



A Fifth Season

L. D. Carano





A basketball coach at a Southern Vermont college builds a winning team while he fights a racist athletic director and struggles over an athlete who may be HIV positive. Outside the basketball court, he loses the woman he loves to someone else, has an affair, fathers a child, and fights for custody of that child after the mother is brutally murdered. Then, he is pushed into a decision that destroys a dream.

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CHAPTER 12

Bonnie did not want anyone to know that she was going to Tanzania, so she gave no reason for her abrupt resignation from Vermont Memorial Hospital. She also vacated her Laurel Hill apartment, and for the past three weeks had been staying with a friend in Bennington. She could have stayed with Hope, but keeping her destination a secret was far more important than offending a close friend. Hope would promise not to say anything, and Bonnie knew that she would eventually succumb to an unrelenting Chris.

Now that she was leaving Laurel Hill, Bonnie figured it was time to tell her friend where she had been and where she was going, yet not say exactly where. She expected a scathing rebuke for the mysterious absence, but leaving without offering an explanation was not an option, since it was truly conceivable that she might never see Hope again. On her way there, she swung by and picked up the accumulated mail her former landlord agreed to hold. The elderly widow also offered to return the security deposit despite the early departure. Bonnie took the gesture as a subtle thank you for the free medical advice she had given the hypochondriac over the years.

Bonnie paused momentarily outside Hope's door, thinking about what she would say once she was inside. Then she knocked.

"Who is it?" Hope yelled.

"Bonnie . . ."

"Where the hell have you been?" Hope railed after opening the door. The look in her eyes augmented the ire in her voice. "You quit your job with no explanation and left without saying good-bye. We had no idea where you were. For all we know, you could have even been a victim of foul play."

"Hope . . . calm down." Bonnie entered and closed the door. "You're overreacting. If that had happened, you would have heard it on an evening news broadcast."

"Can you tell me what the hell is going on?"

"It's a long story." Bonnie paused briefly. "Chris called a few days after his father died. He felt it necessary to stay in Alton a while

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longer to get his mother's affairs in order. He suggested we get married there."

"And that's why you've been so mysterious?"

"Changing the wedding date or him staying there a little longer is not the issue."

"Will you stop talking in riddles?"

"It's Chris. He'll drop whatever he's doing for himself to help someone else. If I marry him, I'll always be sharing him with somebody. I can't live like that."

"Lady, you are one nut case. That guy is the best thing that happened to you. He would be the best thing that could happen for any woman, and you're handing him walking papers."

Bonnie eased back onto the sofa. Her eyes began to well. "You don't understand, Hope."

"I'm sorry, Bonnie, but I don't. You might think Chris is this way twenty-four hours a day. You can't fault him for wanting to help his mother."

"He's been in Alton almost a month. It could go to two."

"And you find something wrong with that," Hope added.

"I can't help the way I feel. I have to have someone totally. I can't change and he can't change being Chris either."

"You still haven't told me where you've been for the past few weeks."

"I've been in Bennington with a friend. I stopped by to tell you I'm leaving the area tomorrow."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll only tell you that I accepted a Peace Corps assignment, but I won't say where."

"The Peace Corps! This is getting more bizarre by the minute. Why can't you tell me where it is?"

"Because you'll tell Chris, and he'll come chasing after me. I don't want that."

Hope shook her head. "This is so unbelievable, Bonnie. You know he's going to ask. What'll I tell him?"

"Tell him the truth. I joined the Peace Corps. He can contact their headquarters, but I'm certain they won't tell him where I am." Bonnie

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rose from the sofa. “I need a ride to the airport tomorrow. Can you drive me?”

Hope nodded. “What about your car?”

“It’s yours.”

“You’re joking.”

“I won’t have any need for it. My lawyer will be contacting you shortly. He’s taking care of the transfer. Meanwhile go ahead and use it.”

Hope wrapped her arms around her friend. “I’m going to miss you, Bonnie. Write me.”

“I will,” Bonnie said as tears fell over her face.

After two overnight flights, the first from Boston, and the second from Amsterdam, Bonnie regretted not getting a hotel room to take a nap and to bathe during the hiatus between the two flights instead of touring the European city. She realized by now she must be emitting body odor as well, and worried that it could be as repulsive as that coming from the heavy man seated to her right. She leaned down and lifted the small tote from beneath the seat in front, then set it on her lap, opened it, took out a small mirror, looked at her reflection and scowled. She ran her fingers through her hair and it felt oily and grimy to the touch. The undergarments she had worn for the past two days seemed like sandpaper against her skin.

Flight attendants came by with breakfast and beverage carts. She had planned to pass on any food and have only coffee until the man next to her poked her arm with his elbow—a reminder to take the breakfast for him.

The pilot announced they would be arriving in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in about one hour. She saw this as an opportunity to freshen up, at least to where she could feel almost clean. With the tote clutched in her hand, she squeezed by her neighbor and went to the restroom. There she stripped down to sneakers, washed using the tiny soap bars and tap water, and then dried off with paper towels. Occasionally she bumped into the compartment’s door as she moved about. She finished with passing antibacterial moistened wipes over

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her naked body and dabbing a flowery essence at strategic epidermis points, hoping to mask any unpleasant remnants of body odor she imagined remaining still. She laughed to herself quietly when unexpectedly she realized she had just taken a “whore bath,” that seedy, yet appropriate description for a task she hoped she’d never have to do again. She donned a clean pair of panties and buried the old one deep underneath spent paper towels in a refuse receptacle. Finally, dressed in the same clothes she had worn for the passed two days, she left the restroom, garnering seething looks from a passenger queue that had grown substantially.

The Boeing 747 jumbo jet burrowed through the clouds on its way down to Julius Nyerere International Airport in Dar es Salaam. From her window seat Bonnie gazed at the Indian Ocean, its vastness stretching to the horizon. Minutes later, the plane landed with a thud, followed by squealing tires as it braked and slowed to a stop.

Anxiety suddenly filled Bonnie’s mind as she exited the plane and headed toward the terminal. Everybody looked more foreign and more mysterious than she imagined. A handful of whites, a larger number of blacks, some dressed in colorful garments, others in suits—some dark, some light—scurried about. The scene reminded her so much of those vintage forty’s films she had seen on the Turner Classic Movie cable channel, where that evil boding American in a white suit lurking in foreign terminals amidst those dastardly locals seemingly involved in surreptitious activity.

An attendant at the carousel helped her with her luggage, and having no local currency, Bonnie gave him an American dollar. She didn’t know the exchange rate, but his face told her it was a generous amount. Her next stop was customs and having never gone through the procedure before, she approached the counter with some trepidation, her uneasiness based solely on the vision she had instilled in her mind. She knew there was nothing in her bags that could draw attention, yet was still relieved when she moved through the process without a hitch. She then exited the terminal and was heading toward a taxi when a tall blond man approached her. “Are you Bonnie Grant?” he asked.

She looked at him, puzzled. “Yes, I am. And You?”

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“I’m John Stevens . . . Dr. John Stevens. You and I will be working together at a health facility outside of Arusha.”

They shook hands.

“How did you know I’m Bonnie Grant?”

“Lucky guess . . . you look American,” he said, smiling, “Only kidding . . . I had your photo and your flight number.”

“According to my instructions, I’m supposed to take a taxi to the U.S. Embassy in Dar es Salaam.”

“I arranged to pick you up. After you’re sworn in, Peter and I will be taking you to Arusha for your training.”

“My swearing in isn’t until tomorrow morning. I’m staying in Dar es Salaam overnight.”

John shrugged. “I guess I got my wires crossed. It looks like Peter and I will have to stay here also.” He turned to the man standing behind him. “By the way, this is Peter Kisuno. He’s Tanzanian. He’s our right-hand man—a courier of sorts at the clinic. Runs errands for us. Does the mail, mostly to the Arusha regional office. At times he may take a trip to Dar es Salaam.”

Bonnie extended her hand. “Hi, I’m Bonnie Grant.”

Peter was short and bulky and had a round face the color of cocoa. He shook her hand and said, “*Hujambo.*”

“Peter said, ‘hello, how are you?’ in Swahili,” John explained. “In time you’ll become more familiar with the language.”

“It sounds so different coming from him. I tried to learn it with one of those teach yourself books. I’d like to say something.” She paused momentarily and then said, “*Sijambo.*”

Peter smiled.

“Very good,” John said. “Peter is smiling. He understood that you said, ‘fine, thanks.’ He does speak English, though.”

Peter nodded.

“Have you eaten?” John asked her.

“I haven’t, but like to. First I’d want to freshen up a bit.”

“Then lets go to your hotel, and then the US Embassy. After that we can grab a bite.”

Peter picked up the bags, and the three went to the parking lot, and into a five-year old dented Toyota Sienna.

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* * *

Bonnie, dressed in khaki slacks and a long sleeved olive colored tee shirt, descended the hotel's Asian-style carpeted stairway to the lobby. John, whose head was buried in a condensed version of the *USA Today*, unexpectedly looked up and saw her coming toward him. His eyes moved over her slowly. She sensed his approval, but wanted to hear it in words.

"Well, what do you think?" She turned around as if modeling a new line of clothing. "I decided to wear something simple and appropriate for the area."

"You look fantastic," he said, while ogling her briefly. Then he asked, "How are you situated with Tanzanian currency?"

"I don't have any."

"You can exchange the American at the cashier's office over there," he said while pointing.

She got the feeling he was gazing at her as she walked away, and when she returned, she saw that he was.

"I'm all set with Tanzanian money," she said. "What's next?"

"We'll grab something to eat and I'll fill you in about what we do at the clinic and answer any questions you may have."

"Where's Peter? Will he be joining us?"

"We won't see him until tomorrow morning. He's not even staying at this hotel. I never ask where he goes."

"Then it's just you and me," Bonnie came back and quickly realized she should not have used those exact words because he might interpret them as an invitation to something further.

"Just you and me," he repeated. "Peter has the van, so we're walking."

The automobile traffic, mostly of small European and Japanese models, was very heavy. Like children's toy cars controlled electronically from a distance, vehicles zipped along streets and darted through intersections with no regard for foot traffic entering the crossing lanes. Pedestrians bustled about. Some bumped into Bonnie as they passed her, and offered no apologies. She came across grotesquely disfigured men and women, expelled from their tribes because of their

birth aberrations. It depressed her to see them squatted on concrete begging for a pittance. She'd hand them a few Tanzanian coins, having no idea of the amount she was giving. Bonnie found herself captivated with the African experience. She was now thinking less of Laurel Hill, and suddenly believing her decision to abruptly leave the States was not so ill conceived after all.

Since it was almost noon by the time they got to a restaurant, they opted for the lunch menu. After eating, they lingered over coffee.

"Why did you join the Peace Corps?" John asked.

Surprised and maybe even slightly taken aback by the question seemed to pop from his mouth, Bonnie hesitated at first, but then responded, "I guess I could give the typical altruistic reply like I wanted to serve . . . help others, but I'd be lying."

"A troubled romance?"

A stunned look came over her. "How'd you know?"

"Two things. You're not just out of college, and they're the ones that always say they want to serve . . . and I use that term loosely."

"You don't think I'm that type?"

"I didn't say that."

"And what made you think it was a troubled romance?"

"Lucky guess."

"I had just called off marriage plans." Her eyes grew misty. "It's a long story. We could be here until the lunch crowd has come and gone, and I probably would never finish. Anyway, I applied to the Peace Corps just out of college," she added with a thin smile. "I even interviewed but never heard anything. As time passed, I completely forgot about it. Years later I got the offer, and at the time, I was having relationship problems. So here I am."

"Is he from Laurel Hill, Vermont, also?"

"How did you know about Laurel Hill?"

"Your file. Before you draw the wrong conclusion, I'm not a snoop. A doctor has to know who his nurse will be."

"In answer to your question, he *is* from Laurel Hill. He's a college basketball coach."

"I suppose you'd like to hear my story?" John said.

"Not unless you want to tell me."

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“I had just gone through a divorce.”

“What happened between you and your wife?”

“We had different viewpoints about medical practice. I was a family practice physician in a small town. She wanted me to go into a specialty and in high-end locations. We started to argue over that and about other things as well, some even trivial. I was happy just being the country doctor.”

“You could have continued your practice instead of coming here.”

He sipped some coffee and said, “I had to make a clean break. Some of my patients were friends of my ex and it would not have been a comfortable situation for me.”

“And you joined the Peace Corps,” she concluded. “So what is expected of me?”

“As medical trained people our role is to educate the locals in maternal and child health, good nutrition, and sanitation. It could be in the community, classroom or in clinics. Volunteers with degrees and experience in public health and nursing usually fill this service. Experienced EMTs or Lab Technicians are recruited also. We provide medical treatment as well. Occasionally the Peace Corps will look for an MD or a DO to work at the clinics. You and I will be working in one outside Arusha. I’ve been in Tanzania four years and I love it.”

“Where are you from?”

“Boston.”

“Well, we’re both New Englanders.”

“I guess we are.”

“How are the living conditions for the volunteers?”

“Sparse, but adequate, and far from what you have been accustomed to. Quarters typically are two room cement block buildings with tin roofs. You’ll be sharing one with another nurse. I live alone. We walk to the clinic but use the van to travel to communities.”

“I hope I can live up to what is expected of me.”

“I’m sure you will.” He glanced at his watch. “Why don’t we take in some of the sites in the city?”

“Sounds good.”

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They left the restaurant and approached a street crossing. The walk signal flashed and Bonnie stepped off the curb. A car whisked by her, and as she jumped back, she tripped and John grabbed her.

“That was close,” he said, gazing into her eyes. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine and thank you,” she responded while easing away from him.

CHAPTER 21

At the Crossroads Diner in Providence, Rhode Island, a man void of many teeth, donned in worn-out shabby clothes, and probably needing a bath, emitted a sucking sound each time he took a spoonful of chicken vegetable soup into his mouth.

Two stools down at the marble-like counter, another man with long dark hair, bushy eyebrows, and a black goatee and mustache, lunched on the daily special—meatloaf with mashed potatoes. He repeatedly shifted his eyes to his right, not that he was irritated at the gastronomical slurping noise coming from the other man, but because he was keeping a close eye on the steel case on the vacant stool between them. A surveillance lapse, and the case and a million dollars could suddenly vanish—a thought that haunted him ever since he left Baltimore with a phony driver's license and a used car he had purchased and registered with a new identity.

Two men entered the diner and sat in a booth by the door. Acting detached, the man at the counter twisted his head slightly for a cursory look. He did not like what he saw. He rose quietly, dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the counter for his half-eaten meal, and scurried out with the case tucked under his arm. He raced to his rental car, jumped in and as he sped away, he saw the two men leave the diner. He screeched onto a side street and then down another. Soon he was on the main thoroughfare. He looked in the rear view mirror and saw no car behind him, then took a deep breath and brought the vehicle down to the lawful cruising speed. Not a good time to get stopped.

Later he pulled into the parking lot at the run-down rooming house where he was staying. He vaulted to the front entrance, and then up the stairway to his second story room. Inside, he engaged the dead bolt and knob door locks and threw the case on the bed. Then he peered through tattered window curtains and didn't see the men from the diner, yet he was certain their absence was short-lived. He hastily packed his luggage, grabbed the steel case, scurried from his room to his car and headed north, leaving another city and men with black shiny hair, puffy dark faces, and flabby torsos in his wake as he traveled up the East coast.

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* * *

It started as a snow and rain mix when Chris and Andy left Philadelphia, and was all snow when they got to Laurel Hill. Chris had gone to his mother's for Christmas, and Andy had gone to his grandmother's.

It was a depressing time for Rose DiMarro. With the death of her husband and the mysterious whereabouts of Michael occupying her mind, she went about her daily routine as if programmed with no forethought to her next move. She had already decided a trimmed tree was not appropriate this year, and wouldn't accede to Chris' wish to change her mind. Yet despite the gloomy atmosphere that permeated the home, he stayed until he had to get back for a scheduled game.

"You coming in?" Andy asked as Chris pulled into the driveway outside Stephanie's home.

"Maybe later," Chris replied. "I have a few things to take care of first."

"Later it is," Andy said, grabbing his nylon duffle bag from the rear seat of the car.

Given that time of the year, Chris hoped he'd find a letter from Bonnie when he arrived at his apartment. But there was nothing, as it had been over the past several months. He dropped the mail on the desk, fell back on the couch and fell asleep. Two hours later, and still in his outer coat, he was awakened by a sudden chill, and he remembered he had not brought the thermostat upward when he returned. He took off his coat and took care of the heat.

The door buzzer sounded. Chris went to the door, opened it and mumbled, "What the hell . . . it's not possible." Underneath the beard and long hair he recognized the man. "What the hell do you want?" he growled.

Mike steeped inside. "Chris, we gotta talk. I need your help."

"Why should I help you, after what you've done?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your car . . . the explosion."

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“You know about that?”

“A Philadelphia detective came to the house . . .”

“What did he tell you?”

“They know the man in the car was not you. Who was he?”

“What difference does it make? The guy was a homeless bum. It was either him or me.”

“You killed someone! If the police don’t find you, the people you screwed will.”

“What makes you think I screwed someone?”

“Then why are you here? You think a small quiet New England town is a good place to hide?”

Mike smirked. “I *could* become a resident of this nice little community, couldn’t I?”

“There’s one problem with that.”

“What’s that?”

“Me.”

“What the hell will you do?”

“I won’t let it happen. You’re slime, Mike. You can’t imagine what you put Ma through.”

“Does she know, too?”

“She doesn’t. She’s still grieving for Dad. It would have destroyed her if she learned about you. Give it up, Mike. It’s over,” Chris turned toward the table by the door and reached for the telephone.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Calling the Laurel Hill police.”

Mike pulled out a Smith & Wesson 9mm pistol. “Touch that telephone and you’re a dead man.”

“You’d kill me too,” Chris said calmly, thinking his brother was bluffing.

“I do what I have to. I killed the bum in Baltimore. I can kill you too.”

Chris backed away and Mike moved forward, pointing the gun still.

“You don’t have the balls, Mike,” Chris said, though he was now beginning to think otherwise after seeing the unhinged look in his

brother's eyes. He realized he had to do something quickly or he was a dead man. Doing nothing, he'd probably be a dead man anyway. He thought that if he could divert Mike's concentration, even if only for a brief moment, then he might catch him off guard, and he could go for the gun. A risk. What else was there? "I guess I underestimated you, Mike. I won't make that call," Chris added casually.

"That's smart, Chris." Mike said, lowering the gun. "Now let's figure out how you're going to help me."

Then with the speed of a serpent's lunge toward prey, Chris grabbed his brother's gun holding arm and forced it upward. The gun went off and a bullet penetrated the wall just below the ceiling. Mike pushed his other hand against Chris' face, while Chris kept hold of his brother's arm.

"Give it up, Mike," he said, as he tightened his grip even more. "I'm a hell of a lot stronger than you. I can break it. I'll do it, Mike. I'll break it."

Mike grimaced, but stood firm. Chris squeezed harder and the gun fell from Mike's hand. Chris then slammed his right fist across his brother's face, and Mike fell back against the wall and slid to the floor. Blood flowed from the corner of his mouth and over his chin. Chris picked him up and hurled another blow to Mike's head, and Mike went down and lay prostrate on the floor. Chris then picked up the gun, put it in the table drawer and grabbed the telephone receiver.

A few minutes later, Laurel Hill police were in Chris' apartment.

"This is Michael DiMarro, Chris said, pointing to his brother. "Baltimore and Philadelphia police have been looking for him."

"Any relation?" the senior officer asked.

"He's my brother," Chris added, sounding apologetic.

"When you called it in, you said a gun was fired."

Chris motioned to the ceiling. "One shot . . . up there."

"Where's the gun?"

"In that drawer," Chris replied while pointing.

"You're going to have to come down to the station to give a statement."

"I'll follow you with my car."

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Although Chris knew he did the right thing when he turned his brother in, still it troubled him that he had, as warm memories—memories of brothers acting as inseparable childhood friends who would go to bat for each other at any cost—crept into his mind after he left the police station. Having no desire to return to his apartment, he drove to Stephanie’s home.

Chris sipped on a beer while watching Alex inhale a bowl heaped with Kibbles & Bits. Then the dog instinctively went to Stephanie, sat and looked at her with captivating large brown eyes, its tail wagging back and forth across the floor with a rhythm seemingly so perfect, the distance between left and right almost equal with each sweeping motion. “Don’t look at me that way,” she said to the canine. “You’ve had enough.” Alex held his position, as past experience told the dog that in a few seconds she’d cave and he’d get the desert that came with the entree. “Okay, only one treat.” She got a large biscuit from the cupboard, and no sooner had she lowered her hand, the dog snatched it from her.

“You’re spoiling him,” Chris commented.

“I don’t mind,” she confessed. “It’s a joy having him around,” she said while wiping her hands on the loose fitting sweatshirt she wore. “He’s good company for me, especially at night when Andy is at school.”

“How *is* Andy doing?”

“He’s working very hard. He even went right to the books after you dropped him off earlier.”

“I guess he’s trying to prove I didn’t make a mistake bringing him here.”

“That may have something to do with it, but I think he’s doing this mostly for himself.”

“Do you think he’ll make it?”

“I’m sure he will. He’s a determined young man.” She glanced at Chris’ almost empty glass. “Can I get you another beer?”

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“I’m fine.” After going silent briefly, he said, “I apologize for coming here unexpectedly. I couldn’t go back to my apartment after what happened.”

“You’re always welcome here. Stay the night if you want.”

“Thanks, but I’ll get a motel room.”

“It could be difficult at this late hour.”

“I’ll try anyway. If I can’t get anything, I’ll take you up on that offer.” He shook his head. “It’s still hard to believe what has happened with my brother. I know I did the right thing. He already killed someone, and I doubt if he’d hesitate to kill again. He was even willing to kill me. Yet, I keep thinking it’s because of me that my brother is going to prison maybe for the rest of his life.”

“I was bothered at first thinking that way with Adam . . . thinking I may have destroyed a man I loved once. But I realized I had to let the past go or it would destroy me. If you don’t put this behind you, Chris, it *will* destroy you.”

CHAPTER 26

Early the following morning, Chris' sudden stirring woke Bonnie. She grabbed the flashlight she had put by her side the night before for quick access after finding out that the van's dome light didn't work.

"What's the matter?" he asked when the light hit his face.

"Nothing. You made a sound and it woke me."

"What time is it?"

She glanced at her watch. "Four o'clock."

Using an unbuttoned cardigan sweater as a blanket, Chris said, "I feel cold," and pulled it closer to his shoulders. "It feels weird wearing clothes once worn by dead people."

She went over to him and put her hand on his forehead. "You could be coming down with a fever." Then she looked at his head wound, noticed the blood had dried, and cleaned it with the sanitized wipes she picked up at the other van. "Let me take a look at that leg." She helped him get the loose fitting tan slacks below his knees, and he grimaced as he turned to one side. She pointed the light beam at the bandage and noticed it was dry. "It looks like the bleeding has stopped."

As painful as it was for him getting the slacks below his knees, he decided to leave it be rather than experience the excruciating pain again, bringing them up. "I'm hungry. You got anything to eat?"

"Two ham and cheese sandwiches left from yesterday and the snacks I got from the other van. You need the sustenance so the sandwiches are yours. I'll nibble on snacks."

"Any beer?" Chris added with a touch of levity.

"Forget it. I have juice drinks."

She left him momentarily to get the food, and when she returned, set the lit flashlight on the seat across from him, and in spite of the miniscule illumination coming from it, she managed to put together a breakfast for him. Then she took snacks and a fruit drink for herself and sat in the seat in front of him. They engaged in friendly conversation while they ate.

"When's your baby due?"

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“In seven months.”

“Are you staying here after it’s born?”

“I have to serve out my tour.”

“And then . . .?”

“I want to return to the States, but John likes it here.”

“Who’s going to win that one?”

“I hope I do. I think it’s important to raise my child in the United States. He thinks it’s good enough here.”

Chris chuckled. “I wonder what he must be thinking by now. Probably you fled to the states with me.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I can’t believe you came here just to get away from me.”

“The assignment offer came to me just at the time I would have gone anywhere.”

“You think you made a mistake?”

“It’s not important anymore.”

“You’ve changed a lot.”

“How so?”

“Your appearance. When we were going together, your face had more color.”

“I wore more makeup then.”

Chris emptied a second juice drink. “These drinks aren’t bad. But now I have to take a leak.”

“Use the empty juice cartons. I’ll put the light on you.” She lifted the flashlight from the seat and pointed it toward him.

He laughed. “Pissing under a spotlight. That’s got to be another first for me.”

The sun crept above the horizon and Bonnie turned off the flashlight.

“It’s getting light enough,” she observed. “I think we can get going now.” She helped him get the slacks back up.

Chris nodded toward the other van. “What about them?”

“I’m sure they’ll be found.”

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“They had to have been missed. I wonder why nobody looked for them last night.”

“I don’t know, and we can’t be concerned about that now. Let’s just go.”

Suddenly a twittering sound could be heard outside the van and it startled Chris. “What the hell is that?”

Bonnie looked out the window. “It’s a hyena clan. They’re scavengers. They must be foraging for food. They make that sound when they find something,” she explained.

“They’re going near the other van. Do you think . . .? Shit, they wouldn’t . . . would they?”

“I never heard of them eating human flesh. They probably picked up the scent of the dead rhino.”

Bonnie started the engine, and the spotted animals scurried away. She put the transmission lever into drive and rode off, the scenario of the seven corpses imbedded in her mind, an image so horrifying to her, she wondered if she could ever see a sight like that even if it were replicated in a motion picture or television program.

Ahead on the gravel road, she spotted a four-wheeled drive vehicle coming toward them. Two men were inside it, and the driver opened the window and waved for her to stop.

“They could be park rangers,” she whispered to Chris as she came to a stop and rolled down her window.

“What are you doing out here so early?” the driver asked.

“We stayed the night.” Bonnie answered. “My friend was shot late yesterday afternoon. I think by poachers.”

“Poachers were arrested last night outside the park entrance.”

“Maybe they were the ones that shot him,” she observed.

“Police found a rhino horn in their vehicle,” the driver said.

“That’s them,” Chris interrupted. “I saw them cut off the animal’s horn. If you need me to identify them, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

“That won’t be necessary. But give us your names and where you will be staying. Maybe the police will want to talk to you anyway.”

He handed a piece of paper to Bonnie, and she took a pen from her jacket pocket, wrote the information down and handed the paper back. “There is something else,” she said.

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“What is that, ma’am?”

“There’s a van back there. The driver and the six passengers are dead. It looks like the poacher’s may have killed them.”

“We’ll check it out.”

“There’s more,” she added.

The driver looked at her, inquisitively. “Yes?”

“I removed most of their clothes. I needed some for bandages for my friend and some to keep us warm for the night. I’m sorry,” she said sheepishly.

“Have a good day,” the driver said, waving as he drove off.

By nine o’clock that morning, John had already seen three patients and was tired. He had stayed up past midnight waiting for Bonnie and Chris to return, and when they hadn’t, he went to bed, but could not sleep. Like a robot programmed to do its tasks, his attention to the patients was mechanical, yet he appeared to be functioning at the same skilled level he always did even when extenuating circumstances were not filling his mind. His latest patient was a child from a nearby village, there with his mother. John’s preliminary diagnosis was a fungal infection on the hand. He took a skin scraping from the boy’s hand for further examination, then applied an antifungal cream to the skin and applied a bandage over the area. Then he gave the mother a supply of ointment and explained in Swahili to her how to apply it once she returned to her village. After the mother and son left, John told Elaine to schedule a trip to the village to examine the other children there. He feared the fungal infection could be spreading to other children.

Elaine was 23 years old, black, and from West Philadelphia. After getting a nursing degree from Center City Nursing Academy, she joined the Peace Corps, filling the vacancy that Peg left. At first, she shared the housing facility with Bonnie, and after Bonnie married, lived there alone. Her face was round, her skin, soft and glowing. She had short, symmetrically cut coal black hair, showing only a hint of the tightly curled African coiffure.

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“John, you can’t keep going on like this. You’re tired and you’re going to make mistakes,” she said. “It’s amazing you haven’t yet.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Aren’t you concerned? She’s your wife. She’s carrying your child. It’s possible something serious could have happened to them.”

“Bonnie’s out there with a guy she used to be engaged to. She’s slept with the guy before. What *am* I to think?”

“So that’s it. You think they shacked up all night.”

“What else is there?”

“Contact Arusha police,” Elaine suggested. “You can’t keep working and wondering.”

Suddenly Bonnie exploded through the door. “Chris has been shot! I need help moving him from the van.”

“Shaalo . . . a gurney . . . hurry,” Elaine yelled.

Bonnie and Elaine ran from the clinic to the van, and moments later, Shaalo was there with the gurney.

“How did this happen?” Elaine asked Bonnie, as they moved Chris to the wheeled stretcher.

“He was shot by poachers.”

Elaine glanced at the white covering on the transport vehicle and noticed blood. “He’s bleeding. Get him inside . . . hurry!”

Shaalo and Bonnie guided the gurney through the door, and John met them inside. He eyed Chris, icily and said nothing, while Elaine removed the bloodied tan trousers. John then examined the wound, and with a cold, uncompassionate tone, he said, “Get him in back. Clean him up and prepare him for surgery. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Okay,” Bonnie responded.

“Not you,” he said abrasively. “Elaine can take care of it.”

“I know what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong, John . . . wrong. Just get that out of your head.”

Elaine pushed the gurney into the back room. She cleaned the wound, shaved the area and administered a local anesthesia. “You won’t feel anything when John removes the bullet.”

“What about shoving the knife into my heart,” Chris came back.

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"He hates you, and I would guess he'd like to kill you, but professional ethics forbids it," she quipped.

"You'll be here all the while, just in case," he said, taking the joke further.

"So, your the basketball coach," she commented as she continued preparing him for surgery.

"How did you know that?"

"I know a lot about you. It must have been tough for you to come this far and find out she's married."

"It was. But there's nothing I can do about it now."

"You're not upset?"

"I am . . . was. I don't know . . . maybe I still am." Shifting to lesser upsetting conversation, he asked, "Where are you from?"

"West Philadelphia . . . why?"

"No reason. A boy from West Philadelphia is going to play basketball for me this fall. His name's Andy Johnson." "Do you think I should know him?"

"You could."

"You figured I might because I'm black."

"I never said he was black."

"You got me there," she said humbly.

Chris felt his leg numbing and he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 28

Grasso glanced at the cryptic notation on the calendar pad. It read: SN-4:30PM. He was meeting Steve Norton in the same wooded area where they transacted their quid pro quo. He was turning over Andy's SAT admission ticket—the final segment to complete the plan, and hoped it was going to be the last time he would see Norton.

It was almost four-thirty when he arrived at the rendezvous site, and Norton was not there. Grasso paced back and forth on the soft grassy area, leaving in his wake faint indentations of his narrow feet. His heart raced and perspiration droplets dotted his forehead. "Where the hell is that boy?" he mumbled. Suddenly Norton burst through the bushes like a magician's vanished assistant mysteriously reappearing. A startled Grasso spun around. "Where have you been?" he yelled. "It's after four-thirty!"

"Keep your voice down," Norton said, while gesturing the request with his hands. "I'm only a few minutes late."

Grasso glared at him. "That's not the point. You know the importance of timeliness. I could have taken you as a no show and left."

"Relax. I haven't let you down yet."

"This entire matter has made me very nervous," Grasso went on while looking in all directions, as if expecting to be seen at any moment, and then needing an explanation for being where he is if asked.

Norton grinned. "I'll say. You're shaking like an elementary school kid that just got caught in the little boy's room with a cigarette. Get a hold of yourself or this Andy Johnson thing will start to fall apart. Everything is going to be fine."

"I hope you're right."

"Were there any reactions to the transcript I created?"

"No."

"You see, and that was several weeks ago. Don't you think something would have happened by now if admissions got suspicious?"

"I guess you're right," Grasso said, sounding calmer.

"You have the SAT admissions ticket?" Norton asked.

"Of course I do. I assume you have your ID."

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“All set.” Norton reached into his pocket, took out the phony driver’s license and showed it to Grasso. He smirked and said, “Not a bad looking Andy Johnson.”

Grasso rolled his eyes. “You see all of this as a joke.”

“After tomorrow, it will be all over. Five or six weeks from now, Andy will get the test results. He’ll be happy, and you’ll be happy. Everybody will be happy.”

“It’s Andy, I’m worried about. He’s a reluctant partner in this.”

“Believe me, he won’t say anything. All he’s thinking about is playing basketball. Once he’s on the court, the SAT will become a blurred memory.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

Grasso reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, pulled out an envelope and handed it to Norton. “Here’s the ticket.”

“Thanks for keeping up your end of the deal, Father Grasso,” Norton said.

“You still have to come through with a decent test score,” Grasso snarled.

Norton rolled his eyes. “You worry too much.”

Stephanie brought a plate of iced warm cinnamon rolls to the kitchen table and noticed that Andy had not touched the bowl of cereal in front of him.

“Aren’t you going to eat anything?” she asked.

“I’m not hungry,” he said while flitting with a paper napkin.

“You can’t take the test on an empty stomach.”

“I’ll be fine. If I feel the need for something later, I’ll stop at a donut shop.”

“Something seems to be bothering you,” she observed.

“I’m just a little nervous about this morning,” Andy said. Having a surrogate take the SAT troubled him all along, for he knew he would have done just fine had he taken it himself. Lately, it was the part where he had to disappear for several hours that haunted him more than anything else. He worried that someone could see him, and recognize him. Stephanie or Chris would be told that he was seen at

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the time he was supposed to be at the test center. What could he say to them when test results showed that he had taken the test and they know that he was never there?

“You’ll do just fine.” She paused momentarily. “Andy, I have a wonderful idea. We should celebrate.”

“About what?” he asked.

“After you get your high school diploma, we’ll have a party. Your sister and grandmother can come up.”

“Party? No . . . please don’t.”

“Nonsense. It would be a lot of fun. I know Chris will come. He should be back by then.”

“You know where he is?”

She hesitated before responding, thinking that if she said exactly where Chris was, Andy could pass the information on to her brother, and he’d have a reason to visit when she wasn’t ready to see him, not just yet anyway. “All I know is that he’s out of town,” she lied. “I ran into a friend of his. She told me he was out of town, but didn’t know where.”

“Let’s talk about this party later,” Andy suggested. He hoped her enthusiasm for it would wane eventually. “I have to get moving.”

“Drop me off at the office. I told Mr. Preston I’d go in today to make up for the day off I took yesterday.” She had not told Andy that she was pregnant. The passing months would do that for her.

“You better hurry and get changed. I don’t have much time,” he lied. He had a lot of time. Disappearing for five hours or so was a lot of time.

“I’m fine the way I am. On Saturday, we don’t see clients, and I’ll be there alone.”

“I’ll be gone for most of the morning and maybe into the afternoon,” he explained. “You going to stay at the office all that time?”

“I can always walk back home. It’s not that far.”

He felt relieved that she decided to walk back. He would not have to discuss a test he never took.

* * *

Stephanie found the door open and the lights on when she arrive at office.

“I had no idea you were coming in today,” she said to Preston when he came out of his office.

“I needed to review some depositions. I made coffee. Do you want some?”

“Maybe later. I have to get to the files I should have taken care of yesterday.”

“That can wait. How’d you make out with your doctor?”

“Everything is . . . I may as well tell you, Doug, before you see for yourself soon enough. I’m going to have a baby. I’ve suspected it for sometime, but I got the official news yesterday. I hope this doesn’t pose a problem. I do need the job.”

He leaned back against a desk and said, “You’ll always have a job here. I’ve grown too fond of you and your work. I don’t know how I’d manage without you.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“Have you told the father?”

“No. And please don’t lecture me on my options,” she said quickly. “I went through that with my brother yesterday. It wasn’t pleasant.”

“Keep in mind that we can get child support from the father of the child.”

“I doubt I’d have to take legal action for that. I’m certain the father will be there for me.”

Preston approached her and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Whatever you decide, I’ll always be there for you.”

She found the words comforting.

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“I told you father. He is a basketball coach. Nameka and I will be playing that game for him.”

“But you have never played that American game.”

“He said he would teach us.”

“You seem to have much faith in this man.”

“I do, Father.”

“Then I would like to meet him.”

“You want me to bring him here?” Shaalo asked with skepticism in his voice and in his eyes.

“This man has never met Nameka. I think he should.”

“Mr. DiMarro is flying back to the United States in a few days. I’m not sure he will have the time.”

“Do you know where he is staying in Arusha?”

“I do.”

“Then tomorrow since you are not working at the clinic. You will go to Arusha to see Mr. DiMarro, and you will come back here with him. He can have supper with us. It will give him a chance to see your mother and your brothers and sisters.”

“But that means he would have to sleep over.”

“If that is a problem for this man, then you do not want to have anything to do with him.”

“Yes, Father.”

By the time Chris and Shaalo boarded the bus in Arusha it was nearly full with passengers. They opted for the last row, not that it was the only one available. Chris figured with them sitting there, Shaalo’s lengthy legs stretched into the aisle at the rear of the bus would not interfere with other passengers as they got on and off. Tourists with backpacks strapped to their shoulders and cameras dangling from their necks took up a third of the seats, and mainly up front. Their tour guide, dressed in safari-like garb, was close by. The remaining passengers were mostly natives, some of them women dressed in brightly colored kangas. The driver stopped several times along the way to pick up passengers and discharge some as well, his acquisitions exceeding his losses. Suddenly the aisle was filled with

standees and the air inside the minibus grew heavy and stifling, and reeked of perspiration.

Chris was sitting by a window. "I'm suffocating. I have to get this window open."

"That's not a good idea," Shaalo remarked.

"Why?"

"Once we get moving, sand and dust will blow inside."

"I'll take my chances."

"But we don't have much longer to go."

"I can't put up with one more mile of this." He unlatched the window, pushed it up and took a deep breath. "Boy, that air feels good."

Shaalo shook his head. "You are not going to like it."

The bus continued down the dirt road, and within minutes, dust and sand was pelting Chris's face. "Damn! This is awful. It's in my hair and mouth." He hastily lowered the window.

Shaalo laughed. "Now do you believe me?"

The bus made a stop at the clinic, and some of the passengers got off. Chris looked through the dusty bus window and spotted Bonnie with a patient at the front door. Then, as the bus drove off, she casually glanced at the window where he sat. It was a look that told him she had not seen him; but seeing her, he felt his stomach knotting over, as he was reminded again that she was no longer a part of his life.

Five miles later, Chris and Shaalo wedged themselves through a crowded aisle and exited the bus. Then as the vehicle departed, its tires spun up a dusty cloud and Chris' face was pelted with sand again, "Damn," he said. "This stuff is like a plague."

They walked a short distance to another dirt road and stopped momentarily as Shaalo pointed down a decline to an enclave laced with huts. "That is my village," he said to Chris in a modest and unassuming tone. Then he singled out a hut larger than the others. "And that one is my home. My father, his four wives, Nameka and I live there. The rest of my family lives in the others."

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As Chris scanned the panoramic landscape, he asked, "How many family members are there?"

"Fifty-five in all. You will meet everybody."

Chris chuckled. "I can't wait."

Shaalo took the response as somewhat condescending. He threw Chris a scathing look and quickly moved to establish verbal parameters. "I must tell you to be selective with your words. Our customs, dress, food, and beliefs may seem strange to you, but it is our way of life. Comments you may think harmless could offend my people and mostly my father. So please be careful with what you say."

"My conversations will be limited to you, your brother and the school. I won't talk about anything else."

"Thank you. I was worried about this visit. My father is a proud man. He is an honorable man."

"I will show my respect to him as I would expect him to do the same for me," Chris said.

Juma Nganga was standing outside the hut when Shaalo and Chris arrived. He gave Chris an uncompromising look, then extended his hand to him, and said, "Welcome to my home, Mr. DiMarro."

"I'm happy to be here, Mr. Nganga," Chris came back, sounding like someone greeting an official of state. "I'm surprised to hear you speak English."

Shaalo swallowed hard. He quickly looked at his father's eyes for that look—the narrowing of the lids that showed he was offended by the comment.

"Do you think it is not possible for me to speak your language, Mr. DiMarro?"

Chris found himself in the situation he promised Shaalo he'd avoid. "I'm sorry, Mr. Nganga. What I really meant is that I'm impressed that you speak another language," he said, hoping to defuse a tense situation he thought might come.

"Don't apologize. I'm sure in a situation like this, at first one must feel uncomfortable, and sometimes say things that come out not

as intended. If I were in your home, it would be the same for me. Then I would be the one that is uncomfortable.”

“Thank you for understanding. You are a very perceptive man,” Chris replied.

Juma smiled. “Now we can enjoy our visit. Let’s go inside.”

They entered the hut and Juma motioned for them to sit at a long wood table flanked with benches. He sat at the head of the table and told Shaalo to get pombe for their guest. “What is pombe?” Chris asked as he sat and set the cane atop the bench.

“It is a beer. We make it from maize, bananas, sugarcane and other ingredients,” he explained. “You will have some?”

“Sure. I’m a beer drinker,” Chris reluctantly agreed, while thinking of his knowledge of beer ingredients as just barley and hops with no fruit.

Shaalo left and later returned with three large cups. He set them on the table and took a seat next to Chris. Juma took one of the cups and began drinking the beverage. Chris then followed with a large gulp, swallowed hard, rolled his eyes and gasped. “This is a strong beer.”

“You do not like it?” Juma asked.

“I do, but I’ve never had anything this strong.”

They laughed.

“Shaalo will get more later.”

“Your English, Mr. Nganga. It impresses me. I hate to bring it up again, but how’d you learn to speak it so well?”

“Shaalo and Nameka have taught me. They bring me books. I do much reading.”

“And you? You walk with the help of a stick. Do you have a problem?”

“I guess Shaalo never mentioned it. I was visiting one of the game parks with a friend. I saw some poachers and got shot. I was lucky in a way. I guess they took me for dead and left without checking.”

“And your friend . . .”

“Nothing happened to her, though I was fortunate to be with her because she’s a nurse and we had to stay the night in the park.”

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“Killing animals for profit is a terrible thing. We sometimes kill wildlife, but it is always for food. Today we are eating zebra.”

Chris suddenly felt that bitter acidity regurgitation in his esophagus. He wondered if it was an uprising from drinking pombe or the thought of eating zebra settling on his brain. “I’m looking forward to it,” he lied graciously.

“My wives are preparing the meal. Soon they and will be joining us. The children are at mission schools. That’s where Nameka is right now. He helps out there like Shaalo does at the clinic. The older ones in my family are working in the fields. All of our food comes from that we grow and hunt. We have cows for milk as well.”

“Nameka wants to go to my college also,” Chris remarked.

“I am concerned about both my sons and this adventure—“

“But, Father!” Shaalo interrupted. “You worry too much.”

Juma glared at his son. “Don’t interrupt me, Shaalo, while I am talking with Mr. DiMarro.”

Feeling somewhat uncomfortable over the exchange between Juma and his son, and wanting to placate them before their words became tense, Chris quickly said, “I know you would want them to further their educations, Mr. Nganga. This would be a good opportunity for them both.”

“I know it would be good for them to go to the American college. It is difficult to do that here. The higher learning institutions are in the cities, many miles away. Transportation is difficult.

“That is why you must allow us to go to America, Father.”

“My son is too optimistic. What if it doesn’t work out? Then he has to return. Am I not right, Mr. DiMarro?”

“That’s true,” Chris agreed. “But you shouldn’t think of that. It’s like when you go out to hunt. If you don’t succeed, you have to return to your home; but that doesn’t stop you from hunting.” Chris realized the analogy was stupid, but he did not know what else he could offer to make a point.

“You are an intelligent man,” Mr. DiMarro.

“Thank you,” Chris said.

“Then you will give Nameka and me your approval, Father?” Shaalo asked excitedly.

“I could never stand in your way, my son. You and your brother are old enough to make your own decisions. I can only give you guidance. What will you do for money? It is expensive in America.”

“It won’t cost them anything,” Chris explained. “They will have food and a place to stay. We can also give them a job at the college where they can earn some money for themselves.”

“It appears that it would be much better for them to be there,” Juma commented.

“I would like to get Shaalo and Nameka started in September. They have to get their passports and visas soon.” “You know about this, Shaalo?” Juma asked his son.

“I do, Father.”

Juma smirked. “And you think their passports and visas will be taken care of by then?” he asked Chris.

“I would hope so,” Chris replied. “If not, then it would have to be in January.”

The elder Nganga looked at his son, questionably. “You know where to get the necessary papers?”

“In Dar es Salaam,” Shaalo answered.

“But that is a long way from here,” Juma said.

“It is, and I will do it, Father. Nameka and I must do it.”

Juma took a deep breath. “Then I wish you both well,” he said while sipping some pombe.

Chris took a sip also, but this time he just dampened his lips.

Children’s banter could be heard coming from outside. Juma announced that Nameka had come with the young ones, and he and Shaalo went out to greet them. Chris picked up his cane and followed them, and he mentally counted twenty children he figured to be between six and twelve years of age. Their heads were shaven, the younger ones’ gender indiscernible if it were not for the clothing they wore. They giggled when they saw Chris.

“These are some of my grandchildren, Mr. DiMarro.”

“They are very handsome children, Mr. Nganga,” Chris commented. Then his eyes fell upon the tall man standing in the back-

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ground like a full-grown tree among seedlings. "And you must be Nameka."

"That is Nameka," Juma stated with glowing pride.

Nameka moved through the cluster of children and swallowed Chris' hand with a firm handshake. They spoke briefly about St. Ignatius and basketball. The children moved closer and surrounded them.

"Would you mind if I gave them something?" Chris asked Juma.

"They would like that," Juma responded, smiling.

Chris reached into his pocket, pulled out a thick fold of Tanzanian paper currency, peeled off twenty, one hundred schilling denominations, and passed them out to each wide-eyed child. Excited, they scurried off with the money clutched in their fists.

"You have made them very happy, Mr. DiMarro."

"You said earlier that they were some of your grandchildren. Where are the others?"

"The older ones are in different schools and others are working in the fields," Juma explained. "Come . . . we must get back inside. The woman will be bringing our supper."

Back inside the hut, four statuesque women, their shapely-bronzed figures shrouded in brightly colored kangas, placed bowls of food atop the table. Juma introduced them to Chris as his wives, singling out separately Shaalo's and Nemeke's mothers. Then Juma sat and the others followed.

Chris stared at the bowls of meat, corn and rice on the table. He thought about the zebra, and his insides churned. Since he was a guest, the food was passed to him first. He took small portions, and Shaalo was quick to point out that at the clinic he ate much more than what he was showing now.

"I'm not that hungry," Chris lied.

"You must be hungry," Juma chimed in. "You have gone all day and have eaten nothing. I can see how uncomfortable it is for you to try this food. I'm sure it is not what you are accustomed to eating, but you must at least try it."

The elder Nganga then lifted a large meat chunk from the bowl, dropped it on his plate and cut through the charred surface. Juices flowed from its pink center and soaked the mounds of rice and corn

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nearby. Chris brought a tiny piece of the meat to his mouth, chewed a little and swallowed. Then he cut off a larger piece and ate it. Soon his plate was empty and he went back for more.

“Mr. DiMarro, you have had an African experience,” Juma said with an air of statesmanship. “It has been a pleasure to have you in my home. I had my doubts about you and the American college when Shaalo first mentioned it. I asked him to bring you to our village and I thought you would not come. I had misjudged you. You are an honorable man, Mr. DiMarro. Shaalo and Nameka will do well under your guidance.” He lifted the pombe and said, “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 36

On a cold, gray and damp day in the middle of November, remnants of a weak front that moved through Laurel Hill, lingered, leaving in its wake a mix of rain and snow. At the local high school's archaic gymnasium, the St. Ignatius Huskies wrapped up their practice session. It was also their final appearance at the two-story brick building, their home court for the past several years. The Monsignor Raymond Casey Arena was finally ready for occupancy.

Chris and the assistant coach, Dan Astor, stayed on in the gymnasium while the team was in the locker room.

"It's going to be great to get out of this pit," Chris commented while glancing over the run down facility. "How many years have you and I put in this place?"

"Too many," Dan Astor responded. He was thirty-eight, six-five, and slim for his height. He could easily add about twenty pounds to his body and not look overweight. He was Chris' assistant at Laurel Hill High and remained in that slot even after Chris moved on to St. Ignatius. Though he was passed over to move up to the head coach's job, and probably could have gotten a high school coaching stint anywhere in or out of the state, and probably with more money as well, he chose to stay put because of family and town loyalty. He grew up in Laurel Hill and was a starting forward on the high school basketball team. He received his bachelor's degree from Montpelier State. Chris thought highly of him when they worked together, a relationship that made for an easy choice when St. Ignatius was looking to fill the slot Adam Wright vacated.

"The team looked good tonight. I think we'll be in decent shape for our opener with Kenyon," Chris said.

"We still have problems," Dan commented. "Shaalo and Nameka are not showing any signs of getting it."

"I'm worried about it. I touted the two to the college, and it looks like I'm going to end up looking like a fool."

"They can't seem to get the concept of team play."

"When I was teaching them the game, they caught on with the fundamentals fast. They handled the ball great, shot well, and leaped

for the boards as if they had propellant in their sneakers; but in game action, it's like their heads and bodies are on different wave lengths. I wasn't looking for them to be starters this year, but I was hoping to get them some playing time."

"Maybe we're expecting too much of them," Dan suggested. "After all, they didn't grow up with the game like the others."

"Traveling . . . broadcasting passes . . . in the paint too long are still problems for them. After going over those areas with them time and time again, they can't seem to avoid those situations in a practice game."

Dan chuckled. "Yet put them on the foul line and there're dead-ly."

Chris shook his head. "Hard to believe, isn't it?" He sighed. "If they don't get any better, people will begin to wonder what's with them. 'Trees' aren't supposed to be benchwarmers in this game. Maybe I foolishly assumed that because of their size, playing basketball was a given for them."

"We just have to put in more time with the problem areas," Dan summed up.

They started to walk toward the locker room when unexpectedly Shaalo entered the gymnasium and came over to them. He looked at Chris and said, "Coach, there is something I must say to you."

"What is it, Shaalo?"

"I'll wait out front," Dan offered quickly.

Shaalo waited momentarily until he was certain Dan was out of hearing range. Still he opted to speak in a slightly quieter tone. "It's the way my brother and I have been playing. We are sorry."

"It'll get better, Shaalo," Chris solaced. What else could he say? He brought them to the United States, filling their heads with the promise of a college education. All they had to do was play basketball. It was so simple.

"But Nameka and I cannot live up to our end of the agreement."

"What agreement?"

"We have to play basketball for us to get our education."

"It's not that way, Shaalo."

"We have been thinking about returning to Tanzania."

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“Why would you do that?”

“Because of what you said to our father. You said that we would have to return if we could not do this, but that we should try anyway.”

“Shaalo, when I said that, it only applied to academics. Students who fail academically cannot remain in St. Ignatius. It’s got nothing to do with basketball. You and your brother cannot give up so quickly. You can’t expect to play as well as Andy and Jason. You and your brother caught on to some aspects of the game well. You have stamina. You run up and down the court so effortlessly, showing no signs of tiring. The other part will come eventually.”

Shaalo wanted to believe him; still he felt it would not be fair for his brother and him to stay at the American college if they do not play the game as the others do.

Jason tossed a wet towel in the bin, dressed, then grabbed his duffle bag and left the steam filled locker room. Outside, he found Andy, Shaalo and Nameka waiting to board the bus to St. Ignatius.

“Damn you take a long time, whitey,” Andy joshed.

Jason smiled and was about to enter the bus, when he spotted Rich’s car at the end of the road. He turned to Andy. “Go without me. I see my friend’s car. He can give me a ride back to the dorm. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“That’s your friend . . . the guy with the Corvette?” he said, sounding surprised. “I didn’t know you hung with money.”

“We went to the same high school.”

“Maybe he’ll take me for a spin someday?”

“I’ll ask him,” Jason replied as he walked away, though he knew Rich would never have anybody in the car he didn’t know, least of all a black man. Later inside the car, he asked, “What’s up, Rich?”

“Maybe I should be asking the same of you. I haven’t seen or heard from you in weeks? Is there a problem?”

“I told you this was going to happen. We’ve had to do extra work because of the Tanzanian brothers. Andy Johnson and I have spent a lot of time with them, teaching them the game fundamentals.”

“That’s not your job.”

"I know, but what can I do?"

"You can say no."

"It's not that easy. If Andy's going along with it, then I have to. I'm expected to."

"We never spend any time together."

"It'll get better, now that Shaalo and Nameka are more involved with the team."

"I doubt that," Rich refuted. "The season is starting soon. You got practice and the games. It won't be any different."

"What do you want from me? Do you think I'd be able to come to this school if it weren't for basketball? My parents couldn't swing the tuition. I picked this one so that we could be together."

"Well there hasn't been much of that, has there?"

"Who's the one that roamed all over Europe this past summer?"

"That wasn't my idea."

"You didn't have to go. You're a big boy. You could have said no to your parents . . . like you say I should say no to the school."

"Now you're talking like an ass."

"You've been acting like one," Jason barked. He took a deep breath, and then sounding more conciliatory, he added, "Rich, you have to cut me more slack. I have to be discreet about us, at least until I finish school. I can't allow anything to jeopardize this scholarship."

"Sorry."

"Forget it. Let's get something to eat."

"Do you have anything in mind?"

Jason smiled. "How about your place?"

Rich turned the ignition key, pressed the gas pedal, and the powerful engine emitted an energetic roar that bellowed through the quiet night. Seconds later, the sleek black wedge sped away.

Inside their dorm room, Shaalo was at a desk reviewing his chemistry notes and Nameka was looking over his mid-term exams, each marked in the upper right corner with an encircled red A.

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“What are we going to do Shaalo?” Nameka asked with sadness laced in his voice. “We can’t continue to hide from the others what we have been thinking.”

“I don’t know what we can do.”

“I have always looked to you for guidance. You were always the strong one. When we first decided to come to the United States, I had my doubts, but you were the one to convince me we should do it.”

“But you were as happy as I.”

“I worried that it would end this way,” Nameka went on, “yet I always felt that with you here, we wouldn’t fail.”

“I thought the game would be easy to play,” Shaalo added. “Andy and Jason and all the others . . . they have no trouble.”

“They have been playing it since they were children. What chance do we have?”

“Chris said it would get better for us.”

“Shaalo, do you truly believe it will? He said that two weeks ago, and it hasn’t.”

“If he believes it, then we have to believe it also.”

“But it is not right, Shaalo. They are giving us an education and we are supposed to play basketball. If we don’t, it is just like stealing. Don’t you feel the same as I do?”

“I try not to think about it,” Shaalo responded. He glanced at the clock on the desk. “It is getting late, Nameka. Why don’t you get some sleep? We’ll talk about this in the morning.”

“What about you? Aren’t you going to bed?”

“I will in a few minutes.”

Shaalo closed the chemistry textbook, put it aside, grabbed the biology text and began to flip through pages when Jason entered the room.

“Saw your light was still on,” Jason said. “What’s going on? It’s after eleven.”

“I was studying,” Shaalo responded. “I lost track of time.”

“On a Friday . . . and why?” Jason asked jokingly upon seeing the exam papers on the bed by Nameka, who was still fully clothed and asleep.

“Jason, can we talk?”

“Now?”

“Please, Jason. It is important.”

“What is it? You seem worried.”

Nameka woke up, lifted his head, rubbed his eyes, and focused on the visitor. “Jason, what are you doing here?”

“I was ready to leave, but your brother wants to talk.”

“I think I know what it’s about,” Nameka said while rising.

“We are worried, Jason,” Shaalo said, “that we will never be able to play basketball the way you Andy and the others do.”

“So . . .” Jason came back with indifference. “Not everybody plays this game with the same level of competence.”

“There is a game in one week, and my brother and I are not ready to play,” Nameka added.

“That doesn’t matter.” Jason stated. “You’ll stay on the bench.”

“But if we never play, it is not right if we continue to receive the scholarships.”

“Who told you that?”

“Nobody,” Shaalo replied. “But if we don’t play basketball, won’t they take them away?”

Jason cracked a smile. “It doesn’t work that way. Bad grades will make that happen, and believe me, I don’t see that happening,” he added, glancing at Nameka’s exams again. “But we were brought here to play basketball,” Nameka said, “and if we can’t—“

“That’s the school’s problem, not yours,” Jason interrupted. “You may never play in any game, but you will still suit up for every game. They asked you to come to St. Ignatius. They can’t take away your scholarships.”

“Then you don’t think we should worry?” Shaalo asked,

“It’s not what I think. It’s the truth,” Jason averred. “You two are here for four years, whether you ever shoot a basketball or not.”

“I feel a lot better to hear you say that,” Nameka said.

Shaalo nodded. “But it still will not be right if we don’t ever play.”

“Give yourselves time. You’ve just started to learn this game. Now you’ll see how it is played in competition, which you haven’t

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done. Sitting on the bench, you'll pick up the fine points." Jason paused. "Have you talked to the coach about this?"

"Yes." Shaalo responded.

"And he told you not to worry about it, right?" Jason stated.

"He did," Nameka agreed.

"Then you have your answer. Stop worrying about this, or you'll get yourselves all messed up. Believe me, it's going to be all right. Now let's all get some sleep."

Jason closed the door as he left the room, and Shaalo and Nameka retired for the night.



A basketball coach at a Southern Vermont college builds a winning team while he fights a racist athletic director and struggles over an athlete who may be HIV positive. Outside the basketball court, he loses the woman he loves to someone else, has an affair, fathers a child, and fights for custody of that child after the mother is brutally murdered. Then, he is pushed into a decision that destroys a dream.

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