had a degree in marketing and communications, a good foundation for a successful career. Sipho, on the other hand, had a

different path in mind. From a young age he had been drawn to entrepreneurship and preferred it to university studies – much to the dismay of his parents. They had hoped he would follow in Thando's footsteps, attend university and get a permanent job. But Sipho was determined he wanted to build something of his own, something that would last.

Themba's life had been different. He had grown up with fewer privileges and his circumstances had forced him to mature quickly. In his early 20s, Themba got his girlfriend, Lindiwe, pregnant, and with a child coming, he knew he had to find a way to provide for his family. That's when he and Sipho decided to start their own business – a computer company to meet the growing demand for IT services in Soweto. They started small, working out of Sipho's bedroom, saving every cent they earned and investing it in the business.

Themba had always been the driving force behind their business. He was driven by success, and his boundless energy and tireless determination helped them to succeed. Sipho admired how his friend's charisma and sharp business acumen effortlessly won over customers and convinced even the most sceptical. Together they had weathered the ups and downs of entrepreneurship and supported each other through difficult challenges.

Themba was the more practical of the two, always backing up Sipho's rather outlandish ideas with a dose of reality. Sipho, on the other hand, was the dreamer, always pushing the boundaries while looking for the next big thing. This dynamic worked well, and even as they grew older, their friendship remained strong.

Growing up they experienced the usual ups and downs of puberty together – first crushes, bullies at school, exam pressure – but through it all they had each other's backs. When Themba learnt that Lindiwe was pregnant, Sipho was the first person he told. They stayed up all night talking about what this would mean for Themba's future, and how he would provide for his family. It was during these conversations that the idea of starting their own business was born.

The road from those late-night conversations to opening their first shop in Jabulani Mall had been long and difficult – but they had travelled it

together. Siphso still remembered the day they signed the lease for their shop – a small space, nothing special, but for them it was everything. That night they celebrated with a few friends, sitting on the kerb outside the shopping centre, looking at the stars and dreaming of where their business would take them.

But as their business grew, so the pressure on Themba's shoulders mounted. He was now a father, with all the responsibility that entailed. The long hours, the stress of being the boss and co-owner, and his excessive personal expenses were beginning to wear him down. Siphso could see that, but didn't know how to help him. He had tried to be there for his friend, to take on some of the burden, but it hadn't been enough.

The last few months of Themba's life had been a mess. Siphso had noticed the changes in him, the way he switched off in meetings, and how his once infectious laugh had become hollow. And then there was the incident with Lindiwe.

And then, just like that, Themba disappeared. Siphso had lost his friend, his business partner, his brother in all but blood. The loss left a void in his life, a void he had tried to fill with work and distraction – but nothing had changed his mindset.

Now, as he sat in his flat and the memories came rushing back, Siphso realised it wasn't just the grief he had been running away from. It was the fear that he had somehow let Themba down, that he had let him down when he needed him the most. Having been a part of Siphso's life for so long, his influence had shaped Siphso in ways he was only now beginning to understand. The lessons they had learnt together, the challenges they had overcome, and even the mistakes they had made – they were all part of who Siphso was today.

The first few months of running the business had been tough. They had spent long hours at their computers, often working late into the night, fixing technical problems and learning on the fly. But despite the challenges, they were driven by a shared dream. They envisioned a future where their business would be known throughout Johannesburg, perhaps even

the entire country. From their small shop in Jabulani Mall, the business grew slowly but steadily, and with each small success, their bond deepened.

But while their business began to flourish, Themba's personal life was falling apart. Besides the pressure of fatherhood, Lindiwe, who had once supported him, distanced herself from him and eventually their relationship deteriorated. When Siphso found out that Lindiwe had cheated on Themba, he was shocked. Themba had always been a loyal partner and father, but the cheating shook him. The final blow came when Lindiwe refused to allow Themba to see their daughter.

If that wasn't enough, the extravagant lifestyle, mounting debts and constant pressure to maintain an image of wealth had taken its toll on Themba's mental and emotional wellbeing. Siphso, who was kept busy with the day-to-day side of the business, had underestimated Themba's problems, and even though he had often tried to talk to his friend, Themba always dismissed his concerns and emphasised that everything was under control.

Losing his friend Themba was a heavy blow for Siphso, a deep wound that festered in his soul. He couldn't help feeling that he had let his friend down, that he should have recognised the signs and done more to help him. The guilt and grief became a heavy burden that threatened to crush Siphso.

In the months that followed, Siphso struggled to find meaning in a world that now seemed so cruel and unforgiving. He threw himself into work and tried to keep the business afloat, but his heart was no longer in it. The passion that had once fuelled him had disappeared, and been replaced by a hollow emptiness. He began to isolate himself, withdrawing from friends and family, unable to go on.

Depression crept into his thoughts like a dark fog – the lingering stares, the occasional bouts of absent-mindedness, the growing sense of restlessness. There were days when Siphso didn't dare get out of bed, when even the smallest tasks seemed insurmountable. He would lie for hours, staring at the ceiling, replaying the memories of Themba in his head and wondering what had gone wrong. The joy he had once found in life had been extinguished, and he was adrift in a sea of sadness.