

Pit Bull Midwives

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Darkness had fallen over Harrington Street and the violence of the previous night's storm had been replaced by the hush of a thick sea mist. Its ghostly fingers caressed lampposts and loitered in doorways, softening the sharp outlines of the doors in their frames and wrapping the street in a damp silence. The curtains in most of the modest apartments along the street were drawn and warm light shined around the edges of the windows.

From the outside, there was no hint that in one of them a miracle was struggling to happen.

The quiet was broken by two women dressed in peaked caps, long black coats and low-heeled boots. They strode purposefully over the cobblestones and each carried a sturdy leather bag.

The women paused halfway down the street, turned in unison and walked down four cracked steps to the front door of a basement apartment. One of the women reached out with a gloved fist and knocked twice. The sharp sound was quickly blunted and then swallowed by the thickening mist. They waited in silence for a few moments.

A shuffling noise, accompanied by the creaking of floorboards, came from inside, followed by the sound of a key being turned. The door opened halfway to reveal a man in his late thirties wearing a worried look on his face.

“Good evening,” said the woman who had knocked. She gave the man a reassuring smile.

“You must be Mr Miller.”

The man looked down at his well-worn but clean and neatly pressed clothes, as if needing to check his own identity first, before replying. "Yes," he said, appearing slightly taken aback by the two figures standing outside the door. "Are you the midwives?"

"Indeed we are," replied the foremost woman. She was fifty years old, but her age showed more in her eyes than in the few lines on her smooth dark skin. "I'm Sindiwe Ngoyi and this is Emily Whyte." She gestured to the much younger woman standing behind her, who smiled and nodded at the man. She wore no makeup and her auburn hair was tied up in a practical bun, but there was no hiding that she was beautiful.

Mr Miller looked relieved. "Thank you for coming." He opened the door fully. "Please come in."

The women stepped inside, put their bags down and took off their gloves while surveying the room. It was sparsely furnished: a faded green couch hunkered in one corner, facing a wooden table and two unmatched chairs. A small bookcase supported a glazed pot that housed an African violet. But there was more to the space than it felt cared for. It felt like a home.

Mr Miller cleared his throat. "You must have come from close by. I phoned Sister Clara at Saint Agatha's not ten minutes ago."

Emily spoke for the first time. "We have cell phones. Actually, we share one." Her eyes darted to Sindiwe, worried that she might have said more than was necessary, but the older woman's face gave nothing away.

Mr Miller rubbed his hands together, even though the room was not cold, and looked at the two women with an anxious expression. "I'm grateful we don't have that terrible storm of last night to contend with as well." He swallowed before speaking again. "Forgive me for talking about the weather at a time like this. It's just that I have no idea what to do. This is our first."

-Please leave us to it, said Sindiwe. -We have an essential function to fulfil tonight and we are well trained to do so.

Mr Miller nodded in eager agreement. -Yes. Yes of course. He started towards one of the rooms at the back of the flat.

-She is in.

He stopped as Sindiwe put her hand on his shoulder. It was a small hand and its touch was gentle, but there was a veiled strength in it, and for a moment Mr Miller had the peculiar thought that if she closed her hand, it would snap his shoulder bone.

-We know. Best let us get on with it now.

-I.

-Why don't you make some coffee? If we should need you, rest assured we shall call.

Mr Miller had the thankful look of a man who, finding himself in a situation far removed from any previous experience, had just been given an opportunity to withdraw graciously without coming across as useless.

-Right, yes. I'll make some coffee. Thank you.

The women picked up their bags and moved to the bedroom, where the time between his wife's contractions was fast decreasing.

Mr Miller switched on the coffee machine in the tiny kitchen. He took some cups from the cupboard above the sink and placed them on a tray, along with milk and sugar. When his wife cried out, he paused and looked in the direction of the bedroom. Hot water began to drip through the coffee. When it had brewed, he took the tray into the living room, where he placed it on the table and lowered himself into one of the chairs.

He waited a few minutes before pouring himself a cup and adding a teaspoon of sugar. While staring at a blank space on the wall, he started stirring his coffee, oblivious to the fragrant steam rising from the cup. He kept on stirring until it was cold.

Hours passed. Whenever his wife cried out, the midwives would respond. Mr Miller could not make out what they were saying, but their voices followed the same cadence the entire time: first the firm and encouraging voice of Sindiwe, followed by Emily chiming in with a soothing tone. At last, a new sound emerged ó that of a baby crying. Mr Miller let out a sigh of relief and dropped the teaspoon he had been clutching. It clinked against the side of the untouched teacup on the table.

Emily came into the living room, her face glowing with sweat and beaming. Come and see your daughter,ø she said.

Young Amelia Miller came into the world pink, bawling and healthy. What neither her father nor mother ó nor even Sister Clara at Saint Agathaø, for that matter ó would ever know was that without the presence of the midwives and their considerable skill, the infant, and probably her mother as well, would not have survived the labour.

Before they left, Sindiwe placed a small medallion on a silver chain in Mrs Millerø palm. Engraved on it was a woman holding a rose in one hand and a sword in the other. It was burnished and beautiful, and it looked very old.

Have her wear this. Always,ø instructed Sindiwe. Mrs Miller took the medallion and nodded her thanks, even though exhaustion was already pulling her eyelids closed.

The two women took their leave of the Miller family and gently refused Mr Millerø offer of a fresh pot of coffee.

Outside, the mist had lifted to reveal a night sky peppered with flimsy clouds and faintly lit by a young moon. The midwives stood close to each other and looked in the direction from which they had arrived. The life-saving assistance they had just given to the Millers connected Sindiwe and Emily through time to generations of midwives who had belonged to the Order before them.

The same was true of the very different task they planned to perform next.

Emily closed her eyes, took a deep breath of the crisp night air and tilted her head back as she exhaled. She pulled her coat tighter around her. "Chilly out tonight."

"It's not the weather that's bothering you," said Sindiwe, with a hint of sympathy. "Just this one assignment more and we're done for the night." The older woman moved a little closer. "It took no small amount of effort to locate him and it needs to be done now. You know that."

Emily nodded and her lips set in a grim smile. "I know. Punishment should be swift and severe," she sighed, as if repeating the words from a lesson.

"That's right," said Sindiwe. "There is a reason we're called the *pit bull midwives* behind our backs." A smile hinted at the corners of her mouth. "I have yet to come across someone who would dare to call us that to our faces."

"It just feels so strange to think of what we are going to do now, after all that," she motioned back to the small flat, "after so much joy."

Sindiwe picked up her bag. "Then don't think about it too much."

They set off for their next destination.

The streets were quiet, with little traffic. The busiest part of their journey came when they passed through a large square lit up by lanterns hung from trees and filled with restaurants and small stores. The two women in their unusual clothes attracted one or two strange looks, but the

people milling about got out of the strange pair's way, only muttering to each other after Sindiwe and Emily had passed. As they walked on, the streets gradually became grimmer and deserted.

Half an hour later they arrived at a tall building of dirty brown brick with broken windows boarded up in some places and the wind blowing through shattered glass in others. The elevator was out of order and they took the stairs up to the fourth floor. If any of the residents noticed the two women, none were concerned or brave enough to question their presence.

When they reached the flat they were looking for, Emily put down her bag, undid its clasps, and took out a knuckleduster. She slipped it over the fine leather of her glove, took one step back from the door and squared her shoulders.

Sindiwe locked eyes with her. "Are you ready?"

Emily's jaw was set and her eyes narrowed with determination. She nodded.

"Very well, then," said Sindiwe, and she knocked on a door for the second time that night.

When no reply came, she knocked again, this time with greater urgency.

An irritated voice called from inside. "Who's there?"

Sindiwe called out, "James Carney, open the door. We need to speak to you."

A few moments passed before the reply came. "Who is this? How do you know my name?"

"We're the police, but we need to talk to you and we're not leaving until we do."

Carney's voice became agitated. "Be off, or I'll call the police."

Sindiwe smiled. It was the grin of a fox whose prey has reached the end of its burrow with no place left to go. Emily looked at her and gave a small shudder.

"You don't have a phone. Not after you lost yours yesterday," said Sindiwe, making sure to pronounce each word clearly.

There was nearly a minute of silence from inside the flat. Then came the sound of a deadbolt being slipped before the door was yanked open.

Carney had black hair that hung oily and limp over sunken pale cheeks. He was wearing a white vest and dark jeans above bare feet. He took a long look at the two women and his forehead creased into a frown. "Who the hell are you?"

With a synchronised movement that was practised and effortless, Sindiwe moved aside as Emily took a step forward and swung. Her fist, adorned with knuckleduster, smashed into the side of the man's jaw with a satisfying crack. He stumbled backwards into the flat. The two women followed him and pulled the door closed behind them.

Inside the apartment, Carney would have fallen down if he had not grabbed on to a table in the centre of the room. He cradled his jaw with one hand and glared at the two women. His bloodshot eyes were stretched wide with shock and confusion.

"What the hell?" He looked from the one woman to the other. An angry red bruise was beginning to bloom along the side of his jaw. "What do you want?"

"We are here because you stole," said Sindiwe.

"I stole nothing." Carney shook his head and the limp hair slapped the side of his face. "You're making a big mistake."

Sindiwe pulled off her gloves and undid the clasps of her bag with a quick, dexterous flick of her thumbs. From the top of the bag she withdrew a syringe filled with a brown liquid. She pulled the cap off the needle.

"In your narrow definition of stealing, I suppose that's true," she said. "But in ours, you are a thief. You stole a life." She flicked the side of the syringe with her index finger and gently pressed the plunger. A thin stream of the brown liquid squirted from the tip of the needle. "You

stole the life of a child, a girl who will never see her teens, thanks to you. Her eyes fixed on Carney. "That girl was delivered by a member of our Order."

Carney was fast regaining his composure and took a step closer to Sindiwe. "You'll pay for this, you bitch."

He had not noticed that Emily had slid behind him and, as he steadied himself to lunge at Sindiwe, she grabbed his wrists, twisting his arms up behind his back. Carney tried to struggle free but could do little against the young woman's determined grip.

Sindiwe held the syringe in one hand and used her free hand to pull an old bentwood chair to the middle of the room. She nodded at Emily, who wrenched the man down onto the chair. Sindiwe jammed the needle into the side of Carney's neck and pushed down the plunger. He screamed. Sindiwe kept the syringe in place for a few moments, making sure all its contents had been emptied into Carney's bloodstream. When she was satisfied that the barrel was empty, she pulled out the needle. Carney started sobbing.

"Please," he said, "you have the wrong guy."

"We are not here to reason with you, Carney," said Sindiwe. "The time for that has passed."

The contents of the syringe were working fast; the man's face became slack, his jaw dropped and his lips parted, showing crooked teeth. He looked up at Sindiwe. When he spoke, the words came out slurred. "What was in there?"

"A mixture of essences," Sindiwe said. "Extracts from a particular family of plants and from the glands of a blowfish. It is a useful concoction known to the Order for generations. The effects will wear off in less than an hour." Sindiwe replaced the cap over the needle. "The chemicals target the muscles, and the nerves to a much lesser degree. Your senses won't be all that much

affected. You will still be able to see and feel and all the rest, but most importantly, you won't be able to move. She patted Carney on his shoulder. "Don't worry. It's organic."

"I'm sorry," Carney mumbled.

"We're not interested in an apology."

The man's head dropped forward onto his chest and Emily let go of his wrists. Sindiwe folded her arms and stood guard in front of the slumped figure. She was confident the drug would last for as long as they needed it to, but she wanted to keep an eye on him, just in case.

Emily went into the kitchen and placed her bag on top of the counter next to a pile of empty takeaway containers. She reached into the bag and pulled out a small branding iron with a wooden handle. It had taken her a full day to make, twisting and soldering the metal until she was satisfied.

She switched on one of the stove's gas plates and placed the brand over the flames, watching as they licked at the neat lettering. A minute later, the letters glowed bright orange. The heat distorted the air around a mirror image of the word THIEF.

When she emerged from the kitchen, her hand gripping the handle of the branding iron was shaking. Sindiwe looked at her.

"Do you want me to do it?" she asked.

Emily shook her head. "No, I'll do it."

She pressed her lips together and stepped towards the man. His breathing had slowed and he looked like someone who had passed out on his chair in a bar. She grabbed a handful of oily hair and yanked his head up from his chest. His mouth hung open and limp, but his eyes widened a fraction as she raised the branding iron until it was level with his forehead.

There was a sharp hiss as metal cooled against flesh, followed by the smell of crispy bacon. Inside his head, heard only by him, Carney screamed.

The women packed up their things and made their way to the front door. Before they left, Sindiwe stole a final glance at the man on the chair. He looked almost frozen, as if he had been caught at an uncomfortable moment in a photograph; his eyes were wide and his face was as white as salt, except for the livid red lettering above his eyebrows. She pulled the door closed behind.

Outside, the sun had just broken above the horizon and was warming the steep grey cliffs of Table Mountain above them.

Author's note: When the sea mist blankets Cape Town's city bowl it's not difficult to imagine the existence of Miss Ngoyi and Miss Whyte. These two characters always wanted to be part of something longer, and their opportunity arrived when this story became a chapter in the novel *Tokoloshe Song*, allowing the midwives to go on more adventures and to gain further notoriety.

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