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No Strings Attached

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A quick in and out is all it was meant to be. But that's not how it went at *Style It*.

Sarah sat on a soft, pink cushion, waiting her turn. The hairdressers were clever; they washed the hair quickly so that clients were too vested to leave. Then they left them in a line, blow-dried and eager for their chance to feel beautiful, perhaps even loved.

Sarah spent nights stalking the *Style It* page, scrawling up and down their Instagram feed, imagining herself with the knotless braids or the Spanish curl as a baddie. When they met at an unfortunate function with crates of duty-free beer, He revealed that he liked braids. She knew *He* would be happy with the neat, waist-length strands *Style It* was known for. This was a new He, and she didn't know enough about him to know what colour he would like; blonde or maroon was a safe bet.

Mr. Zulu would be outraged by blonde braids in public but would love them in private; the look was the opposite of the wig his demure wife wore all year. The fat silly man she called Kateka didn't even know what blonde was, let alone Brazilian, but he would dutifully send K2,500 for it. It only cost K630, which the profit from her small thrift clothing business could easily cover, but she was a student, and extra money was always welcome. The new He smoked black box cigarettes, the "switch" brand, which he flicked with a loose wrist as he spoke lots of English. From their minimal interactions, she gathered he had a tinge of exposure. Honey blonde braids would catch Him in her web.

"Colour 30", she said to the hairdresser assigned to her.

In a hair salon full of beautiful women, nobody paid Sarah any mind. Basically, a Jane Doe, Sarah Lubinda managed to drift by unnoticed unless it was necessary. Admission clerks at Apex Medical School sometimes called her Betty before they cross-checked her face against her student ID to be sure the high marks were indeed hers. She liked it that way; it made her feel anonymous as she sifted through the chaff of men in Lusaka. Nobody cared about trivial details like names.

People – men especially – cared more about looks and feelings. If a girl looked as good as she made them feel, her name could be anything. Free drinks, fun nights, and Sarah could float in and out of their lives as she pleased.

Style It felt safe. Everything was pink but not delicate. This was a place of work; beauty was work. A film and stench of sweltering hair, grease, and gels clung to the air. The stylists were shapely but strong, with hands that worked firm and fast. Though she was a perfect hourglass, Sarah couldn't help but compare figures. The younger women reminded her of when she was fresher than her current twenty-seven. The older women showed her what her body would become as she inched into her thirties and even further into her forties. Black only cracked when neglected. If she managed her diet and exercise, she'd be fine. Fine enough for Kateka, at least, like a baby, he was content when there was a breast in his mouth. But the new man? He seemed like a bit of a fuck boy, the kind that would be loyal only in theory.

Ping!

Ping!

Speak of the devil, and a purple demon emoji appeared on the screen. They both texted.

"R u still doin your air? Pick up my calls, how come pick you." Kateka's texts stunk of illiteracy and desperation.

"Let's hang out. You know us fine people should stick together." The new He wafted.

Replying to Kateka's texts was a chore. He always needed a follow-up call and an ego massage in case she texted a big word beyond his limited vocabulary. She decided she would call when her hair was done. To the new He, she replied with three blushing emojis. He was fishing. No compliments for him yet. Men needed managing but would never admit it. Sarah learned that her main hairdresser's name was Precious. Precious barely spoke, but when she did, it was about food. She had enough money on her to have a set for lunch, but for now, grilled maize would do. The assisting hairdresser braiding in the back asked if the set came with veggies, and Precious said only rape. It was a lot – a complete set of chicken intestines wrapped around the feet and

head eaten with nshima. Sarah forgot her headphones, so she followed the mundane conversations back and forth. It was ordinary chatter until an old lady came in with a black bag. Instantly, Sarah knew she wasn't a customer. She'd seen these women before. They often sold gold jewelry, panties, and fake cosmetics where Fenty was spelled as Fainty. The woman was old enough; she had wrinkles around her eyes and a mouth set in a permanent scowl. She was bleached orange with startling black hands. She reached into her bag and produced several sachets of brown powder. She took more and more out before settling for one with a green powder. She withdrew it and said, "Naleta mankwala."

The hairdresser who'd sent her came from the other side of the room, swinging her hips so her butt jiggled inside her Gucci leggings. She carried the aura of someone whose current circumstance was beneath them. She reached for the sachet and inspected the powder.

"Iwe, you're sure isebenza?" She asked the woman old enough to be her mother.

"Isebenza!" The woman confirmed with a childlike nod.

The hairdresser with the jiggy butt dove into the black bag, inspecting the other powders, and while she shopped, the old woman caught a glimpse of Precious's maize cob. "Pule, nipempako milisi?"

"Nakana, njala yanipaya ine pano." Precious shook her head and shrugged.

The old woman did that to all the hairdressers, begging for small amounts of money and bits of food like children often did out of boredom more than hunger. Accepting the no, her eyes wandered around the salon, searching for something else to ask for. Hard at work, the hairdressers ignored her. She asked about Sarah's hair, enquiring about the price and saying it was fair even though her eyes said it wasn't. She spun a tale about liking such hair though it gave her a rash down her back. Sarah glanced up at the old woman's patchy head with hairs she could count on a hand. No wonder they called her *Iwe*. A woman her age would mind, but her behaviour diminished the respect due to her.

"I'm running late," the abandoned client whined across the room.

“Sorry mama, I’m coming.” Jiggly Butt responded in the sweetest English tone she’d rehearsed and used plenty. “Iwe, isebenza?” She asked to make sure.

Iwe nodded.

“Nipase yabili.”

The women looked on as *Iwe* put two packs of the powder into a small black plastic. Jiggly Butt paid with money from her bra, took her parcel, and rushed back to her abandoned client on the other side of the room.

There was a girl getting a wig installed for her graduation photo shoot next to Sarah. Since the pandemic, graduation ceremonies were reduced to ceremonial photo shoots, but everything in the beauty industry stayed sleek, shiny, and fabulous. Sarah couldn’t believe just how fine the girl looked. The hairdresser was proud, dusting off stray hairs before sending her off in a cloud of hairspray. It was only when the graduate was gone that Precious started to gossip.

“But Mimi akonda mankwala!” She started. Instinctively, the assistant hairdresser joined in.

The green powder was *Kalamatila* – a love potion that the old lady supplied specifically for Mimi Jiggly Butt. Most women bought the brown Mojic powder, even Precious used it, and it worked. Though she was always hungry, it made her hot and sweet. *Kalamatila* wasn’t just for sex; it was for mind control. Once a man had sex with a woman who took the potion, they were obsessed and heeded her every command and whim. How else was Mimi living in a two-bedroom with a geyser and going to Siavonga? Rumour had it her men were bound to her because their katundu went limp with anyone else. All her men were hers alone. Everyone used sweeteners like *microphone* and *fresh nyanganya* but this... Precious and the assistant agreed that *Kalamatila* was going too far. What if the men ran mad? The old woman was insane and couldn’t be trusted, she didn’t even have a man of her own. If *Kalamatila* was so good, the hag would use it to end her poverty.

Sarah listened in silence as the women made progress in both gossip and braids. Colour 30 was a good choice. It blended well with

her untarnished copper skin and brown eyes. She admired the women's braiding skill and romantic fortitude. There's no man she had ever wanted enough to use herbs to attract or keep. Sarah's fear wasn't the herbs, it was herself. Her mind changed with her ambitions, and she preferred to be in relationships she could exit fast and clean when she found someone better for her bed and her bank account. What if a man became obsessed, and she didn't want him anymore? What could she do with a broke man she didn't love?

Ping!

"Would you like to visit my place sometime?" Sarah read between the lines.

The new He wanted to spread her thighs and plant himself between them. She caught him stealing eyefuls of her with mist and yearning. Desire was empowering. Part of her was intrigued, part of her wondered what would happen if she slipped and fell for him by accident.

"That guy you were with when we met, are you in a serious relationship or what?" He double-texted.

The guy was just another one of the men that wanted her, but she wasn't going to tell Him that. There was no need to spark competition. Sarah settled into her chair to type up the right response. She barely got into her sentence when there was a commotion.

There was a woman screaming obscenities then the sound amplified with the *Style It* manager yelling above her to calm down. The woman came with backup, and the harder the manager tried, the louder the noise grew.

Precious froze with an incomplete braid in hand as a herd of women charged in her direction. She scampered. Sarah looked up from her phone just as a fist landed between her eyes. It all went dark.

"You bitch! Leave my husband alone! I. am. going. to show you." The woman uttered as she stomped her. With Sarah flat on the ground, the woman sat on her, exposing the stark C-section scar. The scar reminded Sarah of her own mother. The woman pulled at Sarah's brand-new braids, snatching them from the scalp. How did she get here? All her dealings were clean with no strings attached. Sarah

covered her face. If death was going to meet her, it would find her beautiful.

“Betty. You. Think. You. Can. Be. Doing. Your. Hair. On. My. Husbands. Money.” Spit flew out of the woman’s thick mouth as she rained violence on Sarah. Her heavy-set friends contributed with insults as one stood by recording on an old iPhone.

Betty. It was brief, but Sarah knew the mistake well enough to hear it.

“Betty? I am not Betty. I am not Betty. I am not Betty.” Sarah whimpered.

The woman recording stopped to check her Facebook.

“Iwe mufana, sindiwe Betty Banda?”

Tears froze down Sarah’s cheeks as she mustered the strength to shake her head, “No, I am Sa-Sa-Sarah, Sarah Lubinda. Check my ID! Check the receipt napapata!” She begged.

Precious came flying in with a slip of paper, “Ni Sarah! Ni Sarah!”

The woman rose from Sarah’s body as quickly as she had descended. She called herself to order, pulled down her shirt, and adjusted her wig before rushing out with her hooligans.

“Imwe bafana, you are never innocent!! Someone’s husband is paying for that hair!” One yelled as they jumped into a Noah bus and sped off.

