

**EZEKIEL VENANT
MILLINGA**



**THE
LOVE ECLIPSE**

-LOVE IS NOT A FEELING, IT IS A CHOICE-

A NOVELLA



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THE LOVE ECLIPSE: LOVE IS NOT A FEELING, IT IS A CHOICE.

A NOVELLA

EZEKIEL VENANT MILLINGA

DEDICATION

To my grandmother—

Even though you are no longer here, you often cross my mind. I hope you are in a better place.

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THE LOVE ECLIPSE SERIES

LOVE IS NOT A FEELING, IT IS A CHOICE— BOOK 2 (FINAL PART).

EPIGRAPH

“Somewhere, someone is being punished for loving.”

— Love eclipse.

CHAPTER ONE

TANZANIA SCHOOL OF TALENTS (TST), 2020

“You have made a grave mistake!” Patrice said as he dashed into SJ’s office. SJ wrapped her files and looked at Patrice. He wasn’t wearing his necktie. That was odd. His shirt was wrong buttoned. That too was bizarre. His nose wrinkled. The two were staring at each other.

“Panicking is not good for a 63 years old man.” SJ said.

“What have you done?”

SJ stood. “What?”

“Sending Leo after the cards...”

“He won’t find out.”

Patrice shook his head.

“Relax!” She poured coffee into a mug. “We are different people now.”

“We were supposed to protect him.”

“We are protecting him.”

“By sending him after the cards..?”

“Coffee is getting cold.”

Patrice pulled away the mug. "If he finds out the truth about Leo, he will stalk and kill him."

"To end this, we need to get that file before him."

"Innocent people will die."

"If we don't end this soon, more innocent people will die."

"Why don't we go after the cards by ourselves?"

"You know that's dodgy."

"Same to Leo..."

"You fret too much about Leo."

"We avowed to protect him."

"Your son, Daniel is there. My daughter is also there."

"You made a hasty decision."

"I trust them!"

"Forgotten why we ended up like this?"

SJ sipped the coffee.

"We trusted that man and because of that trust, here we are today."

"99% of the things people worry about don't even happen."

“You are getting old, Sonia.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“Of what..?”

“Hiding...”

“I am but—”

She walked closer to Patrice. She had to tilt her head above to see Patrice well. “We’ve been hiding for long enough. Enough of that shit. It’s our time to attack.”

“This is strange, isn’t it?” Baraka said, standing 20 meters away from the burnt library. A place where a prohibited library was now full of rubbles. A place that was well guarded by proficient guards, 24 hours was now surrounded by constructors. The question about who burnt the library wasn’t answered yet, Leo remained the prime suspect.

“What?” Isla said, watching laborers removing rubbles.

Baraka yawned. “A document that can save the school.”

Daniel sniggered. “A document buried under the library...”

Baraka giggled. “If it falls on immoral hands, the school will crumble.”

“And we are the expendables...” Daniel smiled. “Hired to haul out the document before the enemies do.”

“What a myth!”

“I’m curious.”

“So am I!”

“Maybe we should have a bird-eye on the document after we get it.”

“That’ll be cool!”

Isla grunted. “You idiots!”

“What?” Baraka said.

“We get in, we get the document, and we get out.” Isla said.

Daniel sighed. “Isla, don’t blot the funny.”

“Sure, this was going to be funny.” Baraka said.

“We get the document, we give it to SJ. Over..!”

“Don’t be so straight Isla, bend a bit sometimes.” Baraka muttered.

“Just want to know what’s so out of the ordinary with the document.” Daniel said.

“Yeah, what if it is contrary to what SJ says?”

“I said no!” Isla snapped.

Baraka turned to Leo. “Hey, you’ve been hushed for some time. What’s wrong?”

Leo stared at the men carrying rubbles from the library.

Baraka patted Leo. “Leo, say something...”

Leo gasped. “It’s always funny till someone gets hurt.”

Baraka placed his hands on his head. “Don’t tell me you are with Isla?”

Leo pointed his index finger. “Have you seen that man?”

“There are about 20 men there!” Daniel said.

Leo turned to Daniel with a flushed face. “It's better to shut up and give the impression that you're stupid than to say something and erase all doubt.”

Daniel clenched his fist. He stood, his face growing red. Isla hurried and stopped him.

Baraka turned to Leo. “Yes, Leo. Who’s the man?”

Leo squinted, “The one without a helmet.”

“The engineer...?” Baraka said.

“I saw him wandering around the library the night before fire exploded.”

Baraka smiled. “What are you trying to formulate?”

“If you are expecting funny, there is no funny tonight because someone is going to get hurt.”

CHAPTER TWO

DAR-ES-SALAAM, 1982

The window was bare, maybe she forgot to close the curtains. Latricia was spying on the president's bedroom.

Latricia, a TISS special agent was working as a part of the retired President, secret security team. Raising Ross Solaross binoculars on her eyes, she had a clear view of Christos's bedroom which was in a separate building, 20 meters away from the building she was.

"I think Rahyan is having a death wish." Latricia said, still looking on binoculars.

Saleem, the other special agent rolled around the bed. "He's a special agent, don't worry."

"He's in Christos's bedroom, with his wife."

Saleem rose from the bed. "He said he rebuffed Nailah."

"He's crazy."

Saleem fell to the bed. "When a child cries for a razor give it him."

"Ooh my God!" Latricia snapped.

"Lat... will you let me get some rest please?"

“Christos is back!”

Saleem jumped out of bed.

Latricia pulled her Ross Solaross outside Christos’s house. A black jeep CJ 7 stopped and a retired president, Christos dropped out. She raised the binoculars to Christos’s head. He was smiling as he whispered to his bodyguards. His face looked younger than 52. She lowered the binoculars. He was carrying a briefcase. He walked towards the front door. It will only take a minute to reach his bedroom.

She pulled the binoculars back to Nailah, a young lady of 24 years old. She had a slim, hourglass figure. Her bliss-blue eyes were globe round. Her mouth was glossing Rayhan’s neck. Off with her blouse.

Christos was on the front door. His bodyguards remained on the door as he entered. Forty seconds to his bedroom.

Nailah slithers out Rayhan’s tie from his collar and whips it across the room. Rayhan’s tongue grazes on her ear.

Thirty seconds left. Christos looks around the quiet sitting room, a briefcase swinging in his hand.

“Call Rayhan...” Latricia mumbled.

Saleem took his phone off the pocket. His hands were trembling.

Nailah unlooses her ponytail. Her midnight-black hair flowed over her shoulders.

Twenty seconds. Christos mounts the steps.

Nailah folds her arms around Rayhan's shoulders and kisses him deeply.

Ten seconds. Christos's hands dive into a pocket and come out with a haul of keys.

"He's not picking up!" Saleem said.

Rayhan carried Nailah, the two dropped on the bed.

Christos stabs the key into the lock. Twists.

Latricia raised the binoculars to Nailah and Rayhan. Their eyes sprung wide. They heard.

CHAPTER THREE

TST, 2020

“You sure this is the right time?” Saleem said as he sat.

“Time is always right to do what is right.” SJ said.

“It has been 38 years.”

“The guy doesn’t seem to relinquish.”

“Till he confirms our deaths, he won’t.”

“We need to get the file before him.”

Saleem nodded, sipping coffee.

“We expose his wrongdoings, we clean our names.”

“It’s been sturdy all these years...” Saleem smiled. “Hiding from your history only shackles you to it.”

SJ smiled. “it’s time to face it and free ourselves.”

Saleem gasped. “We will need all four cards to get the file.”

“The kids are after the two. Felix had the third.”

“He’s dead.”

“The card is out there.”

“Maybe he’s after it too.”

SJ nodded. "There's no time to waste. Every second, there needs to be movement on something."

"I'll find details on Felix's card. Handle the kids."

"Consider it done!"

"What about the fourth card?"

"Let's worry about it after we get Felix's."

"Let's not mess it up this time."

"I wish..."

"Many of us spend half our time wishing for things we could have if we didn't spend half our time wishing."

SJ smiled. "Enough wishing. He destroyed us back then, not again."

After surveying the library, the four agreed to sneak during the night. Leo headed to his room. He heard music sound coming from his room. He slowed his pace. He wasn't a very good admirer of music and he didn't have any radio. He heard people believe that Music acts like a magic key, to which the most tightly closed heart opens. He didn't.

His big toe unhurriedly pushed the door. He clenched his fist. His eyes widened after entering the room.

“Rachel?” Leo said, taking a deep breath.

“Leo...”

“What are you doing in my room?”

“You didn’t lock the door.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t leave the keys too...” Rachel indexed on the lock. “I was frightened someone would sneak, so I looked at the room while you were out.”

Leo looked at Rachel for seconds and headed to his bed.

“You’re welcome.” Rachel snapped.

“I’ll take care of my room now. You can go.”

“Leo—”

“I need some rest.”

“I wanted to ask about your brother’s body.”

“We talked about it.”

“I just—”

“Not now Rachel.”

“Fine... one last favor.”

Leo breathed deeply, staring at the roof.

“Can we have dinner tonight?”

“No!”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid it’s none of your business.”

“Leo, please... just dinner.”

“Time is precious, waste it wisely.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Am I wasting my time talking to you?”

“Nobody wants to spend their entire life waiting for someone to change.”

“Time you enjoy wasting is never wasted.”

Leo smiled. “Give me the location.”

Rachel grinned. “I’ll cook and bring the food here.”

Leo nodded.

“What’d you like to eat, what’s your favorite meal?”

“It’s 16:30 now. Better go before I change my mind.”

“Thank you!” Rachel ran out of the room, smiling profoundly.

What's my favorite meal? No one has ever asked me that. He chuckled, closing his eyes. Leo rolled around the bed for half an hour without getting a leap of sleep. He stood, stretching. He pulled a card from the drawer.

He didn't give me the password, he inspected the card closely.

There is no bank name, what kind of card is this? He raised the card to the light, taking a deep look.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAR, 1982

Christos's briefcase flops open. A flock of papers bursts from it and scatters in the wind. He shakes his head, forgetting the door. He starts collecting the papers one by one.

Nailah put on her blouse, pushing her hair back. She speeds from the room. Rayhan is nowhere to be seen.

Latricia exhales deeply. She hadn't realized she was holding a breath.

The bedroom door opens and Nailah comes out, calling her husband. Christos turns. Latricia expected a smile— she can't see. Nailah helps her husband collecting the papers. Christos closed the briefcase and walked inside, trailed by Nailah. Well, maybe next time.

Latricia threw the binoculars on the couch and stretched. She jumped on the other couch. Her obsidian-black hair swooped over her shoulders. Dimples decorated her glossy cheeks as she smiled. Her phone rang.

"Yes sir..." she said, "understood. We're on our way."

"What?" Saleem said.

"Christos needs us in his office. Now..."

Saleem hummed as he woke up. "After you."

Latricia led the way to Christos's office which was inside his house. They entered the front door, one guard escorting them. In the sitting room, Latricia saw Christos's and Nailah's wedding wallpaper hanging on the wall. The wedding was two years ago when Christos finished his ruling years. His first wife died. Latricia remembered Christos's words in the church when he married Nailah. There are no happy endings. Endings are always the saddest part, so just give me a happy middle and a very happy start. Everyone in the church applauded after the words. Latricia was mitigated the marriage didn't end a few minutes ago.

"Are we heading to his office?" Saleem said.

"He asked me to usher you into his bedroom." A strapping black man in his forties, said.

"Why?" Latrice said.

"I receive orders, I execute orders. No questions." The man said.

They reached Christos's bedroom. The bed was rough, Nailah stood at the corner of the room like an effigy.

Christos smiled. "I know it's bizarre but don't worry. I forgot the keys to my office somewhere. Since it's a pressing matter, we'll discuss it here."

Latricia and Saleem exhaled.

“Where is Rayhan?” Christos said.

Latricia’s eyes widened. She lowered her head.

“Something wrong..?” Christos said.

Saleem side-eyed Nailah. She stood still at the corner.

“You’re not telling me—”

The door opened. Rayhan surged in, dressing well his collar.

The three breathed profoundly. Christos stroked his chin.

“He who is in hurry always arrives late.” Christos said.

Rayhan lowered his head. “Sorry, sir.”

“Where were you?”

“Meeting an old friend...”

Christos nodded. “Your face is bleeding!”

Rayhan placed his palm on his face. “It’s a minor wound, don’t worry sir.”

“Where is your necktie?” Christos said.

“I was in hurry, sir!”

Christos smiled. “Why hurry over beautiful things? Why not linger and enjoy them?”

“Whoever is in a hurry shows that the thing he is about is too big for him.”

Christos smiled and turned to others. “I have an imperative matter to discuss with you.”

The room went silent.

“Nailah, can you excuse us for some minutes?” Christos said, looking at Nailah.

Nailah stared at Christos. She didn’t make any movement.

“My wife, a minute only...”

Nailah stood still.

Latricia looked at Nailah’s shoes. Her legs were trembling.

She didn’t want to lift her shoes. She was undeniably hiding something.

CHAPTER FIVE

TST, 2020

Leo didn't fall asleep at all. He was confused.

What jolted him was a knock from the door. He peeked at his watch. It was 1920hrs. He threw the card into the drawer.

He opened the door. Rachel stood in front of him, holding a basket in her hand. She was in a light nightdress, light enough to display her gymslip-thin mermaid's figure.

"Can I come in?" Rachel said.

Leo remained silent.

"Hey!"

"Yeah..."

"You alright..?"

Leo's eyes were on Rachel.

"Hey!"

"Oh, yeah..!"

"Can I come in?"

"Sure."

They entered the room. Rachel prepared the table.

“I don't need to go to heaven to find out what a delicious banana is like because you brought heaven to me in your bananas.” Leo mumbled, scooping the bananas.

Rachel smiled. “I'm glad you liked it.”

“The cook was a good cook, as cooks go, and as cooks go, she went.”

Rachel grinned. “Do you cook?”

“What my mother believed about cooking is that if you worked hard and prospered, someone else would do it for you.”

The two laughed.

“Hey, about earlier, I'm sorry.” Leo said.

“No need!”

“I was a bit ruthless.”

“There are so many great things in life. Why dwell on negativity?”

Leo sighed. “Thank you!”

“For what..?”

“Dinner...”

“No, thank YOU!”

“Me? Why?”

“Having dinner alone, that’s the loneliest thing in the world.”

After the meal, the two lied on a bed, talking.

“OMG” Leo said, looking at his watch.

“What?”

“It’s 2201hrs. I’m supposed to be somewhere.”

“Where..?”

“I’ll be back.” Leo rushed out.

“Hey, hey... leave the keys.” Rachel shouted but Leo was long gone.

She fell on the bed. “Looks like I’m on guard again.”

Hours passed, Leo wasn’t back. She tried to keep her eyes open but at last, she fell asleep.

Rachel felt someone touching her.

Her eyes were hazy. “Leo?”

The person shook her body seriously this time.

Rachel squinted. “Macy!”

CHAPTER SIX

DAR, 1982

“What’s wrong?” Christos said. He walked towards Nailah, brooding. Her body was trembling.

Latricia rushed and stopped Christos. “I think we are the ones who should leave.”

“She’s right. We can talk downstairs.” Saleem said.

Christos chuckled. “Rayhan, what do you think?”

“Be good to her, she’s rare.” Rayhan said.

Christos agreed and the four walked to the sitting room. In the sitting room, He sent his guards away.

“As I said, I have an urgent matter.” Christos said.

The place went silent. Christos dug into his briefcase.

Christos thumbed on the papers. “Do you know Isaac Rwehembu?”

“Dar-es-salaam regional commissioner..?” Latricia said.

Christos nodded, handing the papers to the three. “These are some of the evidence of his wrongdoings.”

The three passed across the papers.

“He’s becoming a burden to the country.” Christos said.

“He’s selling such important natural resources to the whites!” Saleem said, thumbing the papers.

“President Fabian warned him and I too warned him. He won’t listen.”

“What do you want us to do?” Latricia said.

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.”

“That’ll be treacherous.” Rayhan said.

“He has a press conference tomorrow. Your job is to Make sure he doesn’t reach the conference hall. Make it look like an accident.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

TST, 2020

“What does a girl in a light nightdress do in man’s bedroom this late?” Macy said, crossing her arms.

Rachel squinted as she got up from bed. Macy was in a light blouse and a short tracksuit which left her thighs bare. Her foot was tapping as her head moved up and down.

“Why entering in someone’s room without knocking?” Rachel said.

“Should I knock in my boyfriend’s room?”

Rachel chuckled. “Boyfriend?”

“Leo is my boyfriend.”

Rachel smiled. “So what?”

“Stay away from my boyfriend!”

“I’m just his friend!”

“Said by every caught prostitute...”

“Can you open your mind before opening your mouth?”

“I’m warning you!”

Rachel squeezed her eyes shut.

“If I ever find you with my boyfriend again, I’ll raze you.”

“He’s not—”

“You’re not Leo’s type... so lope and never come back!”

“I’ll give you a piece of advice—”

“I don’t want to see you!”

“Trust me... you are not Leo’s type either.”

“You monkey...” Macy said, grabbing Rachel’s hair.

“You’re not in Leo’s heart.” Rachel pulled Macy away. “And one of the hardest decisions you’ll soon face in your life is choosing whether to walk away or to try harder.”

Leo was the last one to arrive at Chrysanthemums garden near the burnt prohibited library. Leo didn’t like chrysanthemums flowerers that much. He read that chrysanthemum in Japan has to do with death. White chrysanthemum blooms are reserved for funerals and decorating graves. In several European nations, including Belgium, Italy, France and Austria, chrysanthemum symbolism has to do with death. The only time chrysanthemum flowers are given in these nations is as a token of comfort, grief or bereavement. Leo stared away from the flowers.

“You’re always late.” Baraka said.

“What’s the plan?” Leo said.

“We lay low till 2300hrs. When the lights go off, we move.” Isla said, bag on her back.

It was 2255hrs. The constructors stopped their work for that day and packed their stuff. The lights around the area went off. When it was quiet and no signs of other people, the four marched towards the library.

“The library was built by five focal pillars.” Isla coughed. “Two are at the front, two back, and one at the middle-center.”

“Guys, are you sure we can do this?” Baraka mumbled.

“Listen!” Daniel snapped.

“Our target is the pillar at the center.” Isla said.

“Guys, my heart is going to burst off the chest.” Baraka muttered.

Leo sighed. “Can you shut up and listen!”

“You’re the one who said this is not going to be funny. I don’t want to ge—”

“Ten footsteps from the central pillar is where our document was buried.” Isla said.

“Guys, what if we get caught?” Baraka said.

The three turned to Baraka. He was vacillating.

“Let’s find this central pillar. Isla take Dan, I’ll go with Baraka.”
Leo said.

They split. Using faint light torches, they searched the area.

“Hey Leo, aren’t you afraid?” Baraka said.

“What you fear the most is what you attract the most.”

“You are here because you did a mistake. Isla and Daniel are children of superiors. If we get caught, I’m the only one who will lose school.”

“Everything will be okay in the end.”

“What if it’s not okay?”

“Then that’s not the end!”

“You say that because you have nothing to lose. I have!”

“Then go—”

Isla whispered, beckoning Leo and Baraka. Leo and Baraka followed her.

“This is the pillar.” Isla said.

“So, ten steps from here?” Daniel said.

Leo started counting the steps. The three followed him.

Baraka's stomach was growling. "Guys—"

"You should introduce your upper lip to your lower lip and shut up." Isla said.

"It's here." Leo said.

"Let's set up a perimeter to shun boo-boos." Daniel said.

Leo drew a square around the area. Isla dug into her bag and removed a plaster chipping machine.

Baraka exhaled. "Guys, that's going to make noise. We will get caught here!"

"You know what..." Leo patted Baraka. "It's so simple to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say and then don't say it."

Isla handed the machine to Daniel. Daniel stared at them for a while and turned on the machine. Baraka's hands were on his head.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAR, 1982

A black 3-door SUV Range Rover parked 30 meters away from Isaac Rwehembu's residence. The half-moon and millions of stars didn't give much light to brighten the area. Latricia went to spy on the house. His house wasn't surrounded by any nearby houses. He didn't have any neighbors. Maybe he was happy, Latricia thought. When you are poor, neighbors close by will not come. Once you become rich, you'll be surprised by visits from relatives afar.

"His wife and two kids are in the sitting room." Latricia said as she entered the car.

"Isaac?" Rayhan said.

"He's reading in his library, 10 meters from his house." Latricia said

"Is everything ready?" Saleem said.

"Yeah..." Rayhan said.

"As planned, I'll cut off the electric power." Saleem said,
"Rayhan, you'll have five minutes to set fire on his library and making sure Isaac never walks out. After 5 minutes I'll turn on the power. Latricia, you'll drive us out after seven minutes."

The two nodded. Saleem walked out and headed to the power box. Rayhan peeked on his watch, so did Latricia. After two minutes, the lights went off in Isaac's house. The two started their stopwatches and Rayhan ran out.

After five minutes, the lights were turned on. An immense fire was seen blazing from Isaac's library. It would take at least ten minutes for neighbors to reach Isaac's residence.

In six minutes, Saleem was inside the car. Latricia's hands were on the steering wheel.

"Where is Rayhan?"

"Not back yet!"

Saleem peeked on his watch, 30 seconds left. "C'mon Rayhan!"

20 seconds left, Rayhan was nowhere to be seen.

10 seconds. Latricia bit her lips, Saleem clenched his fist.

1 second. The only din heard came from a mother and her two kids wailing for help. No footsteps were heard.

"Let's go!" Saleem said

"One extra minute please..."

"We'll get caught!"

Latricia gazed over the darkness, her right foot a few inches from the accelerator.

“Lat... we have to go!”

Latricia pulled the handbrake.

CHAPTER NINE

TST, 2020

The chipping machine produced a mammoth noise. They could be heard at any time.

Baraka's lips were trembling. "I think we should just leave."

Daniel continued removing the cemented floor. Leo's and Isla's eyes were moving here and there twitchily.

Baraka wept the sweat. "Hey Dan, just stop!"

Daniel kept chipping. After ten minutes, only bricks remained on the floor. The three started removing the bricks off.

"Baraka, can't you be of any help?" Isla said.

Baraka looked around skeptically. "If we get—"

"You can leave." Leo said.

Baraka knelt and started removing the bricks.

"OMG!" Isla snapped, looking at the lights coming from a distance.

"We're dead!" Baraka muttered.

"Let's keep digging!" Leo said.

The lights were getting closer.

“Guys, I’m leaving!” Baraka said.

The three kept digging.

“Guys, they are almost here!”

They kept digging.

“Guys, I don’t want to get caught.”

Isla looked at the lights. “I think we should go.”

Baraka exhaled. “You took so—”

“I have found something!” Leo said, removing a small reddish-brown metal case.

The lights were very close. Leo gave the case to Isla and the three started running.

“Leo, what are you doing?” Isla said.

“Buying you some time. Go!” Leo said.

“No. you’re in this mess because I left you alone that night, I’m not leaving you again.”

Baraka kicked a stone. “Guys, it’s not time for arguing!”

The lights were few meters from them. The footsteps were now heard plainly.

“Dan, take this and go. I’ll stay with Leo.” Isla said, handing the case to Daniel.

Leo touched Isla’s face. “I value your concerns but if you want that case to reach into your mother’s arms unopened, you better start running.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll find a way out, I always.”

Isla hugged Leo. “Don’t get caught!”

Leo pulled Isla away. “Go!”

Leo watched the three vanishing into the darkness. His whole body was trembling. But that was friendship. Friendship means laying down your life for somebody, really willing to sacrifice yourself for somebody else.

He felt something sharp pressing his back. “Don’t move!”

CHAPTER TEN

DAR, 1982

Tears shimmered in her eyes as she slowly pressed the accelerator.

“There was no other choice.” Saleem said.

“We made a choice.” Latricia said, “Life is about choices. Some we regret and some we’re proud of. Some will haunt us forever. The message is, we are what we chose to be.”

“Are you blaming me?”

Through her sight mirror, she saw someone running towards the car. She pressed the brakes.

“It’s Rayhan.”

“Lat, you sure..?”

“I’m—”

The backdoor opened and Rayhan surged in. The two puffed out profoundly as Latricia pressed the accelerator very hard.

“What took you so long?” Saleem said.

Rayhan breathed heavily.

“We could’ve left you.”

Latricia gazed at the Rear-view mirror. Rayhan was still exhaling.

“You okay?” Latricia said.

Rayhan’s hands were on his chest.

“Rayhan... say something!” Saleem snapped.

Rayhan sighed. “We killed someone today.”

“He was a traitor.” Saleem said.

“He was a father and a husband.” Rayhan said.

“We did our job.” Saleem said.

“Thanks to that job, we have left a widow with two kids.”

“Hey, he was ghastly. He’s supposed to die.”

“Who are we to decide who lives and who dies?”

“When did you become a saint?”

“You don’t need to be a saint to realize your sins.”

“Looking at you speaking like that...” Saleem said, “One cannot believe you were the one cheating earlier this morning.”

Rayhan clenched his teeth.

“What? The truth hurts?”

“Don’t let your food get cold while worrying about what’s on my plate.”

“Christos almost caught you today—”

“Enough!” Latricia snapped, hitting the brakes. “We have killed once, we won’t kill again.”

Leo chuckled. “If you do something very well once, there is a greater probability that you’ll be asked to do it again.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TST, 2020

Leo raised his hands.

“Turn slowly.” The man said.

Leo turned at a snail's pace. He saw an average-height man wearing a long black pullover which hid his face.

“Did you get the document?” The man said.

Leo remained silent.

The man grunted. “Answer the question!”

Leo gaped at the Walther PPQ pistol pointed towards him.

“The document... did you find it?”

“Yes...” Leo said.

“Go...”

“What...?”

“Run. You didn’t see anyone today, this meeting never occurred.”

Leo ran without looking back, a lot of questions circulating in his head. He rushed into his room. The room wasn’t locked and Rachel wasn’t there. Her basket and utensils were on the table.

He looked at his phone. There were neither goodnight wishes nor missed calls. *A powerful man is someone who can laugh alone, stand alone, and smile alone. That's life.*

He jumped into his bed and after minutes, he fell asleep.

What jolted him from sleep was a weighty knock from the door. Dazzling sun rays pierced through the windows, hitting his eyes.

Why is it Monday again? He squinted, stretching.

A heavy knock proceeded.

“Hey, can’t you knock judiciously?” Leo snapped, walking towards the door.

He opened the door. Macy stood still, her arms crossed. She was in a light blouse and a short tracksuit. Her face was red and her eyes were flashing.

“Come in?” Leo muttered.

Macy entered the room.

“You okay?”

Macy stared at Leo, tears ran down her cheeks.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

She gawked at him, fighting back her tears.

Leo touched Macy's shoulder. Macy pulled him away.

"Hey, what did I do?"

Macy looked over the wall.

"Say something please..."

"Leo, do you know for how long I've been waiting for you?"

"Hey—"

"For four years. Every night before going to bed, I used to pray to meet you again."

"What—"

"I said no to every man who approached me, because of you."

"Macy—"

"Leo, I loved you so much."

Leo breathed deeply.

"You could've just told me that you had another girlfriend."

Leo scratched his hair. "I can explain."

"Said by every playboy..."

"Macy please—"

“I don’t know what’s worse. People who lie or people who think I am stupid enough to believe the lies!”

“Please listen—”

“I loved you.”

“I still love you—”

The door opened, Isla dashed in. “What?”

Leo’s eyes widened. His lower lip quivered.

“Can you recur what you just said?” Isla said. A vein popped out in her neck.

Leo laid his head low.

Isla shook her head. “Leo... with all toys in this world, you choose someone’s heart to play with?”

SJ was in her office. Her mouth curved into a smile. The voice of the birds pierced her ears and kindled her blissful humor. The door opened and Patrice rushed in.

SJ simpered. “I have—”

“I have—”

The two grinned.

“You go first.” Patrice said.

“Alright...” SJ opened the drawer. “The two cards are in our hands now.”

Patrice took the cards. “We’re lucky.”

“Luck is great, but most of life is hard work.”

Patrice smirked, raising his hands.

“Your turn..!”

“I have located Felix’s wife.”

SJ’s face bloomed with a smile.

“She’s in Mbalizi, Mbeya.”

“When are we leaving?”

“Today...”

“Get the plane tickets.” SJ said, “It’s time to pay a visit to our old friend’s wife”

CHAPTER TWELVE

DAR, 1982

Rayhan and his two teammates entered Christos's home office. He was with his favorite bodyguard, Zander. His face was full of smile. He switched off the TV after seeing them.

"You did a good job. My morning is luminous because of you." Christos said, hugging them.

"What will happen to his wife and daughters?" Rayhan said.

"The government will take good care of them." Christos said.

"Was killing him the only solution?" Rayhan said.

Latricia said, "Rayhan—"

"It's alright." Christos said, "The first time you do a thing is always exciting."

Saleem and Latricia nodded.

"I've dropped a small amount in your bank accounts." Christos said, "Go get some rest."

"Thank you, sir..." Saleem and Latricia said.

"No, thank You. You saved your country."

The three walked out of Christos's office.

“You’re arguing with Christos as if you are of the same rank.” Saleem said after exiting Christos’s house.

“The voice of that man screaming to save his life reiterates in my ears every time.” Rayhan chuckled. “You were not there, how can you feel it?”

“This too shall pass.” Latricia said.

Rayhan smiled. “Burning a man alive won’t.”

“You did the right thing.” Saleem said.

“I joined the army to save people not to kill them.” Rayhan said.

“There is no progress or accomplishment without sacrifice.” Saleem said.

“Then what’s the difference between you and criminals?”

Saleem exhaled.

“What did you want us to do?”

“When what you hear does not match with what you see, trust your eyes.”

“What does—”

“RAYHAN!” A voice came from the parking lot. The three turned around. It was Nailah. She waved her hand, calling Rayhan.

“Go invite troubles.” Saleem said.

Rayhan headed to Nailah. She was in a long kitenge dress, her bodyguards behind her. When Rayhan arrived, she sent away her guards.

“You forgot this.” Nailah said, handing the necktie to Rayhan

Rayhan sighed. “Was it the reason you refused to leave the room?”

“If I lifted my leg that day, you would be dead now.”

Rayhan smiled.

Nailah touched Rayhan’s face. “What’s with this scratch?”

“Got it while jumping off your window that day...”

“I’m sorry.”

“I should go before Christos finds me here.”

Nailah grabbed his hand. “Christos is leaving. He won’t be available tonight. Will I see you?”

“I’m not digging my own grave.”

“Please Rayhan. I love you.”

“We’re making a mistake.”

“Is loving you a mistake?”

“You have a husband.”

“I don’t love him.”

Rayhan chuckled. “Why did you marry him?”

“Sometimes love is not a feeling, it is a choice. I made a choice.”

“You made a wrong choice.”

“Sometimes the wrong choices bring us to the right places.”

“Fine—”

“You were here. I have been looking for you everywhere.”

Christos said.

Nailah promptly released Rayhan’s hand.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TST, 2020

“Who’s she?” Macy said, slapping Leo’s shoulder.

Leo exhaled.

“Who are you?” Isla said, looking at Macy.

“I should be asking you the same question.” Macy said.

“What are you doing in my boyfriend’s room?”

“You must be hysterical. He’s my boyfriend.”

Isla turned to Leo, her eyes welled up. “What is she talking about?”

Leo’s lips became heavy.

Isla snatched Leo’s shirt. “What does she mean saying she’s your girlfriend?”

Leo avoided Isla’s eyes.

“You’re changing girls like clothes.” Macy said. Her eyes were wet.

“Once a cheater always a cheater, they can never be trusted again.” Isla said. She walked out, slamming the door.

Leo sighed, lowering his head.

“You wanted everything... well, now you get nothing.” Macy said, leaving the room.

Leo fell on his knees. His face was full of sweat. Words have power, the power to soothe, the power to skewer someone through the heart, and the power to render someone speechless.

You can't have everything. Where would you put it? Benjamin told him when he was 12. He stood and left the room.

There was a wood log under a tree near his room. He fell on the log and leaned on the tree.

“Prof Lucy is in the class now, what are you doing here?” A girl of about 18 years old stood before Leo. She was black, the black that no man can stop looking at, black beauty. They were in the same class. He knows the face but he doesn't know her name.

Leo raised his head and covered his face with his palms. He exhaled. The girl sat on the log next to him.

“I'm Daliah.”

“What do you want?”

“Leo, do you believe in love at first sight?”

Leo chuckled. “Can we just not talk about love for a moment?”

“I fell in love with you the first day I saw you.”

Leo sighed. “Please... I’m just too tired.”

“Do you know for how long I have wanted to say this?”

“What’s wrong with you ladies?”

“I’m in love with you.”

“I’m a man of terrible past and my present is full of troubles.”

Leo chuckled. “You don’t need to be a prophet to predict my future. Why would a girl trust his heart to a man like me?”

“They say love is blind.”

Leo stood. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t see me either.”

“Leo wait—”

Leo’s phone buzzed.

“Who’s this?” Leo said.

“It’s about your mother.” The other side responded.

“What’s with her?”

“Doctors say she needs a quick surgery.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DAR, 1982

“What are you two doing here?” Christos said.

Nailah grunted. “I was asking Rayhan to escort me somewhere tonight.”

Rayhan nodded. His heartbeat rate accelerated.

“I found some blood on our bedroom’s window.” Christos said.

Rayhan felt something like an electric shock passing through his body.

“What do you mean, blood?” Nailah said.

“Looks like somebody slinked into our room.”

“Slink..? Why?”

“I’ve given the blood sample to my doctor. We shall soon find out who and why.”

“Are we in menace?”

“We have guards everywhere. Everything will be okay.”

“Guards..?” Nailah chuckled. “Then how would someone sneak?”

“I’m afraid the burglar was from inside.”

“What do you mean?”

Christos threw an eye to Rayhan. Rayhan ducked.

“Who’s the doctor?” Nailah said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you the results once they are out.”

“Aren’t I supposed to know the doctor?”

“I think your outing with Rayhan should wait.”

“What?”

Rayhan turned to Christos. Their eyes met.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TST, 2020

Leo held his breath. “What surgery?”

“TCAR”

“What?”

“Transcarotid Artery Revascularization”

“What happened?”

“Carotid artery disease. She’s at the risk of getting stroke.” The lady grunted. “Doctors say if she won’t get the surgery early, she’ll die or suffer a permanent disability. They have referred us to Jakaya Kikwete Cardiac institute.”

“How much is needed?”

“For starters, 1 million will suffice.”

Leo gasped. “How much time do I have?”

“Not that much. The earlier the better...”

“Can I—” The phone hung up.

Leo tried to call but the number was unreachable.

Why always me? He gazed at the sky, his fingers rubbing his hair.

“Is everything okay?” Dailah said.

“Prof is in class. Why don’t you scurry and go?”

“A problem shared is half solved.”

Leo signaled Dailah to move her ear closer to him. Daliah did as instructed.

“Never tell your problems to anyone. 20% don’t care and the other 80% are glad you have them.” Leo whispered in Dailah’s ear.

He rushed to his room. He thumbed over the papers in the drawer till he found a number. He typed the number and dialed.

“This is Mr. Patrick!” The other side responded.

“I’m Leo Felix.”

Mr. Patrick giggled. “The dare-devil?”

“Let’s spare the talk, I have a problem.”

“You always have problems. Is it Benjamin again?”

“My mother is sick and she needs a quick surgery. I need 1 million.”

“I wish I could be of assistance.”

“I wasn’t asking for money.”

“Then why call me?”

“I’m in Dar. Can you connect me to any gambling house where I will get that amount?”

“As I said, kid...”

“What?”

“I wish I could help.”

“What do you mean?”

“I quitted that business, 4 years ago.”

Songwe Airport. SJ read on a banner through a window as the Taxi exited the airport.

“We’ll stop at Tarafani market, Mbalizi.” Patrice instructed the driver.

A Taxi stopped at Tarafani market and the two dropped out. The place was full of vendor stalls. Women selling vegetables, fruits, and food spices occupied the area. Motorcyclists were arguing. Some argued about football and others about the general election, which was to be done two months to come.

“Excuse me!” SJ said, smiling at a girl of about 15 years.

“These vegetables are very good madam.” The girl said.

SJ smiled. "Sorry, I was looking for someone."

The girl's face drowned. "Who?"

"Abiola..."

The girl rubbed her chin. "Abi... what?"

Patrice smiled. "Abiola."

"Mama Musa, do you know a woman named Abiola?" The girl shouted.

"Yes, it's Mama Leo!" Mama Musa shouted.

The girl turned to SJ and Patrice. "You should've said Mama Leo. Everyone here calls her that."

"Anha!" SJ smiled. "Where is she?"

"She hasn't been here for a week. I heard she's sick."

"Can you take us to her home?"

The girl sighed. "My mother told me to finish all these vegetables before the sunset."

Patrice dug into his pocket and came out with a ten thousand note.

The girl smiled. "Follow me."

The two followed the girl.

“I wonder why people call her Mama Leo.” The girl muttered.

“Why?” Patrice said.

“I’ve never seen this Leo before.”

“Have you ever asked about him?” SJ said.

“There are a lot of stories about him.” The girl said, “I wonder which one is true.”

After ten minutes, they stopped at a small house. The roofs were reddish-brown and the wall was full of cracks. One would say the house would collapse at any minute. There were two women sitting on a mat, a young girl and a woman of about 48 years old. The two were welcomed. A young girl who brought them left and the other girl who was sitting with a woman entered the house.

“Are you Abiola?” SJ said after greetings.

Abiola nodded. “Who are you?”

“I’m Sonia and he’s Patrice.”

Patrice grinned. “We’re Felix’s friends.”

Abiola chuckled. “I thought Felix had no friends.”

“We are his friends.”

“After neglecting him for 13 years, what do you want now?”
Abiola said.

“We’ve been abroad for ten years. We didn’t neglect him.”
Patrice said.

“What do you want?” Abiola said.

“To help you and your son.” Patrice said.

Abiola seemed relaxed, “How?”

“A long time ago, we worked together with your husband at Geita Gold Mine. We found 10 kg gold. We chose not to sell it and we hid it somewhere. That gold is now worth billions.”

Abiola smiled. “Will I get my husband’s share?”

“You will but we’ll need to get the gold first.”

“What should I do?” Abiola said.

“We wanted to make sure that the three of us are all there when we sell the gold. We split the locker keys into three segments and implanted them in cards.” Patrice and SJ showed their cards. “The card looks like an ATM card but it has no bank name.”

Abiola squinted, taking a look at the cards.

“To open the locker, we’ll need all three cards. Felix had the third.”

“I’ve never seen such a card before.”

“Are you sure?”

“After his death, I looked at all of his belongings. If it was there, I could’ve seen it.”

“Then we won’t get the gold.”

“Maybe I take another look.”

SJ took out a business card. “Please alert us as soon as you find it. The sooner the better.”

Abiola nodded, taking the business card.

“Has anyone asked you about the card before?” SJ said.

“No.”

“Good.” SJ said, “If someone comes to ask for the card, don’t tell them anything.”

Abiola nodded.

Patrice sighed. “Leo too. Don’t tell him anything.”

SJ raised her eyebrows. “I insist. Don’t tell anyone else about this and alert us the instant you have the card.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DAR, 1982

Cold sweat seeped over Nailah's face. A smile on her face tried to conceal the trepidation in her heart.

"I have an imperative meeting tonight." Nailah said, "If you're worried about my safety, I'll be safe with him."

Christos chuckled. "You take Latricia or Saleem."

Rayhan's felt pins nipping his skin.

"Why?" Nailah said.

"I have an imperative work to do with Rayhan tonight."

Nailah was out of words. She couldn't flout anymore. Rayhan had to agree with Christos about the work.

When the sun disappeared leaving the seat to the stars, Rayhan went to Christos's house. *2030hrs*, Rayhan peeped at his watch after waiting for thirty minutes. After twenty more minutes, Christos walked out of his office, Zander at the rear.

"Let's go!" Christos said, a briefcase dangling on his left hand.

Rayhan dithered. After a moment, he followed the two quietly.

They entered into Christos's CJ5 Jeep. Zander drove away. Christos had never left his house, especially during nights without three to five bodyguards. The situation bothered Rayhan.

"Where are we going?" Rayhan said after one hour ride.

Christos smiled. "Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow."

"It's worry which helps us survive long."

Christos laughed. "When I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened."

The Jeep stopped in a wooded area, few kilometers out of Dar-es-salaam. The three walked out. Rayhan's hands were playing around his back where his gun was.

There was a black marquee in front of them. Five muscular men wearing keffiyeh, AK-47's on their hands guarded the marquee. Christos walked to the marquee. Zander and Rayhan followed.

A man of about fifty-five years old, keffiyeh on his head walked out of the marquee. His long, rough beard reminded Rayhan of Osama bin Laden. Christos smiled as he hugged the man. They spoke in the Arabic language. Rayhan didn't understand. The

man seemed to know Zander too. He greeted Zander in Arabic and the two laughed.

The man turned to Rayhan. “kayfa haalak?”

“Ana bekhair, shukran!” Rayhan mimicked zander’s reply.

Christos followed the man to the marquee. He asked Zander and Rayhan to wait outside.

After five minutes, four men carrying a wooden box entered the marquee.

“What the hell are we doing here?” Rayhan said, looking at Zander.

“keep—”

A gunshot was heard from the marquee.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TST, 2020

Leo snorted. “My mother needs help. Please help me.”

“My connections died four years ago.” Mr. Patrick said.

“Help me save her life.”

“After my salvation, I swore before the Altar that I’ll never dirty my hands again with those issues.”

“Salvation won’t let you save life?”

“Through salvation, our past has been forgiven, our present is given meaning, and our future is secured.”

“No one can ever save himself. We are the instruments of one another's salvation, and only by the hope that we give to others do we lift ourselves out of the darkness into light.”

A silence followed.

Leo sighed. “Mr. Patrick...”

Mr. Patrick grunted. “I’ll take a look.”

“Please, someone’s life depends on it.”

“I can’t assure you. Better look somewhere else too.”

Leo perspired profusely.

“I’ll call you if I get anything.”

“Thanks.”

Leo jumped to his bed, scratching his head. He tried to call the girl who notified him about his mother, the number was still unreachable. He couldn’t sleep and he couldn’t go to the class. He kept moving around his room as hours kept running. There was no call from Mr. Patrick and the girl’s number was still unreachable.

The sun was now at west. He tried the girl’s number. This time the girl answered.

“Leo.” The girl said.

“Hey, can I talk to my mother?”

“Give me a second.”

Leo sighed, moving around his room.

“Leo...” Her mother said.

“Mom, good evening...”

“I’m fine Leo. Don’t fret about me.”

“You’re not fine.”

“Concentrate on your studies. I’ll be okay.”

“Father left me his ATM card.” Leo said, “He said he saved money that will help us.”

Her mother remained silent.

“The card has no bank name and he didn’t leave any passwords. Do you know anything about it?”

There was no response.

“Mom, you there..?”

Silence.

“Mom...”

“Leo...”

“Do you know anything about the card?”

“Do you have it?”

“Yes.”

Silence.

“Mom..?”

“I don’t know anything, Leo.”

Leo gasped.

“Leo, I’ll call you later.”

“Mom—”

The phone hung up.

What’s wrong with her? Leo threw his phone to the bed.

He went to his favorite window. Some students were in the class, some in the playgrounds, and some with their beloved couples. Him..? He locked himself in the room trying to fathom how to get 1 million before the sunrise.

His phone buzzed. He ran to his bed, stumbling on the foot of the chair.

He moaned. “Mr. Patrick?”

“Looks like you’re fluky, as always.”

Leo half-smiled, one hand on his aching toe. “You got something?”

“Tonight at Tanzania princess casino.” Mr. Patrick said, “miss tonight and I won’t be able to help again.”

SJ was in her office. The orange color of the sunset was her favorite. She gazed over the sky, feeling the cool air swaying in her nostril hairs. Her phone buzzed.

“This is Abiola.”

SJ smiled. "Give me the good news."

"Will I get my husband's share?"

"Without any doubt..."

Silence followed.

"Abiola, you there..?"

"I know where the card is."

"Tell me."

Silence.

"Trust me Abiola, everything will be okay."

"Leo has the card."

SJ stood. "Thank you! I'll let you know once we've the gold."

SJ typed on her phone. She walked around her office overwhelmingly.

"Patrice." SJ said.

"What's up?" Patrice said.

"Where are you?"

"Home..."

"You need to come right now..."

“Why?”

“Felix’s card. Leo has it.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DAR, 1982

Rayhan pulled out his gun and surged into the marquee. His eyes widen while his mouth dropped open.

Five guns were pointed at his face. His eyes were on the wooden box on the ground. It was full of war rifles.

Christos raised his hand. "He's with me."

The men withdrew their guns, signaling Rayhan to leave the marquee. Rayhan walked out.

After two hours, Christos came out. He waved goodbye to the Arabic men. Rayhan followed him and Zander to the car.

"Are you dealing with arms trafficking?" Rayhan said after Zander drove away.

"There you are again." Christos gasped. "Judging a day by its weather."

"I saw the rifles."

"The problem is you take it for granted you know the whole story. You judge a book by its cover and read what you want between selected lines."

Rayhan raised his eyebrows. “Spare me a philosophy lesson. What the hell were we doing there?”

“Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste that they hurry past it.”

Rayhan clenched his teeth.

“What you saw today is about our next target.”

“We are not killing someone else, are we?”

Christos smiled. “The important lesson I’ve learnt from the Arabs today is that God is never late, we're just impatient.”

Rayhan sighed. “Will—”

“Be patient with your impatience.” Christos said, leaning on his seat.

They arrived at Christos’s house at dawn.

“Zander, call Latricia and Saleem. We have a job to do.”

“Now..?” Zander said.

“There is a problem which must be eliminated before our country falls in trouble.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TST, 2020

Smile surmounted Leo's face. "I'm going right now."

"Find a man called Kamal. He'll help you."

"Thank you!"

Leo smiled as he changed his clothes. He looked under the table, there was a gift box. He took it, cleared the dust, and walked out.

He went direct to Isla's room. He wanted to knock but his hand stopped few inches from the door. He walked away. After making five steps, he stopped and returned. He breathed in and out, and then he hit the door. After knocking for several seconds, the door opened.

"What do you want?" Isla said.

Leo sighed. "Can I come in?"

"There is no room for aliens."

"I just wa—"

"Leave my room."

"Isla, please—"

“Leo, you are just like every other man. You want to play with and ruin my life.”

“Isla, there are a lot of things I want to do in this world.” Leo said, “Trust me, playing with and ruining your life is never a part of them.”

Isla ogled at the sky.

“If you can’t accept me, then at least accept this.” Leo handed the box to Isla.

Isla stared at Leo. Leo insisted on giving her the gift box.

Isla opened the box. “You thought you would seduce me with this old necklace?”

Leo shrugged, watching Isla swinging the necklace in the air. Her foot was tapping.

“Take your necklace and go.” Isla extended her hand to Leo.

Leo exhaled. “Some time ago, a man punished his 3-year-old daughter for wasting a roll of gold wrapping paper. Money was tight and he became infuriated when the child tried to decorate a box to put under the Christmas tree.

“Nevertheless, the little girl brought the gift to her father the next morning and said, ‘This is for you, Daddy’.

“The man became embarrassed by his overreaction earlier, but his rage continued when he saw that the box was empty. He yelled at her. ‘Don’t you know when you give someone a present, there is supposed to be something inside?’

“The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and cried. ‘Oh, Daddy, it’s not empty at all. I blew kisses into the box. They’re all for you, Daddy.’

“The father was crushed. He put his arms around his little girl, and he begged for her forgiveness.

“Only a short time later, an accident took the life of the child.

“Her father kept the gold box by his bed for many years and, whenever he was discouraged, he would take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who had put it there.”

A moment of silence followed. Isla returned the necklace to the box.

Leo sighed. “I knew coming here would bother you. I knew you didn’t want to see me. Still, I don’t even know why and how I ended up here. It looks like my feet were just following my heartbeats and I found myself here.”

Isla remained silent. Her foot stopped tapping.

“My intention wasn’t the old necklace. It was a blow of kisses. If you won’t accept the necklace, then at least keep the box. I’m sorry if I ruined your day. I’ll leave now.”

Leo wept the tears with the back of his palm. He turned around and started walking away.

“Hey...” Isla mumbled.

Leo turned around. His lamenting eyes met hers.

Isla ran and hugged him tightly.

“I’m sorry.” Leo said.

Isla held Leo snugly. “Let’s go inside.”

Leo pulled Isla forward, they were face to face. “I have a better idea.”

“What?”

“Follow me.”

Leo held Isla’s hand and they disappeared into the darkness.

Leo’s watch read 2103hrs when they reached Ohio Street. The two gawked at the bright lights coming from the 13-floor IT plaza.

“What are we doing here?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Isla smiled as she followed Leo. They entered into Tanzania princess casino. Men and women were dreadfully hectic playing casino games.

A young beautiful woman of about 22 years old, in a shiny miniskirt followed the two. “How can I help you?”

Leo smiled, staring at the girl’s legs. “Looking for a man called Kamal.”

The girl grinned. “Wait here.”

Leo and Isla sat. Leo’s eyes explored the area. The place was full of beautiful girls. It reminded him of the old days. He saw people playing slots, roulette, and blackjacks.

“What are we doing here?” Isla said.

“Have you ever seen me playing pool table?”

“I hate these places.”

“It won’t take that long. I promise.”

After a minute, the young girl returned with a man of about thirty-something. His curvy trimmed beard and hair proved his Arabic nature.

“You Leo Felix..?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m kamal”

The two shook hands. Isla was puzzled.

“Mr. Patrick went silent four years ago and now he suddenly appears and recommends you...” Kamal smiled. “Looks like you’ve got something special.”

Leo smiled. He looked at Isla and winked.

“Follow me.”

The two followed Kamal to a high-class pool table. On the other side of the pool table, an Indian man stood.

“You brought a kid?” The Indian man said. The casino girls laughed loudly.

Kamal turned to Leo. “He’s been here for two months. No one has ever defeated him since. You sure you want to try your luck?”

Leo smiled. “It’ll be funny.”

“I put one million at stake.” The Indian man said. Girls around him shouted with ovations.

Leo remained silent, rubbing his chin.

“How much did your mama give you kid?” The Indian man said.

Leo smiled. "I put the girl." He pointed at Isla.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DAR, 1982

“Thank you for coming on such a short notice.” Christos said, digging into his briefcase, soon after entering his office.

Rayhan threw his eye across the room. Latricia yawned as she sat on the sofa. Saleem stretched his arms as he sat.

“I summoned you this time because the matter is very urgent.” Christos thumbed papers on his hands. “It’s a matter of life and death.”

Christos handed the papers to the three. They all took a deep look at the papers.

“President Fabian is selling Mererani to the capitalists?” Latricia snapped.

Christos nodded. “His seal is there.”

“If we have strong evidence, why shouldn’t we bring him before the law?” Latricia said.

Christos chuckled. “A dog never betrays its master.”

“We are a nation of laws. And nobody can ignore our Constitution. No one's above the law. And that includes the president.” Rayhan said.

Christos smiled. "That's why a government above the law is a menace to be defeated."

"And there are laws to defeat him." Latricia said.

Christos chuckled. "Go to law for a sheep and lose your cow."

"What are you suggesting?" Latricia said.

"Rayhan..." Christos sighed. "Tell your friends what you saw on our little trip."

Rayhan grunted. "I saw you with a box full of war rifles."

Christos nodded. "I went there to make a personal deal on behalf of Fabian. It's not only a box but 100,000 war rifles in exchange to Mererani."

"He's taking 100,000 war rifles personally?" Latricia said.

Christos nodded. "We don't have to be good in algebra to figure out what he's planning. Because whatever he's planning is nothing good."

The room went silent for a while. The cool breeze blowing the curtains could be heard.

"Has he already sold Mererani?" Saleem said.

“He’s completing the deal tonight. If we want to save our country we have to make sure that he doesn’t sign the deal and he won’t be able to sign the deal forever.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tanzania Princess Casino, 2020

Isla's eyes were wide open. The color drained out of her face. Everyone around the pool table went silent. It looked like they had never seen anyone staking someone's life before. The Indian man was licking his lips. A smile from ear to ear covered his face.

The Indian man moved closer to Isla as he inspected her from head to toe. He raised his hand to touch Isla's waist—

Leo extended his hand. "She's still in my possession. Don't dare to touch her."

The Indian man smiled, gazing at Isla erotically. "I'll add five hundred thousand for the beautiful girl. I'm putting 1.5 million at stake."

Leo smiled. "I'm in..."

"What the hell are you doing?" Isla snapped.

"I'm about to save two women I care of." Leo whispered in Isla's ear.

"The man has never lost before. You sure you want to put this girl's life at stake?" Kamal said.

Leo chuckled. "Take a deep breath Kamal, and just enjoy the game."

"Leo you fool..." Isla shouted.

Leo looked at Isla. "Everything will be okay."

"I will never forgive you!"

"To have faith is like to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don't grab hold of the water, because if you do you will sink and drown. Instead, you relax, and float." Leo said, "Have some faith Isla."

The male croupier took Isla. Isla and a bag of 1.5 million were placed closer to the high table. The men at the high table placed their bets for the game which was about to start.

Leo took the cue stick and so did the Indian man. The Indian man looked at Leo with a smiling face. Leo didn't smile back. He knew if he lost the match, he'd lose two women. He never smiles in those kinds of situations.

"You better run while you still have a chance kid." The Indian man said.

Leo smiled. "If your brain is not very good at memorizing then at least write this. I have no reason to lose and I won't."

The two stared at each other. After a coin toss, the croupier signaled the Indian man to start.

The Indian man started the break shot. He was the hell of a player. He was talented if not gifted. The way he pocketed the balls amazed Leo. He pocketed all his seven solid balls. The girls around him shouted happily. Leo's stomach was growling. Only one black ball was left for him to finish the job. In the world of pool table, that kind of victory is called super. You pocket all your seven balls with the eighth black ball without your opponent playing.

The Indian man rotated his cue stick as he was focusing on pocketing the black ball. He looked at Isla and licked his lips. Leo closed his eyes. In his whole life, he had never been beaten super.

The image of Isla and his mother appeared in front of him. He knew he made a reckless decision. *I'm sorry*, tears slowly dropped from his closed eyes.

He could hear the sound of a cue stick striking the ball. He lowered his head, his eyes still closed. Half a minute passed, no one was shouting. The place was as silent as it was before the shot. Leo opened his eyes slowly.

He saw the Indian man clenching his teeth. Leo's mouth dropped wide open when he turned to the pool table. The black ball was just a few inches from the pocket.

If somebody is gracious enough to give me a second chance, I won't need a third. Leo picked his cue stick. He looked at Isla. Tears were seeping through her cheeks. She didn't even know what was going on.

Leo started pocketing his striping balls, one by one. The only people who were smiling were those at the high table who betted on his side. After pocketing six balls, he knew he was in trouble.

His seventh stripe ball was few inches behind the black ball which was few inches from the pocket. If he struck recklessly, he will pocket the black ball before his seventh ball. That would be a foul and the Indian man will win. And if he won't pocket these balls correctly, he will give the Indian man a second chance if not a heaven-sent chance. He was in trouble.

He looked at the Indian man. He was smiling ear to ear. The girls behind him were shouting. The noises confused Isla who didn't understand what was going on.

Leo took a deep breath and firmly held his cue stick. The Indian man smiled because he knew in that kind of situation, only angels would win.

Leo pressed his cue stick hardly to the seventh stripe ball. The pressure caused the ball to jump in the air. Everyone around the pool table covered their wide opened mouths with their palms as they watched the ball swinging in thin air. The ball slowly dropped down and entered into the pocket.

The men who placed their bets on Leo rose from their chairs and started shouting as Leo finished pocketing the black ball. The Indian man's eyes were wide open. His hands were on his waist.

Leo looked at the Indian man. "I am not going to say I told you so, but I did."

Leo ran to Isla. He took the bag with 1.5 million and held Isla's hand as they ran out of the casino.

As they got out of the casino, a white Nissan Leaf stopped in front of them. Leo grabbed his bag tightly. His body started trembling when he saw Isla's father, the dean coming out of the Nissan. Isla ran towards her father. Her father inspected her face. Two young muscular men came behind Leo. One was short and the other was tall. They came from the casino.

"She used your daughter's life as a bait." The tall one said.

"He almost lost the game." The short one said.

The dean clenched his teeth, he was snarling. “How dare you fool?”

Leo lowered his head, the hand holding his bag was shaking. Dean raised Leo’s head and gave him a heavy punch on the face. Leo groaned. After throwing three more punches, the two young men held dean to prevent him from beating Leo even more.

“I will kill you.” Dean shouted as the two men escorted him inside his car, trailed by Isla.

Isla stared at Leo before closing the Nissan’s door. “I hate you, Leo!”

Tears were dropping off Leo’s face, a fake smile accompanying the tears.

“When you come to school, you will find your letter of dismissal.” The dean said as he drove away.

I’m sorry that nothing I do is good enough. Leo’s eyes escorted the Nissan Leaf as it disappeared from his sight. His face was too heavy. He could feel the pain without even touching the face.

As he stood, staring at the darkness, something heavy hit his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DAR, 1982

“Assassinating a president is an act of treason.” Rayhan said.

Latricia and Saleem slowly nodded.

“If we let him live, innocent Tanzanians will die.”

“If peace can only come through killing someone, then I don't want it.” Rayhan said.

“There is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people.” Christos said.

Rayhan sniffed. “Why kill people who are killing people to show people that killing people is wrong?”

Christos smiled. “I know what bothers you.”

Rayhan looked at Latricia and Saleem. Their hearts wanted to address something, their mouths resisted.

Christos signaled Zander to bring something. Zander brought a file and handed it to Christos. Christos opened the file and came out with papers. He gave the papers to the three agents.

“If you're worried about your safety, I'll take care of you.”

The three thumbed over the papers.

“It’s an agreement letter.” Christos inhaled and exhaled. “It shows that I’m the one who ordered you to kill the president. I’ll put my signature and seal on the paper and so will you. If things go wrong, I’ll take full responsibility. You will be safe.”

The three went silent. Their eyes were on the papers.

“If you’re worried about who’ll keep that file, then don’t.”

Christos said, “We will lock it somewhere very safe and divide the keys into four fragments. Each one of us will keep one fragment. To open that locker, the four of us must be there. In that way, the file will be safe.”

Saleem dropped the paper on the table and signed it. “Let us sacrifice our today so that our children can have a better tomorrow.”

Latricia stared at the paper for a minute and then she signed it. Christos took the paper, signed it, and stamped his seal. Christos pushed the paper to Rayhan. Rayhan’s eyes were staring at the ceiling board.

Christos held Rayhan’s shoulder. “If we don't make tough decisions today our children are going to have to make much, much tougher decisions tomorrow.”

Latricia looked at Rayhan. “Ray, sometimes the hardest thing and the right thing are the same.”

Rayhan looked at the papers. “These files must be stored securely and I must have my key fragment before going to the mission.”

Christos nodded. “Soon after you sign, we’ll go together to the secure storage location.”

Rayhan took out his ballpoint pen. He looked at the paper. He inhaled and exhaled slowly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TST, 2020

The door wasn't locked. SJ entered the room trailed by three men. There was no one in the room. The bed was well and straight dressed. The clock on the wall ticked 0800hrs. *Tuesday*, SJ read at the calendar hanging on the wall.

"We're looking for something like this." SJ raised her card, "search every corner of this room. The card must be somewhere."

The men started searching the room. SJ opened the drawer. *Leo Felix*, she read the student ID card. Her heart was beating very fast.

The men searched for about an hour. They got nothing.

"Madam, looks like the card isn't here." A tall strapping man said, hands on his waist. The man looked like Batista. The muscles in his neck were like they were going to tear out.

"Keep looking." SJ said.

"If the card is important, why shouldn't we ask Leo?"

"Leo is not supposed to know this... so is my husband."

The men continued searching the room. They removed the mattress from the bed. They removed the pillows. They looked over the curtains. They looked everywhere from the floor to the ceiling. There was no sign of the card. The clock ticked 0930hrs.

“Madam, they will be out of class soon. We better arrange the room and leave.” Batista said, wiping sweat from his face.

SJ sighed. “Fine... I didn’t want Leo to be a part of this. I have no choice.”

“Sorry madam but can I ask something?”

SJ looked at Batista.

“Why is the card that important?”

“Tell your men to put the room in order. You go to the class and fetch Leo for me.”

“What if a professor is in the class?”

“I don’t like to get bored and don’t like to repeat myself.”

Batista asked the other two men to arrange Leo’s room and left. SJ scratched her long-dressed hair. She moved here and there as the men arranged the room. Her eyes peeked over the watch several times. After 15 minutes, Batista returned.

“Where is Leo?” SJ snapped.

“He’s not in the class.”

SJ raised her eyebrows. “what? It’s Tuesday.”

“According to his classmates, he hasn’t shown up in class since yesterday.”

“What?”

Isla idly sat in the canteen. She gazed over the sky as she sipped her tea. Her heart was empty and lonely. At least the tea gave her warmth. She tried hard to fight the emptiness and loneliness but love is just like a quicksand, the further you fall in, the harder it is to get out. Your heart isn’t plastic, and it isn’t a toy but if you want it broken, give it to a boy. She thought.

As she continued sipping, someone knocked on the table. Isla raised her head. Macy stood in front of her, two girls behind her. One was white and the other was black. The three girls crossed their arms and their feet were slowly tapping. The muscles on their faces tightened.

Isla grunted. “What do—”

“Where is Leo?” Macy said.

“Am I his mother?” Isla said.

“Macy... why are we wasting time?” The black girl said, brandishing her fist.

Macy leaned on the table. “We have heard the rumors.”

Isla chuckled. “Rumors are carried by haters, spread by fools, and accepted by idiots.”

“Macy, we should teach her a lesson.” The white girl said, rocking back and forth on her heels.

“Yeah..! Her mother didn’t teach her proper manners.”

Isla exploded out of her chair. “Don’t da—”

“You went away with Leo last night. You came back, he didn’t.” Macy said.

“Macy c’mon... My hands are itching.” The black girl said.

“Let’s teach her a lesson.” The white girl said.

“She should never mess with your boyfriend.” The black girl said.

“Where is Leo, you daughter of a bitch?” Macy snapped.

Isla exhaled, jutting her chin.

“She won’t talk voluntarily.” The black girl said.

Macy grabbed Isla’s blouse. “Where is my boyfriend?”

Isla flared her nostrils. “I’m no—”

Macy extended her hand to slap Isla. Isla closed her eyes. Before her palm hit Isla’s face, Macy’s hand was blocked.

“What’s wrong?” Daniel asked, his hand holding Macy’s arm.

Macy moaned, pleading Daniel to release her arm.

“Nothing wrong.” Isla said.

Daniel chuckled. “I just stopped a hand from hitting your face and you tell me nothing is wrong?”

“She knows where Macy’s boyfriend is.” The black girl said.

“What?” Daniel said.

“She knows where Leo is.” The white girl said.

Daniel turned to the girls, his face was red. “Disappear and never appear in front of her again.”

The girls moved backward.

Daniel gritted his teeth. “I said, disappear.”

“If you want us to disappear peacefully, tell your girlfriend to return Leo to me before the sunset. If not, she’ll have to suffer the consequences.” Macy said as she left, trailed by the other two girls.

Baraka was on the way to his room. He walked slowly as he whispered and sang. A few meters to his room, he met Daliah.

“Hello!” Baraka waved.

“Hi!” Daliah said, giving off a slow and sexy smile.

“Daliah..!”

Daliah stopped and turned.

Baraka scratched his hair. “Excuse me, can we talk for a moment.”

Daliah nodded.

“I... I...I...” Baraka bit his lips and glanced away. “Never mind, it can wait.”

Daliah gave a toothy smile. “Don’t worry, and just tell me.”

Baraka forked his fingers through his hair. “I wanted to tell you something.”

“I’m listening.”

Baraka avoided Daliah’s eyes and gazed over the sky.

“If you can’t talk then goodbye...”

“No, wait.”

Daliah crossed her arms.

“Daliah, I always wanted to tell you this but I never got a chance.”

“Tell me what?”

Baraka exhaled. He dropped his head.

Daliah smiled. “You are wasting my time.”

Baraka inhaled a deep breath and blew out slowly. “Daliah I love you. I want you to be my girlfriend.”

Daliah gazed at Baraka. Baraka dodged her eyes.

Baraka smacked his lips. “I really love you.”

Daliah chuckled. “Can I give you a piece of advice?”

Cold sweat seeped over Baraka’s face. “What?”

“Concentrate on your studies.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DAR, 1982

Rayhan and Saleem were looking at a big house using their binoculars through the Range rover windshield. Stars covered the whole sky, leaving no space for the moon. The bright lights coming from the house enlightened the area. There were no houses near the big house. It looked like a place where people only go during vacations. Maybe rich people like living alone. Loneliness is the universal problem of rich people.

“Christos was right.” Latricia said as she entered the Rover.

“What?” Saleem said.

“Fabian is here.”

“He couldn’t make an illicit deal in the statehouse.”

Rayhan grunted. “How many men?”

“Ten men guarding outside. I’m not sure about inside, maybe less than five.” Latricia said.

“The president is walking with less than twenty guards?”

Rayhan said.

“Most of his guards are in the statehouse. He took few private guards only.” Saleem said.

Rayhan nodded. "How good are the guards?"

Latricia smiled. "You could handle them even if you were asleep."

"I'll take care of things inside. You two take care of the outside." Rayhan said.

"When is the deal to be made?" Saleem said.

"Midnight..." Rayhan said.

Latricia peeked over her watch. "We have two hours."

"If we want to get out of this place safe, we'll have ten minutes only soon after attacking." Saleem said.

"Are we ready?" Latricia said.

The two men nodded.

The three walked out of the car. Latricia opened the boot and took off small bottles written lachrymator.

"This will stimulate the nerves of the lacrimal gland in the eye to produce tears." Latricia smiled. "You better start putting on your gas masks."

"Spare us a science lesson. We have a job to do." Saleem said.

The three smiled as they put on their gas masks.

They walked to the fence vigilantly. There were no guards outside the fence. When they got near the fence, Latricia took the tear gas. Rayhan and Saleem cocked their guns. Latricia signaled and the men nodded. She threw the tear gas to the other side of the wall.

The three jumped over the wall. Smoke covered the whole area. They could hear men moaning and groaning. Latricia and Saleem started shooting Fabian's men. Rayhan vigilantly entered the house that Fabian was in.

The shooting proceeded for five minutes. When the smoke disappeared, Fabian's men were down. Latricia and Saleem remained alert, their eyes inspecting the whole area. As they continued making sure everything was okay outside, they heard three gunshots coming from the house.

The two turned their guns to the door. They could only hear the sound of wind blowing.

After a minute, Rayhan came out. His mask was hanging on his hand. He exhaled deeply looking at the bodies lying on the ground.

"Mission complete." Rayhan said.

Latricia and Saleem removed their masks.

"Everyone okay...?" Latricia said.

The two nodded.

“We need to leave.” Saleem said.

The three nodded. Latricia led the way, Rayhan and Saleem trailing her.

“We saved our country once again.” Latricia said.

“Soldiers usually win the battles and generals get the credit for them.” Saleem said.

Latricia opened the gate. “Yeah. Rayhan wh—”

A gunshot was heard. Latricia fell, blood seeping off her body.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TST, 2020

SJ barged into Dean's office. Dean was taking his breakfast.

"Freddie... what have you done to Leo?" SJ said.

Freddie cocked his head.

"What have you done?"

"Would you like some tea?"

SJ exhaled.

Freddie raised a cup. "I think it's important to start the day with a proper breakfast."

"Leo Felix. What happened to him?"

Freddie slouched on the couch. "He took Isla to the club, used her life as a bait to play his perilous casino games."

"I'm not asking what he did. I'm asking what you did to him."

Freddie shrugged. "Gave him few punches."

"The kid is nowhere to be seen."

Freddie squared an ankle over one knee. "Aha! I also told him to come and take his termination letter. Maybe he decided not to waste his energy and just left."

“You’re terminating him from school?”

Freddie nodded.

“Why?”

“I don’t know why you like this kid so much, Sonia.” Freddie chuckled. “You asked me to give him a scholarship. He was a prime suspect for burning the library when you asked me to forgive him and said you would handle the situation. Now, he’s messing with our daughter and you’re showing a lenient face again. Why do you like that kid?”

“He’s still young. He deserves the second chance.”

Freddie chuckled. “Second chance?”

SJ nodded.

“You know what...” Freddie sighed. “When I was eight, my big brother became a drug addict. One morning, he stabbed me. I barely survived the surgery. After a discussion between my parents and the police, they agreed that he deserved a second chance. A year later, he stabbed our mother. She never survived.”

SJ droop her head. “He will change.”

“There are things that you cannot change no matter how many clothes you change.”

Baraka sat under a tree outside his room. He leaned on the tree gazing over the moving clouds. His happiness floated away like waves of the ocean along the coast of his life. He heard footsteps coming in his direction. He turned hastily. He was slack-mouthed when he saw Daniel.

“Baraka, what’s up?” Daniel said.

Baraka waved.

Daniel chuckled. “Hey, do you know where Leo is?”

“I don’t.”

“C’mon. He’s your friend.”

“Leo has got no friend.”

“Are you okay?”

Baraka rested his chin on his palm.

“Hey...”

“I don’t know where Leo is.”

“You okay?”

“Do I look so?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Everything...”

“We must find Leo. His girlfriend is causing lots of troubles to Isla.”

Baraka exhaled. “How does Leo do this?”

“Do what?”

“There must be a secret that he knows.”

Daniel sighed. “What are you talking about?”

“How does he get girls to like him?”

“I think the degree of your stupidity is enough to boil water.”

Baraka scratched his head. “How did I forget that? You don’t know the secret too.”

“What?”

“Leo took your girlfriend. If you knew the secret, your girlfriend couldn’t have been taken.”

Daniel clenched his fist. “Do you know that when you are dead, you do not know you are dead? It is only painful for others. The same applies when you are stupid.”

“We should all take lectures from Leo.”

Daniel grabbed Baraka’s shirt. “You fo—”

“Excuse me...”

The voice pierced Baraka’s ears. A megawatt shock raised his head reluctantly. His eyes met with an electrifying smile, showing the girl’s bewitching, unicorn-white teeth. Her coral-black hair toppled over her shoulders as the wind blew.

“Daliah...” Baraka whispered.

Daliah smiled. “I’m sorry. I’m looking for Leo.”

Baraka fanned his heated face with his hands. “You too...?”

“Have you guys seen Leo?” Daliah said.

Baraka sighed. “How co—”

“We’re also looking for him.” Daniel said.

“Please, let me know if you see him.” Daliah said.

Daniel nodded. Daliah walked away.

Baraka’s hands were on his head as he watched Daliah walking away, her hips rolling and undulating.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DAR, 1982

“Press hard.” Rayhan brought together Patricia’s palms to her stomach, the wounded area. Saleem was shooting the attackers, outside the gate.

Latricia moaned, clenching her teeth firmly.

“Hang on a little longer.” Rayhan said as he picked his gun.

He walked closer to the gate. The doors of the white SUV Range rover were opened. About five men wearing black masks were behind the doors. Rayhan cocked his gun well, ready to react to their attacks.

Saleem and Rayhan lucratively shot three men. The other two men rushed back into the Rover and drove away.

“Go check Lat...” Rayhan shouted as he wasted his bullets shooting the car which in next to no time, vanished out of his sight.

He ran to the three men lying on the ground. Two were dead and one was breathing difficulty.

“Who are you?” Rayhan said as he removed the man’s mask.

The man spat blood as he coughed.

Rayhan grabbed the man, pulling him up. “Who sent you?”

“Kl... K...—” the man closed his eyes, permanently.

“Fuck it!” Rayhan snapped as he let loose the man’s body, letting it fall like a sack.

“Rayhan, let’s go.” Saleem shouted, Latricia on his back.

Rayhan followed Saleem to where they parked their Rover. Saleem opened the back door and laid Latricia. He ran to the driver’s seat.

“Wait...” Rayhan said.

“We need to rush Latricia to the hospital.” Saleem said.

Rayhan squatted, inspecting the undercarriage. He raised his hand, beckoning Saleem.

Saleem fell to his knees. His mouth dropped open. “A bomb?”

Rayhan sighed. “Christos that son of a bitch.”

“We need to run.” Saleem said.

Saleem carried Latricia on his back. Rayhan took the first aid kit from the Rover and they ran away.

After running the whole night, they stopped in a small jungle. The sun was slowly showing up from the east. Saleem leaned

Latricia on a tree. He removed the bandage which was now red. He replaced it with a new bandage.

“You’ll be okay.” Saleem said.

Latricia tried a smile. “No, I’m losing a lot of blood.”

Saleem sighed. “You will make it.”

Rayhan was setting a radio he took from the Rover. He pulled the antenna and moved here and there.

“Tcha...Tcha ...Tcha...” The radio sounded.

“What do we do now?” Saleem said.

“I’m trying t—”

The radio shouted. “President Fabian has been assassinated last night. The police force has confirmed the assassins to be three special agents named Latricia Kimala, Saleem Abeid, and Rayhan Mkama. The criminals have been declared as the enemies of the state and they are currently on run. The government of the united republic of Tanzania is requesting all Tanzanians to show their full cooperation in helping the police force catch these criminals. They are wanted either dead or alive.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TST, 2020

Isla stared at the food in front of her. Her hands were rubbing a small gift box. The necklace swung in her neck.

“You should eat something.” Rosemary, her friend said.

Isla sniffed, her eyes glistened.

“You have been looking at that box for two hours now.”

“It has been a week.”

“You should eat.”

“The story he told me when he gave me this box.” Isla sniffed.

“As if he knew he was going to disappear.”

“He will be found.”

“I’m afraid I’ll lose him. I left him behind once again.”

“The school has notified the police. His name is on the news and in every newspaper. We’ll soon find something.”

“A week has passed.”

“Isla...” Rosemary patted her. “No news is the good news.”

“It’s my fault, Rose.”

“No. Y—”

A serious knock came from the door. Rosemary went to look.

“We have a problem.” Rosemary said after looking outside.

Isla wept her tears and walked out. Macy and her two friends were outside.

“What do you want?” Isla said.

Macy’s toe tapped a staccato rhythm. “Look at her face. She’s not even troubled.”

“Watch your mouth.” Rosemary said.

“She’s the reason for Leo’s disappearance.” Macy said.

“How sure are you?” rosemary said.

“She left with him the night he disappeared. She came back, Leo didn’t.” The black girl behind Macy shouted.

“Where is Leo?” Macy snapped.

“Why would I hide him?” Isla said.

“Stop playing a victim to the problems you have created.” Macy said.

“You are crazy.” Isla said.

“Of course I'm crazy, but that doesn't mean I'm wrong.”

“One is very crazy when in love.” The white girl behind Macy said.

“Get out of my place.” Isla said.

“Not without Leo.” Macy said.

“Never fight for someone’s attention that hard. It’s either you have it or you don’t.” Isla said as she started walking inside her room.

Macy rushed and pulled her hair. Isla moaned as she struggled to remove herself away from Macy’s hands. Rosemary rushed to help Isla but Macy’s friends blocked her. The girls were pushing and pulling each other.

“HEY HEY HEY...” The voice caused the girls to stop fighting.

Isla was breathing heavily, so were the other girls. “Baraka?”

“What’s wrong?” Baraka said, Rachel behind him.

Macy exhaled. “He knows where Leo is.”

Isla sighed. “I don’t.”

Baraka chuckled. “Fighting for someone who is nowhere to be seen?”

The girls were exhaling deeply.

“If I were you, I would concentrate on finding Leo first. Unless he is alive, these fights are worthless.”

“Do you think I’ll get Leo to love me?” Daliah said.

“Of course. You’re beautiful.” Sophia, Daliah’s friend said.

“You need to steal a man's heart if he won't give it to you willingly.” Evelyn, Daliah’s friend said.

“Who’s in his heart?” Daliah said.

Evelyn shrugged. “Some says Isla and others say Macy.”

“I can’t lose him.” Daliah said.

“We will help you, don’t worry.” Sophia said.

“It's not that I can't live without him, it's just that I don't even want to try.” Daliah said. It is amazing how a person who was once just a stranger, can suddenly mean the world to you. She thought.

“We have an advantage.” Evelyn said. “We know our enemies, they don’t know us.”

“They are fighting each other, every day.” Sophia said.

Daliah smiled. “We can’t just sit and watch them fight. We have to make them fight more. We have to make them obliterate each other.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DAR, 1982

Rayhan kicked a stone. "CHRISTOS..."

"We need to get that file." Saleem said.

"We have three key fragments only. Without Christos's key fragment, we can't."

Saleem sighed. "What now?"

"I think we need to disappear for some time. When things get less tight, we find the file and clear our names."

"We are wanted all over the country. What if we get caught?"

"We must split."

"Split? What about Lat?"

Latricia moaned. "Leave me here and go."

"We're not leaving you!" Saleem and Rayhan snapped.

"I'll be a burden."

"We will get out of this together." Rayhan said.

"If we split, someone must go with Lat." Saleem said.

"I'll go with her." Rayhan said.

“No, I’ll go with her.” Saleem said.

“Listen... at least one of us must survive to clear our names.”
Rayhan said.

“Rayhan, you’re smart. I believe in you. If we get caught, you will clear our names.”

Rayhan smiled. “I’ll go with Lat.”

“No. You go alone, I’ll take her.”

Rayhan removed a coin.

Saleem chuckled. “Our old way of solving disputes...”

“Head, you go with lat, and if tail, I go with lat.”

The two nodded. Rayhan tossed the coin in the air. The coin rolled and rolled. It fell with head above.

“I’ll take lat.” Saleem said.

The three were looking at each other. The sound of wind blowing the trees is what could be heard. They worked together for a long time. They were like a family. Rayhan’s heart was aching. He knew it was the same to Latricia and Saleem.

Rayhan looked at Latricia. “Don’t die. This is an order.”

Latricia tried a smile. “You too, don’t get yourself into troubles.”

“I will do whatever it takes to clear our names.” Rayhan said, his palm on Latricia’s face.

“We will miss you.” Tears seeped over Latricia’s cheeks.

Rayhan hugged Latricia. Tears dropped from his eyes. He stood and hugged Saleem.

“We will find each other when things get cool.” Saleem said.

“Don’t get caught.” Rayhan sniffed. “This is—”

Saleem sniffed. “AN ORDER.”

Rayhan picked his bag. He stared at his two friends. Rayhan knew goodbyes will always hurt, pictures will never replace having been there, memories good and bad will bring tears, and words can never replace feelings.

“Ray...” Latricia said.

“Lat...”

“In case we won’t meet again—”

“We will meet again.”

“Just in case...” Latricia sobbed. “You were a great partner. You were a grand family to me.”

Rayhan droop his head. "Goodbye Lat and Saleem."

"Don't say goodbye, goodbyes are forever. Say, see you later."
Latricia said.

The three laughed.

Rayhan watched Latricia and Saleem disappearing away from his sight. He held his bag tight. He would now face one of the hardest things in the world, grieving the loss of a people who are still alive. His palm was on his wet face.

Where do I go now? God knows. He plodded into the trees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TST, 2020

SJ rested her chin on her palm. “Leo’s disappearance is officially scaring me.”

Patrice exhaled. “Do you think he has got him?”

“I don’t want to think that.”

“He’s always been two steps ahead of us.”

“If he has Leo, that’s very perilous.”

“I warned you.”

“It was a do or die.”

“There is one and half a month to a general election. He’ll do anything to annihilate us.”

“We’re not sure if he has Leo.”

“What if he has him?”

“He’ll need our cards.”

“If he found Leo that means he knows about us too.”

“Worrying will never change the outcome.”

“We had a new life.”

“You call this a life?”

“At least we are living.”

“Have you forgotten our promise?”

“We have kids. We can’t put them in danger.”

“You can’t run from your past. You will end up running in circles.”

“We can forget our past, forgive ourselves and begin again right now.”

SJ shook her head. “That’s too selfish. It won’t help us and it won’t make our country a better place.”

“You know what?” Patrice chuckled. “Sometimes it is foolish to fight if you cannot hope to win.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

BAGAMOYO, PWANI.

2020

The breeze of a cool wind from the Indian Ocean pierced into the window and swayed the man's grey hair. The man sat, his hands flattened on the chair. He gazed over the boats and yachts arriving at the dock. Men and women unloaded fishes from the boats and yachts.

The door opened and a man of about 70 years old entered. His powerfully built body opposed his age.

The man on the chair sighed. "What's up?"

"Everything is okay. It's time to proceed." The man standing said.

"Do we have satisfactory information?"

"Yes."

The man on the chair held his cane stick. "It's time to visit our old friend's son."

"Will you kill him?"

"Why am I struggling in my old age?"

The man standing sighed.

“I left a lot of traces behind. That’s why this old man is struggling hard now to clean the messes.”

“He wasn’t part of this.”

“I made that mistake once. This time, I won’t leave any traces behind.” The man humped over his cane, each step shaking and carefully taken as he left the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

TST, 2020

A baronial envelope lied on the door's bottom gap. Isla's heartbeat rate accelerated, her pace slowed down. Her brows knitted in a frown.

"Rose!!" she shouted, stepping away from the door. "You need to see this."

Rose came out running, a bamboo cooking spoon swinging on her hand.

"What's wrong?" Rose said.

Isla pointed to the envelope lying on the floor.

"What is it?"

Isla shook her head.

"We should open it."

"No, we can't."

"Why, Isla?"

"What if it has something perilous?"

"Someone put it in our room, it must have our message."

"We have lots of enemies."

“Isla, I’m opening it.”

“Don’t.”

Rose tied well her khanga. She picked the envelope and opened it. Isla leaned on the wall, frustration crinkled her eyes.

“It’s a letter.” Rose said, holding a tri-folded paper in her hand.

Isla’s pupils dilated as she walked close to Rose. Rose unfolded the paper.

Tomorrow at 8 PM, come alone to the store near the school’s lavatory. Rose looked at Isla after finishing reading the letter.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BAGAMOYO, 2020

Everything was dark. Was he locked in a dark room or were his eyes removed? He tried to lift his hands but they were tightly held by a rope behind the chair he was on. His legs were tied. Where was he? What happened? He felt as if someone was hammering his head.

As he kept questioning himself, the door opened. The incandescent light bulbs in the room went on. The room went bright. He squinted, hardly seeing two men entering the room. After a minute, he could see clearly. An old man of about 90 years old with a cane stick in his hand and another old man of about 70 years old was standing in front of him.

The room was small with no windows. There were bloodstains everywhere on the dark gray painted walls of the room. There was only one chair, the one he was sitting on. The floor was dirty. The smell of urine and feces bothered his nose. He saw his black bag at the corner of the room. The bag seemed unopened.

“Where am I? Who are you?” Leo mumbled.

The man with a cane stick smiled. “I’m a man with a single request.”

Leo turned to the man without a cane stick.

A man with a cane chuckled. “He is the man who will make sure I get what I request for, no matter what.”

Leo’s forehead puckered. “What do you want from me?”

“Your father gave you a card.” A man with a cane showed his card to Leo. “I want it.”

Leo’s heartbeat rate increased. “Never seen such a thing before.”

A man with a cane turned to the other man. “You said Abiola is lying on bed at IFISI hospital right now?”

A man without a cane nodded.

“Why?” said a man with a cane.

“Carotid artery disease. It’s getting worse. She needs an immediate TCAR.” A man without a cane said.

“How much time does she have?”

“Less than five days, if she’s lucky...”

“Oh—”

Leo gasped, trying to untie himself from the chair. “Don’t dare to touch my mother.”

A man with a cane smiled. “Looks like our friend has remembered something. The card...?”

Leo stared at the roof.

“Anha, let me put it this way.” A man with a cane said, “if you give me the card, I’ll arrange safe travel for your mother to India where she will get high-quality treatment from high-class doctors. I’ll pay for everything for her while in India and make sure she comes back home safely. Is that enough for you to give me a card?”

Leo remained silent.

“Oh my God!” a man with a cane said, “It takes time to persuade men to do even what is for their own good.”

Leo breathed heavily. “I know where the card is.”

A man with a cane smiled. “Do you think that’s fair?”

“What?” Leo said.

“Everything I have offered, just for a single card...?”

“You—”

“Do you know Sonia Japheth?”

Leo narrowed his eyes. “Yes—”

“Do you know Patrice?”

Leo nodded. “Wh—”

“These two have other cards similar to this. I want all the three cards and your mother won’t die.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible... the word itself says 'I'm possible'!”

“How will I get the cards?”

“I should be asking you. It was you and your friends who gave the cards to them.”

“What are you talking about?”

A man with a cane smiled. “A document that can save the school. Don’t tell me you believed in it?”

Leo’s eyes widened. “How did you know that?”

“Sonia and Patrice are not the people who they seem to be.”

“Why should I believe in you?”

The man chuckled. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that Sonia or SJ as you guys address her burnt the library so that she could get the cards. Thanks to you and your friends, she got the cards. I want them.”

“Who are you? What is so special with these cards?”

“Go get me the cards. Your mother’s life depends on it.”

Leo slammed his eyes shut.

“You have two days, more than that your mother dies. Talk to anyone about us, what you’ve seen or what we’ve talked about, and your mother dies. We’ll be watching your every move.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

TST, 2020

Every second the clock ticked, Isla's heartbeat rate increased. She kept on reading the letter.

"I'm sure this is Leo." She said.

"Stop moving and sit. You need to relax." Rosemary said.

"I used to meet with Leo in the store. This is him."

"You haven't slept the whole night."

"When I close my eyes I see him, when I open my eyes I miss him."

"We're not sure if Leo wrote this letter. It's printed, not handwritten."

"This is Leo. I need to go."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, it says alone."

"Isla—"

"God will never give you anything you can't handle, so don't stress."

The clock on the wall read 8 PM. Isla waved at Rose and walked out. The school was very quiet, so was her heart. Trees were quiet without the birds. Her heart was quiet without him. She couldn't remember the last time she slept well. She's been having many late conversations with the moon, he tells her about the sun, and she tells him about Leo.

After five minutes, she found herself in front of the storage room. After hesitating for a moment, she pushed the door. It wasn't locked. She slowly paced inside. It was very dark. Memories she had with Leo the last time they were in this room began circulating in her mind. Good memories are best to be cherished with both eyes closed, she slowly closed her eyes.

A flick of lights jolted her from her memories. Her body started trembling. Was it Leo? She slowly turned as she opened her eyes. Her eyes widened as her body temperature rose.

"What are you doing in here?" Macy said.

"I should ask the same question." Isla said.

"Is this one of your tricks? To kidnap me as you did to Leo?"

Macy unfolded a piece of paper.

Isla's heart was pumping fast. Macy was holding a letter, similar to the one she received.

He was confused. How would he steal the cards from SJ? Why was the old man asking for the cards? Who was the old man? If he needed money, he could've taken the 1.5 million in a bag but the old man returned the bag with money to him. What was inside the cards? Leo forked his fingers in his hair. He had to save her mother's life. She was the only one he's left with.

"Leo? Oh my God!" A guard at the gate stopped him. His eyes were wide. "Follow me."

Leo followed the guard into his office. It was a room near the gate. The clock on the wall read 8:10 PM. There were two other guards in the room. They were all shocked seeing Leo. The guard who brought him made a call.

"Leo is back. He's in my office right now." The guard said over the phone. He hung up.

"Where have you been all these days?" Said the other guard, he seemed to be the oldest in the room.

Leo sighed. "Somewhere very bad."

"What happened?"

"I need my lawyer."

The two other guards chuckled. After a minute, a car stopped outside the office. SJ rushed inside.

“Leo?” she muttered, not believing what she saw. “Wait for me outside.”

Leo walked out. News spread like a virus, a person sneezes and it is everywhere. Many students were outside the guard’s office. Their faces reflected the happiness they had in their hearts. His heart was relieved. He gave off a healthy smile to his fellow students. Baraka rushed out of nowhere and hugged him.

“Hey man, I’m glad to see you.” Baraka said.

“You’ve grown thin man.”

“Many bad things happened.”

“Where is Isla?”

“Go finish up with SJ, we’ve a lot of things to talk about.”

Leo entered SJ’s car and they went to her office.

“How are you?” SJ said.

“Fine...”

“You disappeared, police have been looking for you everywhere in the past two weeks without success and today you just reappear out of nowhere and you’re saying you’re fine?”

Leo sighed, staring at the rotating fan.

“What happened?”

“Nothing good...”

“If you tell me the truth, I can help.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Were you kidnapped?”

Leo gritted his teeth.

“Did someone kidnap you?”

“Why are you so worried about me?”

“Tell me the truth.”

“I have nothing to tell you.”

SJ leaned on the couch. “Fine.”

“Can I leave now?”

“No, your father gave you a card. Do you have it?”

Leo’s heart started racing.

SJ dug into her drawer and came out with two cards. “The card is similar to this. Looks like an ATM card but has no bank name.”

“I’ve never seen such a thing before.”

“I knew your father. He was my friend.”

“My father’s friends attended his funeral.”

“There is a huge amount of money hidden in a safe box. We need three cards to open that box. This money will help you and your mother. That’s what your father wanted.”

“Is that why you pretended to care about me?”

“No. This money—” Her phone rang.

She stood. “Yes, I’ve him.”

SJ walked out of the office. “The kid is very stubborn but I’ll handle him. We’ll get the card Patrice, don’t worry.”

SJ returned to her office. It was empty. Leo was nowhere to be seen. She rushed to her drawer, the cards were gone.

She rushed to her phone. “Put the school under lockdown, now. Make sure nobody walks in, nobody walks out. Take every other guard you have and search the whole school. Leo Felix has something that doesn’t belong to him in his hands. I want him caught as soon as possible. Announce this to everyone in the school, including students. Whoever helps us get him will be awarded 1 million cash and whoever helps him hide will be terminated.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

TST, 2020

Freddie, the dean flashed into SJ's office. "You didn't tell me that Leo has returned."

"I was going to tell you."

"We were supposed to hand him over to the police. You took him and interrogated him alone."

"I just needed few minutes with him."

"What happened?"

"He's stolen something valuable."

Freddie chuckled. "That's your favorite kid."

"I'll find him."

"An hour has passed since he disappeared."

"He's still on this campus. Guards are looking everywhere for him."

"What is that valuable thing?"

"It's better if you don't know."

"You've been doing a lot of strange things recently. What is it that I don't know?"

“Sometimes, it’s better not to know.”

“I’m your husband.”

“This is for your own good.”

“Lies and secrets are like cancer to the soul, Sonia. They eat away what’s good and leave only destruction behind.”

“I’ll tell you someday.”

“Keep—” Freddie’s phone rang. He picked it up. His face grew red as he talked over the phone.

SJ slouched over the couch, her brows bumped together in a scowl.

Freddie drummed his fingers on the table. “Leo that son of a bitch!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Isla is in the emergency room, unconscious.”

“What?”

“She’s in a fight with a girl called Macy. They were fighting for Leo.”

SJ’s mouth remained open.

“Is this the kid you were asking a second chance for? He just made his first appearance, he’s the most wanted man in the school and my daughter is in the emergency room.”

“I—”

“I’m adding 1 more million to whoever helps us get Leo. This kid needs to be found and terminated before he causes more trouble.”

Leo knocked on the door several times. His eyes surveyed the whole area vigilantly. He knocked on the door again. After a minute, the door opened.

“Leo, what are you doing here?” Daliah whispered. She was in her nightdress.

“I’m sorry. I had nowhere else to go.”

“Come in, quickly.”

Leo entered. Daliah surveyed the darkness and closed the door.

“What happened?”

“I’ll just be here for few hours. I’ll leave at dawn.”

“Why is everyone looking for you?”

“I’ve done something appalling.”

“I trust you. Appalling things happen, but sometimes those appalling things... they save a life.”

“Be careful who you trust, the devil was once an angel.”

“Trusting you is my decision. Proving me right is your choice.”

“Dal—”

“Leo, I want that part of you that you refuse to give to anyone.”

“Can I use your shower?”

Daliah lowered her head. “That way.”

“Thanks.”

“Will you eat?”

“No.”

“You need the energy to stay focused. I’ll prepare a meal while you take shower.”

Leo smiled, entering into the bathroom. He found himself staring at the mirror for a minute.

Am I doing the right thing? Why am I being so selfish, doing things for my own benefit only, without caring if they might hurt others? He turned up the tap, allowing water to spray over his body.

After five minutes, Leo walked out. Daliah was on phone. She squinted in a furtive manner after seeing him.

“I’ll call you later.” She quickly hung up the phone.

“Who’s that?” Leo said.

“I... Uh... was talking to my aunt.”

Leo stared at her, she dodged the eyes.

“Um... Ah... She was asking if I will visit her the day after tomorrow.”

“Your aunt...?”

“Yeah, I visit her often on weekends.”

Leo looked at the watch, it was 23hrs.

“The food is ready, let’s go.”

Leo followed Daliah to the table. He felt something was off.

“I’m not very good at cooking.” Daliah said, watching Leo eating.

“Aren’t you eating?”

“I’ve already eaten.”

“The food is delicious.”

“Thank you.”

After the meal, the two remained on the table talking.

“Let’s go get some rest.” Daliah said.

“You look tired. Go get some sleep.”

“What about you? It’s 0020 hrs now.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Then I’ll stay with you.”

Leo smiled.

“Hey, I missed you. I was thinking about you every day.”

Leo stared at the window.

“Leo, I really love—”

A serious knock came from the door. Daliah stood, Leo stopped her.

“Were you expecting a late visitor?” Leo said.

Daliah shook her head. The knock continued.

“I’ll go and check.” Leo said. He stood and walked towards the door. He climbed on a chair and watched over the glass on the top of the door.

“Fuck it!” He said, walking towards Daliah.

Daliah stood. “What’s wrong?”

“Your aunt is at the door, with a bundle of uncles.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

TST, 2020

“Leo, it wasn’t me.” Daliah said, holding Leo’s arm.

“I know.”

“Trust me, I didn’t call them.”

A knock proceeded.

Leo smiled. “Whatever is going to happen will happen, whether we worry or not.”

“I didn’t betray you.”

“Open the door.”

“I’m sorry, Leo.”

“The saddest thing about betrayal is that it never comes from your enemies.”

The knock proceeded.

“Leo—”

“Open the door.”

Daliah opened the door. The guards surged in and took Leo out. The place was full of guards. The faces of students, who were happy seeing Leo a few hours earlier, were now the sad faces.

Freddie walked in front of him, an envelope swinging in his hand.

“Leo Felix, you are no longer a student of TST. Take whatever belongs to you. Go away and never come back.” Freddie handed the envelope to him.

He took the envelope. He lifted his eyes to the sky. His heart was very heavy. He tried a smile but it never came out. This was the place he wanted to leave since the first day he arrived and now he’s been given a chance to leave. Why was his heart aching?

“Take him to my office, we have an unfinished business.” SJ said.

The guards pulled Leo.

“Hey, thank you and I’m sorry.” He whispered to Daliah as the guards pulled him away. He was rushed to SJ’s office.

In SJ’s office, the guards searched Leo from head to toe. They removed his clothes and searched them. They found nothing.

“I need the cards.” SJ said after clearing the room.

“It’s too late.”

“Where are they?”

“You won’t get them.”

SJ pounded the table. "Where are they?"

"Very far..."

"You have just given away something that your father has been fighting for, for many years."

"I was trying to save my mother."

"From what..?"

"A disease and a very dangerous man..."

"You were kidnapped."

Leo stared at the rotating fan.

"Who kidnapped you?"

Leo breathed heavily.

"We don't have much time."

"Why is everyone after those cards? For money...?"

"Who kidnapped you?"

"Are you telling me that my father, a hopeless drunkard..." Leo chuckled, "had a lot of money in the bank which is worth fighting for?"

"Not everything is as it appears to be."

"What's going on?"

“I need the cards.”

“Someone already took them out.”

“Who...?”

“I don’t know the person, I was just following orders.”

“And to whom is he taking the cards to?”

“A man, a very dangerous man...”

“The one who kidnapped you..?”

Leo chuckled. “The one who knows that you burned the prohibited library, not to secure the document that can save school but to secure the cards to save yourself and Patrice.”

SJ exploded out of the chair.

“The man who also wanted me to ask you this, does Freddie know everything?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

TST, 2020

“Do you have any idea of what you’ve just done?” SJ said, moving back and forth around the office. Her hands wanted to snatch Leo’s neck who was just sitting contentedly on the chair. The clock ticked 0123 hrs but her eyes were very dry.

Leo sighed. “I saved my mother.”

“Tell me the truth. Where are the cards?”

“What else should I say?”

SJ shook her head. “Walk out of my office.”

Leo stood. “I’m very sorry but my father will be conceited that I traded the card for my mother’s life. Protect her, those were his last words.”

“Have you really protected your mother? Time will tell.”

Leo walked out of the office. SJ rushed on her phone. “Hello, Leo has just left my office. I need you to follow him and watch his every step. Report to me his every move. Okay?”

SJ threw the phone on the table and took a deep breath. Her stomach was growling. Her whole body was trembling. She tried to focus but how would she focus? Everything she has

been fighting for is about to be ruined. She won't be the only one affected. Her husband and Isla who are very innocent will also be affected.

She took her phone and dialed. "Patrice..."

"Have you got the cards?" Patrice said on the other side.

"We're in deep trouble."

"The cards, Sonia...?"

"He's the one who kidnapped Leo."

"What about the cards?"

"He has them all now."

"What?"

"He used Leo to steal the cards."

"If he has the cards, then we're finished."

"My men are watching Leo but that's not enough."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Maybe it's time to disappear."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

KIBAHA, 2020

Leo took each step carefully to make sure that he wasn't followed. His heart was too heavy, his hands were vacillating and his stomach was in pain. He had to save her mother, he had no choice.

He pulled off the hat of his long pullover jacket as he approached the door of an empty warehouse. The old man with a cane told him that the company went bankrupt five years ago and so the building hadn't been renovated for five years. The cracks dominated the walls, and the roofs were about to collapse. The building was really isolated in that remote area.

Leo pulled the door and entered. "Shit!" he mumbled, removing the spider web on his face. His nose was disturbed by the dust in the warehouse. He took a vigilant look, there was no one around. He peeked over his watch. It was 10:00 hrs, he was on time.

Cold sweat seeped over his body as he heard the footsteps coming behind him. His heartbeat rate increased and his stomach growled more.

“Have you brought the cards?” The man with a cane stick said, the other man behind him.

“Will my mother get the treatment?” Leo said.

“Every minute you spend worrying about things in life, you lose a precious minute of your life.”

“She’s the only one I’m left with, she can’t die.”

“I'd prefer 'be strong' than 'don't worry'.”

Leo held his breath.

The man with a cane extended his hand. “The cards...”

Leo gasped.

“The more time you waste, the less time we have for saving your mother.”

Leo took out the cards and handed them over to the man with a cane. The man handed the cards to his partner. His partner took a deep look at the cards.

“They are the ones.” The man without a cane said.

The man with a cane nodded giving off a smile. His right hand dived into his suit jacket, digging deep into his trouser. Leo’s eyes widened. He made an impulsive slow backward movement.

“CHRISTOS!” SJ shouted as she surged into the warehouse, Patrice behind her. Pistols on their hands.

The man with a cane took out his pistol and as Leo was still in a dilemma, he found himself in a chokehold. Leo’s hands tried to pull himself out of the old man’s arm but it was impossible. A pistol was touching his head.

“Looks like you brought some friends. The long, lost friends.” A man with a cane said, his pistol moving around Leo’s face.

“The kid isn’t a part of this, Christos. Let him go.” SJ said.

Christos laughed loudly. “Hello Latricia, or should I call you Sonia? How about you Saleem? Anha you are now Patrice. Our friend Rayhan is missing, what grief-stricken news. I really wish he was here. But we have his son, what a relief?”

“Let the kid go, Christos.” Patrice shouted.

“Zander...” Christos turned to the man without a cane. “It's pretty scary to know how quickly time flies.”

“Christos, God remembers those who suffer. He doesn’t forget their cry and he punishes those who wronged them.” SJ said.

“I saved this country. This country has survived all these years because of me.”

“There are no secrets that time doesn’t reveal, Christos.” SJ said.

“People will thank me in the future.”

“We got independence to live and not to survive.” Patrice said.

“Independence? Freedom is never free... someone has to pay the price.”

“The world is not fair, and often fools, cowards, liars, and the selfish hide in high places.” Patrice said.

“What’s going on?” Leo mumbled, out of strength to pull himself out of Christos’s arm.

Christos smiled. “There's a war going on outside no man is safe from. You can run but you can't hide forever.”

“Let the kid go.” SJ shouted, focusing on her pistol.

“This is a war no man is safe from.”

“He doesn’t know anything.” SJ said

“That’s not the reality, it’s your perception.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Leo mumbled.

Christos cocked his pistol. “You wanna know what happened then, kid? Watch what happens now.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

KIBAHA, 2020

“You got what you want, let the kid go.” SJ said.

“He deserves to know the truth.” Christos said.

“Put your gun down, Christos.” Patrice said.

Christos held Leo firmly. “Listen, kid... 38 years ago your father and his two friends, the two standing in front of us assassinated a president. Th—”

SJ shot the roof. “Christos, I’ll kill you with my own hands.”

Christos chuckled. “They were declared as the enemies of the state. They vanished. They changed their identities and started a new life. They are not who you think they are.”

“Christos, you won’t live with this.” Patrice said.

“It’s all over now, Saleem. We’ve been struggling our whole lives. It’s time we take some rest.”

“Hell is empty and I think all the devils are here.” SJ said.

Christos pulled the trigger backward, Leo heard the sound. The pistol was just a few inches from his head. “Say hello to Rayhan when you get there.”

Tears were flowing off SJ's and Patrice's faces. Their eyes were red. They bit their lips hard as their hands trembled trying to find a target on Christos's body. Leo's body covered Christos well. Leo closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Death has always been after him but this time, it surely got him.

Before Christos released his finger, Police sirens were heard coming towards the warehouse.

Christos shot up on the roof. "Seems like you will live to see tomorrow."

"You will pay for your sins one day." SJ said.

Sirens were getting closer.

"Christos, we need to leave." Zander said.

"I don't have to kill you today because either way, you'll die soon." Christos said as he moved backward, using Leo as his shield.

"You won't run from death too." Patrice said.

"Good luck..." Christos smiled. "You will need it, especially you Leo. You'll really need it."

"What about my mother? I did everything you asked. What about your promise?"

Christos pulled Leo away from him causing him to fall on the dusty floor. Leo moaned as he rolled around the floor.

“Your mother, your responsibility...” Christos said.

Leo’s red eyes escorted Christos and Zander as they disappeared.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

KIBAHA, 2020

Patrice aided Leo in standing. Leo's right hand was holding his left arm. He moaned as he limped, clenching his teeth strongly.

"The police are here. We need to leave." Patrice said.

"They are not police." SJ said.

"How do you know?"

"They are my men."

Patrice took a deep breath.

"Madam, are you alright?" A tall, strapping man of about 30 years old said after entering the warehouse. He was in black clothes and a bulletproof vest covered his chest.

"Yes, secure the warehouse for now." SJ said.

The man nodded and walked away, giving instructions to other men.

Patrice lied down. "What now?"

SJ's hands were on her head. "As Christos said, it's all over."

Patrice turned to Leo. "You've ruined everything, including your own life."

Leo sniffed. "Was just saving my mother."

SJ turned to Leo with a red face. "You should've told us. We would've helped."

"The old man knew everything about my mother. He intimidated to kill her if I didn't do as he instructed."

"Well, now you will lose everything. Your mother, your father's reputation, and your own life." Patrice said.

"What is in those cards? Why are they that important?"

"Those cards are the keys to the safe box. Inside that safe box, there is a document that will prove that we didn't assassinate the president and it will reveal the real enemy. Thanks to you, the keys to the safe box and so the documents are on the enemy's hands." SJ said.

"You didn't tell me about the document. You didn't tell me about this all. You told me there was money."

"We were trying to save your ass." Patrice said.

"How..?"

"Christos will kill anyone who knows the truth or anyone who walks near it." SJ said.

"If I knew about this, I swear I wouldn't have handed over the cards to him."

Patrice and SJ sighed. Their hands were scratching their hair. SJ moved around the room, Patrice sat on the floor.

“How was my father involved in this?”

“Your father was a good special agent and a good partner.” Patrice said.

“Why did he abandon me and my mother?”

“Because he loved you two.” SJ said.

“Loved us?”

“Sometimes love is not a feeling, it is a choice.” SJ said, “He made a tough choice to save you and your mother.”

“By abandoning us..? At that young age..?”

“That’s the only reason you and your mother are still alive. He sacrificed his life so that you two could live.” SJ said.

“Are you calling this whatever shit am living, a life?”

“We are about to make tough choices to our beloved ones too. I’ll have to leave Daniel and my family, and Sonia has to leave Isla and her family too. It’s not because we hate them, it’s not because we don’t love them. It’s because we know if we stay close to them, they will get hurt.” Patrice said, tears off his face.

“It’s called tough love. We learnt it from your father.” SJ said,
“Before he died, he asked us to take care of you and your
mother. He really insisted.”

Leo sighed, his whole face was wet. “What if we get the
documents before him?”

“Without the cards, that’s impossible, kid.” Patrice said.

“I have a very bad idea.” Leo said.

SJ and Patrice turned to him.

“We break in and steal the document.”

CHAPTER FORTY

KIBAHA, 2020

“The place is fully safeguarded every 24 hours, we can’t break in.” Patrice said.

“We don’t break in. We use brains to get in.” Leo said.

“How...?” Patrice said.

“If we get the map to the building, we can create a path which will lead us to the safe box. We’re not attacking. We are robbing.”

“That’s a very bad idea.” Patrice said.

“And the only idea we are left with.” SJ said.

Leo smiled. “She’s right.”

“It’s dangerous.” Patrice said.

“Well.” SJ sighed. “Let’s go pack our bags and disappear again.”

Patrice gasped. “How do we get the map?”

Leo chuckled. Patrice side-eyed him.

“I’ve an old friend who can help.” SJ said.

“It’s Friday. The safe house closes at noon today and they don’t open till Monday.” Patrice said.

Leo peeked over his watch. It was 1240hrs.

SJ smiled. "Christos won't be able to get the document today."

Patrice nodded. "We've the whole weekend to figure out how to steal the document."

"We don't have time." SJ said, "We're starting tonight."

"You're not planning to leave me out of this, are you?" Leo said.

"It's too dangerous. You stay out of this." SJ said.

"I've nowhere to go and I need to find out the truth too."

"Hide somewhere. We'll contact you once we get the documents." SJ said.

"I want to help."

"Pray hard. That'll help." Patrice said.

"I'm the one who caused all these. Please, let me help."

"By coming with us, you'll soon either face the pain of discipline or the pain of regrets. SJ said, "There is no way you can escape both."

Leo smiled. "I can bear any pain as long as it has meaning."

"Since you insist. You're in—"

"We can't risk another life, SJ..." Patrice said.

“He’s indomitable.”

“Death doesn’t choose.”

“Great things never came from comfort zones.” Leo said.

SJ extended her hand. “See... We’re not leaving him behind.”

Patrice exhaled, staring at the roof. Leo knew what Patrice was thinking. It was a good idea to stay out of trouble. It was good to play it safe. But if he had followed this advice, he could’ve died on his first day in the street. He was five, alone in the street and he had to make a decision. His first option was that he was young and he couldn’t do anything and his second option was that he goes to the street and fights. He chose to fight. That’s how he survived. Too many people believe that everything must be pleasurable in life, which makes them constantly search for distractions and short-circuits the learning process. He’s not a kind of a person who locks himself in and prays for good things to happen, he always goes out and makes things happen.

Leo smirked. “I have a favor to ask.”

SJ and Patrice stared at him.

“My mother needs a quick surgery. Can you help her?” Leo said.

“I’ll arrange your mother’s treatment as soon as I get back to my office. Don’t worry about that.” SJ said.

“Thank you!”

“We’re beginning this mission tonight. We’ll meet in my office at 2000hrs.” SJ said.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

TST, 2020

Leo stood few meters away from the gate. He couldn't enter the school. He wasn't supposed to show his face in there. He peeked over his watch, it was 1514 hrs. His fingers scratched his hair. He had nowhere to go and nowhere to sleep. This wasn't the first time he was in that kind of situation. He remembered his first days in the street. An empty stomach, no friends, no nice bed he used to sleep on, and no knowledge of how things were in the street. On his first day, he slept on the tree. It rained a lot that night and he knew he was going to die, but he didn't. He survived and here he is. He will survive again.

“Hello!”

The voice jolted Leo and brought back his senses. Standing in front of him was Rachel. She was growing more beautiful. The black trouser and white blouse fitted her very well. Leo couldn't pull his eyes away from her gymslip-thin mermaid's figure. Sometimes all you need is just someone who can make you smile and forget about your problems.

Rachel ran and hugged him. “I missed you.”

Leo gasped. “Me too.”

“Found your message. You said it’s imperative.”

“It’s about my brother’s body in the morgue.”

“Two months have passed.”

“It feels just like a day.”

“I reminded you, you couldn’t listen.”

“I don’t remember the last time I rested.” Leo gazed over the sky.

“I’m sorry.”

“Let’s try.”

“Let’s go. Maybe we’ll find his body.”

It took an hour to reach the Muhimbili hospital morgue. They met the dieners. A woman of about fifty years old. She was in a light-blue scrub. Another woman of nearly the same age was behind her in a white scrub.

“Good afternoon.” Leo said.

“Afternoon.” The woman in light-blue scrub said.

“She is always late for her afternoon shift.” The woman in white scrub said.

“I’m tired of waiting for her every day.” The woman in light blue said.

“Excuse me, I’m here for my brother’s body.” Leo said.

“Name?” The woman in light blue said.

“Young ladies are very mulish.” The woman in white said.

“Benjamin. That’s the name.” Leo said.

“These ladies show no respect at all to their elders.” The woman in light blue said.

“It’s 1620hrs now. It’s nearly the evening shift. We have done two shifts already.” The woman in white scrub said.

“That gir—”

“Excuse me! Are you looking for my brother?” Leo said.

“Sorry, repeat the name...”

Leo gasped. “Benjamin.”

The woman in light blue scrub dug into her papers. “Men... be chary of the ladies you marry nowadays.”

“Most of them are indolent.” The woman in white scrub said.

“I wonder if they will be able to take good care of their husbands and kids.” The woman in light blue said.

“They’ll leave everything to house maidens.” The woman in white said.

“Yah—”

“Ma’am... are you looking for Benjamin?” Leo said.

“Last name?” The woman in light blue said.

“Benson. Benjamin Benson.”

The woman lowered her glasses to the nose, staring at Leo.

“What’s wrong?” Leo said.

“He’s buried by the government two weeks ago.” The woman in light blue said.

“What? Why?” Leo said.

The woman in blue thumbed on the papers. “He was badly injured. We couldn’t continue keeping him in the morgue.”

“His body was full of stabs. How bloodcurdling?” the woman in white said.

“You were supposed to wait.” Leo said.

“We did. For two months.” The woman in black said.

Leo breathed out heavily. “What kind—”

“Leo... stop it.” Rachel hugged him.

Leo's hands were on his face. Most of his body parts were wobbly. He felt as if his heart was going to burst out of the chest. He felt as if knives were stabbing his growling stomach. He exhaled deeply. Rachel patted his back.

"Where did you bury him?" Rachel said.

"Kinondoni municipal cemetery." The woman in light blue said.

"Is it Kinondoni or Sinza?" The woman in white said.

"It's Kinondoni." The woman in light blue said.

"I'm sure I heard Sinza." The woman in white said.

"You're getting old—"

"Can you tell me where?" Leo snapped.

"Kinondoni." The woman in light blue said.

The women gave Leo directions and minutiae of the grave. He and Rachel left Muhimbili to Kinondoni cemetery.

When they arrived at Kinondoni cemetery, it didn't take them much time to find the grave. They found a grave that utterly matched the descriptions they were given by the dieners.

Leo fell on the grave. It was just a small hill of soil. There was no cross on the grave. His teeth were tightly clenched. His left arm was on his stomach and his right arm gripped the soil on the

grave. He felt like it was yesterday. The pictures of his moments with Benjamin flew in his head, his smiles, and his laughs.

It all started one morning in 2012. Leo was wandering around the Mbeya bus terminal where he stumbled upon a man sitting, head on his knees.

“Looks like you are no longer in the age of crying in the streets...” Leo said.

The man raised his head. Sadness, hopelessness, and grief were written all over the man’s face.

The man chuckled and exhaled deeply. “Young kid... what do you know about life?”

Leo smiled. “Life is not a garden, so quit being a hoe.”

The man laughed loudly. “What’s your name?”

“Leo.”

“Lion?” the man smiled. “I’m Benjamin.”

Leo nodded. “Mr. Benjamin, had a breakfast already?”

Benjamin shook his head.

Leo extended his hand to Benjamin. “Well, let’s go. I’ll buy you one.”

It is difficult to know at what moment love begins, it is less difficult to know that it has begun. That is how their relationship started.

Leo stared at the grave. “Hey Benji, it has been a while. I’m really sorry I couldn’t make it on time to take your body. Candidly, I’ve been through a lot of troubles recently. Maybe worst of all the troubles we’ve been through.

“Remember what happened to us on that first day we met? I told you I was going to buy you breakfast. You followed me to a restaurant, we drank and ate. When the waitress asked for money, I had nothing. They locked us in their storeroom and took all our clothes. You wanted to eat me alive that day but you couldn’t because you were full. And I was the one who fed you.”

Leo chuckled, gazing over the sky. “Hey, don’t get mad at me because I’m not crying. I’ve been crying out a lot recently, maybe my tears have gone dry.

“There is something that I must do in the next couple of days. When I’m done, I’ll move your grave to somewhere cool and bury you with apposite respect.

“So hey, don’t forget to pray for me. That death ghost that had always been chasing us is now chasing me at a very high speed that sometimes, I feel like it’s going to catch me.

“Rest in peace brother...”

Rachel helped Leo standing up. “I’m sorry, Leo.”

“Rachel, I’m sorry that I’m so complicated and I mess everything up.”

“Don’t be Leo. I understand what you are walking through.”

Leo chuckled. “Do you?”

Rachel held Leo’s hand. “What happens now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You said that there is something you must do. What is it?”

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

“I can help...”

“Sometimes it’s a good idea to stop digging something that has been well hidden.”

“Leo, I love you. I can’t lose you.”

Leo gasped, looking at the sky.

“After you complete that task, will I be able to see you again?

Will I be able to hold your hand forever?”

“I wish the answer was as simple as the question is.” Leo exhaled. “But you know what... the question is not simple either.”

He walked away from the grave, Rachel trailing him.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

HAVOC NIGHTSPOT, DAR, 2020

The clock on his wrist read 0001 hrs. Leo was twitchy. His mind focused on a man sitting alone around the table, few meters from them. The electric beats and cool music from the club's DJs didn't catch his attention. The half-naked females dancing crazily deep in the club's lights didn't catch his eye. In these places this generation, a condom is just a glass slipper. You slip it on when you meet a stranger. You dance all night, and then you throw it away. He thought.

"You said that's the man who can help us get in the post office, what are we waiting for?" Leo said.

"I've arranged a flight for your mother. She'll be here by tomorrow." SJ said.

"Thanks, ma'am. It's getting late, we should talk to the man and see if he can help."

"You should be there when they pick her at the airport."

"We've been here for two hours. We should ask him if he can help us sneak in."

"That man is the architect who designed the post office building. He might know a way for us to break in unnoticed." SJ said.

“Let’s go talk to him.”

“I haven’t met with him for more than thirty years. I’m not sure if I can still trust him.”

“If you don’t try, you will never know.”

“He knows the real me. He may report me to the police.”

“Then what do we do?”

“I’m still thinking.”

“We’re wasting time.” Leo said as he stood up.

“Hey, hey... Leo, what on earth are you doing?” He heard SJ and Patrice mumbling as he walked towards the man’s table.

The man was in a black T-shirt and black jeans. He was no longer in the age of attending nightclubs. People of his age were supposed to be at their homes with their wives, kids, and grandchildren. He was surrounded by Dompos and other high alcoholic wines on his table. Though there were many empty wine bottles, it was like the man was just beginning to drink.

Leo knocked on the table. “While I and my friends there are drinking to remember, it seems like you are drinking to forget.”

The man looked at Leo and turned back to his glass of wine. He took a deep sip.

“What are you trying to forget?” Leo said.

The man poured his wine into the glass and drank it.

“The brain is a very strange creature. The things you want it to remember it forgets, but all those things you want it to forget, it remembers.” Leo said.

The man stopped a glass a few inches from his mouth.

“Whatever you are selling kid, I don’t have money. I’m not buying.”

Leo chuckled. “I’m here to sell you happiness.”

The man chuckled. “If you want a drink, join me. I’ve lots of stress, don’t add me more.”

Leo held the man’s arm, stopping a glass touching his lips.

“When it is too much, it becomes poisonous. Be it love, stress, or alcohol.”

The man chuckled, tears dropping from his eyes. He returned the glass to the table. “What do you want kid?”

Leo closed his eyes. “To reunite you with your family.”

The man breathed out deeply, his hands tightly gripping the wine bottle.

Leo’s heart started racing. He just made bet and he wasn’t sure if it would work out. *In any moment of decision, the best thing*

you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing. Mr. Patrick told him that.

“Who are you? How did you know about my family?”

Leo’s heart relaxed. “That doesn’t matter, what matters is they miss you very much.”

The man gasped, staring at the colored lights on the ceiling.

“I’m the reason they left.” The man wiped the tears with his palm. “I was a negligent father and husband. Long after they left is when I realized that my life was missing something. It took me a long time to realize how imperative my family is. But it was too late, they were long gone.”

“I know how that feels.”

The man chuckled. “How can you know how that feels, kid?”

“I was five when my father left my mother. My mother couldn’t take care of me too, so I had to enter the street. A five years old kid alone in the street. Surviving alone in the street all these years, how can I not know how that feels?”

The man gasped. “I’m sorry.”

Leo smiled. “We can’t let your kid end up like me.”

“I tried talking to her family. My wife is refusing to come back.”

“I can help you bring her back.”

“Why are you helping me? What is it that you want from me?”

Leo exhaled. “You designed the blueprint of Tanganyika post office. I want the blueprint and the safe way to break into box 103 unnoticed.”

“You want me to help you break in into a post office?”

“In that box, there is only secret that can reunite me with my long-lost family. The keys to that box are in our enemy’s hands. If I’m to reunite with my long-lost family, I have to access that box before the enemy does.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Look straight in my eyes and see if I’m lying. Help me get my family while I help you get yours.”

“It will take weeks to prepare that blueprint.”

“We’ve this night only.”

“That will—”

“Tomorrow morning at 1000hrs, come to Triple Seven Bar and Restaurant. Come with my blueprint, I’ll be there with your family.”

The man nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

Leo shook hands with the man, exchanged numbers, and walked to SJ and Patrice.

“What happened?” Patrice said.

“Tomorrow at 1000hrs at Triple Seven Bar and Restaurant, the man will come with a blueprint.”

“Serious?” Patrice said.

Leo nodded.

SJ smiled. “For free?”

“In this life, there is nothing known as something for nothing.”

Patrice sighed. “What’s the price?”

Leo chuckled. “A very tough price.”

“What?” Patrice said.

“We have to reunite him with his family. A wife and children...”

SJ squinted, “what family?”

“I have no idea.” Leo sipped a glass of water. “We have the whole night to figure that out.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

TST, 2020

“What happened, Doc?” Freddie, the school’s dean said after sitting.

“She’s in a coma.” A doctor of about 30 years old said.

“Thought it was a minor accident...” Freddie said, looking at the medical charts on the wall.

“She fell on her head.”

Freddie exhaled, scratching his hair.

“Head injury caused her brain to swell. When the brain swells, the fluid pushes up against the skull. The swelling eventually causes the brain to push down on the brainstem, which in turn damages the RAS—”

“Spare me a medical lesson Doc, will my daughter survive?”

The doctor closed his files. “We gave her medications—”

“Will Isla survive?”

“She will.”

“Two days have passed.”

“We’re doing our best.”

“I’m—”

A nurse of about 24 years old rushed into the room. She stared at the doctor. Her hands were on her chest as she tried to catch a breath.

“What’s wrong?” The doctor said.

“It’s about Isla.”

Freddie stood. “What’s with Isla?”

The nurse exhaled deeply. “I think we’re losing her.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

TRIPPLE SEVEN BAR AND RESTAURANT

SJ exploded out of the chair. “You lied to her?”

Leo shrugged. “There was no other choice.”

“You fool.” SJ looked outside the window. In the garden outside the room they were in, a woman in her late thirties was sitting around a table with a boy of about twelve and a girl of about five.

“We can’t get the blueprint if we don’t reunite Matthias and his wife.”

“Everything will go well.” Leo said.

“You told her there was a job interview. She’s sitting there unwearingly hoping to get interviewed. What do you think will happen when she sees her husband? That you lied to her?”

“Don’t talk loudly, she’ll hear.” Leo said, looking outside.

Patrice sighed. “We were wrong to trust a kid from the beginning.”

Leo slouched. “If you treat every situation as a life and death matter, you’ll die a lot of times.”

SJ drummed her fingers on the desk. “This is a life and death situation and by lying to that woman, you’ve eliminated our probability of surviving.”

“That the birds of worry and care fly over your head, this you cannot change, but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent.” Leo said.

SJ shook her head. “Are you even concerned?”

“There is a great difference between worry and concern. A worried person sees a problem, and a concerned person solves a problem. The question is, Miss SJ, are you concerned?”

SJ sat, squirming in her chair.

Leo rose from the chair. At the entrance gate, Matthias paced in with a bag on his back. Leo’s heartbeat rate increased. He tried to stop his arms from trembling. Leo flew his hand into the air and Matthias waved his.

“Hello!” Matthias said, extending his hand to Leo.

“Would you like a drink?” Leo said, accepting the hand.

“I’ve brought what you asked. Where is Maha?” Matthias said.

Leo looked outside the window, to the garden. Maha was busy with her kids. Matthias started moving out, Leo blocked him.

“After me...” Leo walked out, Matthias trailing him. SJ and Patrice shook their drooping heads. They knew that whatever was going to happen outside was nothing good. Leo knew it too but his gut told him to stand straight, walk proud, have a little faith.

Leo walked to the table Maha was with her kids. “I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

Maha smiled. “No problem. Is the interviewer already here?”

Leo indexed his finger. Maha looked at what Leo was indexing to. The smile on her face faded away. She was on the eye to eye contact with Matthias, her ex-husband.

Maha slapped Leo’s face. “Is this what you called me for?”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

TST, 2020

Freddie ran with the doctor and nurse to the school's hospital. His whole body was wet. He couldn't afford to lose his only child. They stopped at the door written 201 on top. The doctor and nurse surged in. Freddie wasn't allowed.

"Wait here." The nurse said as she closed the door.

Wait? How could he wait? His only daughter was fighting for her life and the only thing he's asked was to simply wait. He moved back and forth near the door hoping the door would open soon. More doctors and nurses entered the room. Freddie didn't have a chance to talk to any of them.

He remembered when Isla was ten. He took her out to the beach. It was their first family voyage, him, Sonia, and Isla. Isla always carried a book with her. He didn't remember the name of the book. How a slapdash father he was? But that day on the beach, Isla had a book in her hands. While other children were swimming and playing around the beach, she slept on the sand and read her book. He approached her.

"What are you reading?"

"A storybook..."

“What does it say?”

“It says...” she looked at him. “Remember that people are guests in your story the same way you are only a guest in theirs. So make the chapters worth reading.”

He sighed, staring at the ships far away from the Indian Ocean. How could a ten years old kid read such a powerful book? Did she understand the power inside those words or was she just reading for fun?

“Don’t you like swimming?” He said.

Isla sighed. “I don’t know how to swim.”

“Want me to teach you?” he said, extending his hand

Isla grabbed his hand and they went swimming. That was the last family voyage too. It was the only funny moment he remembered having with Isla. Did he make his chapters worth reading?

After two hours, a door opened and the nurses and doctors walked out. Their faces were not happy ones.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

TRIPPLE SEVEN BAR AND RESTAURANT

Leo moaned, pressing his palms tenderly on his cheeks.

“Father...?” The young boy, with a hale and hearty smile on his face, ran to his father and hugged him. The young girl followed her brother to her father. Matthias hugged his kids.

Maha wanted to run after her kids, Leo blocked her.

Leo smiled. “This is what I called you for. Wanted to show you how much the kids missed their father.”

“Who are you to interfere with my family issues?” Maha said.

“I’m just a kid who knows how it feels for a kid to grow up alone, lacking parental care. Either one or both...”

“It’s none of your business.”

“I was five when my parents separated. I, having nowhere to go had to enter the street. Five years old kid alone in the street. How I survived all these years, is everything I don’t want your kids to go through.”

“I’ll take care of my kids all by myself.”

“I know. But until you find solid and sound answers to the question *mother, where is our father?* The ghosts of anger, depression, and revenge will always hunt you.”

Maha exhaled deeply, looking at her kids playing around their father.

“They say love is not a feeling if it has ever been a feeling.” Leo chuckled. “Love is a choice.”

“I don’t know what the world did to you. What I know is I won’t let it happen to my kids.”

“Maha means beautiful eyes,” Leo squinted, “but look at your eyes. They are filled with anger, regrets, and revenge. If you don’t do something soon, the beautiful eyes of those kids will end up the same.”

Tears slowly seeped over Maha’s cheeks.

“There’s nothing as exciting as a comeback, seeing someone with dreams, watching them fail, and then getting a second chance.” Leo exhaled. “You’ve everything you need right here. It’s up to you to decide whether you’ll leave with pieces or with the complete package.”

After five minutes, Maha moved slowly to where his husband was. The two hugged each other. Their eyes were welled with tears. Their two kids ran around them merrily.

Leo wiped tears from his face, *why am I crying?*

The smile which came from their faces suggested the happiness they were missing from each other. Leo tried to recall but he couldn't remember any moment he had with his family. His heart was very heavy. Their mouths had a lot to talk but they ended up hugging each other, this time more tightly.

Leo gasped. "As much as I don't like to interfere with the family reunion, I'm out of time. The plan...?"

Matthias dug into his bag and came out with a file. "This is the whole plan. Your safe passage in and safe exit are all in. It's a complete piece."

Leo took the file. "Thank you."

"No, thank YOU. You have saved our lives. We are eternally grateful."

"Having a place to go is a home. Having someone to love is a family. Having both is a blessing." Leo exhaled, gazing over the sky. *I have none, what a curse?*

Matthias patted Leo. "I hope you'll reunite with your family."

Leo smiled. "Hope?"

"Is hope a bad thing?"

“No...” Leo peeked over his watch. “Hope is for the hopeless people.”

Matthias smiled. “I saved you as *blueprint* in my phone. May I know your name?”

“Don’t waste your precious memory. You don’t have to know my name, we’ll never meet again.”

Leo walked away, leaving the happy reunited family celebrating. He went to SJ and Patrice.

“Here is what you wanted.” He threw the file on the table.

Patrice smiled. “How did you do it?”

“In case you didn’t know how a five-years-old kid was able to survive all these years alone in the street. This is the secret.”

Patrice chuckled. “What secret?”

Leo extended his hands. “Negotiating.”

The two busted into a laugh. SJ hugged Leo tightly.

“Well done Leo. But until we get the files and clear our names, there is nothing known as resting and celebrating.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

TST, 2020

Freddie has been in the hospitals many times. He knows the atmosphere when things are not good. The doctors and nurses left the room. Freddie stood still, his body was trembling.

“Sir...” the doctor he’s talking to earlier said.

“Doc, what’s has happened?”

The doctor sighed.

“Is my daughter alive?”

“Can we talk to my office?”

“Is my daughter alive?”

“We can—”

“A yes or no will do.”

“She’s alive.”

Freddie rushed his hands on his head. He exhaled deeply.

“But her condition is not good.”

“Why? What happened?”

“She started showing symptoms of respiratory distress... fever, cough, and chest tightness. X-ray results have shown pulmonary edema, excess fluid in her lungs. Her blood pressure is—”

“Spare me a medical lecture doc, what the hell is wrong with my daughter?”

The doctor looked at Freddie.

“Tell me please.”

“She’s been poisoned. We are certain it’s ricin poison.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

TANGANYIKA POST OFFICE, TPO

2020

Leo sat inside the van. The van was in a parking lot, outside a building opposite to Tanganyika post office. In front of him was an Apple MacBook Air 2020. On the screen, he could see everything going on inside and outside the post office. He didn't do anything special. SJ and Patrice hired a hacker from Pakistan. The hacker did the enchantment. He hacked the post office's CCTV cameras and the surveillance systems. The hacker did the whole job and Leo's job was just to sit inside the van and watch how things were going. The clock on his wrist ticked 0600hrs.

Through his MacBook Air, he saw a white van approaching the Post office's parking lot. He zoomed. The hacker taught him how to zoom. Candidly, he didn't know the hacker's face. He was given all these directives via a Zoom cloud meeting. That was what he did the whole preceding night. A zoom session.

He zoomed to see the van unmistakably. On the body, it was written City cleaners. He smiled.

The door opened, six people walked out of the van. They were on their white overalls and white hats. Leo zoomed. He enjoyed

it. He could undoubtedly see SJ and Patrice. He smiled. How did they do it? They didn't tell him much when he asked. They just told him that they were TISS special agents, so connections were no problems to them. He zoomed. Patrice's overall was too big for him. He smiled.

The six cleaners walked to the main Post office's door. He saw them waving to the guards. He couldn't hear the voices. Only video, there will be no sounds. The hacker told him that. The guards opened the door and let the cleaners enter. Guards too are humans. They become tired of inspecting the same people every day, though the security protocol wants them to. One of Baraka's rules says don't be so straight, bend a bit sometimes. The guards bent a bit and they simplified the entry phase of SJ and Patrice. Leo watched the cleaners entering the post office. He zoomed.

SJ and Patrice headed to the staff toilets. That's what the blueprint wanted them to do. It wanted them to go to the staff toilets and then to the left restroom two. That's the room with the wall behind box 103. They entered the restroom. Phase two was completed.

There were no cameras in the toilets. Why would someone plant a camera in the toilets? There will be no cameras in the

toilets. We'll plant one of our own. That's what the hacker told them. Leo smiled.

"Leo, can you see us now?" SJ said over the comms.

Leo clicked on the MacBook. "Flawlessly..."

"We're starting phase three. Everything clear outside?" SJ said.

"Clear. Good luck."

He saw SJ and Patrice taking the chipping machines from their bags. They inspected the wall. They drew a square on the wall. Leo zoomed.

The two started chipping off the wall. The machines were noiseless. There is nothing money can't buy. Love...? Yeah, money can't buy love, but it improves your bargaining position. The clock on Leo's wrist read 0630. His heart started pounding fast, then faster.

"Guys, I think we have a stern problem." Leo said.

"What's up?" Patrice said.

Leo zoomed. A black SUV Jeep Cherokee entered the Post office's parking lot. The car looked familiar. Where did he see it? His fingers forked in his hair.

"Leo, what's wrong?" Patrice said.

His hands were trembling. The Jeep stopped and a driver walked out. Leo zoomed. He exploded out of the chair. It was Zander.

“Leo...” SJ said.

“Christos is here.”

“What? It’s not seven yet.” SJ said.

“How far are you?” Leo said.

“Not very far. The wall is very solid. Twenty more minutes would do.” Patrice said.

Leo zoomed. “I think we don’t have that much time.”

“Fuck it!” SJ said.

Leo turned to the screen. Zander opened the Jeep’s back door. Christos walked out, a cane in his hand. Leo crushed the paper in his fist.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

TST, 2020

“My daughter has been poisoned?” Freddie said.

“Sir, we can talk in my office.” The doctor said.

“Where were you when she was being poisoned?”

“It’s ricin poison, sir—”

“I don’t care.... It’s your job to take care of the patients.”

“I’m sorry sir.”

“Sorry?”

The doctor managed a deadpan expression.

“Sorry isn’t a verb, don’t expect it to fix things for you.”

“We’re working hard to save her life.”

“Tell me she’ll survive.”

The doctor droop his head.

“She can’t die, doctor.”

“We’ll do our best.”

“Tell me she’ll wake.”

“Sir, ricin poisoning has got no cure.”

Freddie clenched his fist.

“Doctors are now working hard getting ricin off her body.”

“Is the poison that lethal?”

“Ricin works by getting inside the cells of a person’s body and prevent the cells from making proteins they need. Without the proteins, the cells die.”

Freddie took a handkerchief. He covered his face.

“We are giving her supportive medical care to minimize the effects of the poisoning.”

“Will she wake up, doc?”

“She may but I’m not sure when.”

“Doc—”

“Sorry sir, I need to go and continue with her.”

Freddie nodded. The doctor returned to room 201. Freddie tried calling SJ, he couldn’t reach her. Her behavior was eccentric recently. SJ wasn’t staying at school as she used to. She was coming home late and poignant enough, she was undeniably hiding something and she didn’t want to talk. He knew SJ had been acting peculiarly recently but that wasn’t the

big deal then. His daughter was on the bed, in a coma, and poisoned. At that moment he realized that family is not an important thing, it's everything. He didn't have many funny moments with his daughter. He was always busy with works. His heart was aching. Tears slowly seeped over his face. Without a family, man, alone in the world, trembles with the cold.

Freddie sat. He took his phone.

"Warden..." Freddie said.

"Yes sir..."

"Find the best detective in the country as fast as you can. Someone has just poisoned my daughter and I want to know who."

CHAPTER FIFTY

TPO, 2020

Through the screen, Leo saw Christos and Zander walking towards the Post office's entrance.

"Guys, you need to be fast." Leo said.

"We can't make it." SJ said.

"We have less than five minutes." Leo said.

"It's impossible to break this wall in five minutes." Patrice said.

"Our lives depend on it." Leo said.

"It's impossible, Leo." SJ said.

"What do we do?" Leo said.

"Can you do anything out there?" Patrice said.

Leo took a deep breath in and then a deep breath out.

Benjamin told him that breathing in and out calms a person. He tried it several times. That's when he realized he wasn't the professor. He wasn't in Lacasa De Papel. He was in the real world and he was helpless. The document that can free him from his past, free him the hate he had for his parents was inside the office and there was nothing he could do. Sometimes

there is nothing you can do but let it rain and wait for the sunshine. In his life, there was nothing known as sunshine.

“Guys, we have to try.” Leo said.

He saw SJ and Patrice taking their machines back.

“Screw it. Let’s do this.” SJ said.

He clicked his MacBook. Zander and Christos greeted the guards. The guards stood firmly, like those soldiers showing respect to their superiors in movies. He’s the retired president. No guard will bother inspecting him. Christos entered the office, trailed by Zander.

Back to SJ and Patrice, they continued chipping.

Christos passed through the reception office. He waved his hand to the female receptionist. She looked young and lovely, maybe in her mid-twenties.

SJ and Patrice chipped harder.

Christos and Zander entered the elevator.

SJ wiped his face with her palm. Patrice kept on chipping.

Christos and Zander came out of the elevator on the third floor. Christos’s hands dived into his pocket.

Patrice and SJ kept chipping.

Christos opened the door to the locker room. He smiled.

“Guys, stop chipping. They are already in the room.” Leo said.

SJ slid slowly down the wall. Patrice’s hands were on his head. The expressions on their faces said it all. It was like they were hit by a high megawatt shock. They couldn’t move. They were powerless. The only hope they had for thirty-eight years was about to disappear. Leo wiped the tears from his face. He hadn’t realized that he was crying the whole time.

Christos opened the locker.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

TST, 2020

Freddie remained on the bench. His mind was thinking about Isla. He condemned himself for being a negligent father. Regret for the things we did can be tempered by time, it is regret for the things we did not do that is inconsolable. His heart was aching. He now realized the value of family and he thought it was too late. It's not what you are, it's what you don't become that hurts.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

“Warden...” Freddie said. He peeked over his watch, an hour had passed. He exhaled. Time was running awfully fast and with every second ticking, he hoped the door would open and doctors would give him some good news. Nothing happened. The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.

“Sir, are you alright?” Warden said.

Freddie looked at the warden. Behind him, two men stood, both in black suits and briefcases swinging on their hands.

“The detectives are here.” Warden said.

“Mr. Freddie, I’m detective Hudson Charles.” The man on the warden’s right side said. He was black, very black. He had a thin body and he looked like he was in his late thirties. One could say he was more a model than a detective.

“This is Greyson Robert, he’s my assistant.” Hudson introduced the man on the left of the warden. Greyson was a bit white, body well-built, maybe in his early thirties.

Freddie extended his hand and shook both their hands.

Hudson opened his briefcase. “We are detectives from—”

“Please gentlemen, spare me your CVs. My daughter is in a bed, comatose. I want the one who poisoned her found.”

“Do you think your daughter has been poisoned?” Hudson said.

“Think?” Freddie chuckled. “Doctors have confirmed it.”

“Why would someone poison your daughter?”

“That’s why I’m hiring you, detective.”

“What if she poisoned herself?”

“Can someone in a coma poison herself?”

“She was in a coma?”

“She had blows with another girl, she fell on her head. She never woke since then.”

Hudson wrote in his notebook. "Why did she fight?"

Freddie sighed. "I didn't hire you to interrogate me."

"Sir, we need all information to do this job effectively."

Freddie exhaled.

"Why was she in a fight?"

"Because of a man..."

"So, this is a love issue?"

Freddie nodded.

"Do you know the man they were fighting for?"

"I chased him out of school."

"And the girl she fought with?"

"She's still in school."

"I'd like to talk to her."

"No problem." Freddie turned to the warden. "Please take them to the girl."

"We need to talk about the cost first, sir." Hudson said.

"Go find that bitch who wants to kill my daughter before he or she endeavors again. I'll pay you whatever you want."

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

TPO, 2020

“Leo, does he have the files?” SJ said. She was sitting, her body leaning over the wall. Patrice stood, hands on his waist. Everything they had been fighting for 38 years was about to fade away.

Leo looked on his screen circumspectly.

“SJ, it’s over now.” He heard Patrice saying.

He saw SJ scratching her hair.

“We can’t run eternally.” Patrice said.

“We’ve done nothing wrong, Patrice. We don’t deserve this.” SJ said.

“Always the innocent are the first victims. So it has been for ages past, so it is now.”

“We have to fight, Patrice.”

“He has the files now. It’s over SJ.”

“Guys...” Leo said. He zoomed in the footage from the locker room.

“We can find another way.” SJ said.

“We’re too old for that. We can’t hide anymore.”

“Guys...” Leo shouted.

He saw SJ and Patrice turning their heads towards the camera.

“What’s up?” SJ said.

“The locker...” Leo zoomed in.

“What’s with the locker?” Patrice said.

“It’s empty.” Leo said.

SJ stood quickly. “What?”

“They haven’t found anything in the locker.” Leo said.

“Are you sure?” Patrice said.

Leo zoomed in more. “They opened the locker but found nothing. The looks in their faces imply it too.”

“If the files are not in the locker, where are they?” SJ said.

“Tough question for me. I imply you walk out now.” Leo said.

“What is Christos doing?” Patrice said.

“He’s on his knees. Zander is trying to help him stand.” Leo said.

“We’re walking out.” SJ said.

They started packing.

“We locked the files in that locker.” Patrice said. Leo heard via the comms.

“Someone has stolen the files.” SJ said.

“Only four of us knew about this.”

“Rayhan is dead. It’s only three of us now.”

“Something is not okay.”

“Unless Rayhan is alive, all this doesn’t make sense.” SJ said

They finished packing and walked out.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

TST, 2020

Warden accompanied Macy to the school's canteen. It was class time, no one was in the canteen but two men. The men were in black slim-fit suits. Macy hesitated.

"Don't fret, they just want to talk." The warden said.

Macy nodded. But her whole body was trembling. She walked slowly to the table the two men were sitting.

"Hello, Macy?" The black one said.

"Hello!" Her voice was timid.

"I'm detective Hudson Charles." He pointed to his friend, the white one. "He's Greyson, my assistant."

"Why are detectives looking for me?"

"For a small chitchat, if you don't mind."

"Have I done something immoral?"

"Macy, give your stress wings and let it fly away."

Her stomach growled.

"How did you end up in a fight with Isla?"

"I swear, I didn't mean to push her. It was a mishap."

“She ended up in a coma, did you know that?”

Macy nodded.

“Have you ever visited her to the hospital?”

Macy nodded. “A couple of times...”

“When was the last time you visited her?”

“Yesterday...”

“Were you alone or with someone?”

“Alone.”

Detective took some notes. Macy had watched a lot of detective films. Knives out was her favorite. She saw how Benoit Blanc asked questions. It didn't take her much time to realize that she was a suspect but a suspect for what? Did something happen to Isla?

“Isla has been poisoned.” Hudson said.

Macy rushed her palms to cover her mouth. Her heart rate accelerated.

“Her life is hanging.”

“Do you think I've poisoned her?”

“You two were fighting for a boyfriend.”

Macy exhaled. "I swear... I didn't do it."

"Tell me, how did you two end up in a fight?"

She sighed. "I was in my room when I received a letter. It wanted me to go to the store near the school's lavatory. I thought it was from Leo."

"How did you know that it was Leo?"

"Because that's where we used to meet."

"You went to the store?"

"Yes. When I entered, I found Isla instead of Leo. She's carrying the same letter I was carrying."

"You know Leo's handwriting, right?"

"It wasn't handwritten, it was printed."

"You two got heated and started fighting, right?"

"I didn't want to fight. It just happened."

"Can I see the letter you received?"

"It's in my room."

"Do you mind if I escort you there?"

"No problem."

Macy went to her room, trailed by the two detectives. Her room was suitably arranged, bed well covered with white bed sheets, white curtains opened, and tied well and the floor was nourished by a pink mat. She learnt it from her mother. She opened the drawers, looking for the letter.

“Sorry miss...” Hudson said, “Would you mind if we take a look around your room. A pithy look...”

Macy nodded. She continued searching for the letter in her clothes. The detectives moved around the room. It bored her but she believed she was clean. She believed she was innocent.

“Detective...” Greyson said, staring at the drawer. “You need to see this.”

“What?” Hudson said.

“It’s castor beans.”

“Castor beans...?”

“Isla was ricin poisoned.” Greyson said, “Ricin is a poison found naturally in castor beans.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

TPO, 2020

Christos looked at the locker carefully as if he expected a miracle to happen. They say miracles happen every day. Every person is a miracle. Every moment is a miracle. If only we can open our eyes, we'll see God's love everywhere. Christos opened his eyes several times. Same result. The locker was empty. He loosened his necktie and unbuttoned his double breast suit jacket.

“Zander, what the hell is happening?” Christos said.

“I’m perplexed too, sir.” Zander said.

“The files were supposed to be here.”

Zander looked at the security cameras at the corner of the roof.

“Maybe we should look at the security footage.”

“If they have the files, Zander, I’m destroyed.”

“We will get the files.”

“We just have one month and several days to the general election.”

“I promise we’ll get the files.”

“If those files are exposed in public, I’ll lose control of this country that I’ve spent more than 40 years building. Not to mention my reputation.”

“Tides don’t last forever Christos, and when they go, they leave behind beautiful seashells.”

“Those files can’t be released till the man I’m preparing to be a president is elected.”

“Be gentle with yourself. You’re doing the best you can, Christos.”

Christos chuckled. He picked his cane stick and walked out of the locker room. He heard Zander’s footsteps trailing him. He walked to the reception. The receptionist gave him a healthy smile. He returned none.

“Something has been stolen from my locker. I thought this place was secure?” Christos said.

The receptionist’s forehead puckered. “Sorry, sir?”

“Something important has been stolen in my locker. I need you to look into every resource. It’s very imperative.”

“Which locker, sir...?”

“Locker 103...”

The receptionist stared at Christos with cow eyes.

“Stop staring at me. I really need what’s stolen back.”

“Did you say locker 103?”

“Hey lady, you’re not deaf, are you?”

She sighed. “An old woman opened it last week.”

Christos gritted his teeth. “What?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I’m the one who helped her...”

Muscles of his face tightened. “Did you say an old lady?”

“Very old, walking with a cane... A kind of woman anyone would help in the street.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

TST, 2020

Macy's body stiffened. Her whole life she had never killed anybody nor wanted to. But there were castor beans in her room. Who would hassle to believe even if she shouted that she didn't put them there? But she had hope. As fire when thrown into water is cooled down and put out, so also she believed a false accusation when brought against someone of the purest and holiest character, boils over and is at once dissipated, and vanishes.

"Have you found the letter?" Hudson said.

Macy kept digging in her clothes.

"We've got the evidence. Why do we need the letter?" Greyson said.

Macy's heartbeats increased. She kept looking. Her hands were trembling.

"She might be new to crime but not even a kid would leave the evidence in his own room after committing a crime." Hudson said.

"Do you think she's innocent?"

"I think something is missing."

“Something like...?”

“A link.”

“A woman, who opens her heart to love someone, when it’s already broken, is braver than any person you’ll meet.”

Macy found the letter in one of her trousers. She didn’t believe all this was happening in her life because she loved someone. Her only crime was loving Leo. The two detectives were still arguing.

“I’ve found the letter.” She said.

Hudson took it. He turned it, taking a deep look everywhere. He handed it to Greyson.

“Visit all nearby stationeries, see if they have any clue of who printed this.” He said.

Greyson took the letter. “What about the castor beans?”

“Also take a look at Isla’s properties. See if you can find the letter as Macy alleges.”

“Sir—”

“Jumping to conclusions rarely gets us anywhere we want to be.”

Greyson left the room. He didn't look happy. Macy hated him. Maybe because he wanted to conclude she was a criminal or maybe because he was just doing his job or maybe both.

"For how long have you been in love with Leo?" Hudson said.

"I swear I didn't poison her."

"The castor beans?"

"I swear I don't know how they ended up in my room."

Hudson smiled. Macy knew her response didn't make sense. But it was the truth and she was terrified no one would believe her.

Hudson sighed. "Once, there lived a woodcutter, Ramu, who lived a very simple life. He was poor but he was a good man and worked hard. One day while chopping down a branch, Ramu's axe slipped and fell into the adjacent river. He tried searching for his axe but all in vain.

"He sat down by the river bank and started weeping. Hearing his cries, an angel appeared and promised to help him find his axe. She dove into the water and retrieved an axe completely made of gold. Ramu said that this wasn't his axe and refused to accept it. The angel dove again and returned with a silver axe, Ramu refused again and said that his axe was made of steel.

The angel went into the water for one last time and returned with Ramu's axe. Elated, Ramu thanked the angel profusely.

"Impressed by his simplicity and honesty, the angel decides to give Ramu the gold and silver axe too. Ramu went home happily."

Macy smiled. She understood the moral of the story.

"It teaches us to be honest. Honesty is the best policy."

"I'm not lying, detective."

"If you keep lying, I won't be able to help you."

"I'm very honest with you."

"Who do you think would hurt Isla?"

"No one I can think of."

"Leo?"

"No, he can't."

"Why?"

"Leo might be everything but he's not a killer. And why would he poison her?"

"So that he could be with you..."

"Impossible."

Hudson smiled.

After half an hour, Greyson returned. He gave a distrustful look to Macy. Macy didn't care.

"What's up?" Hudson said.

"I checked the stationeries. Found one. A woman remembers someone printed something like this but she doesn't remember any details on the appearance of the person. She can't tell whether it was a man or a woman."

"Then our friend is not very far from here."

"I also checked Isla's properties in the hospital. I found this."

Greyson handed a piece of paper to Hudson.

Hudson looked at the piece of paper. "They are similar."

"Very similar..."

"Do you like games, Grey?"

"I don't think it's time for fun, detective."

Hudson threw the papers on the table. "There is someone very close, someone who enjoys playing precarious games. We have to find out who."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

TPO, 2020

Zander opened the door and Christos surged into his jeep. His handkerchief became wet. Zander gave him some pills and water. He took them promptly. He closed his eyes, trying to control his breaths.

“When I was chosen to be your bodyguard, I was nervous. You told me this...” Zander said, “Rule number one is, don’t sweat the small stuff. Rule number two is, it’s all small stuff.”

Christos chuckled. “If you obey all the rules you miss all the fun.”

Zander smiled. “We will solve this.”

“Who do you think might’ve taken the files?”

“What about Nailah?”

“She’s dead.”

“We didn’t see her body, Christos.”

“The car exploded.”

“We could’ve—”

“The receptionist said an old woman, too old with a cane. Nailah wouldn’t be that old.”

“I know but—”

“Did you confirm Rayhan’s death?”

Zander sighed. “I didn’t get close to see the body but I saw them burying him.”

“He’s the only one apart from us who knew about the files.”

“What if Latricia and Saleem took the files before us?”

Christos smiled. “While we were very busy finding the cards, someone was busy finding an alternative way to open that locker. Trust me, that someone is not them. Latricia and Saleem are as terrified as we are.”

“Are we at a dead end?”

“Tell the pilots to fuel the jet. We’re heading to Mbeya.”

“What? Why? Do you think Rayhan is alive?”

“I don’t have time to think now, Zander. Whether he’s dead or alive, we’re going to find out soon.”

Leo opened the van's door allowing SJ and Patrice to enter. They were on their cleaning suits. SJ took off her cap and threw it hard.

"If the locker was empty, who has the files then?" SJ said.

"Things are becoming more intricate, Lat."

"Please don't call me that."

"The situation is getting shoddier."

"How could someone open the locker without the keys?"

People forge keys. Leo wanted to say that but he kept his mouth shut.

SJ switched on her phone. "If Christos doesn't have the files, we're safe for now."

"Yes, for now. But if we don't clear our names, we'll never be free."

"We've to find out who took the files."

"It's—"

SJ's phone rang. She accepted. Leo couldn't hear what the other side said.

“I’m sorry, I was doing an important job.” She said. She listened. Then she replied. “What? Who...?” She stood. Her brows knitted in a frown. “Okay, give me some time.” She hung up.

“What’s up?” Patrice said.

“Leo, you need to go to the school, TST.”

Leo chuckled. “Tell me I’m not hearing well.”

SJ grabbed Leo’s shirt. “My daughter has been poisoned and the detectives think you can help them find out who did it.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

TST, 2020

“You are free for now but I may call you any time soon.”

Detective Hudson told Macy and left her room. Greyson followed him.

“Hudson...” Greyson said, “Are you using your heart or mind to make decisions?”

Hudson smiled. “None...”

“She’s supposed to be a prime suspect and you let her go. What if she escapes?”

“Grey, the world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.”

“What’s wrong with you, Hudson?”

“I need to talk to Freddie.”

“You—”

“I know what I’m doing, detective. Till I fill all gaps in this puzzle, I can’t jump to conclusions.”

Hudson went to Freddie’s office. Greyson followed gently.

“Tell me you have found something, detective.” Freddie said.
His eyes were crinkled with frustration.

“I’m getting somewhere. I need something.” Hudson said.

“What?”

“I need to talk to Leo.”

“It can’t happen.”

“There are questions only he can answer.”

“He’s not coming back.”

“I need him.”

“Last time he showed up his face, my daughter ended up in a coma.”

“That’s why I need to talk to him.”

Freddie sighed. He gave Hudson an unrelenting stare. “Fine. He comes in, he talks to you, and he goes out.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

MBEYA, 2020

Christos waited till night. He couldn't dig out the grave in daylight. No one would. His watch read 0100hrs. Mbalizi was dreadfully silent. Most of the lights were off and people were doubtless in their beds. No one likes walking near cemeteries at nights unless they turn night into day. But in mbalizi cemeteries, deep in obscurity, there was Christos, Zander, and a bunch of ten young men. As the saying goes, all true stories begin and end in a cemetery. Christos was about to find Rayhan's story.

He sat on the chair, seeping coffee. The weather was cool that he didn't need a jacket. Rayhan's grave wasn't covered with cemented walls or tiles. Just a hill of soil. The cross was nearly collapsing. But as Steve Jobs said, being the richest man in the cemetery doesn't matter... Going to bed at night saying we've done something wonderful... that's what matters. He watched the young men digging off the grave.

"Are we doing the right thing?" Zander said.

"I'm not sure."

"We can stop and leave."

"My reputation is about to be obliterated."

“We’re digging a dead man’s grave.”

“Zander, I’ve done everything I could to look after this country. This country could’ve perished a long time ago if it wasn’t for me. Yes, I’ve killed people, but it was for the better. Life is a song, sing it. Life is a game, play it. Life is a challenge, meet it. Life is a dream, realize it. Life is a sacrifice, offer it. Life is love, enjoy it.”

Zander took a deep breath. His forehead puckered. The young men continued digging the grave.

Christos sighed. “What we did is sacrificing our today so that our children can have a better tomorrow. People will remember our forfeits someday.”

“Have we truly helped this country?”

Christos chuckled. “Zander, do you trust me?”

Zander exhaled. “We’ve given many things to the capitalists.”

“Our country had to survive, Zander. We had no choice.”

Christos patted zander’s shoulder. “To live is to suffer, and to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.”

“What if we are doing all these just to save ourselves?”

“Self-care is not selfish, Zander. You cannot serve from an empty vessel.”

Zander glanced over the sky.

“Our country still needs us. Till we make it the superlative, no one can reduce to rubble my reputation.”

“What if we’re blind? Blind people who can see but do not see?”

“Zander, I—”

A whisper came from young men. They beckoned them. Zander helped Christos stand. Using his cane, he bit by bit sauntered to the grave.

The timbers were already started being annihilated by scavengers. Three young men were inside the grave. They opened the relics of the coffin. Christos held his cane tightly. His eyes widened and his heart started running fast. The coffee cup fell off his hand. He was shuddering. Zander helped him standing. Inside the coffin, there were only dresses. Those white dresses used to cover dead people. There were no signs of bones, skulls, or vestiges of the body parts.

“It’s empty sir!” A young man in the grave shouted.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

TST, 2020

“Leo Felix, thank you for coming on such short notice.”

Detective Hudson said.

Leo nodded.

“Just want to ask you few questions.”

Leo looked around the room. It was the same office the warden interrogated him back then. The same office, the same chair but this time, there was a different interrogator.

“What’s your relationship with Isla?”

“Not sure.”

“This is a somber question, boy.”

“Her last words were... I hate you, Leo.”

“What happened, boy?”

“First, Dean knows the whole story. If you want more, go ask him, and second, I think Leo will do instead of boy.”

“What’s your relationship with Macy?”

“Are we here to thrash out my relationships?”

“All this is about jealousy. The girls were fighting for you.”

“Girls always fight.”

“It's sad how girls will run from the guys who try to make them happy and fight for the ones that make them cry.”

“Maybe it's not about the happy ending. Maybe it's about the story.”

Hudson smiled. “Someone poisoned Isla, if we don't find him or her, they may endeavor to take her life again.”

“We? You're the detective. This is your job. You get paid.”

“Do you think Macy would hurt Isla?”

“With hard work and dedication, anything is possible.”

“What do you mean, boy, uh I mean, Leo?”

“Even if she hated her, Macy has got no dedication.”

“Did you send the letters to Isla and Macy wanting to meet them at the school's store?” Hudson slid the letters to Leo.

Leo read the letters. “This isn't me.”

“Who else knew you liked to meet with your girlfriends in there?”

Leo chuckled. “I never told anybody but girls, they talk too much. I wonder how many they've told.”

“Is there any girl that you rejected so badly recently?”

Leo exhaled.

“The effects of rejection can either kill your muse or change your life.”

“Daliah and Rachel.”

“What about those two? Who would want to hurt Isla?”

“I wish I could be of assistance, detective.”

“Don’t worry. Think...” Hudson leaned closer to Leo. “It’s the little details that are vital. Little things make big things happen.”

Leo exhaled. “Rachel is the kindest woman I’ve ever met. Maybe Daliah.”

“Why Daliah...?”

Leo chuckled. The question was sturdy to him. He didn’t know why he mentioned Daliah. Maybe it was because he wanted to avenge her for betraying him when he hid in her room or maybe because his gut told him so, or maybe both. “I haven’t spent much time with her. So I don’t know what she is and what she’s not capable of.”

“Thank you for your cooperation, Leo.”

“Can I go now?”

“Sure.”

Leo stood. “Can I ask something?”

“Anything...?”

“Isla, can I see her?”

“I’m afraid no.”

“One minute will do.”

“Freddie won’t allow that.”

“I know. That’s why I asked for your help.”

“No one enters that ward without Freddie’s assent. It’s profoundly guarded 24 hours.”

Leo sighed.

“I wish I could help, boy.” Hudson smiled. “I mean Leo.”

Leo walked out at a snail's pace. His heart was heavy. He never got a chance to say sorry to Isla. She’s in a coma and anything could happen. He stood outside, staring at the hospital. Students were still in the classes. It was too empty and hushed outside.

In peace, may you leave the shore. In love, may you find the next. Safe passage on your travels until our final journey to the ground. May we meet again. He remembered the words Clarke

told Lexa when Lexa was about to die. But this wasn't The 100. This was real life and Leo beyond doubt wished to meet Isla again, in the real life.

Leo was escorted out of the school.

CHAPTER SIXTY

MBEYA, 2020

Christos couldn't stand any longer. Zander aided him in sitting. The young men were covering the grave. Christos took a deep breath in and a deep breath out. He repeated that several times. They say deep breathing brings deep thinking and shallow breathing brings shallow thinking.

"If Rayhan is alive, Nailah can also be alive." Zander said.

"I knew Nailah was cheating me with Rayhan." Christos said. He took the handkerchief. The last time he cried was when he was 7. That's the last he could remember.

Zander glanced over the sky.

"The blood sample I found on my window, it was Rayhan's. I knew it and I did nothing. When Nailah said she was going to visit her parents, I knew she was never coming back. When I heard she got an accident, that her car exploded, I knew something was wide of the mark but I did nothing." Christos sighed. "Love blinded me, Zander."

Zander patted his shoulder.

"I loved her too much." His palm pressed his chest. "But in this world, it is difficult to love someone who loves you, but easy to

hate someone who loves you, and love someone who hates you.”

“You need to relax.” Zander said.

“Why did she hate me? I gave her everything.”

Zander sighed.

“Nailah knew many of my secrets.”

“We’ll find her. You really need to relax.”

“Not now, Zander.”

“It’s for your health.”

“Health without reputation is unhealthy.”

“You need to calm down. Go get some sleep.”

Christos stood. “Zander, assemble all the men we have in this country. We’re searching the whole country, leaving no stone unturned. Until I find Rayhan and Nailah, there is nothing known as sleeping.”

Christos knew he was in trouble. He used all of his resources, including the president of the country who was his puppet, to start a hunt against Rayhan and Nailah. His empire was about fall and he was willing to do anything to make sure it doesn’t. He hunted Rayhan and Nailah for 30 days.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

DAR, 2020

“Christos hasn’t done anything against us up to now. Looks like he doesn’t have the files.” SJ said, hands on the steering wheel of her Range Rover Evoque.

“We can’t be sure.” Patrice said.

“I can’t think right now. I’m baffled.” SJ said.

“I only know that from wherever it is that we're going there can be no turning back.” Patrice said.

“Leo, are you okay?” SJ said.

Leo nodded. But he wasn’t okay. The girl she loved was in a coma and no one knew when she’d wake. Her mother was in India for surgery and he didn’t know how she was doing. The files that could help clear his father’s name were nowhere to be seen. How can that person be okay?

SJ’s phone rang. She picked it.

“Are you sure?” she said and then listened. She turned back to Leo, her brows bumped together in a scowl. She then replied, “Okay, thank you. Keep digging.”

“Everything alright...?” Patrice said.

SJ sighed, laying her head on the steering wheel.

“What’s wrong?” Leo said.

“It’s one of my men from Mbeya.” SJ said.

“Tell us something...” Patrice said.

“Christos dug Rayhan’s grave.”

“What?” Leo snapped.

“It was empty.”

“What do you mean, empty?” Leo said.

“His body wasn’t in the grave.” SJ said.

“I was there when we buried him. I saw his body.” Leo said.

“He’s a special agent. Maybe you saw what he wanted you to see.” Patrice said.

“You mean my father is alive?”

“We can’t say but it’s what we’re going to find out.” SJ said.

Leo leaned on the Rover’s seat.

“We’ll use all the resources we have. If he’s alive, we’ve to find him before Christos does.” SJ said.

“This is our last chance, Sonia.” Patrice said.

SJ nodded. “My daughter is fighting for her life and I can’t even be with her. Let’s go draw to a close this shit, irretrievably.”

SJ and Patrice used all the resources and connections that they had in the country. As Arnold Schwarzenegger said, life is continuously being hungry. The meaning of life is not simply to exist, to survive, but to move ahead, to go up, to achieve, to conquer. They searched for Rayhan for 30 days.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

TST, 2020

Life at Tanzania School of Talents changed unexpectedly. Baraka sat at the backbench. The one Leo preferred to sit. Professor Lucy was in class but Baraka's concentration was somewhere else. At least he thought it was the same for other class members. He had four problems. The school had four problems.

The first problem happened yesterday, early in the morning. A bunch of police officers stopped in the school. Detective Hudson and Greyson after an unfathomable investigation found out the real person who poisoned Isla. It was Daliah. She admitted it and all the evidence were found. The police came for her. Her mother was there when the police took her. Baraka eavesdropped on the conversation between Daliah and her mother.

"Why did you do that, Daliah?" her mother said. She's a woman in her late fifties. Her black hair slowly started turning snow white.

"I loved him, mom."

"Daughter, why love things you were destined to lose? Why let yourself feel things if the feelings were doomed to die?"

“Mom, I’ve never loved like this.”

“Your father departed this life when you were young. You know how hard I worked to raise you. Why mess up your future because of love?”

Daliah’s eyes were full of tears. Her mother hugged her snugly.

“I’m sorry—”

A short, powerfully built police officer took Daliah from her mother. Baraka watched Daliah’s hand sliding off her mother’s hand. The whole school saw that. It was an appalling feeling. Unexplainable.

You can’t censure a girl who loved too much. Baraka thought. When you love too hard, you can lose the will to live without them. Everywhere you look is a great big sucking absence of what you once had and will never have again. And life gets weirdly flat and too sharp and painful at the same time, and nothing feels right, and everything cuts. And maybe Daliah was just the beginning, many more were about to come.

He didn’t know what would happen to Daliah. Neither the police nor the Dean said anything. But everyone knew whatever was going to happen to Daliah, was nothing good. The only thing Dean said for sure was that she was never coming back to TST.

The second problem occurred yesterday too, during the afternoon. Students were still in groups, thrashing out about Daliah. That's when Macy's mother appeared. She came to take her daughter out of school. She was in a pink One-Button Blazer, a black Printed Top, and pink Straight-Leg Pants. She looked to be in her mid-fifties.

Baraka overheard the conversation between Macy and her mother, some students did too.

"Mom, I don't want to leave." Macy said.

"You were framed for poisoning someone." Her mother said

"They found the real wrongdoer."

"Today, they framed you. Tomorrow, they may poison you too."

"Mom, it won't happen again. I promise."

"Love is blind, daughter. It will take over your mind. What you think is love, is truly not. You need to elevate your mind."

"Mom, please let me fulfill my dream."

"I lost your father, I'm not losing you."

"Mom..."

"We'll find another school, Macy."

Macy couldn't say no. For God said, Honor your father and mother, and anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.

She forlornly put her luggage in her mother's Manhattan Grey Metallic, BMW X6 M. Every student saw that scene. No matter how prepared you think you are for the death of a loved one, it still comes as a shock, and it still hurts very deeply. This wasn't death but it touched the heart of Baraka and maybe, the hearts of all students at TST. Karma propels us into all kinds of unexpected situations. This is another reason we should behave with love and compassion toward all living beings. We never know in what circumstances we will meet up with them again. Sometimes even in this same lifetime.

The third problem was Isla. She's still in a coma. No hope of waking. Doctors did their best and now, it was only God to handle the rest. Baraka thought she didn't deserve to die young. She'd a lot of things to fulfill in life. Find a husband, have kids, and enjoy her mother role. That's always what Isla told Baraka. That's what Isla liked to do after she finished school. Her dreams were about to perish. A lesson Baraka learnt was to begin doing what you want to do now. We are not living in eternity. We have only this moment, sparkling like a star in our hand, and melting like a snowflake.

The fourth problem occurred a long time ago. But it was difficult to forget. How can someone forget Leo? He was stubborn, a troublemaker, and everything bad. But his presence always left happiness behind. He was terminated from school. Baraka missed him. He hoped it was the same for all other students.

Daliah, Macy, and Leo left without saying goodbye. They never had a chance to say goodbye. Isla was in a bed. If anything happened to her and Baraka prayed nothing to happen to her, then she too will leave without saying goodbye. But maybe sometimes not saying goodbye is good because goodbye means going away and going away means forgetting.

If we do meet again, we shall smile. If not, this parting was well made. Baraka stared at the roof.

“Are you guys okay? You don’t seem to be in class, what’s bothering you?” Professor Lucy said.

That’s how life in TST continued for 30 days.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

DAR, 2020

Leo, Patrice, and SJ searched for Rayhan for 30 days without success. Their hearts started dying a slow death, shedding each hope like leaves until one day there will be none. No hopes. Nothing remains. They were at SJ's home. Not the one in Masaki but the one in Mbezi. With Isla still in a coma, she didn't spend much of her time at Masaki. She's in conflict with Freddie. Freddie knew something was wrong but SJ refused to talk. Maybe she was protecting him but maybe he deserved to know. As the saying goes, Stay faithful or stay single.

They spent most of their time watching television. They hoped if Rayhan had the files, he would release them in the mass media before the general election. Before Christos plants another president who would do as Christos wishes. Every day was the same, no news and no Rayhan.

It was the final campaign day. There was no more hope left.

"Christos wins again." Patrice said.

"It's not over." SJ said.

"Do you really believe that Rayhan is out there?"

"What I believe is Christos has no files."

“We don’t have files too. That makes Christos a winner.”

“Without files, he can’t kill us.”

“After election, he’ll expose our new identities. Don’t forget we’re wanted people.”

“Let’s have faith in Rayhan.”

“If he was alive, he’d have contacted us.”

“BREAKING NEWS...” The voice of a female reporter caught their attention. Leo raised the volume. “Mr. Fabian, a president who was announced to be assassinated 38 years ago has reappeared.”

“Holy shit..!” SJ said.

The three stood involuntarily.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

DAR, 1982

Rayhan surged in president Fabian's house. The gunfire proceeded outside. He went to the sitting room. There was just a cake, with candles surrounding a well-adorned table. On the wall, there was a picture showing Fabian and his wife with words, *happy tenth anniversary to us* on the top. He started searching the house. He entered one of the bedrooms. It was empty. There were pictures of a young lady, perhaps in her mid-twenties. Maybe his daughter. He walked to another room. It was empty. There was another room ahead of him. The door wasn't fully closed. Rayhan cocked his gun and walked to the door. He slowly opened the door. In front of him stood president Fabian, his wife stood behind him. Both were shuddering.

"Who are you?" Fabian said.

"I just want to talk." Rayhan said.

"Says a man with the gun."

Rayhan lowered his gun. "Christos wants you dead."

"What? Who are you?"

"A man hired to kill you."

“Christos would never taunt to kill me.”

Rayhan chuckled. “Yet, here I am.”

“If you are here to kill me, why telling me this?”

“Because I trust you. You must not die.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“You refused to sign the documents Christos wanted you to sign. He thinks you are a fence on his way. He wants you eliminated.”

“Those treaties were not good for our country.”

“They are good for Christos and he’ll do anything to get them executed.”

“How—”

“Sorry sir, I don’t have much time. If you want to live, you have to sham your death.”

“I can’t. I’m the president.”

“Christos is powerful than you. There is no way you can trounce him.”

“What—”

“You are the only one who can save this country but you need to be more powerful than Christos first.”

“Running away from your problems is a race you’ll never win.”

“I appreciate your audacity to motivate yourself but if I won’t kill you today, someone else will tomorrow.”

“Go—”

“I’m giving you a chance to live. You can’t save this country if you’re dead.”

“Fabian, listen to him...” His wife said.

Fabian sighed. He remained silent for seconds. “What should I do?”

“We have to sham your death and you must disappear.”

“How...?”

“We don’t time to talk much now, we’ll talk much later. From now on, you’re a dead man.” Rayhan cocked his gun and shot three times.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

BAGAMOYO, 2020

Christos was in his house when he saw the news. He kicked the glass table in front of him. He breathed like mad as he watched the table scattering on the marbled floor. Fabian exposed his every action. He exposed the files he signed with Latricia, Saleem, and Rayhan. He exposed many other treaties Christos signed with the whites. *Did Fabian die or went deep undercover?* The question circulated in his mind. Christos knew, with all the evidence now available, with his seal everywhere in the files, he knew it wouldn't take long before his arrest warrant was issued. He knew even the president in power wouldn't be able to protect him unless he was above the law, which he wasn't. As Buddha said, No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path. Christos knew he was all on his own.

He felt his whole body aching. His head was aching, the muscles were aching, his stomach was growling and his lips were trembling. When we have lost everything, including hope, life becomes a disgrace, and death a duty. He didn't expect this to happen in his life but it was happening. Witnessing himself losing everything he struggled to build.

“What should we do?” Zander said.

“How comes Fabian is alive?” Christos said.

“I wonder how many things we don’t know.”

Christos changed the TV station. In every station, the news was the same. The thought assassinated President Fabian returns with solid evidence to expose the corrupt acts of retired president, Christos, and his government.

Christos switched off the TV. “Zander, get the money and passports. I think it’s time to disappear.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

DAR, 2020

SJ and Patrice surrendered to the police as Fabian wanted them to. With all evidence available to prove their innocence, they had no choice but to give in. It didn't take much time and they were declared innocent and free. They were no longer birds and no net ensnared them. They were free human beings with an independent will. The general election was performed and many people were waiting for the results. Christos's whereabouts were still unknown.

After long, exasperating efforts of proving their innocence, they were invited to Fabian's house for dinner. Leo was invited too. He put on a slim double-breast suit. He couldn't stop looking at himself. He had never been on a suit before. Nothing tastes as good as looking good feels. He couldn't stop smiling.

When the sun disappeared deep into the sea allowing the full moon to take cover, Leo, Patrice, and SJ arrived at a big, beautiful and posh Bangalore. There were two swimming pools outside. They were the ones he could see, maybe there were others. There were two Toyota V8 Land cruisers in the parking lot. The house was an example of early heaven on earth. Fabian's wife welcomed them at the gate. Her head was full of whitish hair. She's in her seventies maybe. She was very kind

and calm. She's brave too, clothed in strength and dignity, and she laughed without fear of the future.

They were summoned to the table for dinner. Everything was new to Leo. He couldn't avoid moving his eyes here and there.

"I know you have many questions. Let's talk after the meal." Fabian said. The food was so sweet that Leo didn't want to swallow it and he didn't want to spit it out either. Apart from the expertise used to prepare the food, Leo believed when you eat food with your family and friends, it always tastes better!

After food, they gathered into the sitting room. The table was full of drinks, both alcoholic and soft. Everyone took their favorite alcoholic drinks except him. He hated alcohol. He didn't want to end up like his father.

"Before we proceed, I want to introduce someone." Fabian said.

Leo's heart started racing. He heard footsteps marching towards the sitting room. His heart raced more and the smile on his face disappeared when he saw a woman entering the sitting room. She wasn't as old as Fabian's wife, in her early sixties maybe.

"Nailah?" SJ said. She stood and hugged her. Patrice did the same.

"What about my father?" Leo said.

Fabian looked at Leo. Leo knew it wasn't a good news look.

"Rayhan is dead." Fabian said. The whole room went still.

"His grave was empty." SJ said.

"We didn't bury him in Mbeya. It was a distraction technique. We wanted Christos to think Rayhan is alive so that he could focus on hunting him and not think of anything else, like us being alive." Fabian said.

"What happened that night? We had all evidence suggesting your wrongdoings. We heard three shots." Patrice said.

"Rayhan knew the truth. He knew the evidence was manipulated."

"How did he know?" Patrice said.

"I told him." Nailah said.

"How did you end up with Fabian?" SJ said.

"She faked her death." Fabian said.

"You can't hunt dead people, can you?" Nailah said.

"Christos believed it?" Patrice said.

"Love is blind and a deaf-mute too." Nailah said.

"Can I see my father's grave?" Leo said.

“Yes. Your father was a good man.” Fabian said.

“A real man spends time with his family.” Leo said.

SJ said, “Leo—”

Fabian stopped SJ. “Leo, the first step to be a good man is you must deeply feel the burden of the stones someone else is carrying.”

Leo nodded. But deep inside him, there were still roots of hate against his father, who was now announced on every TV station as a hero.

“I think we should not hub on the past. Let’s try focusing on the future.” Fabian said. “Now that you are free, what would you like to do for the rest of your life?”

SJ smiled. “I want to be a good mother and a good wife. A mother who understands what a child does not say.”

“Saleem...?”

“Almost forgot that name.” Patrice said.

The whole sitting room busted into a laugh.

“I want to spend the rest of my life with my kids and wife.”

Patrice said, “Nothing is better than going home to family and eating good food and relaxing.”

Everyone in the sitting room applauded.

Nailah poured champagne into glasses and everyone raised a glass. “Here’s to the nights we’ll never remember with the friends we’ll never forget.”

Everyone toasted and drank.

“What about you, Leo?” Fabian said.

Leo’s heart started racing. Was it because he’s the only youngest person in the room or because he didn’t know what he wanted to do, or both?

He stared at his glass.

“Don’t be afraid.” Fabian said.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’ll do. I’ll go where my feet send me.”

The whole room went silent. SJ’s phone rang.

“I’m sorry, I’ve to take this.” She said.

Fabian nodded.

“Hello, Freddie.” She said and then listened. Her hands rose swiftly covering her smiling face. When she hung up the phone she started jumping and dancing around the sitting room. *Oh my God, she’s not drunk.* Leo thought.

“What’s so funny?” Patrice said.

SJ hugged Patrice. *Well now, maybe she’s really drunk.* Leo thought.

“Hey, what?” Patrice said.

“Isla, she’s awake. My daughter is awake.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

DAR, 2020

After SJ left, it didn't take a long time before everyone else left except Leo. Fabian asked him to stay. Leo sat in one of the gardens watching Fabian seeing off his guests. The weather was cool, he enjoyed the night breeze. After seeing off his guests, Fabian followed Leo. Fabian had already drunk two bottles of wine. He was carrying another one. Leo hoped he wasn't drunk. Adult drunkards talk a lot. If you have a drinking father, then you will unquestionably remember those nights when your father came home drunk and kept on talking to you while your mother quarreled with him to let you go sleep. Leo prayed that not to happen.

"Sonia told me you were living alone, in a rent room." Fabian said.

"It was a for short-term. Because I was helping them find the files. Now that I have nothing more, I'll go home."

"Aren't you tired?" Fabian said, "You can sleep here and we'll talk tomorrow."

"It's too early for me to sleep."

"It's 0200hrs."

“I can’t sleep that much.”

“When did it start?”

“When I was 5.”

Fabian patted Leo’s shoulder. “Do you like stories?”

“I read them a lot.”

Fabian poured wine into a glass. “Two monks were near the end of a long grueling journey. The rain was pouring down and turned the road they were on into mud.

“As they came upon an intersection they encountered a beautiful woman in a silk kimono and sash. The mud had made it impossible for her to cross.

“The first monk watched the poor woman struggle and went to aid her. He picked her up and carried her over the mud.

“The second monk said nothing. He averted his eyes until the woman was gone. He stayed silent until they reached their lodging temple that night. Then he no longer could restrain himself.

“‘We monks don't go near females,’ he told the first monk, ‘especially not beautiful women. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?’

“‘I left the girl there,’ said the first monk. ‘Are you still carrying her?’”

Fabian sipped a glass of wine. “I like that story.”

“Why?” Leo said. He couldn’t drink more soda unless he wanted his stomach to split open.

“The second monk was presented with a valuable life lesson, the lesson of letting go. How often do we fail to let something go?”

Leo stared at the sky. He felt the story was for him.

“It is important to embrace the good and positive. It is just as important to let go of the pain before it turns to scars.”

Leo sighed. “It’s not that simple.”

“When I speak of letting go, I do not mean to forget. I believe you need to let go of the negative emotions and pain but hold on to the lesson that was learned.”

Leo nodded. If it wasn’t for his father, this country could still be under the deceitful leadership of Christos.

“You have to forgive your father, son.”

“I’ll, sir.”

“Now, what do you plan to do after today? I heard you were terminated from the school.”

“I don’t know. I’ll just go home.”

“Don’t you want to go back to TST? I can ask them to pardon you.”

“I don’t want to go back there.”

“Why?”

“I’m not a good person. I always cause troubles there.”

Fabian took another sip and then he exhaled deep. “Do you know why many people are not happy in life?”

Leo shook his head.

Fabian took another sip. “Most people today are not getting what they want. Not from their jobs, not from their families, not from their religion, not from their government, and most importantly, not from themselves. Something is missing in most of our lives.” He took another long sip. “In the world without purpose, without meaningful values, what have we to share but our emptiness, the needy fragments of our superficial selves?

“As a result, most of us scramble about hungrily seeking distraction, in music, in television, in people, in drugs. And most of all we seek things. Things to fill the emptiness.”

Leo sat well. The topic touched him.

“Most of us have no clue of what we want to do with our lives. Even after we finish school. Even after we get a job. Even after we’re making money.”

“Do you think if I go back to TST, I’ll be able to find what I want in life?”

Fabian smiled. He was nearly finishing the whole bottle. “Have you ever heard about the parable of the eagle and the rabbit?”

Leo shook his head.

“There once was a majestic eagle. Every day he could be seen on the highest branch of the tallest tree just sitting and doing nothing.

“One day a small rabbit noticed him and asked, ‘Can I sit and do nothing too?’

“The eagle replied, ‘Sure. Do whatever you want.’

“And so the young rabbit curled up on the ground next to the huge tree the eagle was perched on.

“But... All of a sudden a sly fox appeared from nowhere and ate the little rabbit. End of the story.”

Leo smiled. “What’s the moral of the story?”

Fabian poured the remaining wine into the glass. “Until you are at the very top you cannot afford to be lazy. If you want to sit and do nothing, you better have already earned that privilege.”

The smile on Leo’s face disappeared. It was another emotive message to him.

“If you do not have the life you want, then you do not get to be lazy. You have to work for your success. Acting like you are successful before you are will only get you in deep trouble.”

The wise words from Fabian touched Leo’s heart. He knew he had to change. He knew he had to do something.

Leo saw Fabian’s wife coming. He knew what was going to happen. And it happened.

“It’s too late now, let the kid go sleep.” She said.

Leo waved goodbye and went to the room he was shown earlier. Deep in his mind, Fabian’s words ringed again.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

TST, 2020

Two weeks had passed. After giving it a lot of thought, Leo decided to return to TST. Fabian asked Freddie to forgive Leo and Freddie, by a hair's breadth decided to give him what he called the final chance. It wasn't very good for Leo but he had no choice. Even a ship in a harbor is safe, but that's not why ships are built. At the gate, Baraka was waiting for him.

"Hey, Leo..." Baraka said, waving. He grew a bit thinner. But who else grows fat in school?

"Baraka." Leo hugged him.

"I was not expecting to meet you again. It's nice to see you again."

"I'm glad you're here."

Leo signed at the gate and walked to the school's campus with Baraka. Nothing changed much at the school. The paints on the walls were the same, in short everything was as it used to be.

"Hey, I heard about Macy and Daliah." Leo said.

"Everyone in class is still trying to muddle through." Baraka said.

"I also heard about Isla."

“Please don’t blame yourself for things you couldn’t control, sometimes it’s just not your fault.”

“I’ve ruined their lives.”

“You didn’t, they did.”

“I was the cause.”

“Hey, go get some rest.” Baraka said, “Things are a bit of a marathon in class.”

Leo smiled.

Baraka smiled. “Don’t forget to prepare slides for me.”

“Slides...?”

“How to win a girl’s heart without talking much. Not less than 10 slides.”

Leo smiled.

“Hey, I’m serious. Very serious...”

The two hugged and Baraka went to class.

Leo didn’t go to his room. He went to the school’s garden. He sat, watching the tulip flowers. He liked tulips. Tulips are available in various colors which include red, pink, yellow, orange, and purple. The Tulip flower is an 11th wedding anniversary flower and represents elegance and grace. Yellow

tulips symbolize cheerfulness and white tulips stand for forgiveness. Purple tulip is synonymous with royalty and red tulips symbolize deep love. It is believed that the black velvety center of the tulip represents a lover's heart. He couldn't move his eyes away from the tulips.

He thought about what Fabian told him. Did he have any purpose in this life? If he had, what was his purpose? The aroma of the flowers pierced his nostrils. He had to find his purpose.

"Hello." The voice jolted him from his deep thoughts. The voice was familiar. Even if you woke him up in the mid of the night, he would never miss the voice.

"Isla..." Leo said. He stood.

"I heard you were back to school, I came to say hi."

Leo stared at her. "How are you?"

"Alive and better. Thanks to God."

"I'm very sorry."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Is it true?"

"Yeah!"

“You have decided to become a sister?”

Isla nodded.

The smile on Leo’s face disappeared. It hurts when your heart is taken away by someone you know won’t come back.

“I feel like I owe my life to God.” Isla said, “Waking up after being in a coma for a month is a great miracle. I want to serve God for the rest of my life.”

Leo looked heavenward. Tears shone in his eyes. His hand was pressing hard on his chest. It’s really painful when you cannot do anything about the situation but cry. You can close your eyes to things you don’t want to see, but you can’t close your heart to things you don’t want to feel. Benjamin once told him that, falling in love is like holding a candle. Initially, it lightens up the world around you. Then it starts melting and hurt you. Finally, it goes off and everything is darker than ever and all you are left with is the burn.

“Leo, I came to tell you it’s over now.”

Leo took a deep breath, tears ran down his cheeks. “Before you came, I also thought the same, it’s all over now.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

TST, 2020

A romantic story that started on his first day in school was on its final page. Leo's eyes escorted Isla who vanished out of his sight, without looking back. Leo believed that when a girl leaves knowing that she'll never come back and the girl just leaves without looking back, love is no longer there. The garden didn't smell good any more. Leo headed to his room.

The room was very dirty. Spider webs dominated the ceiling, windows were full of dust and his properties were roughly dispersed all over the room. When he left, he didn't get time to pack his stuff. He left everything in the room. But he left them in order. Unless someone entered his room searching for something there was doubtless a ghoul who scattered his belongings.

He sat at the table. Not only his heart but his whole body was aching. He wondered how a girl could do something so bizarre to another girl because of a man, a man she didn't even know well. Was love that influential? Of course, it was. It was love that made him sit feebly on the table, not knowing what to do. He remembered Benjamin's words, you can spend minutes, hours, days, weeks, or even months over-analyzing a situation, trying to put the pieces together, justifying what could've,

would've happened or you can just leave the pieces on the floor and move on. What was he supposed to do? He wished Benjamin was there.

Someone knocked on the door.

Leo wiped his tears using his shirt.

A knock proceeded.

"Come in." Leo said.

The door opened. Rachel entered. She was on a red Sheath Dress, sitting just above her knees. The dress showed well her gymslip-thin, mermaids figure.

"Hello." Rachel said.

Leo smiled.

"I thought you needed some help cleaning the room." She said as she scrutinized the room.

Leo smiled. His smile dazed him. It was a chaste smile. He didn't remember the last time he smiled like that.

Rachel opened her arms. "Aren't you hugging me?"

Leo stood and the two hugged.

His heart stopped aching and his body was at peace. There's something in a simple hug that always warms the heart. It welcomes us back home and makes it easier to part.

"Rachel, I'm back." Leo said.

"I always prayed for you to come back."

"You can now hold my hand, forever."

"Really?"

"Yah!"

Rachel hugged him tightly. He could hear her smiling.

"I'm glad you are back, Leo. I really love you."

Leo's hands were on her waist. He glanced up to the ceiling. He once read the book called *The Zahir* by Paulo Coelho. He remembered the words in one of the scenes, my heart might be bruised, but it will recover and become capable of seeing the beauty of life once more. It's happened before, it will happen again, I'm sure. When someone leaves, it's because someone else is about to arrive. I'll find love again.

Was it really that he found love again? Or was it as Fabian said, that he was just looking for a distraction to fill his emptiness?

CHAPTER SEVENTY

DAR, 2020

Another week passed. The new president was announced, Nicolas Alan. Many Tanzanian's believed that president Nicolas would take the country to a better place. He was kind, powerful, influential, and he wasn't someone else's puppet. The start of something new brings the hope of something great, anything is possible.

Christos and Zander were caught at the border attempting to flee out of the country. Everything has to come to an end, sometimes.

Leo's mother finished her treatments successfully in India and she returned to Tanzania. Leo was there at Mwalimu Nyerere international airport when his mother arrived. That day, they spent a lot of time together talking. It's when Leo realized that, a mother is she who can take the place of all others but whose place no one else can take. It was a very special day for him.

About Rachel, he realized that it wasn't a distraction to fill his emptiness. It was love. How did he know? You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams. He fell in love with her courage, her sincerity, and her flaming self-respect. And it's these things he'd believe

in, even if the whole world indulged in wild suspicions that she wasn't all she should be. He loved her and it was the beginning of everything. Rachel was always there when Leo was in tough times. Leo always sent her away but she kept coming back. He believed that she's sent into his life to give him something to fight for, to show him where there was love in this world, to give him hope, and to bring him joy, all the proof in life he needed was in her. She was his soul mate and life mate. If she lived to be a hundred, he wanted to live to be a hundred minus one day so he never has to live without her.

President Fabian asked President Nicolas and they arranged a proper burial ceremony for Rayhan. He was a soldier and he died a soldier, he deserved a proper and reverent burial ceremony.

At the burial ceremony, everyone dressed in black suits except the soldiers, who were in their combats. They were at Kinondoni cemetery. Leo sat with his mother and Rachel. His mother liked Rachel a lot. Some representatives from TST also attended the ceremony. He saw Baraka. He tried to look but he never saw Isla.

President Fabian gave a long speech that touched a lot of men and women in the burial ceremony. It touched Leo too. He finished his speech by saying, "We sleep peaceably in our beds

at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on our behalf. Rayhan was one of those men, may his soul rest in peace. If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live. Today, we'll fire three rifle volleys, to show our respect to him. Our nation owes a debt to its fallen hero that we can never fully repay, but we can honor his sacrifice."

The soldiers prepared themselves for the three rifle volleys as people passed to Rayhan's grave to show their respect. Leo looked at the grave. It was well built with expensive marbles. On the cross, it was written, Rayhan Mkama, 1962-2020, a hero, fighter, and a patriot. Tears shone in his eyes.

"He was a good man." Leo said, looking at many people who attended the ceremony.

"Good men must die but death can't kill their names." His mother said.

"I spent my whole life hating him."

"Everyone makes mistakes, Leo. Everyone has regrets and guilt for things they should have done differently in their lives. Shit happens, and we do the best we can at the time. You can't blame yourself forever."

"He died knowing that I hated him."

“No, he died knowing that you love him. His final words were, tell Leo to become a better man.”

Leo smiled. He looked heavenward, his eyes flooded with tears. Rachel held his left hand and his mother held his right hand.

“A better man? I always cause trouble.” Leo said.

The first rifle volley was fired.

“You are a very good man.” Rachel said, patting Leo’s left hand.

“My son is super awesome and I am the lucky one because I get to be his mother.” His mother said, patting his right hand.

The second rifle volley was fired.

The three hugged. Leo knew he had a huge task ahead of him. Like Fabian told him, he had to find his purpose in life and like his father’s final words, he had to become a better person. All in all, he knew he’d completed the first step. He had a family now. You leave home to seek your fortune and, when you get it, you go home and share it with your family. He had a family, he was happy. Leo Rayhan was happy.

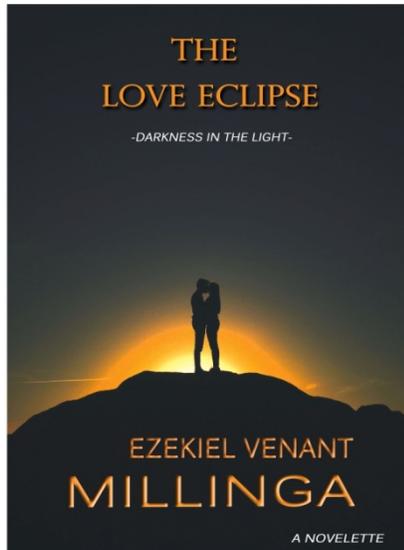
The third rifle volley was fired.

WHAT'S NEXT?

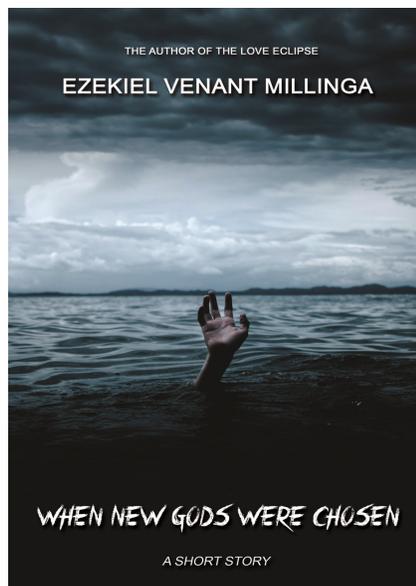
Honestly, I don't know the answer... Because if I do; that will take half of the fun out of it... But this much is what I know, it won't be the same.

ALSO BY EZEKIEL MILLINGA

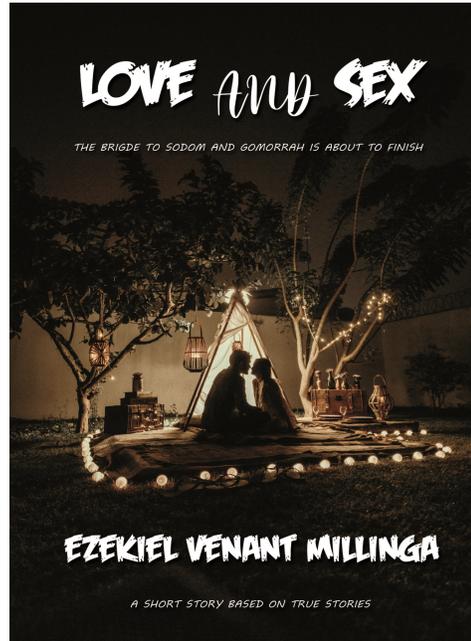
1. The love eclipse: darkness in the light



2. When new gods were chosen



3. Love and Sex



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ezekiel Millinga is an East African writer. Currently, he is undertaking a Doctor of Medicine course (MD) at Kilimanjaro Christian Medical University College (KCMUCo). He has a smoldering gift in creating and writing astounding stories that educate, inspire and entertain.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mr. Venant Millinga and Mrs. Theofrida Ndimbo, All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to them.

My family, It gives me the roots to stand tall and strong.

My friends, Growing apart doesn't change the fact that for a long time we grew side by side. Our roots will always be tangled. I'm glad for that.

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