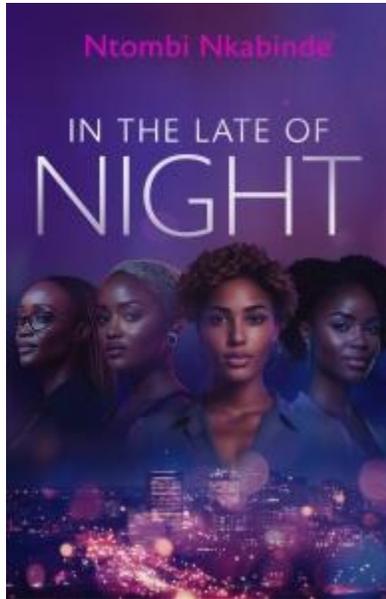


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Extract: In the Late of Night by Ntombi Nkabinde



Nomzamo wants a baby, but her husband keeps stalling. Kioni thinks Michael's ready to commit - until doubts creep in. Jazmine, a single mom, has sworn off love, but a handsome new doctor tests her resolve. And Asanda, driven and successful, is hunting for a man to match her high standards. As their lives intertwine in surprising ways, these four women learn that love is rarely simple - but always worth it. Warm, witty, and full of heart, this deeply relatable South African novel celebrates friendship, romance, and the messy, beautiful process of figuring life (and love) out.

One

Nomzamo

I wake up in the afternoon to a total mess. Chris's clothes, socks and shoes are all over the floor like he has a maid or something. The only thing that's important to him is that precious company I helped him build ... oh, and his appearance, of course. Just because I'm a housewife doesn't mean I'm a robot. I get tired too.

I drag myself out of bed and walk to the kitchen with an aching body and a headache to match. These days, I hardly know if I'm coming or going.

It feels as if my life is happening to me and all I do is watch from the sidelines. My memory seems to be deteriorating too. I put on the kettle and rummage in the fridge, when it hits me: damn, I forgot to RSVP for the art gallery opening tonight at Nelson Mandela Square. Knowing

Chris, he'll have my head on a plate if we're denied entry. It's all he's talked about since we got the invite. Luckily, my best friend, Kioni, knows the event organiser. I'll have to call in a favour before Chris gets home.

I grab a slab of Lindt out of the cupboard. On the fridge is a photograph of Chris and me, smiling on our wedding day.

Nomzamo and Christopher Khoza. Shame, we were so happy. We met at university many moons ago when I was still starry eyed and naive. His dark, smouldering good looks turned heads all around campus and every girl wanted him – including me. He's older now but he still looks good. The way he dresses, you'd swear he's going to a *GQ* shoot every morning when he leaves for work.

My husband looks after himself. He goes to the gym most days of the week and only eats red meat once or twice a month. He doesn't smoke or touch a drop of alcohol or eat junk food, and as his wife, I'm supposed to adhere to the same standards. He'd have a heart attack if he saw me eating chocolate.

My phone rings and I grab it.

'Bestie!' yells Kioni, almost bursting my eardrums.

'I was just thinking about you, funnily enough,' I grin.

'Lesley tells me your name is not on the guest list tonight. Don't tell me you're not coming?' Kioni says.

'Friend, I must tell you, I completely forgot about it,' I say, massaging my forehead. 'It must've slipped my mind.'

'Brave of you to think you stand a chance getting in this late! What's your plan?'

'Well ... that's where you come in,' I smile, even though she can't see me.

'Excuse you?'

'Pleeeeeease, Kiki?' I ask. 'You know Chris will have a heart attack if we can't get in. He's been looking forward to this stupid event all week.'

Kioni sucks on her teeth. 'Rafiki, I really don't know where your head is these days. You forget about our dates, and when you do turn up, you seem to be in your own world. Wat a gwaan?'

I don't say anything, so she continues.

'You haven't started doing weed again, have you?'

'Weed!' I yelp. 'How could you even ask me that?'

'Well, you smoked so much of it at varsity,' she says, laughing while I frown. 'I wouldn't be surprised if you started indulging again.'

'That was a long time ago. People change.'

'There must be something bothering you, though. You haven't been yourself in weeks. I hope that good-for-nothing husband of yours isn't cheating again, is he?'

My heart skips a beat.

‘No,’ I protest, and after a pause say, ‘Why do you have to go there? Remind me to never tell you my business again.’

‘I remember how you were the last time you found out about his ...’ – she clears her throat – ‘extra-curricular activities.’

‘Shut up, Kioni! You’re evil,’ I say through gritted teeth. ‘Chris and I are fine, and if you do the right thing, we’ll see you tonight.’

She snickers on her end, and I roll my eyes and swivel around to rest my elbow on the dining-room table, where a glass of water has been sitting since this morning.

‘Anyway, have you talked to the other girls?’ I ask, yearning for another piece of chocolate. ‘We all have to meet soon. It’s been a while.’

‘I know, right? But you know there’s one face I’m not keen to see.’

I sigh deeply. ‘You and Asanda need to figure things out, and soon.’

‘Ms *Twang* will have to apologise to me first.’

‘You both need to apologise to each other for your stupid high-school behaviour. How old are you again?’

‘Young at heart,’ she says before chuckling quietly. ‘Anyhoo,’ she continues, ‘I know Jazmine is tired and overworked, wherever she is.’

‘Friend, what’s new? I hope those kids of hers are behaving themselves.’

‘I can bet you a million rand – which I don’t have – they aren’t.’

We cackle away before she goes silent and seems to be talking to someone else on her end.

‘I have to run,’ she tells me. ‘My boss wants to speak to me. I’ll see you tonight. Come dressed to kill.’

I catch sight of my phone’s screensaver: a picture of me and Chris at the beach on Réunion Island last year. Kioni’s right – I haven’t been okay since I started suspecting that Chris was cheating again.

He arrived home one night three weeks ago and made a beeline for the shower without even a hello. I picked up his shirt from the bedroom floor where he’d chucked it for his maid slash wife to deal with. I kept my eyes on his silhouette as he stood in the shower and sniffed his shirt all over. Yes, there was an undeniable and distinctive scent on it. I knew I had smelt it before, and it definitely wasn’t his. I grabbed my cellphone from the side table and went to call Kioni from the kitchen. She never steps out of her apartment wearing the same fragrance she wore the day before. She thinks of herself as a fragrance connoisseur and can tell you the name of the perfume you’re wearing from a single whiff.

It was a fragrance she once wore, and I loved it the second I smelt it on her. She told me Michael bought it for her, which annoyed me: it’s an open secret that I don’t like that guy. Anyway, she told me the name of the fragrance over the phone, and we said our goodnights. I watched Chris closely after that and every time he came home late, that fragrance lingered behind him.

‘Who is she?’ I confronted him one night when he got home late and missed dinner.

As educated as he is, he had the audacity to play stupid with me.

‘Huh?’ he said. ‘What are you on about now?’

‘Don’t make me out as some paranoid wife, Chris. You know what I’m talking about,’ I shouted sitting on our bed.

‘No, I don’t,’ he said, putting on his sleep shorts. ‘Why don’t you spell it out to me?’ He sighed and got into bed.

‘This!’ I shouted, throwing his shirt at him.

A few seconds elapsed.

‘My shirt?’ he asked, furrowing his eyebrows. ‘All this crap is about my shirt?’

I told him the name of the fragrance on the shirt and watched his body language closely.

He didn’t flinch. ‘Am I supposed to know what that means?’

‘It’s a female fragrance, Chris.’

‘Yah, so?’ he said nonchalantly.

‘Yah, so?’ I said in disbelief. ‘Yah, so what’s it doing on your shirt?’

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

‘Who is she?’ I asked again, my hands in fists. ‘And what was she doing that close to you?’

‘Look, Nomzamo,’ he said, fluffing his pillow before lying down. ‘I work with women all day. I’m an affectionate man. I hug them once in a while. It’s not a crime.’

I started fuming. ‘Well, you must have hugged one female in particular very close today because I can smell her all over that shirt.’

‘Here we go again with that bullshit. I’m tired of your insecurities, Zamo. When are you going to start trusting me?’

‘When you become trustworthy,’ I answered, folding my hands on my lap.

‘I don’t have time for this. I’m going to bed,’ he said and rolled over onto one side before switching his lamp off. ‘Some of us work for a living,’ he muttered under his breath.

I sat there, my head resting against the headboard, with more questions than I had started with. He fell asleep and started snoring almost immediately. I wanted to grab a pillow and make him see the bright light right then and there. But my sanity won.

I’m pulled back to the present by the sound of the garage door opening.

Dammit, he’s early!

My eyes travel down to my hands: I’m still holding the chocolate wrapper. I fly past the living room and run to the kitchen to stuff the Lindt wrapper way down in the rubbish bin. I race for the bedroom but stop in the living room to wipe a water mark from the table. Chris will have a fit if he sees it. I place a coaster over the mark, then run to the bedroom.

His footsteps approach.

‘Hey,’ he greets unenthusiastically, finding me on my way to the shower.

‘Hi, Chris,’ I say, acting surprised. ‘I didn’t hear you come in.’

He mumbles something I don’t quite catch.

‘How was your day?’ I ask.

‘Same,’ he answers simply, taking his tie off before looking in the mirror. ‘Nothing special.’

‘Why don’t you get in the shower with me? It’ll save us plenty of time and water.’

He looks me up and down. ‘I don’t think so. I have to send a few emails before we go. I’ll come in when you’re done.’

“‘You’re getting lazy, Zamo. Get your act together and do what a housewife does.’”

I remember that he hasn’t so much as touched me in months. The last shag he gave me was pitiful, to say the least. It felt like he was doing me a favour. I’m sure the only thing on his mind was his new girlfriend. Honestly, I’m fine with never sleeping with him again. I hate him these days. I hate him for so many reasons.

I should have married Sandile instead. He and I met when I’d just started working and we hit it off. I wasn’t cheating on Chris or anything (that’s more his style); we were on a break.

Sandile was well mannered and serious about us, and I was too, until the company he worked for got liquidated and he found himself without a job. I panicked. The last thing I needed was to be with a man with no income. The thought gave me anxiety and sleepless nights. There’s no black woman I know who wants a man with no job.

I’d seen what having little money had done to my mother when I was a child, and I knew that wasn’t the life for me. Shame, Sandile tried tirelessly to find another job, without success. During that time, Chris called to ask if we could meet and talk, and I agreed. Sandile was devastated when I broke up with him. I lied and said I wasn’t ready for a serious relationship, but I think he knew the real reason. Probably serves me right that I ended up with a cheater.

Christopher Khoza, rich and everything else, is a selfish man. All he cares about is himself and his wants. I’ve been supportive since the day we met and was there for him when he was busy with his degrees. I helped him study, even read and wrote summaries of some chapters in his books. Hell, I might as well have stood next to him during his graduation ceremonies and accepted the stupid degrees myself.

He’s CEO of Black Lion, the advertising agency we built together with his friend, Lesego. His office sits on the top floor of the building with the view of majestic Sandton. I used to be his personal assistant, until we both started working round the clock and coming home late. That’s when he suggested I stay home, and I was thrilled. But I insisted on being involved in the recruitment process for my replacement. I hand-picked Elizabeth, an accomplished but overweight middle-aged woman with glasses so thick they put Ugly Betty’s to shame. Her idea of dressing well involves wearing kitten heels and dresses that go all the way to her ankles. Perfect for a man with a wandering eye.

The company takes up most, if not all, of Chris's time. I can't even count how many times he's cancelled vacations at the last minute or made us leave before our holiday was over. Sometimes I hate Black Lion for keeping Chris away from me, even though I own ten per cent of the shares, assuring me of a steady income of my own.

You might think I'm just a housewife, but besides being a shareholder at Black Lion, I earn money from the smart investments I continue to make, and Chris gives me a sizeable monthly allowance which I tuck away for rainy days. My husband might be a lot of things, but stingy isn't one of them.

We live in a two-storey contemporary Dainfern home with six bedrooms and a huge garden. I go shopping whenever I want and treat myself and sometimes my friends to spa days when the going gets a bit tough. I also send money home to my mother and baby sister. I live a comfortable life, I must say.

Even though it was Chris's idea for me not to work, I thanked the Lord the day he suggested it. Honestly, I have no desire to climb the corporate ladder like some women do. I watched my mother slave away working three jobs when I was younger and swore that would never be me. She worked as a secretary at a local radio station and waited tables in the evenings in a small Indian restaurant in town. On weekends, she did hair in the neighbourhood. That woman worked her fingers to the bone but had nothing to show for it when she retired.

My father was in the picture but not completely present, if you know what I mean. He didn't pay much attention to his family. He didn't work and I still don't know why. He was just useless and because of him, I knew the kind of man I didn't want to be with. He passed away while I was in varsity, and I didn't feel anything. In fact, I was relieved. Fewer mouths for my mother to feed.

Even though I went to university and got a business degree, there's only one thing I've longed for since I was a little girl. When I was about fourteen years old, my mother had my baby sister, Samukelisiwe. I fell in love with her the moment I set eyes on her. She was the most perfect little thing I'd ever seen: her pale skin and cute, wrinkled fingers and toes captured my heart. Since then, I knew I wanted to be a mother.

Chris knows I've always wanted a child, but every time I bring the subject up, he tells me he's too busy. It's been ten years since we married and I'm thirty-five years old now and still not pregnant. All I want is a baby. But, of course, it's never a good time. I'm sick and tired of this emptiness I feel inside me – this loneliness that seems to be growing and getting louder every time I see a baby on tv or pass one in a stroller or a mother's arms. He's got everything he wants; what about me? What about what I want?

'Why haven't you done something with your hair?' Chris barks when I step out of the shower wrapped in a towel.

'I thought I'd undo my cornrows and show my natural hair tonight. I can put it up for a more professional look if you want. I'm just tired of wearing wigs when I go out.'

'You can't be serious,' he scoffs, setting his laptop aside. 'That's not elegant at all. You look much better with straight hair.'

For a second, I refuse to believe what just came out of his mouth.

'I didn't have time to go to the salon, Chris. Besides, my natural hair looks fine.'

‘Unbelievable!’ he spits, getting up from the bed. ‘What do you do with your time, Nomzamo? It’s not like you do anything in this house.’

I stand mute, staring at him.

‘The washing is not done,’ he continues, pointing at the laundry basket in the corner. ‘The sheets haven’t been changed in over a week. You know I want my sheets changed every week. What do you do all day while I work my ass off for us?’

I continue staring at him in silence.

‘You’re getting lazy, Zamo. Get your act together and do what a housewife does.’

‘I need a helper, Chris. This house is too big for me to clean all by myself.’

‘We’ve had this conversation before and I’m not going to repeat myself,’ he roars, glaring at me.

Of course, he doesn’t like the idea of getting a helper because he doesn’t want strangers walking around the house, touching his stuff. He must be out of his mind if he thinks I’m his maid. I can do a little cleaning here and there, but Chris expects miracles. I wake up every morning to make him breakfast and I cook him a wholesome meal every evening; isn’t that something at least?

‘So, what are you going to do with your hair now?’ He checks his watch.

‘Like I said, there’s nothing wrong with my afro. I’ll tie it up in a neat bun. It’ll look good.’

‘Nomzamo, the Minister of Arts and Culture and the Mayor of Johannesburg will be at this event tonight. You have to look your best.’

‘Are you saying the hair that grows on my head isn’t good enough?’

‘I never ask you for anything. All I’m asking for right now is for you to do this little thing for me. That’s literally it. Surely you can manage that for the man who works hard every day to give you all the finer things in life?’ He clicks his tongue, picks up his laptop and walks out of the bedroom.

I do my make-up in the mirror, making sure to add extra concealer to the dark circles under my eyes. To make Chris happy, I wear one of the brown bob wigs that accentuates my round face. Red lipstick and the diamond earrings he got me last Christmas complete the look.

We drive to the art gallery in silence.

These events bore the hell out of me. If I have to smile and exchange stupid pleasantries with all these stuck-up people who think the world revolves around them, I might just go ahead and puke. Chris is an art collector and never misses an opportunity to add to his growing collection of paintings and statues at home and at his office. I just know he’ll go out of his way to purchase the biggest, if not the most expensive, piece of art on exhibit tonight. He’s such a show-off.

Catching up with Kioni is the only thing I’m looking forward to, and I start looking around for her as soon as Chris leaves me to go and talk to his people. I grab a glass of fruit juice from a passing waiter and gulp it down before smiling at Lesley, who’s too busy fussing about tonight’s proceedings meeting his standards.

“His phone rings as we change into our sleepwear; he doesn’t pick up. The phone rings again as we slip into bed and again he doesn’t pick up.”

Lesley is Kioni’s cousin, a sought-after events planner in town. He gets us into all sorts of events we wouldn’t be able to even smell invites to. I escape to the bathroom once I’m officially tired of wandering around by myself.

Relief washes over me when I come out of the bathroom and spot Kioni chatting to Lesley, waving her hands all over the place and laughing as she speaks.

‘Bestie!’ she screams from across the hall, walking as fast as she speaks. ‘I see you brought out the big guns tonight, Rafiki. This outfit is giving,’ she exclaims, snapping her fingers.

I’m wearing a Khosi Nkosi ensemble tonight, a pants and bustier set with a long coat, and black patent high heels with a large bow at the heel.

‘Firstly, Khosi doesn’t make outfits,’ I respond cheekily, pressing my index finger against the thumb. ‘She creates moving art.’ I take up a dramatic pose.

We laugh and hug.

Kioni looks good, happy even. I’ve known her for a very long time and I’ve never seen her with long hair – she always cuts it short and sometimes dyes it all sorts of bold colours. She’s grey-haired nowadays and it suits her. I could never pull something like that off. You need a certain personality for such a statement hairstyle, and hers is fitting. She’s so tall and fit, I don’t know whether to liken her to a model or marathon runner.

I call her ‘the jumpsuit queen’ because that’s her go-to style. No surprises tonight: she glitters like downtown Johannesburg in a sparkly number that seems to add inches to her height.

‘Geez, girl!’ she exclaims, twirling me around. ‘I thought I was the skinny one in the group. Your Pilates classes are doing things.’

‘Friend, I wish. It’s that stress diet,’ I say, exhaling the tension of the whole day.

‘No, don’t even say it. It’s that low-life husband of yours, isn’t it?’

It’s no secret that Kioni doesn’t like Chris. But the feeling is mutual. Chris first cheated on me back in varsity and again after two years of marriage. My mistake was telling my friend about his infidelities. I told Chris I had told Kioni about it, and he blew a gasket. Since then, there’s been no love lost between the two.

I look around for Chris and catch him in a corner with his hands in his pockets, talking to some middle-aged man with thinning grey hair and a suit that looks a few sizes too big for him. The gallery sits on the \neq third floor of this building and the cool air flows past us as we walk out to the balcony. It’s got dark out since I arrived, and the stars have started multiplying in the sky.

I walk behind Kioni, eyeing the birthmark on the back of her neck that looks like a map of Africa. If you didn’t know better, you’d think it was a tattoo. A waitress offers us champagne before moving over to three other ladies standing near us, also dressed to the max.

‘I don’t even know how to tell you this,’ I confess, sipping at my fizzing drink. At least I can drink in peace out here, where detective Chris won’t see me.

‘Geez, Zam,’ Kioni exclaims, throwing her arms open. ‘Please don’t tell me the bastard is doing it again.’

‘I mean ...’ I start to say, dropping my head to the side before looking down.

She raises her eyebrows, mouth hanging open. ‘Not again!’

‘I didn’t say he was,’ I try to explain. ‘There’s just something off about him these days.’

‘It’s that female intuition,’ she says, pressing her lips together. ‘And it’s never wrong. If you suspect he’s cheating, then he probably is.’

‘I don’t know for sure that he is,’ I say before crossing the balcony to stand on the other side.

‘He is!’ she exclaims. ‘I know he is.’

A brief silence descends as we quietly sip our champagne.

‘Anyway,’ I say finally, elbowing her softly. ‘Let’s talk about you. What have you been up to lately? Where’s that nice guy you went out with last month?’

Her brow creases. ‘You mean Wand?’

I nod. ‘He seemed like a great guy.’

‘I told him not to call me any more. It wouldn’t have worked out.’ She adjusts her jumpsuit with one hand, her glass in the other. ‘He only seems like a nice guy, but he’s not nice at all. He was such a jerk.’

The venue seems to be filling up but neither of us has the desire to go inside and look at the art.

‘But guess who I went out with last weekend?’ she says, moving closer to me. ‘Mike!’

The other ladies on the balcony look over at us but Kioni doesn’t notice. She rarely cares what people think of her.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ I hiss, fixing my gaze on her.

‘Listen! We met and talked. Extensively. He thought a lot about us while we were broken up.’

I look up at the crescent moon and let out an exasperated sigh. ‘What lie did he feed you this time? That he’ll marry you before 2025 is over?’

‘As a matter of fact, that’s what he said,’ she laughs out loud. ‘And I believe him.’

‘That guy is taking you for a ride, Kioni. He has no intention of committing. Isn’t that what you said to me last time, after dumping him for the hundredth time?’

Just like there’s no love lost between my best friend and my husband, the same goes for me and her on-and-off boyfriend, Michael.

‘He’s grown up since the last time we were together. He’s ready to be a man.’

‘And I suppose he told you that too, right?’

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. ‘He has his eye on this new job he applied for. He’s also saving up for a bigger house and wants to give me the big wedding of my dreams. But it’ll take some time. I just need to be patient and supportive.’

I chuckle quietly, even though I find the situation more pitiful than entertaining.

‘I don’t get it, Kiki,’ I say when I’m done laughing. ‘You’re smart, beautiful and successful; you could get any man you want. Why do you keep going back to Michael and wasting your time with him?’

‘He’s going to marry me, Zam. This time it *will* happen.’

I shrug. ‘It’s been eight years, you dumb ass. Almost as long as I’ve been married. He’s been promising to marry you for eight freakin’ years.’

She doesn’t say anything, so I continue. ‘If he wanted to, he would’ve done so already.’

‘I love him, okay?’ she snaps. ‘There! That’s it!’

I shake my head and say, ‘It’ll end in tears, Kioni, mark my words. He’s no good for you.’

‘People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones, Zam,’ she mutters softly, staring out into the night.

‘Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?’

She turns around to look me in the eye, her hand on her hip. ‘You know exactly what it means.’

My lips quiver as I take a series of quick breaths. ‘I don’t appreciate you talking about—’

A familiar presence at my back startles me.

‘Kioni!’ Chris says, eyeing my friend, his voice blunt as a plastic knife.

Kioni purses her lips and looks him up and down. ‘Christopher!’

‘I want to introduce you to some important people,’ Chris says looking at me. ‘Can we step inside for a minute?’

I look up at him with a stiff smile as he hooks his arm through mine. He doesn’t wait for my answer.

True to his style, Chris and I arrive home with two paintings, one by a favourite artist of his and the other by some new kid on the block. He tells me he bought them for his office, but I couldn’t care less. His phone rings as we change into our sleepwear; he doesn’t pick up. The phone rings again as we slip into bed and again he doesn’t pick up.

‘Who is it?’ I ask, both of us under the covers now.

‘Hmm?’ he asks, narrowing his eyes.

I point at the phone with my eyes. ‘Who is it?’

‘Oh, it’s, uhm, Lesego.’ He swallows. ‘It’s about work. I’ll speak to him tomorrow.’

‘Are you sure?’

He looks at me intensely. ‘Yes, Nomzamo, I’m sure.’

I swallow. ‘You never ignore Lesego’s calls, no matter the time of night. I don’t understand why you’re not answering tonight.’

‘Dammit, Nomzamo!’ he growls, sitting up. ‘I hate being questioned like this. You complain when I take work calls at home, and now you’re complaining when I don’t. Can you figure out what it is you want from me?’

‘Is there someone else, Chris?’ I ask him, my heart thudding against my chest.

‘Not this bullshit again,’ he hisses.

‘Answer me!’ I shout, tears brimming in my eyes. ‘Are you having another affair?’

A short silence descends.

He lets out a loud sigh before saying, ‘No, I’m not. You think we can go to sleep now?’

The phone vibrates against his side table and the noise fills the deafening silence. Once again, he doesn’t answer.

‘Goodnight,’ he says, giving me a cold kiss on the cheek before turning off his bedside lamp.

Then he rolls over on his side and moves over to the edge of our king-size bed. I sit there for a while, just staring at him, tears blurring my vision. I catch sight of my shadow stretching across the wall, a lonesome companion in this dying marriage.

And, in the late of night, as I listen to him snore softly beside me, my lips quiver and I cry.