

CONSENT

THE LOAN SHARK DUET (BOOK 2)

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Valentina

A baby.
I'm going to have Gabriel Louw's baby.

Gabriel Louw.

The most dangerous man in Johannesburg.

Oh, God.

I clutch a hand over my mouth to silence a sob and place the other over my stomach where our child is growing.

While the taxi takes me farther and farther away from my captor on my impulsive escape route, my mind reels with a thousand thoughts. How did this happen? Did I forget to take my pill? I'm sure I took it every day at the same time. I even have an alarm programmed on my phone. Did I slip up? How? When? I haven't taken any medicine that could've interfered with the contraceptive.

For the life of me, I can't think of an explanation. My rational mind, the part of me in denial, demands that I find proof that the

pregnancy test is wrong, but my gut knows otherwise. The knowledge pounds in my ribs.

I'm pregnant.

And alone.

I have little money, no job, and I'm running from Gabriel Louw.

I'm in so much trouble. Now is not the time to figure out what went wrong. I need to think of how I'm going to stay alive.

"Where to, ma'am?" the driver asks.

When Gabriel finds out I'm missing, he'll go after my brother. I give the driver Kris' address and sink back in the seat, nauseous from fear.

He glances at me in the rearview mirror. "Everything all right?"

I lower my hand from my mouth and grip the door handle. I need to hold on to something. "I'm fine, thank you."

It feels like forever before we pull up at the clinic. I ask the driver to keep the meter running and skirt around to the back of the house where I won't be visible from any of the clinic windows. I try the kitchen door, but it's locked. I knock softly.

Please, Charlie, hurry.

For several painful heartbeats, nothing happens.

Biting my nail, I run from window to window until I spot Charlie. He's sitting on his bed, reading a comic book. I tap on the glass. The last thing I want is to scare him by pounding on the window. No reaction. I knock harder. I can't afford to attract Kris' attention. In the meantime, the taximeter is running a hole into the small amount of cash I have on me.

Tap, tap.

Finally, Charlie looks up. When he sees me, he calls out, "Va-Val."

I motion for him to be quiet with my finger on my lips and point at the window latch. Instead of opening it, Charlie hops from the bed and leaves the room.

Don't call Kris.

CONSENT

A moment later, the backdoor opens, and my brother steps out.

Beyond relief, I want to pull him into my arms and tell him we're going to be all right, but I have to act normal.

"Surprise, Charlie," I whisper. "I came to fetch you. We're going on a holiday, but you have to come quietly."

"Q-quiet," he whispers back, mimicking my earlier gesture with a finger on his lips.

There's no time to go through the house and gather some of his things. I lock up so Kris will be safe inside and throw the key through the bars of the open bathroom window. Hooking my arm through Charlie's, I lead him to the waiting taxi.

Inside, the driver and Charlie speak simultaneously.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Where are we go-going?"

Where are we going?

Where can I run to where Gabriel won't find me? A place like that doesn't exist. If I'm to keep my wits about me, I have to ignore that notion. I'm no longer responsible for only Charlie and myself, but also for a third life. I have no plan of action. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

Think, Valentina. Think.

"Ma'am, where to?" the driver repeats, more impatient now.

I can't afford a plane or bus ticket to anywhere for myself, let alone for two people. There's only one option left. Wherever we're going, I'll have to drive.

"Ma'am?" The man turns in his seat and gives me a piercing look. "Is everything all right back there?"

"Yes. We're going to Berea."

He regards me from under his bushy eyebrows and says with a hint of disbelief, "Berea. You sure?"

"Just drive. I'll give you directions."

He holds my eyes for another moment before turning back to the front and pulling away from the curb. I exhale in relief, and squeeze Charlie's hand to reassure him, happy that Kris hadn't

seen us. Charlie has wound down his window and is staring at the buildings that whiz past, oblivious to the lump of concrete in my stomach and the maddening fear pumping through my veins.

I send a quick text message to Kris so she won't worry when she finds Charlie gone.

Charlie and I have to leave for a while. Sorry to sneak off like this, but the less you know the better. Thank you for always being a friend. Love you.

A block from my old flat, the driver stops. "This is as far as I go." He motions at the street ahead. "That's hijackers' paradise."

I pay the extortionate amount and usher Charlie out before the driver can pose the questions I see in his eyes. The minute we're on the pavement, he speeds off, happy to get out of here.

"Va-Val." Charlie kicks in his heels as I take his arm. "This is ho-home."

"Not anymore." I give him a bright smile. "This is only where our holiday starts."

I have precious little time. It's a matter of hours, minutes maybe, before Gabriel discovers me gone and puts a death warrant out for our lives. He'll track my phone and be on our tail faster than I can say disappear, but if I want Charlie to follow hassle-free, I have to make him happy.

We walk one block to a corner café where I buy Charlie a King Cone ice cream. While he sits down on the pavement to eat it, I call Jerry. The number rings and rings, and finally disconnects without going onto voicemail.

Darn it. Jerry is my only hope. I try the special number he gave me when he was still supposedly watching over Charlie. It's a number only me and some of his crime buddies have.

This time, he picks up with a hesitant, "Val?"

There's no time to beat around the bush. "I need a car."

"What?"

"A car, Jerry. Now."

"To buy?"

CONSENT

“Would I have called a car thief if I wanted to buy a car?”

He utters his refusal meekly. “I can’t do it. What’s going on? This isn’t like you.”

I’ve always condemned his shady business, but now isn’t the time for my moral values to induce guilt. “After what you did to us, you owe me, damn you.”

There’s dejection in his voice. “Val..”

“Do you want to know what Gabriel Louw did to me because of your ignorant stupidity?”

“Oh fuck. Oh fucking fuck. You’re running.” His voice trembles. “You’re running away from The Breaker.”

“If he finds me, I’m dead. So is Charlie.” And the baby I’m carrying. “Please, Jerry. You got us into this mess. Help me get out.”

There’s a long silence. I can almost feel the gears turn in his head. Just when I think he’s going to hang up, he says, “Where are you?”

“Your place.”

“Give me an hour.”

“Thirty minutes.”

“Goddamn, Val.” He takes a breath, as if to calm himself. “Wait at the side of the building.”

“Thank you. You better show up. When I hang up, we can’t speak on this phone again.”

He knows what I mean. I have to destroy the phone if I don’t want Gabriel to track me.

“I’ll be there.” The line goes dead with a click.

Charlie has finished his ice cream. I make him clean his hands on a tissue and throw the wrapper in the trashcan so I can go around the corner and crush the phone under my heel. There are too many tiny parts to discern a tracker, not that I know what to look for, so I stamp on everything again, just to be sure, and dump the lot in the trashcan.

“Ready for our adventure?” I take Charlie’s hand. “Let’s go get our wheels.”

We hide in an alcove from where I can watch the road. Thankfully, we haven't crossed any thugs, but they'll soon crawl out of their holes with the setting of the sun. I play a distracted game of noughts and crosses with Charlie, using a chalkstone I picked up in the road to draw lines on the brick wall.

Thirty-five minutes later, an orange station wagon pulls up. The bodywork is dented and the metal rusted where the paint has peeled. My jaw drops when the rickety vehicle comes to a stop next to us and Jerry exits.

"Jerry." I throw my arms in the air.

"What?" he says in an exasperated voice. "It's all I could do on short notice."

"How far will this thing get us?"

He pats the bonnet. "She's good. I checked her out. Engine is a make-over, the full Monty." He holds the key out to me. "Swapped the registration plate, too, but keep off the main roads, just in case."

"Thanks." I snatch the key from his hand. "Let's go, Charlie."

Jerry pats Charlie on the back as my brother rounds the car. "How's things, my man?"

Charlie gives him a high-five and a grin. When he's buckled up, I look at Jerry through the window one last time before pulling off, heading for the highway.

The engine makes a funny noise, and the body of the car rattles, but we make smooth progress and manage to get through Hillbrow without any hijacking attempts, courtesy of the state of the car.

Once we hit the N1, my frayed nerves finally unravel. My hands start shaking on the wheel. A hot flush travels over me, making me break out in a sweat. My stomach is so tight it aches. I fight the urge to throw up. The summer smog is brittle and dirty, but I open the window to fill my lungs with air. As always, survival mode kicks in and numbs me to the fears and dangers of our situation.

CONSENT

Charlie is looking through his window, humming a song. I manage to tweak the radio enough to find a Country and Western station he likes. Checking the petrol gauge, I groan inwardly. The tank is near empty. At the first petrol station after Midrand, I fill up and use my last cash to buy a few supplies from the Quick shop, which are mostly snacks for Charlie. I don't dare withdraw money at the ATM with my card. It will be too easy to track. I should have remembered to do that before I started out.

My gut twists and churns the farther we crawl away from Johannesburg, the city of gold that is ruled by a man as beautiful and ruined as the place itself, a man who'll kill us if he finds us.

When the skyline of Sandton disappears from my rearview mirror, a crippling notion of loss and loneliness hits me. The emotions throw me off kilter. Shock runs through me. I miss Gabriel. That makes me twisted and sick. It must be the hormones. Yes, I'm not myself. Uninvited tears sting my eyes. Swatting at them, I force my gaze on the road ahead.

Don't look back.

There is only Charlie, me, and my baby now.

We'll make it. We'll survive.

I have no idea where I'm heading until we hit the sign announcing the three-way split. If we carry on straight, we head north toward Polokwane. I don't know the area. The only remaining options are Bloemfontein or Durban. Durban isn't as far away as Bloemfontein, and the weather is less harsh. Without financial means, Durban is the better option. Plus, I can make it there on a tank of petrol, whereas I'll run out of fuel in the middle of nowhere, long before I hit Bloemfontein.

The sign for the N3 appears. I change lanes and enter the interchange that takes me over the highway and east. With a flick of the indicator, I decide our destiny and future.

Gabriel

THE GUY I took out this afternoon was scum, but today the violence leaves a bad taste in my mouth. All I want is to go home to Valentina, crawl into her body, and melt into her bed. Things between us have changed. No matter how much I lie to myself, she's no longer the toy I pickpocketed from her life. She's something--someone--I want enough to break every rule in the book to keep. She's no longer my captive. I'm hers.

My addiction has grown over the months to an all-consuming obsession. Despite the coldness inside of me, she awakens emotions I thought I didn't have. She makes me feel things I've never felt before--gratitude, regret, joy, and fear--and even if these feelings scare me shitless, I want more.

When I get home, I dismiss Rhett and Quincy and go upstairs for a shower. I don't want to face my girl covered in blood. Washing the stench of my sins away, I think about her and what I want to do to her body. The thoughts make me hard. If I wasn't so impatient to plant my cock in her body, I would've made myself come first so I can last longer, but my urgency is palpable. I towel myself dry quickly and dress in slacks and a shirt.

My heartbeat speeds up as I make my way to the kitchen. At this hour, Valentina will be ironing. It irks me to see her work so hard, to see her work at all, but it's not for much longer. The minute she falls pregnant, everything will change.

Silence greets me when I enter the kitchen. The counters are tidy and wiped down. Marie has already left for the day. An eerie emptiness presses down on the space. I don't like it. I quicken my step, putting my head around the scullery doorframe, but there's no one. A sickening sensation settles over my body. Every nerve ending tingles. Rushing to the maid quarters, I jerk open the door. Valentina's bed is made. Oscar is sleeping on her pillow. My leg hurts from the force I put on it as I limp to the bathroom.

Empty.

CONSENT

With a growing feeling of dread, I fling the cabinets open. Everything seems to be there. The cosmetics and bath salts I bought are neatly stacked. Back in her bedroom, I do the same with her closet. The clothes, shoes, jewelry, books, and other knick-knacks I got for Valentina are there. Still, something is wrong. I know it in my gut.

Standing there, absorbing the chill from the descending night, the molecules of my body go flat and cold. An overpowering sense of abandonment fills me. Then the fear hits, hot and liquid, rippling over me in a wave. If Magda did something to Valentina... If she hurt her... I swear to God I'll kill my mother.

Making my way down the hallway to my office, I dig my phone from my pocket and call Rhett.

He replies with a cheerful, "What's up, boss?"

"In my office. Now. Bring Quincy."

I hang up and rush through my office door, expecting an army or Magda, but what I see is a sheet of white paper on my desk.

All of my attention hones in on that scrap of paper. Instinct tells me everything that has just derailed in my life is summarized on there, and for three whole seconds I can't make myself move. I pinch my eyes shut, brace myself, and round my desk. It's in her handwriting. My hand shakes as I lift it to the light and read.

I can't honor my promise. I hope you'll forgive me.

Goddammit, no!

I crumple the paper in my fist and drag my hands through my hair. I feel like falling to my knees, but somehow I remain standing. Of all the things she could've done, this is the last I expected. Charlie means too much to her. My feelings are a mess of tangled, electric wires. I'm about to short-circuit, explode, and burn out. I want to find and hurt her, make her pay for her betrayal and for what she's putting me through. I'll take the skin off her backside and drag her right back. This time, I'll chain her to my bed until she understands the meaning of *property*.

Rhett and Quincy chase through the door, saving me from my dark thoughts. They both still at the state of me.

“What’s up?” Quincy asks carefully.

I lower my hands to my hips. It’s hard for me to speak. For a moment, I consider thrusting the paper at them, but I don’t want them to witness Valentina’s intimate rejection. I swallow, breathe in, and say, “Valentina’s gone.”

Quincy pales. “What do you mean, gone?”

It takes every ounce of strength I have to push out the words, and when I finally do, my mouth is bitter. “She ran.”

Rhett’s eyes go wide. “Fuck, no.”

Quincy is the first to get to his senses. “Did she say something? Has someone seen her go?”

“She left a note.” Since Quincy seems more in control than Rhett, I say, “Go to the guardhouse. Ask them when she left and how. With what? Did she go with a suitcase? Pull the tape. I want to know every fucking detail. Not a word to Magda or her guards.” A dribble of cold sweat runs down my spine as I say it. This is the opportunity Magda has been waiting for.

Quincy is out of my office in a flash. I’m tripping over my thoughts in the orders I’m thinking up for Rhett. Track her phone. Pull her bank records for the last six hours. Put out word with our informants. Before I can voice anything, Rhett steps forward. Something in his demeanor makes me pause. His shoulders are hunched and his eyebrows drawn together.

“Gabriel...” he starts.

This is going to be bad.

He pauses and licks his lips. “There’s something you should know.”

Those words make me want to kill him. He knows something and withheld it from me. I stand quietly, waiting for him to continue.

“I think...” He lowers his head. “Maybe... I don’t know for sure, but...”

My patience snaps. “Spit it out or I’ll shoot a hole in your goddamn tongue.”

He takes a deep breath and faces me. “Valentina asked me to buy her a pregnancy test this morning.”

I reel in shock. “What?” I heard him fine, but I can’t process what he told me. “Valentina thinks she’s pregnant?” I say more to myself than him.

“If you think about it, she’s been acting kind of emotional, lately.”

I let the observation sink in. She’s been through a lot with her accident and giving up her studies. Naturally, I attributed her sadness to those events. Now that Rhett mentions it, Valentina has been more tearful than usual. When I touched her last night, her breasts were bigger and tender, but I blamed her pending period for the changes.

Fuck me.

There are too many feelings assaulting me to make sense of anything--pride, joy, fear, hot fucking raving mad anger. If Valentina is pregnant and she ran, it can only be for one reason. I know how negative and depressed the women in my life felt about their planned pregnancies. How much worse must she feel about an unexpected one? She doesn’t want the baby, and she’s going to get rid of it.

Even if I expected the reaction, I’m filled with rage and heart-ripping anxiety. The rage is not for her, but for me. I could’ve prevented this disaster. I should’ve locked her up. I should’ve noticed when her disposition changed. I could’ve prevented her from killing our child, the child who is supposed to save her.

Pain rips through my insides when I think about losing an unborn baby, but I have no one but myself to blame. This is all my doing. I swapped her birth control pills for placebos. I deceived her in the most despicable way, and I’ll take full responsibility for her actions. No matter if she’s no longer pregnant, she’s still mine, and I want her back.

“Gabriel?” Rhett has taken two steps back and is standing at a safe distance closer to the door.

“Search every trashcan on the property.” There’s a good chance Valentina took the pregnancy test with her, but I need to be sure. “Find that test and bring it to me.”

I’m clear enough in my fucked-up state to realize I may be jumping the gun. There’s a chance she’s not pregnant, but I have to consider all options.

When he’s gone, I call the guardhouse and bark out commands. I don’t want the news to leak to Magda prematurely. Eventually, she’ll find out. Until then, I need all the time I can get or Valentina is dead. I punch in the details to activate the tracker software installed on my phone. Her tracker is goddamn dead, which can only mean she destroyed the phone. To be sure, I dial her number, but it goes straight onto voicemail.

The day I kicked down Valentina’s door in Berea, I gave her my phone to call her friend, the vet she’s been working for. I saved the number on my phone when she was done. Scrolling to Kris’ name, I dial the number with a shaking hand.

Her voice comes tired over the phone. “Kris, here. How can I help?”

“Gabriel Louw.”

She goes quiet at the mention of my name.

“Is Valentina with you?”

“Why would she be?” Panic enters her tone. “What’s wrong?”

I believe her. Her reaction is too genuine to be acting. “Is Charlie there?”

“You know he is.”

“I think you better check.”

“Even if he wasn’t, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Listen to me, and listen carefully. This is not the time for games. Valentina’s life may be at stake.”

“You useless son of a bitch. I’ll bust your balls.” She carries on with elaborate and colorful insults that are interrupted by a lot of

barking. I assume she's walking through the clinic to the house. "I'll mince you up and eat you alive."

"Kris?" I keep my voice calm. "We both care about Valentina, each in our own way. Help me to help her."

She grows quiet at that, and for a moment, so do I. It's the first time I've admitted to anyone but myself that I care about Valentina. The words shock me, but they also free me. It's out in the open. No more hiding.

She inhales and exhales. The air that leaves her mouth is shaky. Her verdict is short and sweet. It has a sense of terrible finality. "He's gone."

Jesus.

I raise my face to the ceiling and search for calmness within myself.

"What the hell is going on?" she shouts.

"Is there a note?"

I can hear her footsteps clacking through the house. "No. Nothing." She's shuffling things around. Something hits the floor with a thud. "Fuck-all. All Charlie's stuff is here."

"Stay calm. I'll find her. Do me a favor. Call me on this number if you hear anything from her."

"Why will I give you shit?"

"Believe me, right now, I'm her only chance."

"The sad thing is I do."

I cut the call just as Rhett reenters my office, a zip lock bag in his hand. He holds it out to me. "We found it."

His solemn eyes tell me the news even before I reach for the proof. Two blue lines.

The air leaves my lungs. My weak leg twitches, and I have to grab the edge of the desk to maintain my balance.

I was right. Valentina could only have left for one reason--to get rid of a baby she doesn't want. It may just kill her if Magda has her way. It's the exact opposite of what I intended. My fucked-up, ingenious plan backfired.

Quincy comes rushing back. Words fall like verbal diarrhea from his lips. "She left on foot four hours ago. All she had with her was an overnight bag. I tried not to raise suspicion, but the guards know something's going on. I'm afraid..." He trails off as his eyes land on the bag in my hand. "Fuck. Is that what I think it is?"

"What now, Gabriel?" Rhett asks, his expression concerned. "What do we do?"

I don't hesitate in my answer. "We get her back."

"You better hurry," Quincy says. "The guards made noise. By now, Magda knows."

The stick with the evidence of Valentina's conception in hand, I march to Magda's office.

She sits behind her desk, scribbling on a notepad. "Valentina ran." Her expression is smug. "We're going after her with everything we've got. A team is already on the way to her brother."

"Stop them."

She throws down her pen. "Excuse me?"

I drop the evidence of my child in front of her. It takes her one second to connect the dots. In her eyes, I see her understanding. We both know I did it on purpose, and we both know why.

She pinches her lips together and leans back in her chair. "So, this is how you get what you want."

"Call off your men."

"You made a big mistake."

"That's your opinion, and you know I don't care about what you or anybody else thinks. Valentina is going to be the mother of my child. From now on, she's family. That wipes away her debt and keeps her and anyone remotely connected to her safe."

I don't say what I suspect, that the baby may already be gone. It doesn't matter whether I bring her back pregnant or not. Eventually, she *will* have my child, even if it takes years and thousands of rands of fertility treatments. I don't care. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know it's a lie. I do care. I do care if she wants to be a mother. More than that, I care if she wants *my* child.

Unfortunately, when it comes to life and death, we don't always have the luxury of choice or answers to our questions. Maybe it's better that I don't know the answers. I already know I'm a monster, and she hates me. What I'm doing to her is selfish, wrong, and immoral, but I've never claimed to be a good man. I wanted her from the moment I saw her. I still do. More than ever. Letting her go is the one thing I'm not capable of.

Magda is still regarding me with contempt. I'll go as far as to say with hatred. Even as she speaks, she picks up her phone and dials a number. "You foolish boy. This goes to show men can never be trusted. It's too easy to lead them around by their dicks." A ringtone sounds on her phone, followed by a curt answer. "Scott, turn back. The hit on Charles is off." She listens to a reply. "We still want the girl, but bring her in unharmed." She cuts the call and glares at me. "You do realize you've given all your power away. Now, she holds the power over *you*. I hope this makes you happy."

It's been a long time since Valentina took power over me, and a man like me can never be happy. I'll settle for being content, and I'll be that when I get my precious property back.

My mother needs to understand one thing. "If a hair on her head is harmed, I'll take it as a personal attack on me and my family. All gloves will come off."

"This can never have a happy ending."

I don't want to hear my mother's prophecy, because it hits the instinctive knowledge inside me with a bullseye. "Just make sure your men understand. She's my responsibility. Anything they find, anything they hear, sniff, guess, or divine, I want to know."

"You will. I owe you a *fuck you* for getting tangled up between that whore's legs and screwing this up for the family."

I inch closer to the desk, towering over Magda. "Careful. You're talking about the mother of my child. This is your last warning. Insult her again and you won't like the consequences."

The smile that cracks her thick layer of foundation is artificial. "I'd love to see how you explain this one to Carly."

It's a low blow. Since considering the possibility that Valentina may be pregnant, it's something I've contemplated. I'll have to lie to my daughter, telling her some rosy shade of pink bullshit story about Valentina and I falling in love, when in reality nothing can be further from the truth. There's no way to ensure Valentina will keep her mouth shut about the circumstances of how we ended up in bed. I seduced her, but I did it against her will. There's little difference between my kind of seduction and force. For all I know, she'll take revenge in telling Carly how I stole, blackmailed, and tortured her for nothing but my pleasure, only so I can feed my sick addiction to giving her pain and orgasms. Her tears and pleas make me hard, but her climaxes make me explode. The combination of the two--her pain and pleasure--is the biggest aphrodisiac. Beyond that physical part, something else has started to develop, these *things* she makes me feel, like the agony that's slicing through my gut right now.

"I'll deal with it," I say bluntly. "No one says a word to Carly but me."

"Oh," she snickers, "I wasn't going to volunteer. I'll leave the unpleasant task to you."

"Good. I'm glad we understand each other." I walk to the door and turn. My smile is as cold as her eyes. "Congratulations. You're going to be a grandmother again."

I don't wait for her reaction. I go back to my study to start my own search.

It becomes apparent I have nothing to go on. Valentina destroyed her phone in no place other than that godforsaken area where she used to live, and she hasn't touched the money in her account. Even though she couldn't afford a plane ticket, I set up a search for travelers by plane and bus. Trains going farther than Pretoria are non-existent, so that leaves me with private taxis, but none in the Johannesburg area has crossed the city borders during the last few hours. My hackers plant bugs in electronic banking and medical servers to raise a flag if her and Charlie's names pop

CONSENT

up anywhere on the system. I inform my network of colleagues and police informants to be on the lookout and offer a huge reward for any information on her whereabouts. Then I drive to Kris' house, who's shell shocked. She shows me Valentina's text when I finally convince her I'm only trying to keep Valentina safe, and demands to know why Valentina ran. I don't tell her about the baby. For now, it's best that only Magda, my bodyguards, and I know.

I take Rhett and drive to Berea. We knock on the door of every bar and business in a five-mile radius of her old place, but no one knows anything. By the time night falls, I'm sick. My concern is so great I can't even hate her for it. I only want her back. She's got no money, and the world is a very unsafe place. Valentina may be cold, hungry, or scared. She may even be in danger. Without money, her only option is a backstreet abortion, and those don't come without health risks. Feeling defeated, I get behind the wheel and drive to an unbearably empty home.