

*Mad  
Mischief*

—A NOVEL—



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Susan St. John

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To my dearest friend, Genya Soovajian, and my brother David P. O'Malley. This dedication is best understood by knowing that each made a trip many years ago that in all likelihood saved my life.

David rarely saves me from myself anymore, unless, of course, I let him; and Genya died in April of 2006. On her deathbed, she looked at me plaintively, threw her arms up in her typical "what can we do about this" gesture, and said, "You have to go back to Africa so I can rescue you."



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## PROLOGUE

The door flew open and a tall, soaking-wet figure catapulted into the room wearing a confident grin on his ruddy face. Protecting a slide carousel under his well-worn leather bomber jacket, he landed next to a Kodak projector, his drenched boots touching down on the conference room's plush carpeting. He clicked his slide tray into place.

Sarah and Peter, who lived in California, were guests of a prominent Atlanta couple who had invited them out for a weekend of fishing and golf. When rain washed out those plans, their hosts suggested they watch a presentation by a well-known private safari guide, a guide they themselves were going to go to Africa with as soon as their schedule permitted. This was what accounted for Sarah and Peter now being in the well-appointed conference room of their host's business.

With the faint residue of a Scottish burr spicing his speech, the guide introduced himself. "Hi, I'm Max Einfield. Sorry to be so late, but I rode my motorcycle across town as fast as I could. It's a bit wet outthere!"

Sarah became spellbound, even seduced, for although there were traces of an Atlanta rainstorm all about this famous guide, to Sarah, he was dripping with charm, accented by the scent of musk and leather.

She looked over at her husband, Peter, rigid in his determination that he not be moved against their plans to only travel to East Africa with Abercrombie and Kent, as planned. When Max began to speak, Sarah sensed that those very plans, which she had so meticulously organized, might shortly be undone. It was a premonition arising out of her once infallible sixth sense.

After casually flicking beads of water from his face and hair, Max removed his jacket, revealing a faded blue cotton short-sleeve shirt. His Levi jeans showed the early signs of being worn through.

The unusually high regard in which Max was held resulted from the fact that he had earned a PhD in Zoology and a master's in teaching, giving him an advantage over other guides when it came to understanding and predicting animal behaviors, thus bestowing to his clients a studied appreciation of their sightings. He had also received private flying instructions as a gesture of appreciation from a wealthy repeat client, thereby allowing him to become a licensed pilot; soon thereafter, he purchased a six-passenger plane. He was a self-taught, world-class photographer, and, not insignificantly, was reputed to be one of the most effective game spotters in East Africa.

Straight, bluntly cut red hair fell over his forehead like a burnished Celtic helmet. Max could be forty-five or fifty-five; there was youth in his step but statesmanship in his stance. His expression suggested mid-forties. His creased face said over fifty. No single factor betrayed his age, a fact that further enhanced his intrigue.

He made his way around the conference table exuding an air of assurance, his badly scarred right arm

## PROLOGUE

moving as his advance man. "Hi there. I'm Max. And you are—?" he asked in one form or another, managing to elicit a smile from every handshake.

When he reached Sarah, his roughened hand took hers and, glancing at her pale skin, he smiled into her eyes.

Max completed his circuit, then picked up the projector's remote switch and commanded the lights to be turned off. Like a gunslinger shooting cans along the top of a fence, he began to punch the forward button, triggering a succession of *National Geographic*-quality images. For Sarah, sitting still in her seat, the lifelike pictures became a magic carpet, transporting her more than nine thousand miles away to the East African veldt. The subjects were unfamiliar, yet for reasons she could not understand, they struck a haunting, personal chord.

One moment the peripatetic Max was at the side of the projector. The next, he was at the front of the room, standing beside a crisp close-up shot of a lion's head, pointing to the magnificent animal's whisker pattern.

"Every one of these configurations," he informed the group as he traced the facial hair and the ears of the beast depicted on the screen, "is different, unchanging, a unique fingerprint. It's their personal identification."

Image after image pulled Sarah deeper into their thrall. Nature, without Max to interpret it, would never hold the same allure. Even a series of pictures depicting a monstrous crocodile lunging at the belly of a zebra and exploding its stomach in midair only heightened Sarah's growing desire to be on the river's far shore. She whispered her enthusiasm into her husband's ear. "I can get us out of the Abercrombie arrangements. We must do the

safari this way, with Max! He could help you get just the type of quality pictures you want.”

After almost twenty years of accommodating Peter’s overbearing personality, she realized the risk in altering their journey.

Peter sighed in that way Sarah knew to mean he did not want to have this conversation. “A trip with Max would be a unique adventure and yes, I could get great photographs with him, but this is nothing like the safaris we’ve read about. This is hard work. I can’t get pictures like we’ve just seen without hours of waiting around, and I don’t want to have to deal with you.”

Sarah could well understand how someone, some other person in the room perhaps, might look at her and judge her as an improbable candidate: the makeup, the perfume, the perfectly coordinated outfit, the hair pulled back into a tight chignon secured with a black velvet bow. “Peter, you of all people should know I can handle anything, and that I have.”

Of course Peter knew that Sarah could handle all that was thrown at her, she thought with subdued frustration. That is why he had married her instead of all the other women he might have chosen. And perhaps when he witnessed her handling everything that a safari would entail, he would be reminded of why he had wanted her to be his wife. Maybe this safari would bring them close together again. A personal safari with Max would be intimate. And, Sarah dared to hope, perhaps she and Peter might be intimate again on what would be their biggest adventure. The issue of going to Africa with Max or with a more conventional operator came down to a match of wills. “Peter, this is not a coincidence, our being here. It’s

## PROLOGUE

fate. There are no coincidences. We're meant to go on safari with Max."

Sarah could see that Peter was beginning to bend, perhaps not because of her but by the unflagging strength of Max's conviction in himself. This was a trait that Peter identified with. He shrugged, and Sarah breathed a sigh of hope.

She looked out through a small parting in the curtains of the boardroom. The rain had stopped, and a sliver of sun spread across the screen, lighting up the savanna. yet.



## CHAPTER 1

# THE FIRST RELEVANT QUESTION

**S**arah has stayed on in Nairobi after the safari so she can write in her journal, conduct interviews, and check facts that seem to elude her. And, she has been planning her own going-away party for the following week. But her days have been eaten up by Max and his endless requests for favors, which, for some reason she cannot grasp, she feels obligated to grant.

But at last, the day would be hers. Sarah's hand rests on the proof of it: a large brass handle protruding from the thick mahogany door. She releases the gold safety lock, feeling like a thief, for she is taking the first moment of time that will belong entirely to her.

To announce the irony of her plan, the phone peals out insistently just as the latch chain releases. The concierge had phoned earlier to inform her that her driver waited downstairs. Sarah is thirty minutes behind schedule and thinks the ringing is a courtesy reminder.

"Sarah, this is Eric, the pilot who flew you to the Aberdares. Has Max's lawyer been in touch with you?"

"No, I haven't heard a thing. Why? What in God's name is wrong now?"

Eric's lips sound as if they are pushed against the mouthpiece to shelter his voice from others. "Max has been arrested. The authorities grabbed him the minute he landed here at Wilson Airport with his group."

Sarah has already squandered her allotted time extension in Nairobi. She cannot afford another day that ignores her purpose for having stayed on in this frantic city. "Okay, Eric. I've got a driver waiting downstairs. I can be there in twenty minutes."

"Sarah, whatever do you imagine you can do?" he asks, sounding so damn British.

She has no idea what she is going to do. All Sarah knows is that she has managed to escape her husband, responsibility, and sanity, the effect of which is she esteems herself capable of anything.

Downstairs, Moses introduces Sarah to her driver, who, like most others in her service thus far, has been given the first name of a biblical figure or American president. He is Joseph.

Joseph opens the back door of the cream-colored Mercedes-Benz, motioning Sarah inside. She declines his offer in favor of riding in front with him, a position of proximity the social norms frown upon, and which she relishes all the more for this very reason.

The driver is almost six feet tall. His frame is sturdy, as if his muscles have been hard-worked and well-tested before settling down into a strong physique. A somewhat passive face bears the suggestion of extraordinary serenity. He comports himself with self-assuredness, a quality that stands out in marked contrast to Sarah's anxiousness, as she delivers instructions contradicting the trip sheet he holds up as if it is a winning lottery ticket.



## THE FIRST RELEVANT QUESTION

“Joseph, we’re not going to the museum or the library. I need to go to Wilson Airport, and I want you to get me there in fifteen minutes instead of twenty-five. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Madam. And shall I wait for your flight to return?”

“I’m not flying anywhere. I’m going to Wilson because a man’s been arrested, and is, I’m afraid, in a great deal of trouble.”

“And Madam, you are able to fix this problem?”

“I don’t know. It’s an immigration issue involving his visa and Kenyan work permit.”

“Oh, then I will help you. I have a relative at the Immigration Department. I will take good care of you. Yes, Madam, this is why I am here: to help you. And after I am done and have solved the problem, I would like you to be my wife.”

Ordinarily Sarah would have judged his remark to be impudent, but he has delivered it in far too earnest a manner to receive any reprimand. Joseph—almost angelic in his appearance of wanting to do good—defies any harsh word. “I think you are asking quite a lot for helping me. Let’s just get Max out of jail before we start making any long-term plans.” Sarah laughs, certain he understands her effort to diffuse his intentions.

But the imperative has shifted, for he is now pushing the car beyond the pace of Nairobi’s traffic jungle, adding to the volume of sound by his unrelenting use of the horn. He steers the vehicle deftly around an overcrowded matatu minibus, dodging rusty, skeletal bicycles, skimming past throngs of moistened bodies crossing the busy streets, and creating scenes of chaos.

The colors of countless lavender Jacaranda trees swirl together with the effusive purple bougainvillea flowers hanging over gray cement walls. Yellow-green bananas and orange-yellow mangoes are piled high on fruit stands set back only slightly from the street. Blankets of variegated green leaves cover the sidewalk. Blacks, Asians, and whites whirl against the tightly rigged canvas of an intense blue sky.

Joseph is racing madly to create a tornado of blurred color. He has understood Sarah's directions perfectly.

"This person we will help, he is your husband?"

No, Sarah thinks. Her husband is gone, and within the shocking context of this realization, she has to ask herself, "What am I doing here? Why am I forcing this gentle man to break the law, to speed along the dangerous, madly congested streets of Nairobi, to help Max, a man who has expressed such obvious contempt for me?"

The answer is the same excuse she has used to rationalize every other action she has taken throughout her life: because it's the right thing to do. "No. He's not my husband. He was my safari guide."

"Ah, I see, Madam. He is your very good friend?"

"No, actually, I don't think I even like him anymore. But he was the reason I was able to so completely experience the areas we visited, the animal behaviors we observed, and even some of the history of your country."

"I am very sorry, Madam, but I do not understand. If you don't like him anymore, why, then, will you help him?"

"Because, Joseph, he's an American citizen."

"Yes, I see. Then it is a very good thing to be an American citizen. No one would help me so much."

## THE FIRST RELEVANT QUESTION

There it is again, Sarah acknowledges, the persistent conviction seemingly bred into every Kenyan man, woman, and child she has encountered thus far, that everything about America is unequivocally good.

Joseph speeds past the guard gate, the car's trunk barely escaping a hard slap by the armature's red metal limb. Sarah directs him to the last hangar in the long row of gleaming, corrugated tin. Here, he screeches to a stop, scattering dust about as if trying to disguise their arrival. This is a place Sarah has come to know over the last several weeks. Once again, she is at the home base for private charters, Kenya's Wilson Airport.

"Where should I be?" Joseph asks before unlocking and opening the door.

"Stand right behind me. Be close enough for me to turn around and grab you, okay?"

"Yes, Madam."

Sarah spots Eric immediately. He scratches his head, as if agitating his memory to recollection. The last time he saw her, he was looking over his shoulder from the cockpit of his plane to the backseat where Sarah was putting ink to paper thousands of feet above the sprawling Kenyan countryside.

"They just left for Nyayo House with Max. They're going to detain him until his trial."

As she heads back to the car with Joseph, Sarah's heart spasms in irregular palpitations and perspiration forms rivulets down her face. Somehow she must bluff through the next crucial stage: rescuing Max. He has inspired Sarah's picture of Nyayo House—the government building housing the offices of immigration and customs—during the safari, describing it in terrifying terms.

With Joseph again at the wheel, the car careens around corners and obstacles, as if attempting to shake sense into her, the horn screaming for all to hear. Sarah vaguely understands that there is no rationale for her rescue of Max, but she is operating on the very edge of reason, a place where her actions make perfect sense.

Joseph's worn shoes press hard on the accelerator, his broad shoulders swinging from right to left and then back again in a ride of professional daring. He bends the car to his own will and passes every impediment in the way of his single purpose.

At last, they approach a building reaching over twenty-seven redwood stories high, emboldened by a length of granite bearing large, white, badly soiled lettering: NYAYO HOUSE, Nairobi Provincial Hall. So this is it, Sarah realizes. Nyayo House. As Max had explained to her one night on the safari, at some point in history, in the lower hold of the building, prisoners were stripped naked, beaten, and made to suffer indignities. Cigarettes had been used to burn skin. Razors made to slash. Food and water withheld. It was Amnesty International's classic description of human rights abuse. The worst of these horrors may have been reserved for political prisoners, but it is, nevertheless, the building where Max is now being held.

Before stopping, Joseph elevates his body above the driver's seat, reaches into his back pocket, and withdraws a fat, dilapidated wallet. He fishes out a tattered business card. "I'm taking you to see my cousin, Cecil. Put this card in your purse. When I introduce you, take it out and give it to him. Tell him you are a good friend of this man. Then

he will be sure to help you. Get it back from him but don't do anything to let him see it belongs to me."

Sarah inspects the card inscribed with the words UNITED NATIONS and a name, under which bears the title "Representative to Kenya."

"Joseph, who is this person?"

"He is a man who is my friend. I was his driver and his bodyguard for many years, a long time ago."

No parking space is available, causing Joseph to position his vehicle illegally along a wedge-shaped piece of ground adjacent to the government building's lot. He motions for the nearest policeman. When the guard appears in front of Joseph, he is given the car keys along with a fifty-shilling note.

Then they are there, within the chamber of Nyayo House, running upstairs, turning through dank stairwells, moving past throngs of disconcerted foreigners, expatriots, black and white Kenyans. All are clamoring to be heard, their hands reaching out forcibly with fistfuls of paperwork, frayed files shoved under their arms.

They smoke, swear in their disparate languages, huddle, sweat, wear expressions of despair or frustration or, more often, fierce distrust, as if Sarah's and Joseph's legs will take them to their desired results faster than the others might reach theirs.

At the top of the seventh floor, Sarah finds a corridor that appears to be more abyss than hallway. The office belonging to Cecil is directly ahead. Joseph hovers a moment at the open door, saying nothing, his eyes lowered in a tactical effort to prevent Cecil from glancing up and becoming alarmed at the large, bulky intruder standing in his doorway.

Cecil finally takes notice, and when he does, there is an expression of abject surprise. Joseph begins to speak their common language. In a jocular voice, Cecil invites, "Oh yes. Come in, cousin. Come in."

Joseph and Cecil speak again, still rapidly, in the lingua franca of Kenya, Kiswahili, so that they alone understand what transpires between them.

While they banter unintelligible words, Sarah studies Cecil and, occasionally, he studies her. His pale gray pin-striped suit is contemporary and impeccable. He looks like a dandy, and yet his appearance reflects a radiance of childlike mirth, as if firecrackers in his soul were once lit and continue to sparkle. Bright teeth flash against his charcoal face, a contrast as compelling as the sun unexpectedly bursting through dark clouds.

He turns to Sarah and clasps her hand with both of his. Holding on in this personalized clench, he pumps her arm up and down in a careful, calculated manner. "I am so very, very glad to meet you, really. Joseph, my cousin, whom I have not seen in many years, has just told me about you. I know who you are, and why you are here. I think you have nothing to fear, really. I would be only too happy to be of service to you. But, first, let me tell you what I must do. I must obtain the file on this Max person. Then, it will be necessary for me to speak to 'the big man upstairs.' Quite coincidentally, I am about to see him soon, for a meeting in town."

With an exaggerated flourish, he picks up the receiver from the old-fashioned dial phone and brings it to his ear. In the demeanor of a man comically displaying power, he speaks words that result in a woman wearing a florid dress to enter his office, Max's file in hand.

## THE FIRST RELEVANT QUESTION

Cecil asks Joseph and Sarah to step into the hallway. He sequesters himself inside his small, functional space only to open his door a few minutes later. "I will be out for a while, so please, go to lunch. Come back in about an hour, and we shall work everything out."

Sarah realizes she has not yet given Cecil the business card. She quickly withdraws it from her pocket, allowing him to study the implicit message. When he has reviewed it sufficiently, she takes it back. "Could I speak to Max for a moment, just so he'll know everything's going to be okay?"

"Oh no. Max isn't even here yet. Don't worry." He skips down the steps with the file neatly packed into his black leather briefcase.

"My God, Joseph, what did you tell him?"

"Madam, I told him you are the mistress of my friend, the UN Representative. He was very impressed."

"You did what?" Sarah interrupts. "How could you have said such a thing without my permission?"

"Please forgive me, but you are an attractive white woman. He would have made this conclusion once he saw the name of my friend, even if I had said nothing."

Sarah is appalled, but his logic acts like a sharp slap across the face, awakening her to the street smarts Joseph possesses and she so obviously lacks. "Did you also tell him you want to marry me?"

"I only told him, Madam, that we had spoken of it. Shall I drive you somewhere for lunch?"

"No, I don't intend to move. Christ, if we leave and Cecil returns, he'll think we've eloped! Joseph, you stay here in case Cecil comes back. I'm going to walk around."

"All right, Madam, but please, if people talk to you, never appear afraid. They like very much to intimidate foreigners."

"Joseph, you have nothing to worry about. In fact, your fears should be the other way around."

"I am sorry. I don't understand."

"I cannot be intimidated! If anything, you should be concerned with just how boldly I might act."

Her reply brings his first smile of the day.

As Sarah walks up a flight of stairs, a pungent ammonia-like odor fills her nostrils. When she reaches the eighth floor, she looks directly at a white plastic nameplate affixed to a door. Its black letters read: J. Z. ONDUKO, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL IMMIGRATION OFFICER. Underneath is a second, black plate: PERSONAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRINCIPAL IMMIGRATION OFFICER.

Onduko is the very name Max used whenever he spoke of the person whom his lawyer was endeavoring to reach. Onduko is where the bribes stop. Onduko is "the man."

Sarah opens the door to find the same professional-looking woman who had earlier brought Max's file to Cecil. "Pardon me, I'm waiting for Cecil. I believe he's gone to a meeting with your boss. Do you know when they're expected back?"

"No, you are wrong. Cecil is not with Mr. Onduko. Mr. Onduko has gone to lunch alone."

"Are you absolutely sure? Cecil told me he was just going to a short meeting with your boss."

"Yes. But they are not together. I am certain."

"Then could you tell me where you detain individuals who are awaiting their hearing?"



"No, I cannot." She returns robotically to her typewriter.

Sarah's anger heightens, as evidenced in the clutched sound of her voice. "If I'm not mistaken, you're the secretary to the second most important man in this building, and you can't tell me where they hold people?"

She nods that this is so, and without looking up, her nails continue pecking at the keyboard, sounding like a blackbird working its beak feverishly on cheap metal.

Sarah rushes down the stairs to find Joseph propped up, as if he is a leaning sentry, his face blank, exactly as she had left him. "Goddamn it, what the hell's going on around here? Cecil didn't go to a meeting with 'the big man upstairs'!"

Joseph looks at Sarah with the same vapid look she just witnessed on the secretary. She feels every symptom of her low blood sugar, each one ushering in a concern that she is part of a shadowy something she cannot fully comprehend. Her shaking is not fear, but anger submerged in an underfed, exhausted body. "Never mind, Joseph. I'll handle this myself."

Joseph hears her, but his bland face makes it clear he does not intend to reply. He stands there, an enigmatic, ebony puzzle wrapped in pressed khaki slacks and a sporty short-sleeve striped shirt.

Sarah tries to open Cecil's door without success, then attempts the door to the right. Locked, it shelters several men whose voices can be heard within. With a force of desperation driving her, Sarah bangs on the door with her open hand, increasing the intensity of each thump. At last the door opens, revealing a tall wiry black man with sick, fluid eyes, yellow in the area that is usually white.

His open mouth gives way to badly discolored teeth. His anger holds him erect until he falters and sways toward her. His breath reeks of alcohol. Behind him, in his small, stuffy office, sit two other men who have taken off their suit jackets and draped them across the back of their chairs. Bent over, shirtsleeves rolled up, they are picking from a pile of rancid-smelling French fries spread on sheets of grease-stained wax paper.

"Why do you knock on this door? Stop. It is my lunch-time. I don't have to talk to you now."

"Just tell me where they keep someone when they bring them here, before their trial."

"No!" He thrust the door in Sarah's face with a force she did not anticipate from one so inebriated.

She pounds again with both hands. Moments feel like forever until the man abruptly reopens the door. "Tell me where Max is and I won't bother you again!"

"I don't know about any Max. You are not to knock again or I will call someone to take you away." He pushes the door into Sarah's face with a final slam.

She turns to Joseph and notices a delicate woman in her early twenties leaving an office at the far end of the hall, locking it behind her. Sarah walks up to the young woman, gathering her shredded composure. "Hello. I am from the American Embassy and I want to visit a citizen who's being held until his trial tomorrow. Mr. Onduko said I could see him, but I forget what floor he said he was on. Can you tell me where the American might be?"

The girl covers her small mouth, hiding her poor dentistry. She giggles, embarrassed at her fascination with Sarah's makeup and gold earrings, which must strike her as amusing in contrast to Sarah's stained and crumpled

safari outfit. "I do not know which room he is in, but he would surely be somewhere on this floor."

"Really? Thank you so much." Sarah returns to Joseph who, at a distance, looks as if he already knows Max might be on this floor. But perhaps, she thinks, it is just her imagination.

"Joseph, I don't know what the hell's going on, but I can assure you that I am very much up for the game. You better think about whether you want to stick around, because I can't predict what might happen."

Joseph shakes his head affirmatively. He leans back against the wall, the slightest smile lurking behind his face.

Sarah begins at one end of the hall, shouting, "Max, are you in there?" She plunges from one door to the next, knocking hard and bloodying her knuckles.

At the very last room, at the opposite end of the hall from where Sarah started, she is rewarded by the words, "In here."

"Sarah, I don't want you here pulling one of your goddamn 'wobblies.' Get the hell outta here. You're just going to make everything worse. We're talking about my life, and you could fuck up everything I've worked for."

Sarah is not surprised. There has been little evidence of humanity toward her during the last several weeks. Unwittingly, she continuously managed to rub him like a brass lantern, always releasing the worst of his many genies.

"Thanks for the warm welcome. How could things possibly be worse, Max? Why don't you direct your anger at your goddamn lawyer, the one who ought to be here instead of me?"

She scans the door for a way to see him. A panel of glass at the top appears to be the only way this might be accomplished. Sarah motions for Joseph. "Put your hands together so I can stand on them. I want to see if I can reach up there."

Sarah is unable to gain the necessary height. Without words, Joseph points to the linoleum beneath their feet. She sits down and bends her head to the floor. From this lowly vantage point, sprawled out on cold prefabricated squares blotched with the permanent scars of accumulated filth, Sarah sees a hunched figure rocking on the edge of a mattress streaked with dirt, the squalid centerpiece of an otherwise bare room. Sarah's eyes are drawn to the nervous, twitching fingers belonging to Max, the once supremely confident guide who conducted her private safari just three weeks before. These are the hands she remembers ably pointing out all variety of game, after which would come an explanation of the order, family, subfamily, genus, species, and subspecies. Here are the fingers on the hands that had come together repeatedly to amplify bird calls or animal vocalizations, the hands that had wrapped around complex camera equipment in a kind of private catechism.

Those hands Sarah had known so personally now knot and unknot in pained distress. He is incarcerated in Nyayo House, the very government hellhole he has so ardently tried to avoid.

"Max, get down on the floor so you can hear me. I've found someone here to help you. Everything's going to be okay."

"Sarah, I don't want you here pulling one of your god-damn 'wobblies.' Get the hell outta here. You're just going

## THE FIRST RELEVANT QUESTION

to make everything worse. We're talking about my life, and you could fuck up everything I've worked for."

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\* \* \*

First, there is just one man, and Sarah can see him clearly as he stands alone, profiled against the long hallway. But then there are more, so many that she cannot make out where one man starts and the next begins. She is looking at approximately ten figures, each dressed smartly in suits or jackets and pants. All of them stare with hardened faces.

Together, they represent one office or another of the bureaucracy that constitutes the seventh floor of Nyayo House. They chant their recrimination.

"Go away from that door."

"You have no right to be there."

"It is not allowed."

"Get away from there at once."

They move forward, stop, and then move back again. Sarah must subdue an urge to laugh, for each of the men is somehow ridiculously oversized, like putty characters of evil either grotesquely stretched up for tallness

or sideways for great girth, depending on the whim of whomever pulled the clay.

After a time, their individual words fuse together: "Go away."

Despite Sarah's initial rounds of controlled entreaties, then stronger, louder, wilder protestations, she is not being allowed to see Max. Her incantations continue, rising periodically over Max's repeated instructions to leave him alone, go away, and be damned to hell.

Time passes; men come and go. Even Cecil, the glib gray suit on whom Sarah had attached earlier expectations, eventually returns, looks angrily at Joseph, then bolts into his office.

Sarah screws her bottom to the plastic floor. And there is Joseph, watching her in a steadfast gaze that expresses pride, for as he has directed, his charge is not being cowed by the men looking down at her.

Sarah studies her untidy safari clothes, removes a camera from the top pocket of her shirt, and pretends to take pictures of the antagonists before her. This is an act calculated to incite the mob, but still no one opens the door to Max.

After goading these officials without results, Sarah takes out a cigarette and methodically lights it. She begins to tear empty pages of her journal from their spiral spine, crumbles them, and assigns them to a carefully constructed pile. She flips ashes atop the paper heap, thus, she imagines, threatening to ignite a fire for her audience of men, one of whom finally crosses the invisible line and approaches. In a voice of heavy concern, he both states and questions, "You are causing quite a disturbance, you know. I can tell you there is going to be a

lot of trouble for you. What can I do to make you leave this place?"

Sarah looks at his young, willing face, and replies evenly. "You can do this: You can go to 'the big man upstairs,' Mr. Onduko, and you can tell him I am attached to the American Embassy, that I am a personal friend of President Clinton, and that I want this goddamn door opened in the next twenty minutes or I will call the President of the United States. Do you understand me?" As she delivers the words "goddamn door," Sarah hits it soundly with her fist, giving substance to her empty threat.

The man looks at her intently and turns around; he is heading to the eighth floor.

Sarah is fighting Max behind the door that separates them, the faceless men in front of her. Her throat is dry; swallowing has become increasingly difficult. There is nothing to drink. She continues to drag on cigarettes, consigning their ashes to the paper pyre at her side.

Forty minutes after the delivery of her ultimatum, the biggest man of the assembly appears, and for a moment Sarah thinks she might laugh hysterically. The man is so tall she indulges in a long, slow gaze to comprehend the magnitude of his height. This could only be "the big man upstairs."

But it is not a time to laugh. Onduko is in a raging fit of temper, his arms flailing out in every direction, his eyes shooting off several rounds of steel-cold indignation. When he opens his mouth to talk, he disgorges questions like the rapport of bullets from a short-range pistol. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" he

demands belligerently. "Why do you risk yourself for this person? Is he your husband? Is he your lover?"

Sarah tries to answer what Max is to her.

"Is he your lover?" Onduko demands again. "Answer me! Who is he and why are you here?"

Indeed, Sarah asks herself, how is it that she arrived in Nairobi with her husband, her health, her sanity, and her journal, and now finds herself alone, sick, and quite mad, throwing out insults and infuriating officials.

Why, she wonders, is she risking her life for Max, who has so adversely affected hers? Although she is barely able to think clearly, the shadow of an answer forming around the edges of what is left of her mind suggests that all her life she has been a caregiver, ministering to the real or imagined needs of others. And that is why she is here now.



## CHAPTER 2

# THE TEMPLATE

*Sarah's mind time-traveled to the stretch of the Serengeti where the scents of nature allied to perfect intoxicating perfumes. Confined as she now was, she could only inhale the stench of human waste.*

*She reflected on the animals that had looked upon her in varying degrees of assessment. There was no hatred in them such as that which now bore into her from the suited men held at bay by an invisible force.*

*Where there had been endless openness, now there was only the narrow passageway of the building with its bureaucrats. Flickering florescent lights replaced the bygone blue sky.*

*"The Big Man" interrupted her flow of memory. He bent over her as if he might strike her. Even then, she could not bring herself to care. Had he dared to do so, she only knew she would slap him back. Such was her false sense of fearlessness.*

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