Beyond the Seawall

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Chapter One

I am drawn to her with the force of inevitability, the force that drives the wave to its ending on a beach where it dies in a smooth surf. Is it that I am drawn to her tragedy, her wreckage? Or is it the hunger of the hunter for the flesh of a wounded prey? Compassion or exploitation? Or worse, did the attraction lie in that loathing which comes from pure fury, the anger we feel towards the weak for being weak? The need not so much to devour the victim, but to tear at its flesh?

We are sitting on a sofa upstairs in the large space that serves as a living room. The sofa faces east, and we are backing the rays of the setting sun filtering in through curtains. We are left alone by her family, for it is known that it is only with me that she speaks fully and openly of the events that have befallen her. It is only with me that she braves a smile. Or are we left alone by the family because they read in us the need for privacy, the kind desired by those who would be lovers, reading words without knowing their portent? Their voices float upstairs, corroded by distance into whispers. They seem to come from another world.

As always, Rose is dressed carefully for my visit. A dark blue dress of light fabric reaches below the knees. A small silver broach pins together the V of her neckline. Her dark face is powdered to a smoothness that hides the lines drawn there by the occurrences of the past twelve months. We sit at a discreet distance from each other, that precise distance which implies we are neither strangers nor lovers. There is a small, low table placed within arms' length on which she has set a tray with cups of tea. After the tea is finished, she moves between me and the table and collects the tray. Her perfume is expensive. Rose leaves with the tray for the kitchen, and I breathe again. I think hard of what to say next, what words to use. I never worry about tone; that comes naturally.

It is remarkable how close Rose and I have become in these five weeks, taut and rapid with a feeling deeper than sadness. Remarkable because I had hardly exchanged ten sentences with her before. It was her husband that was my friend. Joey and I had met each other at the university where we had done two linguistics courses together. He fitted in well with our group although everyone knew that he was a mediocre student. In fact, most of the group were mediocre, but it was only Joey who admitted it. What set him apart and yet made him part of the group was

his calm, a certain assurance which comes from being slightly older, slightly more mature, and financially secure. He was the only student we knew who owned his own house. The rest of us boarded with families or remained with parents or sheltered in hovels. Perhaps it was this assurance that allowed Joey to get past my intensity and my arrogance, my apparent disregard for what others thought and felt. My peers thought that I was brilliant, but I was not bright enough nor assured enough of my brightness to let others forget it.

Joey reached into my heart with his calm, with an excellence above academic performance. And he withdrew from me a deep, genuine friendship. In asking for my help with assignments, in listening to my explanations of the mysteries of "h-deletion" and partial assimilation, implicational scales and morphophonemic condensation, he taught me the more complex and lasting lessons of humility, patience and regard. I began to trust my judgement because he trusted it, although calm deliberation was a thing I never learned.

Joey invited me to his house, which was situated outside of the city. He never invited anyone else from the group of university students, and I interpreted this as a signal of the regard and friendship he bore me. I have never been easy about visiting people, and I still have not learned the art of being comfortable in other people's homes. It was therefore with a customary dread that I went to Joey's house.

The house was off the main road, at the end of a mile-long ribbon of uneven tarmac. It was a pretty, one-story house of concrete, white, stark against a dense wall of green. The house was the type that I'd imagined suited Joey's character: neat, clean lines, solid, modest. But the setting surprised me: it was forlorn, beyond a scream or a cry for help from other houses, locked within a fortress of trees. It seemed to intensify Joey's reserve into something like loneliness or fear.

I stood under the blazing sun, before the new iron gate, unsure of whether to call or toot or simply walk in. Joey's voice broke through the heat:

"Hey, man, come on in!! What you waitin' for? The red carpet?"

"Hey, Joey. Red carpet? Heck, man, that would've been nice." I returned loudly, with an ease that I did not feel.

Joey had walked out to the gate, opened it, shook my hand, and led me in, his arm draped over my shoulder. Rose stood in the doorway. With her was a little child who used the hem of its mother's dress to stand upright.

"This is my wife, Rose. And this is our daughter, Sumitra. Sumitra is ten months."

I shook hands with Rose and bent down to the child, putting out my hand. She took my index finger, smiling. I was about to remove my shoes when Joey stopped me.

"Don't worry 'bout that, man. Just come in and make youself at home."

I went in and sat, and Joey launched into a long narrative about one of my "escapades" at the university. We laughed, as Joey made me out to be an ogre of a frightening order. I protested to Rose that he was exaggerating, that I was really a nice chap who was misunderstood by everyone. Laughter came easily to both Rose and Joey. Then they told a joint story about Sumitra the child, constantly correcting each other on details of time and place. It was pleasant to listen to the banter of when the child was born, where they bought the crib, how long the labour, how many pounds she weighed. I was almost irrelevant to the conversation, yet I felt that the tale and the manner of the telling made me part of the narrative.

Two hours passed in this pleasant fashion, and I thought it was time to leave.

"Wait a minute, man," said Joey, "you just got here! What you running to, man...or what you running from...?"

I protested that I had two literature papers to write, and deadlines were looming.

"And you know what they mean by deadline, Joey? If you don't hand in things on time, they lynch you from the nearest tree," I reminded him. So I left Joey and his family. They were framed in the doorway, Rose holding the elbow of the child so that she could wave her little hand, her fingers opening and closing all at once in farewell. That was the last time that I saw the child. She died of meningitis one month after.

Joey had told me that the child was ill, but he did not make much of it, and I did not know just how serious was the illness. We all knew that something was seriously amiss when Joey did not turn up for one week of classes. And when he did turn up, his unshaven face and dishevelled appearance confirmed our suspicions. His eyes were wide and dazed, sunken deep into their sockets. He had lost weight, his belt drawn tightly so that the waist of his trousers bunched up beneath the belt.

"Hey, wha' happen to you, man? You sick or what? You had we worried,"said David, one of the regular members of the group.

"My daughter died four days ago. She~"

"What? Christ, man Joey. We're so sorry. What happened? How?"

But Joey kept looking at his feet, wanting to cry, and seeming to despise himself for wanting to do so. I placed my arm over his shoulder, not knowing what to say, knowing that whatever I say will be stupid and senseless.

It was David who came to everybody's rescue: "Hey, Joey, let we go for a beer, man. To hell with classes."

So David, Joey and I set off to the nearest shop for a drink. I had never seen Joey drink, but now he drank rapidly, beer after beer. There was little conversation while we drank. But as the beer took effect on Joey, he started to talk haltingly, in the manner of one too exhausted or half drunk.

"She was my life, you know. Not even one year old. If there is a God, he's a cruel God. That house I built was for her more than it was for anybody else, even for Rose."

"How's Rose standing up to this, Joey?" I asked.

"This was our first baby, man, how do you think she's doing?" I swore at myself for asking something so unforgivably stupid.

"She's in tears all of the time. Thank God she got her parents to lean on. How can she lean on me, eh? I ain't no pillar of strength, you know. I just feel so lost, so helpless. That's why I came back to classes. To find something other than pain in me heart, in me mind. You know what I mean?" David and I nodded in the fashion of the dumb.

"I was goin to extend the house, you know. Make up the yard nice nice for Sumit~for her to play in. What's the point, man? What's the point?" This was the question he asked over and over again until he had had no fewer than ten beers. His head drooped, his dark hair clinging to his forehead. Then the tears came, in streams, without shame. David and I placed our hands on each side of his shoulder as Joey shook with pain and anger. We could feel each shudder begin, build up, and release itself in tears. Shudder after shudder. I told myself that this was good for him, that it was healthy that he release all this pent-up hurt and fury. I looked at David and saw that his cheeks were stained with tears.

Joey's head jerked up, he reached into his back pocket for a handkerchief, but found none. I gave him mine. He wiped his face, called for another beer. But his voice had now a new edge to it, a new determination. I knew he was as sober as if he'd had nothing to drink. There was a clarity in his eyes, a hardness too, I thought.

"Well, to hell with it! I will finish this degree. But I will sell the house. It has too much of the child in it. Rose and I will move to her parents' house. At least she will get some support from them. And we will have another child. A new child to fill

the emptiness. At least half fill it, you know. Is not healthy for the heart to be empty for too long, man. That's when hate enters. Hate for God and man. And I won't let that happen to me or to Rose."

And Joey was as good as his word. He sold the house, moved in with his in-laws, and Rose became pregnant soon after.

Rose 1-
The Death of Sumitra

When Sumitra died, I paid little attention to the medical explanations given by the doctors. Joey attended to that. I think it was his way of trying to deal with this thing, keeping his mind on particulars which he can at least try to understand. I looked elsewhere for explanations. What had I done that was so wrong that this fate was visited upon my daughter, upon me and my husband. And I could not think of anything that was so bad that warranted such a punishment. I was a dutiful and obedient daughter to my parents. I was good in my school work, and Joey was the first man that came into my life, the first man with whom I had slept. I was the first woman for him too, and that surprised me. We had met in the Teacher's Training College. He was shy and so was I, but we found things that interested us--teaching, learning.

I was having lunch in the cafeteria, and he joined us at the invitation of one member of our group. It was all very easy, really. I was attracted to him from the beginning, to his sweet face, his kindly manner, his willingness to believe the best of everyone. He directed much of his comments to me, and I was flattered by it. We met like this on several occasions, eating and talking as a group. Then he asked me to have lunch with him. We went to a shop off the campus of the Teacher's Training College. And there was immediate tension. I thought we had made a mistake, leaving the group.

"Why did you ask me to have lunch with you, Joey? Me alone, I mean?"

"I wanted to talk to you. I- I-well--"

"Well what? What did you want to talk to me about?" I asked, softly.

"I--I--wanted to tell you that I like you. Rose, I--I ain't good at this. Well, I never did this before, you know."

"You never talked to a girl before?" I tried at humour.

"Of course, I did. But not like this, you know." He replied earnestly.

"I like you too, Joey." And I thought that this was the most juvenile conversation that I'd had since I was in high school. What a foolish thing to have said, "'I like you too, Joey'!" Goodness gracious.

"You know, Rose, I ain't got much to offer. I mean, I'm not the brightest fellow or anything, but I try my best. I've saved up some money, and that could give us a good start."

"Joey, what are you saying? Are you sure of what you're saying? You~"

"I know exactly what I'm saying. I want to marry you, Rose. I want you to be my wife. I want to be your husband. I want us to have children and live a long and happy life together." His hands were shaking, and he had not touched his lunch. Neither had I.

"But you don't know me that well, Joey. You don't know me at all."

"That's the point. I know a little of you, and I want to spend a lifetime trying to get to know you better."

"And you think liking me is enough? And me liking you?"

"I don't mean 'like', you know. I mean, well, you know what I mean. You know~"

"I know, Joey. I know."

That was how it all started. It was all wonderfully unstudied, innocent.

Chapter Two

She returns to the sofa and assumes the identical posture at the identical spot where she sat before. She puts her clasped hands upon her lap, her knees drawn closely together. Her dress fans out to close the distance between us.

"You know, sometimes this house that was like a haven some time ago seems like a prison. Sometimes I'd like to just break out. It's not that I am ungrateful or anything like that, but I feel trapped by these roles I am bound to play. The role of grieving wife, grieving mother. I am the pitied, no matter how well meaning that pity is. Do you know how I envy you sometimes?"

"Me? What do you envy? My freedom? My freedom is just a lack of attachments, a fear to commit, maybe. There are times when what seems to be freedom to you seems to me like emptiness. I don't know. But I do know that it is not something to envy."

"You don't understand. It's something as simple as movement, things people take for granted. It's the simple luxury of being able to get into your car and drive. No questions, no answers. No parents. No brothers. No certainty that I will get into yet another mess."

"You're a very strong woman, Rose. One of the strongest I know. In fact, only my grandmother would match up. Anyway, I hope you know that if ever you need my help, I'm here. Even if it is for something as simple as a drive. Joey and I used to go for these drives--"

"To where?"

"Well, nowhere in particular. Just anywhere on a whim. The beach sometimes. Sometimes Joey would want to go to the airport. Why, I don't know. Neither did he, I don't think. But he would simply sit there and watch the planes take off and land. It made me somewhat uneasy, to tell you the truth. I like when my analysis leads somewhere, but this time it was useless. But I respected his silence, his reticence."

"Yes. I know. He told me about that. The way you helped him with his studies. That you asked questions, but was content when he chose to be quiet. You were a good friend to him, you know. He knew that."

"And he was a good friend to me. He taught me more valuable lessons than what they teach at the university. That is why I'm here, Rose."

"Do you really mean it? Your offer to take me for a drive, I mean?"

"Of course. I never say things I don't mean."

"Yes, he told me that as well. Can you take me out now? This very moment?" Her face turns towards me, her eyes an impenetrable black. Her voice carries the weight of challenge, I almost think.

"Sure. Of course. Let's go, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want, but I'll have to tell them downstairs. Strange this, this return to adolescence, to the time and place when I had to ask permission to go out. They won't say no, mind you. It's just that I *have* to tell them, *inform* them. It's as if I was never a mother, never a wife, never with responsibilities of my own. That's a sad thing, isn't it? When kindness traps you."

Her voice becomes a whisper, and with its lowering the words are almost whispered between her teeth. There is a slight gap where her lower teeth meet the upper. I had not noticed that before. I've never seen this passion in her before. Or was it anger, something she'd set aside and nurtured that was now slipping into life, light, sound? She leaves for downstairs, and the voices that were but whispers now grow thinner. She returns.

"Well? Are you ready? Let's go. Or have you changed your mind?"

"No," I reply.

When Joey had suggested that they have another child, her initial answer was no. Joey had told me that it took days of persuading to get her to agree to have another baby. I know now how difficult it must have been to persuade her from what she had determined. I wonder what words he used, what his demeanour was, what his posture could have been. Did he sit close to her and hold her while he tried to persuade?

Her parents' house is set alongside the abandoned train tracks. The government had got a fleet of buses as aid from China or India, and had decreed that the train was no longer a relevance to a sovereign nation. The train was a British legacy, an unwanted reminder of the colonial past. They relegated the trains to the junk yard, and bit by bit the people rooted up the tracks to make different things--stoves, lean-to's, chicken sheds. Or they had just pulled up the tracks because they were there to be pulled up. A wide road of red burnt clay, a thing built by default, had taken the place of the track. It became a short cut to the university.

After the death of the child, I passed by each morning to get Joey to take him to the campus. They would be sitting on the stairs, together, waiting. They knew I hated waiting. I seldom went in, seldom got out of the car, but I noticed the stages of the pregnancy. First, Rose's drawn and sallow countenance, then a glow, and with it, smiles. At first, her keen movements, then the movements becoming more difficult and laboured as the life inside her grew. As her husband gathered his bag, she would grasp the rail of the stairs with her right hand and pull herself upright, her left hand tugging at the back of the dress. She would smile at me, and I would wave from inside the car. Joey would get into the car, a question of how I was on his smiling lips, and we would take off in a cloud of red dust. I always wondered how they managed to keep the house looking clean with all that dust in the air. And it was painted white at that.

"What do you think Ricky meant by "acrolectal"? Why not "standard" English?"

"That's DR. Ricky to you, Joey. Have you no respect, man?"

"I beg your pardon, sire. Many pardons, sire. Is just dat me foget dat you is DR. Ricky brown eye boy," and his laughter came like a welcome breeze in the deep heat of the morning.

"Dr. Ricky's point is that we need to ask *whose* standard. The Brits? The Americans? Whose? His point is that formal language may take different shapes and not be judged in terms of accents. You know, Joey, if ever we go abroad to study, and the likelihood of that is one in two million, we shall be judged 'native' by virtue of accent. Judged by people in England or America or Canada who can hardly put a sentence together. That's Ricky's point, Joey. That formal English has many standards."

"Good lecture, ol' chap. I get it. Hey, do you think you'll go abroad for your M.A. and Ph.D.? You're brilliant, man. You were born to do this stuff."

"Look, Joey, don't start me off. I don't have that kind of money. In fact, I don't have any money. Period. The only way is to get a government scholarship or a Commonwealth Scholarship. And why would this government send me? I'm the wrong colour, the wrong political persuasion. They'd be insane. And they are murderous, but they ain't insane man. There is always a logic to cruelty, Joey. Always."

"You're right. I don' want to get into that. But you will end up going abroad, man. You will end up as Dr. this or Dr. that. I just hope that you don't burn yourself out before your energies are truly needed." He had turned his head away,

and the words had come is rushes, flying to the back of the car and then returning to wrap themselves around my head.

"So, Joseph, how's the mother-to-be doin', man? She looking good."

"Rose?"

No, Queen Elizabeth! Christ, Joey, sometimes I wonder 'bout you, you know."

He laughed: "Well, she doin' okay, Bro. The baby should come in three weeks to a month. You know, Sumitra come two weeks early. They say that the second child come even faster. Heck, the baby can come tomorrow. The timin' perfect, though, man--end of the term. I can spend a lot of time with Rose and the baby."

It was the first time that Joey had mentioned his dead child by name, and I interpreted this to be a signal of healing. He knew it as well, that he had called the child by name for the first time, as if in the utterance of the name he could exorcise the torment. Name a thing and control it. It was as if the child growing inside of Rose was filling more than a physical space, and in both of them. The laughter had returned after ten months.

"Hey, Joey, you okay now, yeh?"

"What do you mean?" He was on guard, had gone stiff, and I wondered if I had made another mistake.

"Don' be dense, man! You okay? You happy?"

"Sometimes it comes back, man. And nothing can really fill the emptiness. Silence is emptiness, and Rose has been too silent about Sumitra. We never mention her out of habit. But we're as happy as can be under the circumstances." He had turned to look at me this time, trying to impress upon me with a look the truth of what he said.

"That's what I askin', Joey. That's all I askin'."

The baby came. A boy. They named the child Alvin, after a famous West Indian cricketer. Joey stayed at home during the break and I only saw him when I went to the house. Each time I went, he would be in the same spot, in the same posture: in a wooden rocking chair, holding the child, its tiny head in the crook of his left arm, its tiny body resting along his forearm, and beneath the left forearm, his right arm. Holding the child, as if he would have it suckle from his breast. Always rocking back and forth, always at the same pace. I seldom saw Rose. When I did it was only for a second or two, as she seemed to flit from one room to another. But I never asked about it. I do not know if she retired when she saw me coming in or if she retired when anyone came to visit, or if she had simply withdrawn herself

for fear of being too attached to the child. But Joey seemed content enough holding that child, wrapped in a blue woollen blanket.

The baby fell ill after two months and died. It came without warning. One evening he ran a high fever; the next day he had died. I had gone on one of my usual visits to Joey, and I knew from the crowd and the hush that hung over it that something was terribly wrong, that someone had died. I had thought it might be one of Rose's parents, but there was an air of mourning deeper than that reserved for people who were old and half-expected to die. And no-one was crying. This frightened me into knowing the truth before I allowed myself to acknowledge it. Maybe something was wrong with Rose. Maybe that was why she seldom showed herself. Nothing could be wrong with Joey. He was always in good health, and he never left the house, so that there could have been no tragic road accident.

I passed through the silent crowd, weighed down by the distress in their faces, the defeat in their postures. I never allowed myself to think that it could be the baby. Fate, however cruel, could not be this malicious. But it was, is. Joey was sitting in the same rocking chair, but he was still. He was clean-shaven, his white shirt grotesquely neat. I went up to him but said nothing, and he did not acknowledge my presence. His eyes were wide and blood shot, but there were no signs of tears. There was nothing to say, so I stood by his side, my hand upon his shoulder. It was wooden. There was no breeze, so that the silence was like something tangible and still. There is always a certain sweet, sickly smell at places of death, I find. And that smell was over-powering here. I wanted to leave, but my friendship got the better of my cowardice. Or maybe I was just paralysed, like everyone else in the house. The crowd grew, and with the entry of each new person there was a brief movement of air, a brief scent of cheap perfume or cologne or sweat, all a welcome relief from the sweet cloying smell that I associate with death. But it returned soon enough, and with greater oppressiveness. Someone blew her nose in one of the rooms in the house, and several people started as if it were a gunshot. I was startled by it as well, and it was only then that I removed my hand from Joey's shoulder. There was a large dark stain on the shoulder of his shirt where my hand had been resting.

ROSE 2 THE VISIT

When I heard he was coming to our home, I was not so much nervous for myself as I was for my husband. Joey had a regard for this man whom I had never met but who was always in Joey's conversations with me, even in our bed. I was

nervous because of Joey's nervousness, because he wanted to make an impression on our visitor. The ways of men are strange to me. Joey says they are friends, but why would one be nervous at the visit of a friend? Does friendship not imply an ease of relationship? And here he was, my calm Joey, like a child about to see a parent after a long separation. He paced and sweated, muttered and paced. He stopped long enough to peer through the glass louvres, then started again with the interminable pacing. This is how I imagined him to be when he was awaiting news that our child was born. And I was resentful because I see him in this fashion at the impending visit of someone who could not be that important, but I could not see him awaiting the birth of our child since he was in the waiting room–safe from the pain, from the discomfort of seeing me in pain. Anguish that became wonderful only afterwards, for we don't remember the process as we do the product.

Joey saw the car slow, then stop before the gate, but he did not rush out. Instead, he withdrew for a few seconds, smoothened his shirt, passed his hand over his hair, then moved with deliberate calm to the door. But the jerkiness of his movements betrayed his nervousness. I was prepared to dislike this man who, even without entering our life, had invaded it. I was prepared to dislike him for his arrogance, for his chauvanism, for the way he condescended to people, even to his lecturers. This was the character that came through in Joey's stories, although this was contary to the impression I was meant to have. Yet, I was grateful to him for helping Joey with studies. That too came through in the stories. But neither my gratitude nor my resentment was pure: the gratitude undermined the resentment, and there was resentment that Joey depended on him, respected him. It was as if he were taking Joey away from me, from his family. Taking away from me Joey's need for my presence, my love. Here he was, seeking approval.

When he came to the gate, I was surprised at just how good looking he was. Boyish, almost, thin and wiry, as if not yet fully fleshed out. He hesitated at the gate, and as Joey placed an arm around his shoulders, I saw his discomfort and his pleasure. This was a man who enjoyed being close to people, but who was frightened by it. When he shook my hand and looked into my eyes, my resentment dissolved immediately. I was not attracted to him, but I felt I could have been interested in him if I were not married, or if I were not married to Joey. There was no place for anyone else for me. My whole life revolved around Joey and our daughter. And what would have attracted me to him was not so much what may have passed for good looks, but for the shyness behind those light

brown eyes. He was out of his element, a fish out of water, and I could sense his need. I knew that he needed Joey more than Joey needed him.

Neither man knew this, and I was surprised by their lack of insight into the nature of their friendship. True, they needed each other--complimentary distribution, Joey would have called it, I suppose--but they knew little of the nature of the need and the degree to which they needed each other. Yet, I envied them that which they did not know. For in not knowing there was a strange kind of innocence. He needed Joey as a bulwark against his loneliness. Joey needed him as a buffer against total domesticity. I did not envy their inability to say what they felt for each other though. That was too much like imprisonment.

I had never heard Joey speak so much and so rapidly. The rush of words seemed to surprise Joey's friend as well. The sentences rushed out of his mouth in torrents, the words leaped and gambolled like fish, the stories ran into each other without pause or punctuation. The one thing that held them together was the one character, the smiling man who sat beside my husband. The relaxed smile did not spread to his body; he was tense, nervous. His back never touched the back of the chair. He was enjoying being the star of the show though, the protagonist of the stories. Even his protestations as to his innocence and his self-deprecating humour served to emphasise rather than diminish his role. He was the actor and Joey the recorder: Dr. Johnson and James Boswell, I thought.

Joey rattled on about me, about how we met, about the baby, when she was born, at what time, the weight, the length. From time to time, he turned to me for confirmation of what he'd said. I pointed out some inaccuracy or the other, and we were all entertained by this banter between husband and wife. Joey teased me about what he regarded as my obsession with our daughter, and I retorted by telling a story of Joey's own obsession with the child. Even my husband's friend seemed to enjoy himself, although the conversation was entirely too much about our family. But this was not really Joey's fault. He had tried several times to steer the conversation in the direction in which he thought his friend would have been most comfortable--academic things: history, literature, linguistics. But it was clear that his friend did not want to discuss university topics, and I was grateful to him for that. He wanted to keep me in the conversation, and I thought he wanted to keep Joey talking. And yet, through all of this, he did not direct much to me. Anything he asked or anything he said was done through Joey. If Joey's stories were true, and he was quite the one for the ladies, it was nevertheless clear to me that he was not entirely comfortable with wives.

Without saying much, he had dismantled all that Joey had said of him. Here was the academic, the bright boy, who refused to show that he was the bright boy. The lady's man who could not direct any of his questions or statements to me, a woman. Here was the arrogant man who was shy. I could not help but think that he was assuming another character. He was re-making himself as he went along, as circumstances allowed or dictated. There will come a time when the role he assumes will not match the circumstances, and he'll be lost. Lost entirely.

The time went by quickly, but I cannot say with any honesty that I was sorry to see him go. He seemed to know when it was time to leave, but I do not know what clue I offered. He simply arose and told Joey that it was time he went, using university work as a convenient excuse. But even that was the subject of a joke.

Joey walked him to the door, then to the gate, their shoulders brushing together. Grudgingly, I admired what they shared, and I wanted to be a part of it. But I remained at the threshold of our home, my daughter in my arms, and smiled goodbye.

Chapter Four

I place my hand carefully upon the door of the car and open it for Rose. It is burning hot. I am conscious of the eyes of her family upon us, and become suddenly aware that I feel guilty. Rose smiles at me and gets in. I go around to the driver's side, wave stupidly to the audience and get in. I turn the key, and the engine rattles to life. It sounds louder than I've ever heard it. We leave.

"Well, always the gentleman, huh?"

"What?" I hadn't heard.

"Nothing...I was just saying that you're always the gentleman. I don't think many men in the West Indies open doors for women." She laughs a tinkling laugh, unpleasant for being forced.

"I don't think that many men in the world open doors for women any more." I respond, willing banter into my voice.

"Is this why all the girls fall for you? The old-fashioned charm from a young man?" She is teasing, but the hardness is still there.

"What do you mean?"

"Ahh come on! You can drop the innocent act. Joey told me all about the women at the university who swoon or giggle stupidly or sway when you so much as look at them."

"Joey told you that?" I do not hide my annoyance, and she knows it's directed at her.

"This is not about Joey, you know. It's about you."

"Where do you want to go?" I ask with gentle impatience.

"The seawall."

"Where?" My voice betrays my surprise.

"I want to go to the seawall. Why are you surprised? You should know the seawall well by now, shouldn't you?"

I do know the seawall. A thick concrete bulwark against the invasion of the sea. The land is below sea level and the Dutch had built it one hundred years ago when they were deluded into thinking that this was their colony to keep, before they were routed by the British to another part of the country, then to another country that became Dutch Guiana. That was long before the British had left us to the horrors of

independence. Yet, the Dutch legacy still serves the country by saving it from being inundated. The seawall is a favourite place for lovers in the evening and at night, but it is a dangerous place.

There are two reasons why I am surprised that Rose wants to go there. The first is that going to the seawall would mark us as lovers, or at least potential lovers. And I do not think she is ready for this. I do not know that I am ready for it, or if it was there to be ready for, or if it ought to be there at all. And I feel guilt descend upon me for thinking this way at all.

We drive into a narrow road off the main road, and I drive as close to the seawall as I could. She is out of the car before it comes to a full stop. There is an urgency in her walk, as if she is rushing to something or someone. Before I get out she is already up the five or six steps and is standing on top of the six-foot-broad wall. Her sandals scrape the old concrete, and I clench my teeth in annoyance. My lips taste of salt. There is a small breeze coming in from the Caribbean Sea, brown from the silt of many rivers that flow out of the country. This is a country whose waters rush to a muddy conclusion, I think fancifully. And Rose is rushing to that conclusion or racing from it, I think. Mud, mud, everywhere.

She sits on the wall, her feet dangling. It is a small jump to the steps that lead to the sea, wrinkled like a sheet by the small breeze. The loose curls of Rose's hair flow back, showing the nape of her neck; her ears that are somewhat big. She turns her face upwards, her eyes closed, as if she is preparing herself to be kissed by the wind. Her tongue moves over her lips leaving them moist, her hands are rigid at the side of her body, her shoulders bunched up; her hands, close to her thighs clasp the edge of the seawall, fingers pointing downward. She is tense and relaxed. The sea stretches before us infinitely, empty.

It seems awkward that I should be standing over her, my shadow a dark pool around my feet. I sit beside her.

"It's large, isn't it?" I ask rhetorically.

"The sea? The Ocean? Is this the Caribbean Sea or the Atlantic Ocean? Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"It's both I suppose."

"It's hard to think that this is such a small part of the world. And that we are a tiny part of this small part of a large world." There is a hushed quality to her voice, a quality of awe in the face of the expanse before us. It is a thing that I've always wondered at–this tendency to be hushed in speech before natural spectacle. The

edge has gone out of her voice, eroded by the sea, erased by the breeze. Her eyes are closed still.

"You must come here often. I notice that you found the turn-off without looking for it. Am I right?" Her voice is playful.

In the same tone, I answer: "If you're so certain, why ask?"

"Who do you come with?"

"Believe it or not, I come here alone mostly. Do you think that I have a long string of women waiting for me to bring them here?"

"Yep! The operative word is 'mostly', isn't it?" She laughs. She is flirting, a girl, someone I do not know. I could feel the excitement rise in me, and I feel uneasy about it.

"You didn't answer my question, you know."

"Which one? You've asked about two hundred questions."

She ignores my cue. "Why were you surprised when I asked to come to the seawall?"

"Because it's not the safest place to come, Rose. A lot of nonsense happens here."

"So why did you agree to bring me?"

"Because it's midday. It's still safe here during the day."

"Well, I'm glad we came. I feel more relaxed than I've felt in months...years."

"I'm glad. But this is a dangerous place during the night, Rose. Even if you are escorted by a man."

"Is this experience talking? Tell me about it. Please."

"Not my experience, but one that I know of. It happened to a friend of mine, Morris, just last year. Well, he isn't a friend of mine, really. More a friend of my cousin."

"What happened?" Her eyes are wide now with attention, almost with excitement.

"This guy came here with his girlfriend. They came in his car, an MGB. He's rich. Anyway, they came here after the movies. It was late, almost twelve. And they started, you know, doing things in the car." She giggles at my language, but I go on.

"They started kissing and fondling in the car, but the idiot left the doors unlocked. They were too busy to notice three chaps approaching the car. They pulled them out of the car. They had knives at their throats. They wanted money, they said. And Morris gave them all that he had, without argument. Then one of them started fondling the girl. Morris started to protest, but the chap who had a

knife on him punched him in the face. He fell. The guy sat on him while the other two raped the girl. Then they traded places and the third one raped the girl."

"My God!! How awful! Animals!"

"That's only the beginning of the story, Rose. They then opened the trunk of the car, put Morris's torso in, clamped the trunk down, pulled down his pants, and raped him. He screamed and begged. They laughed. The girl cried. When they were finished, they simply strolled off. They did not even have the decency to run off. No fear, no shame."

"God!" She says again. "Did they go to the police?"

"Why, Rose? To be humiliated further? Not only would she have to face the shame of being questioned in detail by these idiot cops, people who join in the rape of people who oppose the government. She would be telling of her rape to people who were themselves rapists. Many of them, anyway. The victim ashamed of the crime done against her. Not only that, but he would have to tell of his part in it. That he was raped, that he didn't fight back. Can you hear the laughter? The cops would laugh, Rose. They'd laugh, these keepers of lawlessness and disorder. These bastards. The truth is that the police are as guilty as the rapists."

"What did Morris and the girl do?"

"Nothing, mostly. They went home and never saw each other again. Too much shame. But do you know the irony of it? Morris's father owns several pharmacies in town. The father is a card-carrying party member, a must for good business in this country. Morris had a gun in the car. A gun, for God's sake. And yet he and his girlfriend were raped by animals carrying knives."

"Could he have used it?"

"Of course, he could've used it. But he never had the chance."

"God, this gives me the chills. Even under this sun."

"That's not all either. There is some justice at the end of this. You see, Morris came back one week later. He paid two chaps and a girl to come with him. Different car. The girl and one of his friends pretended to make out in the front seat while the other two hid in the back. He had given them a gun each. They did this for three nights, I am told. And on the third night, sure enough, the three animals turned up. Same scene. The two were dragged out of the car, but then Morris and the other guy came out with the guns. The rapists froze. The rapist—any rapist—deserves to be murdered, but Morris did not have killing on his mind. From what I know of him, he doesn't have the heart or the stomach for it. They lined the chaps up on the seawall as if they would shoot them. But they didn't. Instead, they had

them spread their legs wide and put their arms straight out, hands flat on the seawall. Then they took down their pants. It must have seemed peculiar to the chaps, really. But they were told to keep their fingers together. Legs wide spread, pants down, hands out, with their fingers close together. Then one of Morris's friends went to the trunk of the car and brought out a cutlass. They chopped off the fingers of those animals. It's harder to rape when you have no fingers, I suppose. The three ran off howling. Justice!"

"Did they know it was Morris? The same chap they had raped before?"

"I really don't know. I'd like to think that they knew, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I suppose, but it still does not settle the matter. What about the girl who was raped? Did Morris ask her to come along?"

"I don't know, Rose. I don't know."

"So justice, as you call it, was done but not seen to have been done by one of the people who needed most to have seen. Right?"

"What do you call it, if not justice?"

"Revenge." She is calm and gentle in saying that word. There is no argument, no reprimand, just calm. I chose not to get involved in a debate of vengeance versus justice. Instead, I say:

"You're amazing. Do you know that, Rose?" She smiles.

"Why? Because I know what pain is? Loss? Tragedy? Too many losses, too fast?"

"No. Other people have losses like that. It's how you deal with it that's amazing. It's your strength."

"Careful, Mr Bright Boy. Others may say it's callousness."

"And they would be ridiculous to say so. They'd be stupid."

"Maybe it takes some callousness to be strong. I don't know."

"Maybe. But I see it as strength. I admire it, you know. The same way that I admired Joey's compassion."

'Well, he certainly admired you. More than anyone else, you know. He admired your brain. And he envied it as well, but not in a bad way. It made him try to do better in his studies."

"You really love him, don't you Rose?"

"Yes. I still do. I always will, I think."

"I understand."

"Do you? Do you really?"

"I think so. How could you not after all that's happened? Did you ever ask Joey so many questions? Man, it would drive me loco."

"No. Joey and I never talked like this. Joey was fragile, you know. And he thought I was too. I couldn't talk to him like this. It would threaten him; it would upset the balance."

"The balance? What balance?"

"The balance between what roles we were given and what roles we took on." I am amazed at her perceptiveness, her analysis.

"You know, Rose, you should enrol in the university. You'd do well. I'm sure of that. For one thing, you are brighter than most of the students that I know."

"Maybe. We'll see. I couldn't talk to you like this before, in front of Joey."

"Well," I respond, "You did not even talk to me like this up to one hour ago.

" Maybe I did, but you weren't listening to me. You were listening to Joey's wife, your friend's wife, playing her role as the friend's wife."

"And who am I listening to now?"

"You are listening to me in my own right. To someone who dares to talk to you on equal terms. You see, I am operating outside of your reputation at the university. I only know of that reputation and your reputation as a lady's man, but only by way of second-hand information. From Joey, especially. And everything that Joey said about you was touched by your friendship, by his admiration for you. Getting to know you directly is like knowing a different person. A new friend, maybe."

"I was always your friend, Rose."

"No. I told you this before, do you remember? You were always Joey's friend. I was Joey's wife, that's all." She remains very gentle, contradicting me without challenging me too much.

"Well, I suppose that's a good thing. You know this West Indian habit to exaggerate!" I choose the safe ground, for now.

"I doubt whether he was exaggerating, on both counts. I could see why the girls would fall head over heels for you. Above everything else, West Indian women like intelligence in a man. Not that you're bad looking either, you know."

"Well, thank you, Rose. You are the very soul of kindness. Not bad looking? Heck, I always thought that I was the most gorgeous man on this planet, except for Muhamed Ali." I laugh at my own joke.

"Do you expect me to fall for that rash talk? Keep that for the university women. I've always found you to be quite shy, you know."

"Really? Well, no-one would believe you if you told them. Anyway, remember that you were dealing with Joey's friend, so how come you made such a sharp observation?"

"Unlike other people, I don't throw away the baby with the bath water. I have heard you and Joey go on about the Brits, about colonialism and so on. And you were right, I suppose. I don't know too much about it except for the history books. But I do know that we gained some things--"

"No-one denies that, Rose. What? I daresay, ol' girl, what would we be without cricket and the English Language? But the fact is that the Brits--like the Spanish and the French and all those who came to rape this region, never gave anything without ropes attached. They gave us straw and we made bricks, man. We built a whole cultural cathedral from the straw. We made English into a thing that the English can only admire, and we made cricket into a game that the Brits can only hope to emulate. And before you say it, I know that what replaced the Brits was a more monstrous device. Killing is all the worse when the people that are doing the killing are your kin. But the fact is that the Brits put them in power. The fault lies on both side of the Atlantic. Both sides of the colour spectrum--we the blacks, they the whites."

She is looking at me in a way that makes me uncomfortable and happy. My hands twitch to hold her, but I dare not, not yet. It must always come from the woman; it always does, I think.

"Now, you see, you are talking to me in a way that you would never do if Joey were here. It would be a two-way conversation between the two university boys--men. Now, you are speaking to me in my own right. And your bravado does not fool me, like it did not fool Joey. That is why he liked you, you know. Because he saw through the act." She smiles, as if she has won something precious or lost something unwanted.

Chapter Five

The child, Alvin, was buried quickly and quietly. There were no tears, just resignation or tiredness. Joey stood on one side of the tiny grave; Rose on another. The two were worlds apart in their identical pain, like a shared contagion. I started worrying for the marriage itself, but I told myself that things have a way of working out, that people have a way of recovering from even the most tragic circumstances. This is always the thinking of the comfortable, the observer.

The new semester started and I picked up Joey as usual, but I hardly saw Rose. All of our talk for the first few weeks was about studies. Yet I felt no slackening in the friendship between Joey and me.

Then, one Thursday, I stopped at the white house beside the red road, and Joey was not there. I tooted with some annoyance at being kept waiting. Rose came out. I had expected to see her at some point, and I had expected to see someone who was bent over by the burden of having two small children taken away in quick succession. But Rose looked pretty, though somewhat worried. She came to the car, walking quickly:

"Hi, stranger!"

"Hi, Rose," I responded, "Where's the man?"

"He isn't too well. He has a tummy ache. He says that you should go ahead. He'll take the day off today, but he wants you to give him all the notes you can on Monday."

"What about tomorrow? Isn't he going on campus tomorrow?"

"He says that he'll take the two days off. Actually, I think he's tired, you know. It hasn't been easy. None of it. Not on anyone." And it was then that I realized that she had dressed and prepared herself mentally to face me, for she suddenly looked tired, the kind of tiredness that make-up and a pretty dress cannot hide. But I did not say anything.

"Well, tell him he can't be relaxing while the rest of the world works. Tell him I'll see him on Monday, okay?"

"Okay," she replied and moved back from the car and out of the dust that it would raise when I drove off.

On Monday I pulled up beside the house, but Joey was not waiting. Instead of sounding the horn, I got out and walked up the stairs to the front door, a journey that I have now made many times. I knocked and Rose's sister answered the door. She let me in, snickering slightly, and showed me to Joey's room. The room was bright with the morning sun, but the air was thick with the smell of Chinese shilling oil. Joey was on his back, and he smiled when I entered.

"Hey, man! What's goin' on? You playing sick or what?" I ask breezily.

"I wish, bro. But I'm not well, man. I think it's *nara*, a pulled stomach or something. In fact, the in-laws just had a woman in here to massage my stomach. She says it's a bad case of *nara*. All I can tell you is that it hurts like the blazes. And after she finished, the pain got worse. Now, I can hardly breathe without pain."

I sat on the bed, and Joey cried out in pain from the movement of the bed. His face was ashen with the pain.

"Shit! I'm sorry, man. Look, Joey, are you sure it's just a pulled stomach? What have you been lifting?"

"Nothing at all. The heaviest thing that I've carried are books."

"So how can it be *nara*, then? That happens when you lift heavy things in a careless way."

"Hey, I ain't no doctor, man. How would I know?" He half-smiled.

"Okay, that's it. I am taking you now to a doctor. Now. This very minute."

"No, man. You have to go to classes."

"To hell with classes, man Joey. That can wait. I can catch up. I'm the bright boy, remember?"

"Yes, but I ain't. I need for you to get the notes. If you really want to help me, that's what you can do. Go to classes and get me the notes. Also, explain to Dr. Ricky that I'm ill." I knew that arguing was pointless, so I took another route.

"Okay. I'll go and get your precious notes, Joey. But on one condition, and this is not up for debate. I want you to go to see a doctor today. I mean it, Joey. Today!! Do we have a deal?"

"Okay, my friend. I'll do it. I'll get one of Rose's brothers to give me a ride."

"Promise?"

"Hey, man. I said I would, and I will. Promise."

"Look, I'll go to classes and get the notes and talk to Ricky. But I'll be back to check to see if you've gone to the doctor. If you haven't, you'll lose a friend, Joey. I'm serious."

"I know, Bro. Don't worry, man. I'll go."

And so I left with the certainty that he would go to the doctor. I did as I had promised, and on my way back stopped in to drop off the notes and check on Joey. His brother-in-law told me that Joey had been hospitalized in the General Hospital, but he did not seem too worried. I did not bother to ask any questions. Instead, I set off for the hospital.

I did not have too much difficulty finding the ward, and I found Joey's bed easily because there were many people there—all of his in-laws. There were no smiles of greeting, but I still did not worry too much. The hospital was dirty, and in the ward there were two people to a bed. As if to follow some unspoken but rigid code, each of the two people in each bed lay on their sides, their faces and bodies turned away from each other. Illness brings with it a strange sense of self-shame, as if one had let oneself down somehow. The sheets were stained to a dirty brown, and the nurses moved in slow motion. They had drawn the curtains around Joey's bed.

I opened the curtains and went in. My heart quickened painfully when I saw him. He was more grey than he was when I had seen him this morning. Rose was holding his hand, but he was not gripping hers. She started explaining even before I asked:

"They had to operate immediately when he came in. He had a ruptured appendix. It was bad, they said. Joey could have died." There was a thinness in her voice from panic, but the panic was receding from her eyes. I looked into Joey's eyes and saw the fear, and hurt. He was in pain, it was clear. He smiled, but it did not reach his eyes.

"Good thing I followed your advice, huh, old friend? If not...."

"Hey, man, it's going to be okay now. You're fine now. They got to you in time, right? That's all that matters, right?" I strained against my own fear, willing certainty into my voice. It would do no-one any good to read my fear."

Joey looked at Rose. She told me later that that was the first time that he had looked at her since he was in the hospital. There was something in his eyes that I could not quite place. Anger. Accusation, maybe.

"Rose, can you and your family leave us alone for a minute. I want to talk to my friend." She looked surprised and hurt. I felt guilty, but I did not know why. I noted the "your" family. For a second, I was a bit annoyed with Joey. How could he want to talk to me now? Are studies that important?"

"Look, Joey, I got the note--"

"--Let them go out. I want to talk to you privately." It was more than the notes, then. Much more, I thought.

I held his hand, and he grasped mine with the kind of power that I did not expect from him even when he was well. His face was muffled up from a hurt beyond the physical pain he was enduring.

"Do you know what they did? Do you know what they did to me?" he cried.

"Who Joey? Who?"

"My in-laws. Even Rose, man. Even Rose. For days I could not move from that bed. When I wanted to go to the bathroom, I crawled, man. I crawled like a crab. They laughed, man. They laughed. They giggled, man. God! And no one did anything. Then they brought in that woman to rub my belly, and she ruptured the appendix. They could have killed me, man. They laughed while I crawled to the bathroom. They laughed."

I searched for something to say, for I know that something had to be said. He expected me to say something. I could feel myself going out of control, could feel the muscles in my face taking on a life of their own. But I did not want to cry. I cried with Joey that evening. I cried for Joey laying there, for his anger and his humiliation. And I cried for my own lack of courage for not being able to offer anything but the comfort of tears.

"I'll never forgive them, you now. Never." He muttered, his lips quivering with the remembered humiliation, the remembered animal crawl to the bathroom.

"It's okay, Joey. It's okay now, man. We'll deal with this when you get out."

But Joey never got out. He died later that night. When I went to see him the following morning, the bed was empty. There was a large yellow stain, yellow and vile, in the middle of the sheet. There were people two to a small bed, and yet this bed was as empty as the besmeared sea. And there, in the bed, loneliness lay like tragedy. A witness to this, I had seen no one at all.

Then I saw Rose. She was just standing there, shocked into immobility by this new horror that was visited upon her. I went to her, and she put her head upon my chest. A thin whine came from her throat, then gathered force into many "why's". I held her while she cried until I could hardly stand, then I led her to a bench. She cried as if she was crying for all the deaths that her afflicted heart had had to endure: her baby girl, her baby boy, her husband. All in rapid succession. As I held her, I kept seeing Joey's face. Serious, shy, smiling, laughing, crying, angry. It was as if I was looking at photographs of him. Strange, how all those photographs were in black and white. All around us, the morning was a grey backdrop. The hospital walls were grey as if they would open up like clouds and let a world of grey stones fall upon this earth.

Then I realized with a start that I was angry with her. I was angry with her, but I did not know why. Even while I held her, I wanted to slap her silly, hurt her physically. Was it that I despised her pain even while I felt for it? Was it that I had taken on Joey's anger at his final humiliation? She cried against my chest for hours. Softly, then in shudders, then loud gasps that died out to whimpers. Then it would begin again. But my anger did not subside, my sympathy did not come with the expected readiness. Sympathy, I realize now, is the luxury of the uninvolved, the observer.

Chapter Six

When my father had died, some two years ago, the day was bright. It was Republic Day and the Ruling Party had organised celebrations in the manner of the Trinidad Carnival. Our originality was to call our celebration "Mashramani", after an Amerindian word. Not that the celebrations had anything to do with the Amerindians or with the people at large. It was the falsehood of soldiers and policemen and party stooges dressing up in tinsel and prancing around, false spears jabbing into the side of the sky. But the guns and batons which the uniformed soldiers and policemen wielded on people's heads were real enough.

My father had been in hospital for two days—his first stay in a hospital to my knowledge—having suffered a massive heart attack. He was teaching when he took ill. But he was recovering, or so they said.

That morning, my brother and I set out for the hospital to visit our father. It was early, around seven, but the sun was up, burning up the night's cool. When we went in, my father was sitting up, the first time we had seen him do so since he was admitted into the hospital. He was in a good mood, laughing, and re-telling jokes that he had told the nurses. For the first time ever, I shaved my father. I took the soap, swirled in around a bowl of water, and applied the lather on his face. We had taken his razor, and I pulled it gently over his face, thick already with almost three days' growth. I feared cutting him, the way I cut myself, even now, when shaving. I told him that he should grow a moustache, and he agreed. So I left the moustache, flecked with grey. Yet, he was only forty-five. I told him as well that he should stop wearing these old-fashioned pleated pants, those that are even now back in fashion. He smiled at my feeble attempt to make him young again, as he put it. But he agreed. The razor scraped against the stubble, like a shoe scraping on rough concrete. He puffed out one cheek to get the skin tight, then the other. Then he strained his neck upward so that I could shave below the chin and along the neck. The scraping hurt me more than it hurt him. I took a towel, soaked one end, and wiped his face of the streaks of lather. Then I took the other end and wiped the face dry, standing back to admire my handy-work. He smiled at me, his eyes almost closing shut, as they did when he found humour or joy in a thing.

My brother stood there, watching. In everyday things, he was always closer to my father than was I, and this unusual intimacy between my father and me was

pleasant. There had been many arguments between my father and I, arguments about history or literature, arguments about my temper or about my unwillingness to go to mosque. Now, he asked to speak with me alone. My brother, always so very accommodating, left the room.

"If anything should happen, I want you to do two things for me, okay?" For the first time since we had arrived, he was serious.

"Nothing's going to happen to you. You've recovered already."

"I know. I know. But just in case, son. No-one knows when he will be called, you know. First, I want you to take care of your mother, okay?"

I nodded.

"The second is that I don't want you to give up karate."

"What?" I was surprised that he would bring up what was surely trivia at a time like this. It wasn't even about my studies. Karate? I thought that he was joking, but he was not smiling at all.

"You're good at it. Don't give it up. Okay?"

"Yes," I said meekly, not wanting to get into an argument at this time.

"Now let me talk to your brother for a minute, okay?"

I signalled to my brother to come in, and I waited outside the room. My heart said that I loved him, but the words did not take shape in my mouth and did not reach my lips. To this day, I regret not having the courage to tell my father how much he meant to me, how much I loved him. I can only hope that he saw it in my eyes.

On our way home, I asked my brother what they had talked about.

"Oh, money things."

My brother did not ask me what we had talked about. He still hasn't. I felt some resentment. After all, I was the eldest. Yet, it is only now that I understand why he spoke to my brother and not to me about things financial. My brother is financially secure; My carelessness with money ensured that I am not.

The rest of the family had planned to visit my father during lunch, and I knew that there would be a crowd: his mother; my mother; my brothers and sisters; my father's sister and her hoard that were my cousins, all grown up and mostly older than me; my cousins on my mother's side. I did not enjoy the prospect of seeing them rival each other, proving who could receive more attention from the patient and the audience, who knew more about medicine, and who could pray the most fervently. Also, I did not want to do battle with the fools in tinsel, the celebrants of our freedom from the British.

I stayed at home, luxuriating in the quiet of a house seldom empty and quiet. I took a long shower, and blessed the silence, the sheer pleasure of not having someone shouting at me to hurry up. Then I sat down to read. It was noon, and the sun stood in the sky exacting its revenge for a cool night. But my satisfaction at being alone protected me from the heat.

I was interrupted by the screech of tires. My cousin had returned to get me. He said, simply:

"Uncle has taken a turn for the worse."

I did not say anything, but went into the car. The sun beat down so that it was a hot plate on my head. My brain raced, but things seemed to move in the most peculiar slow-motion, like those commercials we see these days of people running in slow motion to indicate that they are running quickly, to capture effort. We had to take the long way round to the hospital, since there was a procession coming up the road that leads directly to the hospital. There was colour everywhere: red, yellow, blue, green. My head hurt from the colours. There was noise everywhere: steel bands, loudspeakers with loud and brassy music, but the sounds poured themselves into my ears like molten lead, slowly, hot. Hot sound. Hot sun. Hot colours.

We were at the hospital in a slow blur, and I ran up the steps. I hardly registered the presence of the extended family in the lobby. I passed by them, and walked quickly down the brief corridor to my father's room. No-one stopped me. The doctor and nurses seemed to be working feverishly. There were machines that looked so impressive then that I now know were primitive even then. There was a transparent tube around my father's ankle. The doctor, a Sikh in a mauve turban, jabbed a long needle into my father's chest, but my father did not move from the pain. The needle withdrew dark blood into the syringe. Someone untied the transparent tube, and I noticed that my father's second toe on his right foot was pushed downwards below his other toes as if it had been pressed into that position by the big toe. Pain, I thought. Our feet betray the pain we feel, if we are prone. So there was movement, but I had not seen it. The Sikh doctor took the white sheet and drew it carefully up to my father's neck, as if to prevent him from being cold. My father's eyes were closed. He was asleep. I looked to the lobby, and signalled a thumb's up.

"It's okay," I said with my mouth moving but with no words.

The Sikh doctor asked to see me and my mother in the office. He was grim, so the situation was still touch and go, I thought.

"I am sorry," he said to my mother, "but the teacher has expired."

"Expired?" "Respired?" "Tired?" “Retired? My mind registered options of relief.

"Do you mean he's dead?" My mother's voice came to me.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

This is all very stupid, I thought. Very stupid indeed. He's forty-five. Strong men of forty-five do not die. At any rate, the doctor had drawn the sheet up to my father's neck; he had not covered his head as they should at death, as I'd seen so often in movies.

I became aware that my mother was leaning on me. I took her out of the doctor's office, and put her gently into a sofa of cheap orange imitation leather. My body began to shake, and I could not control it. The ground was moving and I was still. My hands were shaking violently. Someone reached out and touched me on the shoulder, and I hit out, a short vicious swing. I did not see him fall. There was chaos, noise, blood, cries, screams. Someone swore at God, then at everyone else. He was speaking in my voice, but I was in too much pain to speak. My hands were hurting, but the sun was exploding in my head, explosion after explosion. My arms were being held down, and I was on the floor. There was a sharp sting in my hip, and I could feel the shudder become a shiver. Then darkness, and I was grateful. I felt that I was at home again, and that it was quiet.

I awakened in my bed, and all was quiet. Voices came to me in whispers, in rustles, like paper scurrying across a road chased by a breeze. My pillow was wet, I realized, but I was not sweating. It was evening, and a chill had descended upon the land.

I thought that I must have fallen asleep whilst reading my book. But I was outside in the living room when I was reading. I must have had a terrible nightmare. How strange it is to me now, that I had hoped that a nightmare had visited me. I got up on one elbow, and willed my legs off the bed. My feet touched wood, and a sense of relief washed over me.

I moved to the door of my room and walked into the living room. Someone had moved the furniture, lining up all the chairs against the two opposite walls. There was no furniture in between the two rows of chairs, and the people on each side sitting on the chairs seemed ready to do battle with the other. But no-one was speaking. There were sniffles as if many people had come down with the cold. There were many handkerchiefs, all white, like flags of surrender. I wanted to chase them all away, these people who were in my real nightmare; but instead I walked to an empty sofa, sat, drew my feet up, and stared at these people who were so awesomely quiet. They all seemed like cardboard cut-outs, moving their flat cardboard arms at the end of which were cardboard fingers holding real handkerchiefs. Then a loud

snort, cardboard fingers squeezing at cardboard nostrils. The pupils of their eyes were like black buttons on red backgrounds.

Someone stood over me. My cousin who came to get me, I think, and asked if I was okay.

I nodded, stupidly.

Then someone cried out loud, a loud rasping cry as if all the tears of the world were about to be unleashed upon the world. Many people moved towards me. They engulfed me, and I could not breathe. But I didn't mind. They were flesh and bone, after all. And they pressed their flesh and their bones against my numbness. Everyone was crying, except for my cousin with the car. There was a sweet, sickly smell in the air. It floated in that air which entered my nostrils like liquid. I smelled its sweetness even as I breathed it. The sickly-sweet liquid air filled up my lungs and set my heart to a new panic. My heart hammered wildly at the wall of my chest, as if it would set itself free from the pain that held it captive. Then merciful darkness dropped again.

Morning came like a surprise, packaged in orange and grey. Someone informed me that I had to bathe and dress and go with my brother and my cousins to bathe my father at the funeral parlour. These are my father's sister's sons, all seriously Islamic now, far away in Canada. I obeyed.

The Muadhin, the man who looked after the mosque that my father frequented and where he often led the prayers, was in attendance. He was there when we arrived, looking dark and sombre against the pristine white of the funeral parlour. My cousins did all the talking and greeting, in the Islamic fashion. They spoke in hushed tones, in the manner of conspirators. There were five of them and my brother, so we formed an impressive procession down the halls of the parlour. As we walked, the white yielded to more appropriate grey, and we were shown into a poorly lit, enclosed space. There was a table or a slab of concrete. On it was my father, covered in the same sheet that I had seen the doctor pull up to his neck. His face was grey, and there was stubble on the cheek that I had shaved not so long ago. I wanted to rush to the body and embrace it, but my feet were crucified to the floor. I tugged them loose, and they took a step backward.

The Muadhin reached below the sheet and removed my father's pyjamas. Then he pulled down the sheet to the waist, just below the navel. There were small grey hairs amongst the mostly black on my father's chest, still powerfully muscled. My father's hands were over the navel, one hand frozen in mid-air at the shock of death. The Muadhin urged us to chant specific Koranic verses, and everyone did so in whispers. I chant nothing since I understand nothing, but the rest of the equally

ignorant whispered away as if they were telling each other some grave secret. I wished I could pray, but my heart was as frozen as the body before me.

There were bowls of water and soap, and each person took a turn at wiping clean a part of the body. The Muadhin reached beneath the sheet and wiped clean my father's genitals, but not once could we see the private parts. He looked at me, and he understood my gratitude. Dignity was important, vital. It is a ritual for the living, all of this that we do with the dead. It makes us feel good to say that we are preparing the dead to meet its Maker. But the meeting would have happened already, wouldn't it? Or at least the journey half-made. The body without the soul is only so much dead meat. But we bathe away ritually in a final or farewell act of intimacy.

My brother, so very composed, put a towel into my hand. Without thinking, I soaked it in a bowl of water. I was given the honour—the honour of the eldest son maybe—to clean the face. I wiped the face clean, and then I was given the task of removing the stubble from my father's face. So, twice in as many days, I shaved him. The razor was the same. But now the skin was not supple, and he did not puff out his cheeks, and he did not crane his neck so that I could get beneath the chin. And he did not smile. But I found myself pulling the razor with the same care as I did yesterday morning, a lifetime away. I did not want to cut him. I did not want to hurt this man who was now beyond the world's hurt. And love. Now beyond the knowledge of my love.

I left the moustache, curiously darker now against the grey skin. Then I took the towel again to wipe off the streaks of lather, but I realized that I had not used soap. I wiped his face, his brow, smooth now. The final wiping over the face must have prized open his eyes slightly. His eyes, through the slits of his lids, were greenish-greyish and milky. I could not wrench my eyes from them. The Muadhin pressed them shut, index finger on one lid, thumb on the other. Again, he sees my gratitude. He knew.

We dressed the body in a white *kurta* , a loose, collarless shirt, and white pyjamas. Then I combed his hair, the way I thought he liked to have it combed: a part on the left, and the rest brushed neatly to the right. There was a slight mound of hair in front and to the right. It was always there when he was alive.

Chapter Seven

As I held Rose, I knew that I would have to do for Joey the same as I did for my father. Our last talk demanded that of our friendship. Rose was as still as if she was asleep, but when I looked at her face against my chest, her eyes were wide and blank. She looked the way Joey had looked when I saw him on the day that their son had died. There was a fury there that I knew well: fury at God, fury at Fate that would visit us with loss after loss after loss, tragedy after tragedy after tragedy. All so very unnecessary, all so very arbitrary. I understood her fury, and so it was like into a mirror that contained my face and Joey's, two faces with one fury. I understood Rose's fury and Joey's rage; I did not understand my own.

She saw me looking at her and took her head from off my chest. My shirt, wet from her tears, stuck to her face, and seemed to peel off like skin when she moved her head.

"Where's everyone, Rose?" I asked.

"I sent them away. I wanted to be alone. I am alone." She replied.

"You're not alone, Rose. You have your family, you have me."

She started crying again, this time without sound. The tears just came in a steady stream, and I felt stupid for having said anything.

She stood up, slowly: "No, I don't. I don't have my family. And I don't have you."

"Let me take you home Rose. You must get some rest, if that's possible. You must at least lie down for a while." And she was curiously acquiescent. I took her to my car and drove her to her parents' house. We did not talk in the car. She simply sat there, her feet drawn up and crossed beneath the car seat, her knees together and leaning towards the door, her hands folded upon her lap, her face turned away from me, her eyes looking unseeingly at the world outside.

When we arrived at her parents' house, a whole group of people came to the car to get her. They led her up the stairs. I recognized some of the faces I had seen before, but I tried not to make eye contact with anyone for fear that I would be drawn into conversation. And what would I have talked about? That Joey was my friend, that he was a good man who deserved more from life than the early deaths of his babies and an early death himself? How would I have said anything without sounding pretentious or cynical? Mostly, I did not want to speak with his in-laws,

not after what he had told me about their laughter. But when I headed back to my car, having seen members of her family take her to the top of the stairs, one of Rose's brothers had followed me out.

"Joey body at Charan's funeral parlour. You want to come and bathe he? We goin' tomorrow at two o'clock." Then he walked away, without waiting for my reply. And I was glad at not having to say anything. Any words would have released my anger, and I would have hit him. I drove to the campus to tell anyone I saw that Joey had died, but when I reached there, I turned around and headed for my mother's house. I ate and then I slept. The dream that I had gave me no rest.

It was evening, and I was returning from some sort of secret meeting where I had met a man of great courage and integrity, one that spoke with conviction and acted upon that conviction. He had a moustache that grew down to meet a short beard. He has a short Afro-cut,but long enough for the ends to be frizzy. He spoke with passion about freedom from tyranny, freedom to live and to die in one's bed rather than at the hands of a soldier or policeman. He spoke of loyalty to principles and of freedom of speech. And he spoke of dignity, of the right of upright man to live in peace with his neighbour. I was full of his words and his courage, both of which were known to the nation and to the government against which he spoke, a government that represented the true legacy of colonialism, tyranny begetting tyranny, cruelty yielding more cruelty, death giving birth to more death. But he was beyond speaking of the British and the brutality they had meted out to the entire region, to Africa, to India. Instead, he spoke and wrote and acted against those that took over, those that had school children singing songs of praise for the stewardship of Comrade Leader. He spoke out against those that put flags in the hands of these children and took away pens and pencils and books. And then they put guns in the arms of children and made them march to a national tune. And this was the dirge of my dream. But this man that I met as in a wakeful dream spoke out as did others that gathered to his side. And the misshapen thing that was called Comrade Leader grew afraid and gnashed his teeth in fear.

After the meeting at which this man spoke, I was walking home, full of words and noble intentions. Full of another man's courage. I was never so full of love for this torn country. It was dark, nearly twelve, but it was the kind of darkness that embraced rather than suffocated. There was the smell of frangipani blossoms in the air. Then I entered into a ring of yellow light cast by a street lamp, and was suddenly struck by the stink of sweat. I was surrounded by eight or nine men. They swore at me and at the good man with whose words my heart was full, then they swore at the party to which he belonged as one of the leaders. They swore at his courage and re-named it betrayal. The sweat was overbearing. I moved to get out of the circle they had formed, but the circle expanded, then closed in again more tightly. The ring of yellow light closed in with them, like a wedding ring shrinking by the light of the moon, cutting the blood supply to the wedding finger, the finger turning purple then black. The snarling and swearing

men had hands that held knives or their hands were knives, but the steel seemed unreal in the yellow light of the lamp. One of the men punched me in the stomach, and I double over with the pain, my throat filled with a sour taste.

Two of them held my arms and spread them wide as if they would have me fly or crucified. The sockets where arms met shoulders open their mouths and screamed. Another pushed my head down, and there was curious relief since I was straining to keep my head up, to watch them, to see another punch when it came, for I knew it would. But the relief was short-lived. I was bent double from the waist, my torso parallel to the ground. Someone grabbed my hair and yanked my head upward. I was still bent over. There were bodies without heads, and the grass was singing the dirge in tongues that I hardly knew. One man stood before me, but I could not see his face, for although my head was pulled upward, I could not see the full length of a man. He swung his right leg in a mawashigiri, a round house kick, and I took the trouble to admire the skill with which he executed that kick. Right leg swung round, the left foot pivoting like a dancer's feet. I felt the blow as if it were cushioned, surprised at the softness with which it landed, as if there was a pillow of air between my face and the foot. But my glasses flew off, and I felt my left eye close almost immediately. With my right seeing eye, I saw him dance again, right foot turning on the grass, left foot arching to my face. I felt and heard my nose break, and I could see no more with my right eye. There was a new and hostile darkness. I was blind. Then, just as suddenly as the sweat had replaced the scent of flowers, now the smell of blood replaced the scent of sweat. The men disappeared as swiftly as they had come, and, stumbling, I felt myself fall over the edge of the yellow light, which I could no longer see.

I was aware that I was bleeding profusely from the nose, and I cupped my hand to catch the blood, as if I could drink it again or else wash my face in it. The cupped hands ran over with blood, and I threw the blood away, setting my cupped hands again to catch more blood. This ritual of collection and discarding was done three times. I was surprised that I felt fear only after they had gone. I had fallen and my cheek was upon the grass. There was a song coming from the tongues of grass, but I could not make out the words. But it sounded for all the world like a song which contained the word danshikabu, the Arawak expression for "I love you."

The song expanded from one voice to a chorus of voices and from one harp to a symphony of lutes and harps and cellos and violins and trumpets. Then the music stopped as if halted in mid-note by some angry conductor, and I was left with the silent feeling of humiliation, not that I was beaten but that the fight was so unnecessarily uneven. The headless man with the deadly dancer's feet would have been enough. Somehow I knew that this dream contained the future as much as it was linked to the past and to the present. Dream and reality and the tenses were all a seamless cloth.

Chapter Eight

She sits for a long while in the breeze, in the sunlight. Her eyes are closed again, but I sense that she knows that I am watching her. She knows that she's being admired or desired. This role in which men see themselves as hunters and women as the hunted is sheer self-delusion. We are only hunters because women allow us to be so. They prescribe the role, and we assume it; then we imagine that it is our role by order of Nature. The other delusion is that we capture our prey; really, it is the prey, acting as prey, that decides to be caught. Only rarely is this true order changed. This insight arrives, but I am unwilling to accept it, since it will leave me weak. But she knows. She knows as surely as she knows grief and the sun that beams upon her face.

The sea is in a mood of repose; it is still to a mirror-like smoothness that I have seen before, but rarely. At times I have come here, drawn by some force that I never understood nor questioned. And I am drawn most often when the sea is at its violent majesty. It would vent its force on the seawall; and, meeting that historical grey resistance, would fly eight or ten feet upward, in a violent spray, like some livid god spitting at this land. But now it is as implacably calm as is it sometimes uncontrollably violent. I am sure that if I were to walk to the water's edge, I could see my face as I would in a mirror. But that prospect frightens me, strangely; as if such an act would be to reveal too much of myself to myself.

I want to break this reverie, and I do:

"It is time we go, now, Rose, don't you think? I wouldn't want your people to think that you been abducted or something like that."

She looks towards me, her head tilted sideways and upwards, so that one side of her face is awash with light, the other in shadow. Her face is split into halves, one side alight, the other dark, one side a smile, the other grim.

"Okay." She says simply.

By instinct, I put my hand out to help her up. She puts her hand in mine. It is dry and soft, and there is a suggestion of grit from the concrete upon which she was resting her hands. She raises herself up, and I help. I take her hand and look at it, brushing off the grit from her palm, softly, slowly. She smiles at my care, and I concentrate on the small pock-marks left there by the pressure of the hand on the

concrete of the seawall. I have never held her hands before, and I know that we have become closer. The discreet distance that was customary in the living room of her parents' house has been closed. I feel a delicious arousal, a thing like pain. But it is too bright, the air is too laden with salt, and I do not know if she is ready.

"Well, Your Brightness, are you ready? Take me back to my prison where they care for me like a patient."

Her voice is light with humour, but I knew that she was serious. The placing together of prison with patient (rather than inmate) was unconsidered, spontaneous, serious. But her tone was jocular. How remarkable we are: our mouths say one thing and our minds think something else. And in between mouth and mind, thought and language, the eyes leave us guessing.

"Don't worry, Rose. I could take you or bring you whenever you like."

"And I will come whenever you like, if you want the company, that is." My heart leaps at this admission, this admitted willingness to be caught.

"Tomorrow?"

"Sure. Why not?" Still, her tone is light, almost trivial. She stressed the "t" in "not" and let a puff of air escape her lips.

"Well, I could name you one dozen reasons why not. Do you want me to list them?" So, there, I think. I have left the door of the cage open for escape. But something in my mind revolts at this. Is it Joey of whom I am thinking? Is it about her? Is it just simple cowardice or is it conscience? Whose escape? Mine? Hers?

I want to say something to alleviate this nameless thing that I'm feeling, but the words will not come. We drive back to her parents' house in silence, and she opens the door before the car comes to a full stop. She gets off and then turns back, as if it were an afterthought:

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow, then. And thanks." She spoke too loudly, in the manner of those who have secrets to whisper, but who would, if people were around, speak loudly of anything other than what they want truly to say. And before I could reply, she was on her way into the yard. I do not look in, for I do not want to meet the stares of her family. I am guilty by thought. But by deed, not yet. Not yet.

Chapter Nine

I go home, grab something to eat, and sit down to read. But the words swim before my eyes and do not enter my mind. I think of her, and I think of the betrayal of Joey's friendship. If he could not forgive Rose's family for laughing at him, will he be able to forgive me for thinking of his wife in this way? I suspect that he would have forgiven me almost anything. But this? About this, I do not know.

My attempt at trying to get her to leave my mind borders on hysteria. I am angry with her and with myself. But why am I angry with her for promising what I desire? "The fault, Dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves..." Even lines from literature conspire against me. I am betrayed, I think, by the thing that lies closest to my heart. So, this is not only impending betrayal of Joey and of Rose, of what they shared; it is also self-betrayal.

With one part of my mind, I think these thoughts of betrayal and self-betrayal. I, who have boasted so often of not ever having betrayed a friend! With another part I think of tomorrow, of what I will say and do to further my closeness to her, to enact the betrayal. My mind torn to pieces, I cannot sleep. And I do not sleep because I may dream. And I remember the words of the poet Martin Carter: "I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world". But, like Conrad's Kurtz, I shall change the world by kicking it to pieces. Then I think that I take too much upon myself, that this is the height of arrogance, this idea that I can change a people's history by simply being close to them.

But changing the course of people's lives by betrayal and through self-indulgence is something that I have done before, even as a boy of seventeen. It was Christmas Eve, and the road of Rose Hall town was filled with people. A whole blessed chaos of many races, all making one noise, one music of human voices. And the language they spoke was one of the few things not decreed in this country. Such was the inner order within chaos, and this strange order was beyond politics and race and religion; beyond class and education. This was theirs forever, unfathomable and without price. And all of this, on this night especially, we all took for granted, like we take good health for granted until stricken with some ailment to remind us of our mortal aspect.

I have always hated the idea of too many people, too much sweat, too many voices raised in a West Indian clamour or in any clamour. But Christmas in Rose

Hall was the exception: the brushing against people was comforting. Rose Hall was small; it was bisected by the main road. There were buildings, mostly shops, on both sides. At Christmas, carols would emit from these shops, attracting costumers. And people of all colours and all religions would obey this compulsion to see their children's eyes light up with joy at some simple toy bought at Christmas. The coloured lights twinkled like so many fallen stars, and people wished upon these stars. The large glass windows were decorated with white drawings of Christmas trees, red and white Santa Claus, reindeer and bells. The art work, such as it was, was done with shaving cream. All so very foreign to us; yet we were all so at home.

All the surrounding villages emptied their houses, spilling whole families into the streets of Rose Hall at Christmas. One would think that the little, the children, would be in danger of being crushed or lost. Yet, there was no danger whatsoever. To be lost by some parent was to be found by some caring person who would find joy in the returning. There was no fear, only joy. Those who had not spoken to each other for the year would, through some miracle, forget that antagonism for the day and the night. All was spontaneous, all good. This was reprieve from the politics of division which tore the nation to pieces, pitting neighbour against neighbour, children against parents, friend against friend, brown against black, countryman against countryman.

It was on such a Christmas Eve night that I saw Verone. I had heard about her some weeks before; she was new to the town, and the boys were all full of praise at her beauty. She had got a job selling ice cream and soft drinks at one of the shops. That night I went into the shop. There was a crowd, but I was in no hurry; and stood at the back of a crowd waiting my turn to be served. I looked at her as I would look at a painting, carefully: her movements were economical, brisk, efficient but pleasant. And you could tell that all of this was not practiced, for she had yet learned to treat people like customers. I noticed the half-Chinese man at the cash register looking at her as well, looking for mistakes or wrong-doing, but she seemed above reproach, taking the orders, giving the drinks and cakes, collecting the money, taking it to the cash register, and returning with the change.

I was happy to be occupied in this manner, not minding losing my turn on several occasions. She was pretty, this girl. It was clear that she had several races running through her veins. I guessed at Portuguese, Black and Indian. And I was right. My turn came and I ordered a milk shake, giving her five dollars. She had delayed ever so slightly when serving me, looking at me for just too long a while. When she came back with my change, she gave me change for ten dollars. The mistake was the Chinese owner's, but she had not noticed the mistake either, and I

pointed out that she had given me too much change. She smiled at me, returned the change in triumph to the man. This was a signal of my honesty and hers. I saw the man smile widely, and he did not look at her again.

I took my milk shake into the crowd, sucking the sweet liquid through the straw, loving its cool down my throat. Every so often someone would slap me on the back, and the straw would scrape the roof of my mouth.

After that night I went to the shop on several occasions. She would wink at me when she was sure no-one was looking, and the price of my shake or my soft drink became progressively cheaper; then it became free. I went to the shop when I was sure there would be only few customers, and I would go alone. It would not do to have my friends find out about this, and I wanted to avoid being the centre of gossip. We'd talk flirtingly, as young people do. Then I asked her what time she got off work. The question had come to my lips suddenly, not from courage but from a moment of reckless abandon. Yet, as soon as I had asked it, I knew that she would not say no to whatever I asked.

"Nine o'clock."

"I'll come and take you home, okay?"

She nodded. And I did. She sat on the bar of my bicycle, and as I peddled, I allowed my right leg to move up and brush lightly against her buttock. She turned and looked at me, but there were no words. I enjoyed the smell of her powder, a smell I remember even now. I dropped my head so that my face touched her hair. It was soft, brown and knotted with curls. She put her hand on mine.

Verone stayed with her grandmother in a small house off the main road. The path leading to the house was not lit and it was of dirt. It was badly rutted so that riding on it in the night was not advisable. We got off the bike and walked down the dark path to her grandmother's green and white house. I knew it since our house was not far away though in a different section, separated by an invisible line that marked off the classes. Invisible, but as real and insurmountable as any tall, electrified fence.

The house, her language and her occupation marked her as someone from the working classes. But there was something in her fastidiousness and in her bearing that spoke of larger ambitions. She knew she was pretty, and she expected her looks to give her the things in life that most of us regard as valuable: a house, a husband, children, entry into the arena of the middle class. And I belonged to that class that could give her what she needed, thus her willingness to be touched by me in this fashion so early in the relationship. She had ambitions for herself, and she had

ambitions for me. She was, like me, seventeen. She miscalculated the male immaturity at that age, and so never counted on my readiness to use and abandon.

We walked into the darkness, and where it was thickest, I stopped and kissed her on the mouth. Then, just as I was pulling my head away, she grabbed the back of my head and forced it down to hers again. The aggression scared and excited me, at once. Then we broke off.

"When can I see you alone, Verone?" I asked, in the manner of a seventeen year old.

"I don't know. It depend when my grandmother go out."

"When?" I asked, more aggressively.

"Day after tomorrow. She goin' to New Amsterdam."

"Are you working day after tomorrow?"

"Yes, but I could ask for the aft'noon off, if you want."

"Yes. I'll come at two thirty."

Then she asked me that archaic question that has never failed to drive fear into my heart:

"What are your intentions?"

But I was now full of the hunter's passion for the kill, a passion unrefined for it was untempered by thought and connivance. To say that I threw caution to the wind would not be the truth, for I knew she was beyond saying no.

"What?" I asked harshly, "Look, Verone, don't be silly. Don't be crazy."

"I sorry. I'll wait for you. I'll wait for all the time you want me to wait."

"Okay. Day after tomorrow. Two thirty."

I walked with her for a little while, and when a red glow from one of the windows of the house broke into view, I turned back.

The next day was interminable. I did everything I could to let it pass by more quickly. I played games and went to the afternoon movies. Yet the day dragged by. The following day arrived overcast, and by twelve it started to rain heavily. This pleased me greatly, for rain provided some amount of cover as I rode to her house. But the rutted dirt road had become streams of thick mud, and riding was difficult. I stood on the peddles willing the bicycle to move forward. The wheels were clotted thick with mud and turned as the mud would have it turn.

The gate to the yard was of roughly-nailed wood. One hinge was about to come off, and the gate was held shut by a ring of worn rope. I stopped before the gate, uneasy and anxious. When I looked up, she was looking out from the upstairs window, her hands clasped beneath her chin. When she saw me look up, she smiled and beckoned me to come up. I leaned the bicycle against the side of the house,

making sure it was out of view from the muddy path that ran in front of the house. I climbed the shaky stairs, my knees wobbly from excitement, my heartbeat increasing with each rickety stair climbed.

When I got to the top stair to the small veranda, the round brass doorknob turned and the door opened inwardly, a small enough opening for me to see her hidden behind the door, small enough for me to enter and for her not to be seen. Through the spots on my glasses, I could see the details of her face and dress: the light brown freckles beneath powder—her powder was in the air—her brown-black-gold hair of curls as thick as plaits reaching to her neck, her dress light pink, round collar low to the top of where he breasts began. The dress fell sheer and full to her calves. The sleeve of the dress reached four inches or so along her arms, the fabric bunched and held there by elastic. There were light brown spots beneath her neck.

I was soaked, so that removing my clothes was less of an embarrassment than it would have been normally for a boy of my age. As we lay together, she said:

"I want to tell you something--"

"What? What do you want to tell me, Verone?" I asked almost gently.

"I never--you know?"

"No--what?" I pretended ignorance.

"Well, I never been with somebody before--you know?"

"That's good, Verone. I'm glad." I said, but this made me all the more nervous.

But as we lay there, with the rain beating upon the zinc roof, we seemed to be the only two people in all the world. We both felt shielded by the rain and by the sound it made on the roof.

She brought to our contact a kind of compassion that I felt but hardly understood at that time. She had given me a gift beyond her physical newness. And so we made love, awkwardly at first, then with a natural rhythm that I found mildly surprising. This was her first time, but it wasn't mine. Yet, I was to find that each time one makes love, it is the first time; but only when there is love. But here, there was only love from one direction.

We met in this surreptitious manner for two months; and in spite of my care to keep the relationship secret, the rumours started. I began to stay away from her, not even visiting the shop. When I passed it from work--for I had just started teaching at a primary school--I found myself riding faster. My cowardice did not even allow me to break the relationship off in some gentle way.

Then, one night, as I was going home from the cinema, I found her waiting for me. She was in the shadows, and just as I was about to ride by, she stepped out. She was running beside the bicycle, and a panic seized my heart. I swerved and rode

faster so that she was left behind. Then, more out of anger than sympathy, I turned the bicycle around and rode up to her.

"Hi," she said, almost as she would to a stranger. But even in the dark, I could see the anguish in her face.

"Hi, Verone." I said haltingly, making an effort to call her name. And I knew even then that I was about to be cruel, that I had been cruel and cowardly. The kind of cruelty and cowardice that even youth could not excuse.

"What do you want?"

"I never want nothin from you. I never ask you for nothin'. I only say that I gon wait for you as long as you want me to wait. That's all I want, for you to tell me not to wait for you because you ain't comin."

I felt more shame then than I had at any other time in my life. And I was angry with myself for feeling such shame.

"No, Verone. Don't wait. I can't meet you any more. I'm sorry, Verone."

"I ain't sorry, you know. I ain't sorry. I love you, but we too young. You too young, and you got a lot to do with your life. You can't be with somebody like me. I gon hold you back, and even now you feel shame because of me."

"I'm sorry, Verone. I--"

"No. That's okay. Pain is pain, and pain make to go away. I gon find somebody else. But I want you to do me a favour, just one small favour."

"What do you want, Verone?"

"Don't worry, is a small-small favour. Just tell me that you gon never forget me. Just tell me that sometimes you gon remember me. You can do that for me? I beggin' you to do this small thing for me." The tears were streaming down her cheeks, but her voice was strong and determined.

"I promise you, Verone. I promise not to forget you."

"Thanks. That's all I want from you." And she turned and walked away into the dark again.

"Verone!" I called after her, but she did not reply or turn back.

In this small town, nothing is kept secret for long. And soon it became known that Verone was moving from boyfriend to boyfriend, then from man to man. The last time I saw her was when I had returned to the town for a few days. She was sitting in a tiny shop, and I was walking past with some friends. She saw me, but did not wave or acknowledge my presence. I left my friends and went into the shop. She smiled widely at me, seeming genuinely pleased to see me. She had grown old beyond her twenty-four years, her features grown coarse, dark rings under her sunken eyes. Her dress was loose and there was a large smudge on the chest. The

curly hair into which I had buried my face was now greasy mass of knots, streaked already with grey. A child had her head buried in her lap.

"Hi, Verone," I said. "How you doin'?"

"Hi! I good. I deh."

"Is she your baby?"

"Yes. This one and the other three playing outside there in the sand. Three boys and a girl. She the smallest, this one here. She so pet up, you know."

I held out my hand to Verone, and she took it, holding it for a long while.

"You still got beautiful hands, you know. A doctor hands. I see you photo in the papers. You did win some big prize at the university. I so proud of you." Then she was quiet for a while, and I stood there awkwardly.

"Tell me something?"

"What?"

"You remember to remember me?"

"Yes, I do. I remember."

Then she squeezed my hands and let it go. And in that squeeze, I felt forgiveness, even as I saw pain in her eyes. I left her then, again. I have not seen her since.

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So I know that it is not arrogance to think that we can change people's history from our contact with them. No matter how brief that contact, no matter how insignificant our individual lives may be. Had I not kicked her very life to pieces?

And now I stand on the same threshold, but with another life at the other side of the door. Rose. It was at this moment that I missed Joey more than I had ever missed him. There was an ache in the centre of my heart; it wanted to get out, and I thought that my heart would rupture from the pressure.

Chapter Ten

I awakened from the dream of being beaten, and my body ached. There was a tiredness that seemed to enter my very soul. I wanted to stay in bed in my mother's house and wish all of this death away. My father. Joey's two children. And now, Joey. All of this death. All of this sadness. But even being in my mother's house gave me no peace. Even without pain and tiredness, there would have been no peace. For my presence here in this house reminded me of my promise to my father, that undertaken just hours before he died. "First, I want you to take care of your mother, okay?" "The second is that I don't want you to give up karate." Promises he had extracted and I had given. But as soon as he died, as soon as I could have willed my legs to movement, I left my mother's house for a flat of my own. And I never returned to karate. Thus was the pettiness of my revenge against my father for having died. And revenge against that heavenly Father, to whom I prayed so fervently, for having allowed him to die.

By the time I got up it was almost twelve, and my mother had placed some food on the table. She must have heard me get up. Or sensed it. She sensed also my need not to speak, as if she knew that my mind was too raw to be exposed to words. I looked at the plate of garbanzo beans--what we called channa--and pieces of fried plantain, golden and shiny from the still-hot oil. At the head of the table, she had set a knife and a fork on either side of the plate, as was her custom. The plate was centered perfectly on a table mat. Wilfully, ungratefully, I used my fingers. I was very hungry, but I could not bring myself to eat. I pick up each bean between my thumb and forefinger and, rather than lift my hand to my mouth, I bent my head to my hand. I placed each bean between my teeth, crushing it as if it were something upon which I needed to exact revenge. I must have eaten a dozen of the tiny brown beans, then felt too tired to eat any more.

She brought coffee, and I got up from the chair at the head of the table and moved to the other on the right hand. This gave me a good view of the yard outside through the wide tunnel of the living room. I looked at the sofa where my father had sat so often. It was of red leather. It was here that he would sit and read the newspapers. Then he'd fold the sheets and put them at the side of the sofa, take off his glasses, place his hands on the top of his head, fingers interlocked, elbows set

wide apart. I would always be surprised at the size of his arms, the heaviness of his chest. They made me feel safe but inadequate, for I have always felt that my arms were skinny. This, even though I had worked so hard at weights to increase their size. He would tilt his head up, close his eyes, and think. I have always wondered what went through his mind when he sat like this. The actions and posture were almost obviously ritual, but I was never privy to the thoughts. I wondered how much I have lost for not having asked.

There have been times when I have caught myself assuming the identical posture, in some kind of unconscious, perverse mimicry of his ritual. Whenever my mother sees me in that posture, she becomes upset, shouting at me to get my hand down.

"It's not good to do that," she'd say, "it's a cross!"

But I knew that it had nothing at all to do with me or with ill omen. She hated it because my father had done it. It reminded her of my father. And it reminded her that he was dead.

When I finished the coffee, I showered. I was revived somewhat after that, and left for the funeral home where Joey lay. It was a bright day, hot and lazy, and there were few cars on the road. Throughout the journey, I tried remembering my journey to give my father his final bath. I imagined that it would be a painful replay of that day, but I could recall no details of the drive, no matter how hard I tried.

Now there was a liquid quality to the road, as if everything was beginning to melt in the face of the sun. I arrived just before two o'clock, but there was no-one waiting as the Muadhin had waited for us at my father's final bath.

The funeral home where Joey lay was a drab affair of raw concrete. There was a great deal of noise: men from different rooms shouting or swearing for cloths and buckets, children running from the back room into the front room and then back again, laughing all the while in the manner of children at play. The noise was out of place, and I wondered for a moment whether I was in the right place. In the midst of this noise, I felt a loneliness descend upon me like a physical weight. My tiredness was returning although my body was refreshed, and the weariness entered my heart and took the form of dread for what I was about to witness in this place of death, this place where by some bizarre logic of human nature there was play and laughter rather than solemnity and tears.

I was aware that my shoes were filling up with water, and my skin crawled at the thought that this water could be coming from dead bodies being washed. But I continued to a back room which was not a room since it opened out into a small

space. And in the open, on a slab of raw concrete, lay Joey's prone body. One of his brothers-in-law held a hose. He was pressing together the end of the hose to increase the pressure since there was no nozzle. Two other fellows were turning the body so that the water could be directed at Joey's body which they had tilted onto its side. Then they let the body fall again with a hard thud. Children ran to see the body. They were pointing to Joey's genitals and laughing out loud. The men who were bathing Joey simply smiled. I felt the unpleasant sensation of sour rising to my throat, but I refused to vomit in front of Joey's in-laws.

But even more compelling than the revulsion I felt for them at inflicting this final indignity on my friend was the rage that rushed in a hot red flash to my head. The in-law with the hose noticed me, and he was smiling when I hit him. I saw his eyes widen with the hurt and shock as my fist connected with a delicious crunch upon his mouth. I hardly felt my hand hurt, hardly felt the power of the punch; but I felt a sense of joy at feeling his tooth loosen beneath my fist. His head jerked sideways, but his widened eyes were still on me as he fell.

"Get up!" I heard my voice say loudly, but I knew that I was not shouting. I wanted to hit him again. Then I saw the two other fellows who had been turning Joey's body move towards me. Yet, I felt no fear; instead, I felt this curious sense of relief that they were coming after me. I took two steps back to keep them in my vision; and when they knew that I was not going to move anymore, they stood still. Joey's stricken in-law was sitting up. He pulled his legs up into a triangle and pushed himself back, sliding on his behind, away from me. Between his torn and swollen lips he was making a sound that was somewhere between a whimper and a gurgle.

"You," I said to one of the other chaps in a voice that was so soft I hardly recognized it as mine, "Go and get some towels or cloth to cover him."

"And you, pick him up," I pointed to the in-law. "When you done, chase these children away."

And they moved quickly at my commands. Then I walked over to the in-law, and he cringed away from me. There was fear in his tear-filled eyes, and although I knew that those tears were from the blow, for himself rather than for Joey, they dissolved my anger.

"I ain't gon hit you, man. I just want to look at you face," I said, my face distorted into a smile.

I cupped his face in my hand, roughly.

"You'll live."

Then I spoke to him as I would to a child who was guilty of some transgression and who has just been spanked for it:

"Do you why I hit you, man? Do you?"

He nodded but said nothing.

"I hit you because you took dignity away from my friend. A hose, man? And he so exposed, man? And these children laughin' at he. Jesus, man! What's the matter with you, man. You ain't even think to cover he up? You not a stupid chap, so why do something so stupid? How would you like for somebody to treat you like a piece of dead meat when you time come, eh? How?"

And I saw the fear leave his red eyes, and I saw tears of shame well up in those eyes.

"Now, let we do this right, aright?"

But his head was down and his shoulders were shivering from his crying. Now he was crying for both himself and for Joey. And for Rose, maybe.

"Aright, bro?" I asked again.

"Mhmm," he responded.

"And another thing...you tell you two friends that no-one must know about this, okay? This is just between me and you. Agreed?"

"Yesh," he agreed again through his bloodied mouth.

We put a towel over Joey's private parts, and took more towels to wipe him off. Then we placed the body on a trolley and rolled him to another room where we dressed him in a white shirt, black trousers and black jacket. Then I tied a necktie around my neck, making sure to get the knot as neat as possible, took it off, then put it on Joey. I combed his hair as I had combed my father's. The hair was straight and black, strangely thick and alive. And all the while we were doing this, the absence of some kind of prayer made it all less than it was.

The funeral was to be at five, and we all left to ready ourselves. I went back to my apartment, got some clothes for the funeral, then drove to my mother's house to shower and dress. Somehow, however inadequate it was, I was struggling for atonement.

Chapter Eleven

But how will I atone for this thing that I know will be done? And do I need to atone? Is this something which is wrong? Is it not that she was now without a husband and me without a friend? And may not two separate isolations not find some relief in being together? Yet, must they share a bed in order that respite be found?

If I found that I was in love with her, then I do not think these questions would arise with such painful persistence. Is it just sex, and the violence that comes with that? As I asked myself before, is this compassion or exploitation? Or is it some perverse need to exact revenge on Joey's behalf, even as I betray our friendship? And what part of the blame should she assume, if any? Does she have these thoughts as she sleeps in a bed now empty of husband, as she lives a life empty of the laughter and tears of children?

Maybe I am going about the analysis in the wrong way. Suppose I begin with what I know rather than what I do not know. I know that I do not love her. And I know that she is not my friend in the way that Joey was my friend. I know that I never thought of her in this manner when Joey was alive, and that I now think of her in that way consistently. I know that she has almost welcomed the attention by what she had said when on the seawall. So, given these, who is the hunter, who the hunted? Is she too guilty of self-betrayal.

My mind goes round and round. I begin with what I do not know to get to what I need to know, and I end where I begin. Then I begin with what I know to make sense of what I do not understand, and I conclude with questions with which I started.

I decide that I must get off this carousel. Action! What I need is to move my body so that my mind can be still. It is still too early for me to get Rose, so I set off for the campus. I have no classes today, so that I think it best to seek out my group of university friends. I had not seen them very often after Joey's funeral, and even after classes I would leave immediately to see Rose. That was the time when there was that thing which I've lost and for which I now long: purity of motive.

As soon as I get to the gates of the university, I know that there was greater tension than that which drew itself over the campus and the country like a skin, like

a habit. This is a country of great tension at the best of times, a place where soldiers are stationed at the gates of the only university campus in the country to prevent "undesirable elements" from entering. This has been so for some seven years now, and there is no end in sight. People are muzzled by fear, and those that speak do so in whispers. Radio and newspapers are state-owned and controlled tightly, and what we hear and read are what we are allowed to hear and read. This, we are told, is to prevent our people from corruption spawned by Western countries to contaminate our people. It is as if there is no big world spinning outside this country. And even if there were this world, it seems to have forgotten us. A noose has been put around the conscience of this nation. And the air is thick with suspicion; it hums with rumour. In such an atmosphere, people are recruited for the price of bread, and life becomes cheap. Involuntarily, I remember the man in my dream who did not appear in my dream, but whom I met in that dream. I hope with the illogic of the desperate or foolish that he will come. And when he comes, if he comes, I hope with even greater desperation that he will he be able to save us from this oppression and deprivation which is more or less than starvation of the soul.

I am aware that we began in that murderous corruption that cannot be called merely colonialism. We began with murder, in the massive killing off of our indigenous peoples, then the other horrors of slavery and indenturship began. It was if they found a precious and fecund egg, then proceeded to suck the very life out of it. Then, they sought to remake it in a fashion that would yield profit. So they filled it with other kinds of meat--African, poor Whites, Indians, Portuguese, Indians, Chinese--all made to be incompatible, all rotting from the lack of the air of freedom, from being entombed, from the departure or transformation of gods. Each was made to perceive the other as the enemy, and every impulse for the creation of society was confounded. We were our brother's keeper only if that brother was of the same skin. In this country, the major racial players were the people of African descent and those of Indian descent.

The British had left, and they had left us shipwrecked and under the hammer of local tyranny. Political affiliation depended mostly on racial affiliation. And this was one of the legacies of the British here: leaders of what are called Indians pitting themselves against what are called Africans. Only few, self-interest uppermost in mind, exited one racial solitude to enter that of another. The ruling party, lead by Comrade Leader, was made up almost exclusively of brothers of African descent. This is a nation, then, that was cannibalizing itself, eating its own entrails. And this self-destructive enterprise, encouraged by local political generals, saw much killing

and rape and burning and looting, each group out to extinguish the other. But the only victors were those in power, those whose foreign bank accounts got fatter and fatter with each deprivation of the working people of this country, the victims, many of whom were made of participate in their own deprivation.

The regular soldiers, armed only with pistols, at the entrance of the university knew me well; I was never stopped, and my car never searched. But now there were different soldiers, and their postures were more rigid from their newness and from their tension. The seams of their uniforms are starched and the seams are razor sharp. There are four of them now; there used to be two in shifts of five hours each. In addition to sidearms, they each carry Self-Loading, semi-automatic rifles, aid from Cuba. And they stood in the self-arrogant posture of the armed when they confront the unarmed. One of the four raps loudly on the top of my car and orders me out:

"Get out the car!"

"Good day, comrade," I say in my most relaxed and affable voice. Since the government has assumed the new mantle of socialism, everyone is to be called comrade. The directive came from on high in official memos to the university, to schools, and to all sectors, public and private.

I get out of the car. My stomach churns with the memory of my dream of being beaten.

"Come here!" He orders, in the voice of one who carries a gun.

I walk around the back of the car and approach him.

"That's far enough!" He barks, his right hand held up, his white palm flashing in the sun.

I stop in mid-stride. Then I drag my back foot forward to get them together.

My knees feel weak, but I make an effort not to show fear. Fear feeds arrogance. Yet, there is in me this self-loathing because, though I may not show fear, I feel it.

He walks slowly to up to me, and there is a smile playing upon his lips. I look into his eyes, just for a second; but it was enough to see the eyes become dark with rage at being looked into. I know that I must say something before he gets to me, but my mind draws a blank.

"Lawd, Comrade. You new here? The other comrades who were here knew me well-" I hear myself say.

He comes right up to me, his face almost touching mine, and I look at his boots. They are bulbed to perfection, reflecting the sun like a single star.

"Comrade, you need to show more respect. You understan', Comrade. You understan' what I tellin you?"

"Yes, Comrade. I understand perfectly."

"Now get back into that car and go 'bout you business."

I get back into the car and make sure that I take off ever so gently. I do not want to raise any dust that might dull the boots or put grime upon the faces of the uniformed comrades at the gate.

On my way in I notice that there are more soldiers on the campus than usual. They are everywhere, walking abreast in threes and fours. They all carried SLRs. I notice that students and lecturers move out of their way to let them pass. Might is right, after all.

I see my clutch of friends on the pavement and I walk quickly towards them.

"Hey, man! Whatzup?" asked David.

"Yeah, man! You as scarce as potatoes in this country." I smile at the reference to the banning of potatoes by the government. Potatoes, we were told is "white people food;" so that it was unsuitable for our taste. The simple pleasures of apples, grapes and chocolates--customarily, to be had only at Christmas--were taken away from the ordinary folk. This, while the Leader's pigs were made fat on apples and kept cool in air-conditioned stalls. In addition to these, flour was scarce, tomato paste was banned, as was canned sardines and a host of other canned items.

"Nothin' much, man! I've been busy, you know?"

"Yes, we know. How is Joey's wife doing? God, I can hardly imagine the pain that she must be going through," says Deepa.

"As good as can be expected, I suppose," I respond, unwilling to continue with this conversation.

"Listen, guys. What's going on with the soldiers. Do we have new students who are wearing uniforms? I just got stopped at the gate."

"Where have you been, bro?" asks Shirley, "Elections are due in one week, and the government has beefed up security in case of trouble."

The Youth Wings of the two major National Parties were contesting the elections for the student council. It was only slightly more free and just as fair as the National Elections. The student Council was itself a sham, for only people who had the university's approval could contest, and the council simply carried out the instructions of the government-appointed vice-chancellor who in turn carried out the instructions of the Board of Governors which was made up of government ministers, their wives and their relatives.

"And, dear boy, people have been asking for you."

"Who?" I ask.

"No less than Comrade Lewis."

Arnold Lewis was an army man of about forty-six who headed the Youth Wing of the government party. He was the top goon on the campus. I had never met him, and I did not know that he had even heard of me.

"What does Lewis want with me?"

"We don't know, man. But it sounded important, whatever it is. Maybe Comrade Lewis wants you to take over the running of the Wing. Maybe they have you marked for the next Comrade Leader."

Shirley: "Hey, that's not funny, David. You could get us all into a heap of trouble with that kind of talk."

David: "I was just kiddin', Shirley. Just~"

Shirley: "Well stop it. Stop it now."

"Okay, you two. That's enough. Lewis can find me if he wants to badly enough."

"Walk softly, man," warns Deepa.

"But don't carry a big stick, bro." adds David.

"Do we have classes tomorrow?" I ask.

"Of course, old chap," says David affecting a British accent

"But don't bother to carry a big stick, bro. Sticks and stones don't bother people that got guns." adds David.

"Do we have classes tomorrow?" I ask.

"Of course, old chap," says David continuing with his parody of an British accent, "we have the class of none other than Professor Bill Rhodes. The Modern Novel, what! Will you condescend to attend, dear boy? You've only attended two classes for the semester. This will not do, not a jot!"

"Yes, man. I comin' tomorrow. For now, I bid thee farewell!" I reply.

"See you later." They all say in chorus.

In the short walk back to the car, my anxiety at seeing Rose returns. I want it to go away. Too great anxiety does not make for good performance, not oral, not physical.

Chapter Twelve

I drive out of the campus slowly, making sure to wave to the new soldiers on my way out. I do not quicken my pace as I drive through the gates and onto the long stretch of narrow road which links the campus to the main road. I do not want to give the soldiers the impression that I am running away from something, that I am guilty of something, or that I am afraid. Also, I need to think about what I shall say to Rose, what words to use to make an awkward situation less so. I am also preoccupied with the idea that Arnold Lewis was asking to see me. Like the party he served, Lewis was ruthless and violent. He belonged to the army, and he had been given leave to do some course or the other. But everyone on campus knew that he was there to coordinate the government wing of the party on campus, and to listen for and silent any opposition voices. I could not think of any reason why he should want to see me. I wasn't important enough or vocal enough. The one thing I did know was that he did not want to meet me for my own well-being.

Half way between the main road and the university gates, I turn off onto the unpaved red road that leads to Rose's parents' house. In the rear-view mirror, I see plumes of red dust raise up, hiding from view the road over which I have just travelled. In the rear-view mirror, I catch a glimpse of my left eye; curiously, it holds my attention. It seems angry, this red eye in the mirror. I tug my sight away from it and concentrate on the red road which lies ahead, the road that leads to Rose. The side of the road is the colour of rust where the red dust has covered the grass.

I pull off to the side of the road, and I see her at the upstairs window. She was waiting. I wave at her airily, more for the benefit of her family than for her. I remember the first time I saw her, feeling more than the same nervousness. I say hello to the group of people downstairs, and it is only then that it occurs to me that every time I visit Rose, they are always there, the same number, in that same position as if in a huddle, as if they were props in a play in which Rose and I were the main actors. By the time I get to up the stairs and to the door, she has already opened it and is waiting. She smiles, opens the door more widely, and stands aside for me to enter. Although it is almost five thirty, it is still hot. The inside of the house is cool, and she seems quite unaffected by the heat.

The change in the nature of our relationship is immediately obvious. She says nothing, but motions me to the sofa. I sit, and she sits beside me. She is much closer than normal, her right thigh just brushing mine; but her body is drawn away from me so that she may look into my face. Her silence and the tension in her neck make me uneasy, increasing my already high level of anxiety. I want to tell her about my feelings of guilt, that I feel as if I'm betraying Joey by being with her in this way, by having her sit so closely, by thinking of her in the way that I do.

"Listen, Rose~"

"What?"

But I say instead: "~I'm sorry if I kept you waiting. It's just that~"

"That's no problem. As soon as you left yesterday, I realised that we had not arranged a time."

I do not say I had realised that omission even before she had got out of the car, that I had kept quiet deliberately, and that I had meant for us to meet in the evening. I do not say that I knew she would be waiting, for I knew that she would be at the window even before I saw her. I knew, and I despised myself for having known.

"It's just that I had to go to the campus. I had to meet some people." And in my tone and in the repetition of the words with which I started my sentence, there was reprimand at being interrupted in mid-sentence.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you. I have too much on my mind, you know."

The ready apology and the quickness with which she responded to the reprimand make me relax somewhat.

"Yes. But I had to go. And it was a good thing that I went too. The campus is as tense as a drum. Elections..selections! There were even new soldiers posted at the gate. In fact, they are all around the campus. They stopped me at the gate."

"You didn't do or say anything stupid, did you? I knew that you'd be safe once Joey was around. He tended to calm you down. He calmed everyone down. He always said that you had a violent streak in you. It always seemed to surprise him that someone with so much discipline in his studies could be so ill-disciplined otherwise. And he said that it would get you into hot water someday. I know you hit my brother; you know."

"What?" My instinct is to deny, but she put her finger to her lips.

"Don't worry, I'm not accusing you of anything. He is very thoughtless sometimes. He probably looked for it, and I don't want to know the details. But

when he came home with his mouth all busted up, I asked him. I told him that I wanted the truth, and he told me that you hit him."

Thoughtless? All of you were thoughtless when you laughed or smiled or were silent when Joey was crawling to the bathroom. Dying on his way to the bathroom. I can feel my ire raise, but I make a conscious effort to hold it in check. Not yet. Not yet.

"Well, yes. At the time, I thought that he deserved to be horse-whipped. And I was on hand to do it."

"So, what did you do when they stopped you on the campus? Did you punch them?" She was laughing at me, but it was not unpleasant.

"Look, Rose. Why don't you invite me out for supper at some nice restaurant? We could continue the conversation there, if you like."

"That's great. I'd like that. I haven't gone to a restaurant in goodness knows how long. But is this not a reversal of roles? Why should I invite you and not you me?

"Simple. You're the wealthy--"

"--widow?"

"Look, Rose! If you're in a bad mood, I'll leave and return some other day. I'm not in the mood for people to second guess me. And I do not like it. People think they can get into my head and read to their heart's delight, but they're always wrong. Always. I was about to say that you're the wealthy person around here."

“I'm sorry. I don't understand why I'm like this today. I couldn't sleep last night, I—”

"Would you come if I invited you to dinner?” I asked, a bit too aggressively.

"No, I'll invite you. I insist. And I'm sorry again."

She sees me relax again at the apology, and I wonder if she's playing a game with my mood, playing me like a violin.

"Can you give me a second? I'll go tell them that I've asked you to take me for a drive." I nod, imagining her talking to the huddle of props downstairs. She is prepared to lie or to tell a half-truth: the first step in those who would be conspirators or lovers.

She takes more than five minutes, and when she returns her hair is brushed neatly, the curls falling around her neck. She has refreshed her lipstick also. She walks back to me slowly, wanting to be admired, knowing that I will admire.

"You look good, I said," But, having said it, I regretted it. I gave too much away. I am too anxious. Yet she does not appear affected by it, smiling as she does at my appreciation.

In the car, I bring up Joey again:

"Did he really say that? That I have a violent streak?"

"Who? Joey? Yes, he did. And even that had a touch of admiration when he said it."

"And you? Do you admire such a tendency?"

"I don't know. I've never encountered it. Joey was very gentle. Always, through everything. I have never known anything else but that gentleness. The only time Joey was violent, I think, was when he was quiet. Then, he did violence to himself. I suppose I will decide if I meet violence, on how it's done and why it's done. And maybe to whom it's done. Then I'll see how to respond to it."

"Do you really think that we choose how to respond to violence, Rose?"

"I don't know. That's the point. isn't it? I don't know how or if I'll be able to if and when I encounter it."

"God, you sound more academic than most academics I know. All of it is so abstract that we lose touch with the physical world around us. And when we lose touch with something we tend to destroy it."

"Yet you choose to be in academics, in this world that you see as abstract?"

"Yes. But I fancy myself different. I think that I try to ground academic pursuit in fleshly life--the life of man as social animal."

"Is that why you're prone to violence?"

"That's not what I said. That's what you said or what Joey said. And that's what you believe. There are two things here: one, I am only a fledgling academic; people like Dr. Ricky are real academics. I can only hope to be like him. And two, grounding scholarship to social and individual life does not translate to violence."

"I think Joey was right. You'll be put to the test."

"Not if I can help it. I don't like getting hurt any more than anybody else, you know."

"But so far it's not a case of you getting hurt. It's a case of you inflicting the hurt."

"Do you think I'll hurt you?"

"Yes."

"Are you kidding me? What a thing to say!"

"I'm kidding. Well, I'm half-kidding anyway. I think you're beginning to have the ability to hurt me, though not physically."

We arrive at the Tropicana Hotel. It is a place that I thought of that we should come. It is known for good food, for its quiet lounge, and it has rooms. Also, I am not known here, so there is little danger of running into people with whom I am or she is acquainted. How easily this compulsion to be secretive came to me. This secrecy seems necessary, but I do not know why it should be so.

I am glad also that we've arrived, for it gives me a chance to think about our conversation about violence. I really meant it when I talked about making things less abstract. I wonder if it ever occurred to Rose that I was talking about sex, about violence in sex, even as she was talking about other kinds of violence. Sex is never abstract. Violence is never abstract. We might as well have been speaking different languages, and maybe we were.

Once again, there arises this distinction, this contradiction, between what we say and what we think. There is much more here than different languages or careless use of language. It is as if we each live behind a seawall, hidden from the whole ocean of humanity, with each part of ourselves padlocked in a different house. So that we say one thing, think another, feel another, and do something else. Only rarely do actions, thoughts, words and feelings meet, breaking free of house and seawall, so that each part of self meets the other and all as one reach out to that large body of humanity. When this breakage and reassembly occurs, a saint or art is born. And these last only moments.

I suggest to Rose that we go to the lounge for a drink before dinner, and she agrees. The place is small and dim, and I am pleased by the intimacy of it. We order a glass of wine for Rose and a rum and coke for me.

"Do you really believe I could do you violence, Rose?"

"Not in the ordinary way, but you can or may."

"How?"

"Ah c'mon," she says, "don't try to seem naive. It just doesn't work for you. You know very well what I mean."

"So why don't you say it, Rose? Why can't we be honest here, in this place, the two of us--alone."

"Because we are not alone. We've never been alone, and maybe we'll never be alone."

"Joey?"

"Yes."

"So what do you plan to do about this? Keep it all bottled up inside?"

"What do you want to do about this? Don't leave it up to me alone. That's not fair to me...or to you."

"What do I want to do? What do I want?" I ask quietly, looking into my drink. And this is silly, because I know what I want. I know what I want. My acting is exactly that: acting, a lie. And the lie that she told to her family signifies that she knows as well. But she wants confession, as if confession would dispel the doubts, would answer the questions. God, how we need to hear words! How we need to speak them.

"Why don't you tell me what you're feeling?" She asks gently, reaching her right hand across the table, palm up, like someone offering or demanding. I take her hand in my left, and again am surprised by its softness. The palm of her hand seems yellow in this dim light, and I use my right hand to turn her hand palm down into mine. My hands enclose hers, and she places her left hand over mine. I am aware of the bartender's eyes, and I hate the intrusion. There is enough between us without him trying to enter this as well.

"Tell me," she insists, "and don't lie to me--please."

"I don't lie. I--"

"We all lie. We either lie outright or we lie by omission, by not saying what we feel or think."

We call the politicians hypocrites, but theirs is an easily understood hypocrisy. The greater and more complex hypocrisy is the one we ordinary people live every day. Lies. Saying one thing, feeling another, thinking another, doing yet another. The major difference between politicians and us is consequence: the consequence of our hypocrisy is that individuals get damaged. The lies of politicians damage entire nations. They confound the world in chunks; we do so by morsels.

"I have never betrayed a friend, Rose. Never."

"And you feel that by being with me, by holding my hand, you're betraying Joey? Is that what you feel?"

"I don't know. That's the problem; it's that I do not know. Do you? Do you feel as if you're betraying Joey?"

"You speak as if Joey were here. Joey's dead. And I don't mean to sound callous, in case that's what you're thinking. But he is. I loved him, and when he was alive there could have been no-one else. Not even you. He was my husband." She whispered the last sentence.

"But you've just said that we've never been alone. That maybe we never shall be alone. Is he really dead? Joey is alive in my mind. In yours."

"No. The memory of Joey is alive in my mind. That's why we have never been alone and never will. We can run from people, but we cannot run from memories. They are much more formidable than people, you know. No, Joey is dead. My pain at the loss--all the losses--is not less because I say this--" There are tears now, finally.

"I want to make love to you--" The words come out with a life of their own. I did not mean to say them. But having said them, I feel a strange sense of liberation descend upon me, relieving this paralysis that has afflicted me for these weeks. I move from the chair opposite hers and sit on the one to her right. I am closer now, my knees pressing hard against hers. I can feel the hunger rise in me, like a craving for food.

I am startled by the absence of shock on her tear-stained face. It is calm and beautiful, dark and glistening in the soft light. She takes her right hand from my clasp, and touches my face with her full palm.

"God, you're a beautiful man."

The temptation is to make a fool of myself, to mock myself by mocking what she has just said. I want to say that I'm also intelligent, fast, strong, articulate--But I say nothing. And it is well that I am quiet. Her hand is cool and moist on my hot face.

"I'll order another drink. I need it." She nods.

I get up and walk over to the bar. I am surprised by the heaviness of my feet; they drag on the carpet.

"Give us another round, please."

But the bartender does not move. He knows what I am about to ask even before I have asked it.

"And I want a room."

"Sure. I'll get you the drinks, then you can pick up the keys from me when you're ready to pay." He too is expert in this subterfuge, this secrecy.

"Hey, thanks, man."

"No problem," he says, simply.

I take the drinks over to the table, sitting again on her right.

"I'll tell you what I hate. I hate this hiding. Why are we hiding? Can you tell me that?" she asks.

"Because people will rush to judge if they knew. They will judge you and they'll judge me. I will be the one who betrayed a friend; you'll be the one who betrayed a husband, even though he is gone. We both lose."

"But we have judged ourselves, haven't we, by being secretive? We have condemned ourselves, haven't we?"

"I don't know. I have come to no conclusions. All I know is that people come together for a moment, then they go apart, looking for another moment."

"So there is no hope of people having a life-long relationship? I can't believe that."

"There can be. But then the moment remains the moment. Like love. People meet and fall in love. There is the passion, desperate passion. Then they may get married, but the moment is gone and is replaced by another moment, another type of togetherness, another reason for it. Children, maybe. Financial security, maybe. Or habit. Maybe just cowardice. Sometimes I think it's like grasping a handful of water. You think you have it, but you find that there is nothing there--but your hands are wet."

"Is that what you feel for me? What is in this moment for you?"

Everything depends on this answer, I know. All would be lost if there is an argument. This is not the time for arguments. Not now. I take my time to respond.

"This moment for me is a moment of togetherness. Me and you. The pain we've been through. You more, much more, than me. It's a moment that can be like love, like comfort."

"But not love, right? You can't say with any honesty that you love me."

"No. I can't. Not yet."

"Thank you for not lying. If you had lied, I would have left right now. I would never have seen you again. I--women--feel desire too, you know. This is something that men have a problem believing. But we do."

"Rose?"

"Yes"

"Let's go--"

"I said yes."

"I'll pay for the drinks."

I leave for the counter again to pay for the drinks and the room, and to collect the keys. The bartender says nothing, and I do not look into his eyes. I turn, then realise that I do not know the way up to the rooms. I turn back to him:

"Listen, bro, where--"

"Use the back entrance. It's more private. Go up the stairs to the second floor."

I return to the table and, still standing, I take her by the hand. She gets up, and we walk to the back entrance. To go up the stairs meant going outside. It is already dark, and a slight rain has started. It is fresh and there is a sense that we are hidden from all the world. There is the scent of blossoms from the flower pots hanging from the side of the wooden stairs. Small romance in a place friendly to sex but hostile to romance. But we do not delay, walking quickly to the stairs, up two flights, and walk in through the door. I look at the key: 209. We walk past some doors, our feet sticking to the cheap linoleum in the hall. 206, 207, 208. 209. I try the key, and the lock turns willingly, but with a loud clack. We go in and I close the door behind us. We do not turn the light on, but it is bright enough to make out the bare furnishing. A bed. A dresser with a small mirror. A single chair. Her face glows in the slight light, and I draw her to me, kissing her softly, then hard on the lips. She responds to my passion, her hand pressing into the small of my back.

We can hear the rain outside in a hush. Then harder, like the rush of waves. To the sound of rain, in a sordid little room, a dim light seeping through drawn curtains, we make love.

ROSE 3 – Passion and Compassion

When we made love, it was like a dream. Not in the sense of something surreal or wonderful, but in the sense of being in two places at the same time. Like being awake and asleep, like being in the present and the past at once. So that when we made love, it was as if I was making love with a man and with a memory, with this man, my husband's friend, and with my husband. I know I cannot tell this to the man who is lying beside me, for he will be hurt by this, hurt by his inability to understand. Already, his hunger satiated, I can sense the guilt creep stealthily into his mind, placing its paw prints upon his face.

I look into his face and see my own hurt and guilt mirrored, as if he were me and me him. I find his halting love-making touching, as if he were new or hesitant, as if I were new. But I am and am not new, and this may be understood with instinct but not with intellect. I enjoy the tenderness with which he makes love to me, but I wish I could feel it was less practiced, less deliberate. I know this will not last, that this tender love-making will give way to roughness, even violence, that there will come a time when he will draw blood with his teeth biting into the skin of my shoulder, that he will tear at my thighs with his nails.

I know this and think that, in knowing, I'm prepared for it.

The only time I stop him during our love-making is when he tries to kiss my breast. I cannot let him do that. It reminds me too much of the children who suckled at these breasts and who will suckle there no more. My babies, taken by some cruel force. That took my husband's life, and my own life that I shared with him. By being here at this time, in this place with this man, with my husband's friend, I am embarking on another life. But I know that this will not lead to any birth. This will lead only to abortion. And yet, I go ahead with this futility. I go willingly, half-leading, half-led. My heart reaches out for this man who lies with me, his sweat mingled with mine. It is not with love that I reach out, but something more or something less: the simple longing to comfort, and to be comforted by embracing. Yes, I know that this will not lead to birth, like I know that his tenderness will not last.

I cannot tell him nor any man these things. How does a woman explain to a man what goes on in her mind when she is pregnant, when she has given birth? I remember looking at my own body become a stranger to me. The swelling and the bulging, the stretch marks, some of which I still carry today. The distending. Then, after months, after I have got to know the stranger as me, I give birth and things change again, and I am left deflated, my skin loose and ill-fitting on my body. I can explain it to myself, but I think the image that I use is too silly. It is as if my body were a house, new and unlived in. Then I become pregnant, and it is as if a whole family has moved into the house, making it a home. A home with children and parents and toys. Toys in the bedroom, on beds, on the stairs. A home with stains on towels and sheets, with smells and noises, a real place, where people live.

After I give birth, the people move out, and all is quiet. All that is left is a building, a shell. And there may be renovations and paint to seal the cracks and cover the stains. Preparations for new occupants. But, in between the leaving and the entry, the house is left alone without the occupants that gave it meaning. It is then that the sense of dilapidation strikes, a decay that can come only with aloneness. There are no voices, no cries and laughter, no sounds of praise or admonition, only echoes of voices, wind that blows through empty rooms, rushing through windows left open, bare without curtains. And the house has only a memory of what it was and a knowledge of what it will never be again. It is not like the onset of age, for time is the enemy then. It is the arrival of strangers; event is the enemy. Maybe I will speak to him of these things by speaking of age and aging, but he is as yet young, and I could sense his feeling of being immortal and

invulnerable. So these thoughts will have to remain in my mind, this pain within the walls of my heart. I will never see him old.

I do not mean to say that there was no comfort in the first child outside my body. There was. I loved my daughter with an intensity that surprised me. The stranger that I was to myself found companionship in this tiny stranger. And when she died, I was reduced to ashes. The world was a pyre, and each subsequent unwilling love-making with Joey was the fire that set me to burning. I hated it, yet I longed to be held. But my husband could not share that fire which consumed me; he had his own demons, lighting their own fires which consumed his heart like a sacrifice.

When she died, I could let no-one man kiss my breasts nor any subsequent child suckle at them. I look at my dark brown breasts, collapsing now, even though I am young. There are lines beneath the purplish-brown nipples, white lines like worms that mark the arrival and departure of my two children, that mark the absence of my husband's awkward groping hands.

So that the woman that lies here with this man is me and not me. I am again a stranger to myself. There is the me that is alien, and there is the stranger that I know. I want to talk to him. The words are screeching in my head, but they retreat from my mouth. I want to turn away from him, so that he does not see the tangle of emotions in my face, as I see them in his. But I do not have the courage to turn away, to wound. Instead, I cup his beautiful face in my palms. I kiss him instead on the cheek, and he smiles at my reassurance. I place my head upon his breast so that he does not see the tears. The tears mingle with the sweat on his chest. With one ear I hear the rapid beating of his heart; with the other, I hear the weary creak of the overhead fan. They both meet in my head, and mingle with the confusion of unuttered words. I have lied, and I know I will lie again.

Chapter Thirteen

Our passion spent, she lay in my arms. All is quiet, and we are both unwilling to speak. I want to tell her that it is a wonderful thing, this closeness I feel to her. I want to say that I enjoyed the surprise that she was so inexperienced. But I say nothing, for that would have brought back Joey and the two children. I just let the time drift by slowly. The moment. I wanted to prolong the moment; for though we may make love again, this moment will be lost forever. Lying there, it suddenly occurs to me that it was she who extended compassion to me. It was not love or lust that brought her to this; it was compassion. I wonder why it has taken me so long to see this, that all my visits to her was so that she may comfort me. She had been through the pain, the fire; I had stood at the fire's edge. All this time, I had thought it the other way round, that I had been her source of comfort. And on this night and in this room, my dead friend's wife in my arms, I feel shame. The moment has come and has gone.

A tiredness drifts into my bones, and I can feel myself drawn into half sleep. Yet, with that tiredness comes a most delicious sense of invulnerability. Joy. It is joy that I feel. And the joy that I feel now is more intense because of the shame that I felt only seconds before. Behind my closed lid I could hear her soft breathing, as close as a pulse. I drift off to sleep, but I know that I am dreaming.

The dream comes again, as I knew it would, even in the daze of my waking. This dream is linked to the first but is much different. The first was like sitting in a movie house looking at oneself on the screen. This dream is shown and narrated to me as in a documentary film. The picture is clear as are the opening credits, but the narrator is hidden behind a strange haze fallen from the roof of heaven. The voice is baritone, clear yet muffled; it is inside my head and outside of it, simultaneously. So that I hear it and sense it at the same time. Yet my squinting eye cannot capture the shape of the teller of my dream.

The voice from within and without my head from this narrator, who was neither solid nor liquid, says:

A man will play a song on the radio. He is a radio announcer who speaks in the language that people of this land understand. His words have been distilled through the history of this land of many waters, this place of varied landscape which you love and despise, which you call home and which will never leave you, but which you will leave. The man will play a song by Robert Nesta Marley and Peter Tosh: "Get Up, Stand Up!" But Bob Marley's music is

banned in this West Indian country. Minutes after the song ends, a truck load of soldiers will pour themselves onto the radio station. They will beat the radio announcer of the folk leaving his face raw, puffed and bloody. His clothes in tatters, his heart will beat like a frantic bird within the cage of his breast. It will beat a frantic song of departure; a new flight to survive.

He will crawl a mile through thorns, through mud. Through a valley of shadow, he will crawl. And this announcer will arrive at your door and knock thrice with his crushed knuckles. And although you do not know him now, you will know him well; but on that night you will not know him. You will address him as if he were a stranger at your gate. But he will give his name that you knew and you will by that means know him, though the battered person before you will look like no-one should.

You will take him into your house and have him sit, and you will wash his wounds with a towel and with warm water that will turn quickly the colour of blood. But his wounds will be beyond your healing, so that you will take him to an hospital where you have seen already anger and grief, tears and death.

The announcer will not be able to answer though many are the questions you ask. His will be baptism by silence, by blood. He will be in one person all of the oppressed and afflicted, the lamb to the slaughter, dumb before those who kill and maim. His mouth will be wounded beyond words, his heart torn beyond the telling. The voice of the folk in this manner will be muzzled, a nation choking on its own blood.

You will take him to this hospital that you know and he will be attended to by doctors. And as you wait for the announcer, four men will arrive, walking in the rhythm of those who are of the cavalry. Their faces will be different, but the mask they wear on their policemen's badges will be the same. One walking horseman will remain like pestilence to guard the man who was the announcer before they took his words away. Yet, be comforted. For you two shall meet again, though far off and brief be the meeting, in another place from which I speak. For you too must make other flights to redemption, to being swathed like the reborn.

I squint to see the shape of the narrator of my dream, but it is like looking through opaque glass or through eyes blinded by tears. I can see the outlines of buildings; a large building stands on a hill; atop it there is a large cross, large so that I see it through the unfamilar haze. The cross faces a river, but this river is as dry land; it is solid and white. There are trees to the left, some with leaves, some without. I feel that I know these trees, that amongst them I have walked or will walk with comforting friends. Yet, this is to me an alien landscape where many people walk like so many ghosts.

The voice continues:

Attend to me that you may understand, and be comforted by that understanding. For I bring to you that which grows out of the past that has yielded this present. This tale I tell is one of hardship and loss, survival and gain. Heed, and know that this passage is not yours only, but was made before you and shall be so after you. You are ancestor and descendant.

Those walking horsemen will take you to a place below the land; it is enclosed so that the air is still and stale. There will be but one light, yellow and small. And they shall do onto you all manner of things with fire. You shall carry the marks of this tribulation on your body to the grave as reminders of trespass and betrayal. But even as they are inflicting upon your body great pain, there will appear another horseman; and he will have a different face upon his badge. In giving you one pain, he shall save you from the knowledge of pain beyond your bearing.

The saving man will take you to a village of better hope. There, a woman derided by all as one of ill-repute shall care you to health. And you shall take this health with you to other lands, to new tyrannies, new follies.

In your pain and in your flight, you shall be one with the announcer. You shall share the same hurt as you shall share the same respect for the man who will arise to redeem this land with noble words and noble deed, and with his blood.

The voice begins to break up as if something or someone were jamming the reception: salvation...he...death...when...rebirth...land...by...love...escape.... The picture flicks on and off until it is replaced by a haze that looked much like that which hid the narrator from clear view, yet it is much different. And the voice breaks into silence.

I feel her shaking me awake.

"Hmm?" I ask wordlessly.

"You were shivering. Are you cold? Were you dreaming?"

"No. I'm fine. I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"Yes. I was watching you while you slept. It was like standing guard. It was strange, this watching over you."

But I do not want to talk. Instead, I hold her tightly.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" She asks.

"Yes."

Chapter Fourteen

It is tomorrow, and I go to the campus. The pre-election tension is still thick, but I try to concentrate on the class that I am about to attend. It is one on the Modern Novel, and I have been absent from it too often. The lecturer is Professor William Wright, a Yorkshireman who has been in the country for more than two decades. He is one of the people who have taught at the university since its inception in 1963. He is also an intimidating man from all accounts, hard drinking, hard-smoking, loud, but also fearless. He also has a reputation for being unconventional: he treats students like adults, unlike most of the other lecturers. In the literature section of the department, he is the only one within the university who has something of an international reputation.

I go to the classroom where we are scheduled to meet, but there is no-one there. Maybe the class is postponed. Professor Wright also has a reputation for postponing or cancelling classes. I wander down the hall to his office, and through the half-opened door, I could see the rest of the students. Wright is not yet there, but my mates were already seated on chairs lined up against the wall. No-one speaks. They are all too busy concentrating on reading, but there is a kind of hysteria in this concentration, a kind of panic in the silence.

"God," I say, "You all look as if you're about to be executed by a firing squad the way you're lined up against the wall."

But my attempt at levity is met with strained smiles and silence, so I sit in the empty chair closest to the door. As I am opening my folder, Bill Wright shuffles in. There is a collective gasp from the eight students at his condition. His shirt is in tatters, his face is bloody. There are cuts above his eyes, and his lips are puffed and blue-black.

"My God, what happened?" Someone asks, but the Professor walks silently to his desk. He opens his brown leather case and takes out a bottle of rum. Then he reaches into a cupboard in his desk and withdraws as many glasses as there are students in the room. I could see by the way his eyes moved that he was counting the number of students and matching each student with a glass.

'Should anyone like a drink?" He asks, his voice flapping the "r" in "drink", the words muffled by his swollen lips.

No-one answers, which he takes for a "no". With his bruised fingers, he takes out a cigarette from a crushed pack. He feels around his person for a match, but finds none.

"Does anyone have a match?" He asks.

Same shocked silence. Same interpretation.

He gropes around in his cupboard and finally comes up with a box of matches.

"The problem with this country is that there are no men here. NO MEN!!" He screams.

I could sense the indignance in the two other men in the room. In other circumstances, the women would have found the remark to be funny. They seldom missed a chance to mock our manhood or what we regarded as manhood. But now, this exclamation was laden with meanings beyond joviality or gender. It had to do with courage, the willingness to fight for what one believes in, for the things that make life worth living, the things that give it meaning. It was a statement indicting the entire nation, we who existed with meekness under this oppression, who smiled in the face of violence and nodded in the flood of lies.

Then, suddenly, the professor spreads his arms wide, in the fashion of one crucified, and he cries:

"Do you see? Do you see what they have done to me? Do you~" Then he buries his beaten face in his beaten hands and sobs uncontrollably. He tries to control the tears, the anger, but the attempt at control causes him to shudder. Rapid shudders at first, as if he is gasping for air, his shoulders jerking up and down. Two of the women get up and put their arms around him. The show of compassion makes him break down further, and he begins to sob loudly. This man, this white man, is crying for the country as much as he is crying at his own humiliation. The rest of us walk out, shame bowing our heads, making us almost tip-toe out of his office. The two women remain.

Later, we discovered what had happened. Professor Wright was walking along one of the covered walkways of the university to his class. As usual, he was walking with his head bowed, muttering to himself. From the opposite direction a group of three soldiers were walking abreast. Wright walked right into one of them. When he looked up, his path was being blocked by the three who refused to give way. He tried to force a path between them, but to no avail.

"You people come to this country, and you want to boss we round," said one of the soldiers, "Well, dem days done, white dog. Massa day dead, chap! Dis ain't you

country no more. We *own* dis place! We walk where we want. And if we don' allow you to walk, then you crawl."

Wright, not knowing when to keep quiet, responded:

"Do you know how this place was built? People like me built it! You come here to destroy it--to make shit out of gold!"

They grabbed him, in full view of everyone, called for a Jeep on their walkie-talkie, and loaded him in. They took him to the back of the campus and beat him. Then they let him walk back to his class. Such was the law of the land, such was the fear that gripped the people. No-one spoke up, and no-one intervened. It will surprise no-one if Professor William Wright is arrested for inciting violence on the campus. In a week, we will all forget about it, our minds taken up with some new horror that was visited upon some poor soul that had dared speak up in a moment of frustration or hunger, against the government. Such stories are told in the shadows, in mutters and whispers. It is as if the entire nation, trashing around under a pall, is muttering in a nightmare. Stories of new horrors and new laws are told in the underground press, printed on cheap paper, the printing hardly legible, for it is done on *Roneo* machines, and ink and stencils. All means of printing were given only to government organs and organisations. Paper is imported and dispensed, according to its wisdom, by the government.

Even "underground press" is a somewhat pretentious expression for two respective sheets of foolscape paper. They are printed poorly and in limited quantities, so that they are passed from house to house, from hand to hand, heart to heart, after they are read. Often, by the time a sheet reached my house, it would be dog-eared and grimy from the many sweaty hands that had held it.

The newspapers, printed on real newsprint, are mere mouthpieces for the government. When the former condemns these ragged sheets as examples of betrayal and irresponsibility, many are happy. This means that the government is paying some attention, is somewhat worried. But mostly these are ignored in the "responsible" press. The only "responsible" journalism is that which praises Comrade Leader and his band of goons, also called ministers. There were only few days in the year when the Leader's photograph and his pronouncements did not glower up from the front pages.

We all excused ourselves by removing ourselves from the beating that had been inflicted upon Professor Wright. He should have known when to be quiet; it's better to move around an object than through it. He's a foreigner, after all, no matter how long he has spent here, no matter how much he has contributed.

Others placed the blame more squarely on the victim: the chap had a Christ complex!! He liked being beaten; it gave him something to talk about.

My own response is not any less ambivalent: I resent Bill Wright because he seems to stand for everything that history made us resent. Yet, I admire his courage at struggling against these new shackles that are placed around the neck, wrists, and ankles of this nation. Then I resent myself for not having the same courage as Wright, and I hate him for reminding me of my cowardice. Like so many others, I am caught between the twin demons of hatred and self-hatred. The result is a paralysis that prevents me from joining the few brave voices raised in chorus against this oppression. I remember my dreams, and I think that I dream it because I am too cowardly to take action that would lead to the realization of the dream.

As we walk away from the Professor's office this day, it is this loathing and self-loathing that muzzle us. This is our customary posture: bitten tongues and bowed heads. Strangely, our only hope is in our anger. And it is this anger that wells up in me like some flood beating against the walls of my heart. It is while I am still in this mood, hours after we had heard what transpired with Professor Wright, that Comrade Lewis's boys come for me.

"You!" I turn quickly, with the instinct of one too ready to follow orders.

"Yes. you, comrade! We gat to talk to you." The tone was that of command, and it came from the tallest of the three men. He was very dark, the sweat forming a film on his face, the light of the sun bouncing off his forehead as if it were the light of the moon. A slight smile played on his lips. He reads my mood, this man. He reads my anger, and he is hoping that I will be foolish enough to act on it. No-one in my company says anything.

"You gat to come wid we. Comrade Lewis want to talk to you."

"What does he want?" I ask, unnecessarily, since I know that I will go without too much fuss.

"Well, you gat to ask he that. Look, I ain't gat too much time to argue wid you, so leh we go."

I walk off with the three, not looking at my friends. We march to the back of the campus where Lewis has an office. There is a line of trailers that were taken from the dismantled trains. They seem humble enough, squatting as they do at the back of the taller and more sophisticated concrete buildings of the university. Once we are inside, however, it is clear that the place is well appointed. There is an air-conditioned outer office, a typist banging against an old type-writer, another rattling away at an electronic one. Both were uniformed in dark green, their name tags

proclaiming their surnames--Singh and Brummel, respectively. The woman on the electronic typewriter, a sergeant by the three yellow stripes harsh against the green of her sleeve, looks up in the manner of one fashionably bored. Through half-closed eyes, she assesses us, me and the tallest of the soldiers. Then she picks up the phone and whispers seductively into the set:

"They here, comrade." Then she listens for a few seconds and returns the set to its cradle. Her nails are painted a deep red.

"Sit! Comrade Lewis will be with you in a minute."

I sit. The soldier remains standing, his legs spread apart, arms stiff behind his back, the hands meeting in a white V just above his buttock, the right palm placed into the left, left thumb over the right. The soldier at ease. The sofa upon which I sit is low, so that my head reaches only up to his knee. I know this drill, this ritual of positioning and waiting that is meant to make one feel small. I understand it, but with that understanding comes no comfort: I feel as small as I am meant to feel, my anger deserting me in waves. I peel my mind away from my situation and try to concentrate on the typists. The second one types with two fingers, someone who has not been given this comfortable job as a typist in an air-conditioned office because of her typing skills. She feels me looking at her, and she looks up. I do not lower my stare, nor do I look away. She allows herself a smile, the kind of smile that we use to confirm our station over others. The stamp and signal of superiority. They are all safe and confident behind the unform, behind the wall of the Party. And as I think of this, I could feel my resentment return. It returns in drips.

The door opens, and a big man fills the space. He is brown, neat, confident. He is a tall, thick-chested, brown man. He has the considerable paunch of one who sits too much and exercises too little, of one who lives well. LEWIS, says the tag on his uniform. He smiles broadly as he walks over to me:

"Welcome, Comrade. I'm sorry about the wait, but I just had to finish off something."

"That's okay." I hear myself say.

"Come in! Come in. We have important things to discuss." And he puts his large arms around my shoulders. We walk into his office, and by the time he moves around to his large wooden desk, the smile on his face has widened showing well-kept teethe.

"I was puzzled that you'd want to see me, Comrade. I did not think that you'd know me or of me. " I say.

"I know. I know. But you'd be surprised at how much we know, Comrade."

He shuffles a few sheaves of paper aside, braces his arms against the desk, and leans forward. He is about to speak earnestly.

"Look, Comrade. You know that elections on the campus are around the corner?"

"Yes."

"I don't need to tell you how important these elections are to us. We need to keep a strong hold on this campus, Comrade. You would not believe it if I told you how many wrong-headed people there are here. They speak and act in the most irresponsible ways. They have no regard for law and order, for discipline. And I don't mean army discipline, Comrade. I mean the kind of discipline which *you* exhibit--academic discipline. I have express instructions from Comrade Leader himself to find the best candidates, people who would be assets to the Party."

Now, the problem is that we have no-one who is worthy to represent the Party in the Faculty of Arts. Well, to be more precise, we want to field the best possible candidate, as I've said."

"I understand, Comrade, but I fail to see how I can help you here. I--" He holds up his right hand. I stop.

"Let me continue for a moment, Comrade. Afterwards I'll answer all the questions you ask." I am struck by how nice he seems, how reasonable. Even when he stopped me and even as he says this, he does not lose the smile. I am being taken in by the quality I suspect lurks in most politicians: charisma.

Then the smile wanes and is replaced by an expression of practiced earnestness.

"We've looked around carefully, Comrade. Very carefully. As I said, this is of utmost importance to the Comrade Leader, the Party, the country, the university, and to me. We need the right people in the right place. This is the only way that security and stability can be maintained. One of the things lacking in our young people today is commitment, Comrade. But I am not telling you anything you don't know. Clearly, you're a thinking man, a committed and disciplined man. The kind of man we need, Comrade. This is why I'm inviting you to run on the Party's ticket."

He pauses for his rhetoric to sink in and take effect. He's good; he's better than good. That's why he's here. He continues:

"I realise that I have said what you may do for the Party, for the country, for our university. This, I realise, Comrade. I also realize that I have said why you have been chosen and why you're being asked. The other question is this: What do you have to gain? Now, let me respond: First, your fees will be waived. But I know that this is negligible, since our government subsidizes all tuition. Second, you'll be

assured of some fine rewards for service to the university when you graduate next year. Third, you'd be in a position to help others, Comrade. You will have real influence, tangible influence. Third, you will be assured of a Commonwealth Scholarship to read for your M.A. or so abroad. As you know, Comrade, this is not an opportunity that is extended to everyone, Of course, this will depend on how deep your commitment goes, but I have little worry in that regard. You will be expected to return and contribute to the development of the country. But that is a formality, is it not, Comrade? A formality because people of your calibre--your rare and unquestionable calibre--will return anyway to be of service to the nation."

"And another question we must ask, Comrade, is this: if we don't have right-thinking and intelligent people like you taking the lead, then will this not make way for those in the country who are much more extreme? If not you, then who?"

"In other words, Comrade, we are offering you a chance to improve the situation in this country in the long run. To play a part in fulfilling Comrade Leader's vision for this country. At the same time, we are offering you, in a word, security. Security for yourself and for those you care about, security for the future."

"Now, Comrade, you may ask all the questions that you can think of." He leans back into his chair, satisfied that he had covered much of the ground, asked and answered all the questions of which I may have thought. The smile returns to his face, but it is now smug, self-assured. I'm quiet, my brain racing in a thousand directions. I hope that my silence is taken for contemplation rather than the inability to think under pressure.

"Well, Comrade?" He replaces the sheets of paper he had removed to the side, so that they occupy the space immediately in from of him. He's impatient to get back to what is more important. He's also impatient with my delay. His fingers begin to tap out a tune on the desk.

"Look, Comrade," he says, "I really do not see what you have to lose. In fact, you have everything to gain. This is a chance of a life time. A life-time, man."

It is the first time he has used "man" rather than the official "comrade". The former is more informal, but his tone implies impatience rather than an attempt to set me at ease. I begin to realise that my silence is unnerving him more than any number of questions that I may ask. I must prolong this silence.

"Comrade Lewis, I am silent because I do not know what to say. So, my reply will have to be that I want time to think about this. You have put a feast before me, and it would be foolish and unbecoming if I simply wolfed it down. Don't you agree, Comrade?"

He smiles widely, again showing those teethe. But this time, the eyes are cold and hard. This is a man who is not accustomed to be kept waiting.

"I will give you over the week-end, Comrade. I expect you in this office at nine on Monday morning. Is that clear, Comrade?" He stands up quickly, losing that fluidity of movement which he had earlier. The interview is over.

The tone of command is meant to leave no doubts as to who's in charge here, who holds the gun. I am angered by his tone and the implication that I am already under his command.

"I get the picture very clearly, Comrade. I shall make time on Monday to see you."

We do not shake hands, and I imagine he knows what my answer will be. He will want to see me on Monday only if curiosity gets the better of him. He will be interested in listening to how I will say no.

The soldier that brought me in is standing in exactly the same spot as he was before I went in to Lewis's inner sanctum. Lewis tells him to take me back, and he snaps into a salute, right knee lifted parallel to the ground, coming down hard on the floor, right hand moving off to the side and up to the brow, his index finger brushing his eyebrow. His hand, facing outward, is yellowish. Then he drops the hand rapidly forward, his hand curling into a fist, right thumb ending up parallel to the seam of his trousers.

He leads me out, takes me to the nearest building, and turns about. He says nothing, and I say nothing. If ever they send anyone to teach me a lesson in responsibility, it will be this very fellow. And though it is the day, my dream of being beaten returns with a lucidity that makes me shiver. The day seems too dark, the air too thick to breathe. I suddenly feel very, very tired, as if I am sleep-walking.

It is in this state that I drive to Rose.

Chapter Fifteen

I find myself at her door, knocking too hard and too rapidly. I am relieved that it is she who opens the door.

"Hi!" She greets breezily, and with a smile. Then she sees my countenance, and her face refashions itself to worry.

"Come in. Sit. What's the matter? Do you want some tea?"

I do not answer, taking my now-customary seat on the sofa without having been asked to sit. She rushes off to get tea, returns to her usual place close to me, and asks again:

"What is the matter? What happened?"

She is holding my hand, and I realize suddenly that it is not tiredness that I felt on my way here. It is fear. Lewis had succeeded in injecting fear in me with ease. I realize that she is squeezing my hand as if to extract an answer, and I begin to resent it. The demand, I resent the demand. I extract my hand from her grip.

"I've just come from an interrogation. I don't need another right now. I don't!" She returns her hands to her lap, a return to the posture of the young widow, the posture of loss.

"Okay," she says with an edge to her voice, "You want to tell me what happened? That is why you came, isn't it? So tell me."

"I was just dragged in by a chap named Lewis—Comrade Lewis—at the university. He's some military chap who is a big-wig in the Party. He wanted me to join the Party for elections on the campus. If I joined there would be advantages; if I did not there would be a price to pay."

"I'm sure that is the short version, but what did you say?" she asks.

"What do you think I said, Rose? What could I say?"

"I don't know what you said. I am asking."

I realise that my anger was getting the better of me. I realise that I am taking it out on her. I realise that I'm being foolish and unreasonable.

"I did not say much. He asked the questions he thought I would ask, then he answered them. He left no room. No room at all. I felt like a fool. I told him I would have to think about it. He gave me the weekend to do my thinking. He ordered me to see him on Monday."

"Do you have any idea what your decision will be?"

If I say yes, there will be benefits—cash prizes for service to the campus when I graduate next year. Almost a guarantee to get a scholarship to do my M.A. abroad. And safety. If I say no, there would be a price to pay."

"So there is no real choice. No means that you get hurt or worse. But why you? I have never heard you talk about politics, so why you?"

"I suppose it's because they think I'm bright and popular. Probably more so than anyone else they had in mind. I really don't know. But it could have something to do with my skin colour. I don't know."

"Aaah!" she utters. "You're bright, you're popular, you're fair-skinned. Do you see it?"

"Right now, I see nothing at all, Rose. Nothing at all."

"I hope you're seeing me!"

"Of course I'm seeing you, Rose. Don't be stupid."

At the word. Her body stiffened. She moved almost two feet away from me on the sofa. Gone was the posture of the widow. She turned to look at me full in the face, her face angry.

"Listen to me carefully, Mr. Steven DaSilva. Carefully. You will never, ever use that word to describe me again. Never! Do you understand me?"

"Shit! I'm sorry. I did not mean that. That word does not describe you in the least. I'm sorry."

"Well, that was the first, and it will be the last. I accept your apology. When I said I hoped you were seeing me, I was just trying to get you to smile. That's all."

There is a long moment of silence. Then she returns to the topic that was under discussion before the flare-up:

"Do you see it, see why they would identify you as their pick to represent them?"

"Yes. Colour. Charm and good looks. Intelligent. Weak and useable."

"Hear. Why don't you treat this as if it were a character in a novel or so. Examine what those characteristics mean."

"Ah! That's a good one. Yeah, let's do that…together."

"Okay! Colour first."

"Most people in Guyana are either black or brown. I'm more fair-skinned."

"Right! So why does your complexion matter?"

"Well, I suppose I can be seen as neutral, outside of the black/brown hostilities that retard this country."

"Okay, that's good. What's the second one?"

"Charm and good looks."

"Right. Does that matter?"

"You are the one being approached, you're the one reading this novel, not me. So tell me how and why that matters."

"I don't know, Rose. Am I charming and good looking?"

"Well, it's a question of taste, no? Hey, are you fishing for compliments?" She giggled girlishly, four fingers over her mouth. I glanced at her breasts, surprisingly firm for a woman who has had two kids. They rippled rather than shook with her giggle. I felt the hunger rise up in me. I pulled her to me and kissed her, reaching beneath her dress. I forced her down on the sofa, roughly. At first she was responding, then stopped.

"Stop it! Stop! What the fuck are you doing? Have you lost your fucking mind? Get off me!"

"What's the matter, Rose? What?"

"Do you know where you are? You are in my parents' home! There are people all around! You want them to come in here with us doing that? Jesus, Steven! Have you lost your senses?"

"I did not think. I wanted you, that's all. You could have said we could go into your room."

"Do you mean the room and the bed that I shared with my husband? Is that what you mean?" She spat out the words, her face darkened, teethe almost barred.

"I-I-I just didn't think, Rose. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"You didn't think? You didn't think? Is that it, your excuse? Some bright boy you are! Didn't think, my ass. You have the luxury of forgetting Joey already. Some friend, you are! Do you take me for some slut? A whore?"

"I'm sorry. I will never forget Joey—"

"Don't you even mention his name. Just don't! Do you think he would do this to you? Do you?"

"I-I don't know, Rose. Maybe not. Maybe, but—"

"No buts here, Steven. None! I know my husband. He would never do this to anyone, much less someone he liked and respected. Never. He had honour. Do you know the meaning of that word? Honour!"

"You're right, Rose. I'm sorry. Yes, he was an honourable man, a good man. And I never think of you in such ways. Never."

"Tell me something. Just be honest, will you?" I nodded.

"Was it always your intention to simply get me into bed? Just to conquer a piece of property that belonged to someone else? Or worse, just a piece of ass?""

"Jesus, Rose! Is that what you think of me?

"That's not what I thought of you, but you just behaved like a 'piece of ass' person," she said, tears welling up.

"You know, Rose, you act as if you did not want exactly what I wanted. We both wanted what we had."

"You wanted sex! You took advantage of my grief, Steven. It was your chance, and you took it."

"No. We both felt loss. We were both lonely, and that loneliness brought us closer and closer. You know that. I did not take advantage of you and you did not take advantage of me. We both needed comfort, intimacy. We found it in each other, Rose."

"You are a damn liar, and you just proved that fucking me was all you wanted. Closer, comfort, my ass!!"

"And what, Rose? You were in innocent by-stander in all of this, a poor little victim? An innocent flower? Crap! That's all bullshit."

We were both shouting now. Voices carry, screaming obscenities attract audiences.

The usual clutch of family members had migrated en mass up upstairs, forming a semi-circle around Rose and me. The father sat a distance away on the rocking chair that Joey had sat upon holding his dead child in his arms. The father's arms were folded. They gazed upon us for what seemed a long time.

The brother whom I had hit could control himself no longer. He shouted first:

"You are a whore and you are a dirty bastard!" The rest nodded at his venom.

The sister: "You come in we house and do this? You got no shame. And you," pointing to Rose, "invite he here to do what? You are a dirty girl. Dirty!"

They took turns with similar insults. Then the mother spoke, her voice breaking with rage, her face muffled up with grief:

"Rose, I shame to say you is me daughter. Me shame! You bring shame to this house and to you own family. Me nah even know what to say. Me kyaan even look at yuh nasty face! Me shame fuh say you is me daughter! Me shame. What people gon say, Rose? What? 'Look Sumitra datta! She two children just-just dead. He husband nah even cold in he grave, and she gaan and tek up wid another man.' Dat is what dem guh say." She then broke down in sobs, unable to bear the thought of what people would say.

The father's voice, hysterical, screamed: "Yuh mother right! Yuh brother right! Bastard and whore. Joey must be turnin' in he grave, dat poor boy. And he wife gaan and tek up wid he best friend before he body turn cold."

"Lemme ask the two of you one question?"

For the first time since they gathered, I looked up. Rose kept her eyes riveted to the floor.

"Ayuh two did plan dis nasty ting? Ayuh two nah get a conscience? Not even one ounce a conscience? Ayuh nah see how nasty this thing is?"

"I did not plan for this to happen, Pa. Steven brought me comfort. I had no one to talk to, nobody."

The brother: "Shut yuh nasty mouth before I slap yuh upside down! Yuh hear me?"

I muttered quietly: "She's right. We did not mean for this to go so far."

The father: "You should shut yuh trap, bai. I aint want hear the shit dat come out yuh nasty mouth! You should put yuh tail between yuh leg and get out of me house! Nobody want see yuh nasty face again."

The sister: "Wha yuh guh do now, eh? Ayuh guh married?"

Rose looked at me, waiting for me to answer. I did not have the courage to say no. She kept her head down.

The sister continued: "Me father say to get the fuck out of we house! Get out, yuh piece of shit!"

I got up and made for the door. The brothers followed me into the small veranda atop the stairs. I felt the kick on my back and tumbled down the stairs, hitting my head on the last round of stairs. I was dazed and bleeding, but made my way out of the yard and into the car."

The brothers and father were at the gate, armed now with cutlasses. I drove off.

Chapter Sixteen

The family had left me sitting there while they followed him to the door. I heard the thuds as he fell down the stairs, heard the car zoom off. Satisfied that they had drawn blood, they returned to the living room where I was sitting, still angry but less so. I was now fully aware that this place which I had always called home was no longer so. I will never attach that word to this place ever again. Home. They gathered around, more a mob than a family. They could not make their hatred clearer. Or scorn. Maybe it was more scorn than hatred, the kind of scorn we keep for those who have compromised themselves, for those who have betrayed every sense of decency. I felt that their scorn was justified, but I resented it nonetheless.

I had betrayed them. Worse, I had betrayed my dead husband, my dead children. I no longer deserved the title of wife nor mother nor daughter. And all of this, for what?

When I heard the car take off, I felt more bereft than I had felt at my children's funerals, a bereavement that was equal to what I had felt when Joey died.

My father's voice broke into my thoughts:

"You listening to me? Like yuh man gaan and he take yuh brain wid he! Yuh shameful, Rose. Yuh bring shame to this house and to this family." He was loud, screaming, saliva gathering at the corners of his lips. Shame? Shame, I thought. Shame came when we were all laughing when Joey was crawling to the toilet. I am ashamed, and I will carry that shame for all my days. Now I'm ashamed by this thing I had had with Steven. My shame became anger:

"You tellin me bout shame, Pa? The rest of you callous donkeys telling me bout shame. Do you remember when Joey was so sick that he could not even go to the toilet? Do you remember how that man had to crawl on all fours like a sick dog to go? Do you remember how you all, yu set of asses laughed at him? I am ashamed of that. I am ashamed that I laughed with the rest of you fuckers when I should have been helpful to my husband, a man who treated me with love and tenderness, the father of my two daughters. Yes, I am ashamed."

My father was now beside himself with anger. I had never sworn at them before. He exploded: "You learn fuh cuss yuh own father and mother now, eh? Like yuh learn dah from yuh man. Joey never cuss we and he woulda slap yuh whorin rass if he yuh bin cuss yuh own father. I want yuh pack yuh bags and get out of me house by tomorrow, yuh hear me? Get out of my house!"

I started at this: "Pa–I–Pa–"

I cut myself short. I realized that this will only get worse with each day I spent here. Not one member of my family tried to defend me. And maybe they were right. Maybe what I did was not defensible. Maybe. I got up, leaving their scorn, and went into my room.

Then, as I lay there in what was Joey's and my bed for a time, I thought about having to leave. Where do I go? There was no time to find a nice house to rent, a house in a nice neighbourhood? I will probably have to stay in a decent but cheap hotel for a week or so while I hunted for a house to rent.

Money. There was always that. But Joey had sold our house after our first child died. And I was expecting money from Joey's insurance. Joey was careful about things like that, making sure that his family was provided for. In the end, I was confident that I would be okay in terms of money.

My next calculation was about Steven. I'm not sure about that. Will he try to make contact with me? To reconcile? Do I want that or need that? Should I try to contact him? If I do so, will I be admitting weakness, surrendering?

Looking back, I do not think that I loved Joey. At least not in some romantic way. I admired and trusted him, and I was happy to awaken each morning with him. I was happy that he was the father of my two children. Our home was stable. I felt safe, secure, contented. We found safe harbour in each other, and that is as much as we need from a marriage. He was the first man in my life, and I wish he would have been the last. While Joey was alive, if someone had even suggested that I be unfaithful, I would have slapped them and spit in their face.

But Joey died, as my two babies had died. I was alone and adrift. My family provided no comfort; they were there, continuing with their old ways as if nothing had happened and no one was lost. I knew all of this before the events of today. There was only Steven there for me, the only reminder of Joey. He brought comfort, and I leaned on him. For that, I will always love him. Love appears, I suppose when we need to be loved.

I do not love him in the same way as I did Joey, but who is to measure one love against another? Certainly not me. With Joey, my passion was concentrated on my family: Joey, me, my children. Our love-making was about having children; sex was a kind of neutral, biological undertaking, a necessary thing for a dutiful wife, a necessary thing to have our children. The closeness mattered, but the act itself was bereft of pleasure. I did not know what an orgasm was, for I had never experienced it.

Steven had awakened in my that passion, and an orgasm took me by surprise. I had bitten my lip to keep from being loud. It was pleasure, a pleasure that made my guilt more intense. When he tried to make love to me in my parents' living room, I wanted it. But we was in a place where it was wrong, inappropriate. I cannot be blamed for stopping it. The question is this: what was it that triggered him to make such a move in such a place? I must find ways to meet with Steven again to ask.

My mind raced like this for the entire night. Tomorrow, I will book into a modest but respectable hotel.

Chapter Seventeen

I exited the yard, bleeding from the head. I was never afraid; these people never scared me. But to kick me in the back, to kick me down the stairs as if I were some flea-ridden stray dog. But worse than that was to have subjected me and Rose to such shame, that was more than I could take. For that, they must pay a price. That humiliation will cost them much. I swore that, as I drove the car to a doctor whom I knew.

I will reduce these people to dirt.

I lay on my bed that night, trying to recall the events of the day, trying to think through the pain in my head. There was Comrade Lewis and his uniformed goons. That was reason I had gone to Rose in the first place. We were talking about why they seemed to select me as their candidate. She was helping to clarify that for me. Skin colour, popularity, charm, or some such thing. I must decide what action to take when I go in to see Lewis on Monday, if he even sees me, that is. I suspect that he has already dismissed me, but I cannot take the chance of them grabbing me and administering physical punishment for my "attitude".

Then what happened? What happened to involve those fools? She had giggled, that girlish giggle that signals that innocence and sweetness in women that I find irresistible. I have always been repulsed by aggressive and loud women. Her sweetness arose in me a desire—a sexual hunger, really—that I could not control. She responded at first, then recoiled. Her parents' house! Maybe she had a point about wrong time and place. Maybe. But that still did not give them the right to invade our private conversation, no matter how loud it was. Then the interrogation, the aggression, the moral judgement, then the humiliation for which they must be made to pay. Joey had told me how they humiliated him at his hour of greatest need. They will pay for that too.

And Rose. She was trying to defend the reputation of their home by refusing me. Their gratitude was to call her a whore. They humiliated her in the same place she was protecting. These are very base people, incapable of understanding or even trying to understand. More than anyone else they should have known the pain she has had to endure, but they cared not. In addition to being stupid, they are callous

in the most cruel way. Cruel and callous to their own family. What kind of people do that? What kind of people can be so base? For that too, they should be punished.

Rose and I never talked about money, but my understanding is that Joey was supporting them all. The father was a cane cutter for years, then he was promoted to the vehicle repair and maintenance division of the sugar estate in Ogle. He was fired for being drunk on the job. One brother was some kind of handyman doing odd jobs here and there. The other was a labourer loading and unloading goods from the trucks of small businesses. Both worked in a kind of on-again-off-again way. The women, uneducated, stayed at home. I suppose they cooked and cleaned. But the expenses incurred by such a large family was supported by the man they mocked. Now they insult his widow, who was also carrying their financial burdens, I'm sure.

It is because of money that they will not throw Rose out of the house. I don't think they would do that because they are not folks who are willing to work hard. The father lives in a rum bottle; the sons are lazy, erratic, and always waiting to be served by the daughters who are themselves without ambition and prospects. In my opinion, it is Rose who rescued them by marrying Joey. The rest have little else except bloated pride. It was their pride that made them react the way they did today. I hope they don't kick her out because of that obscene pride. On the other hand, they react only on emotion.

I wish I can talk with her about all of this rationally, but I will never return to that place. How, then, do I make contact with her? Apart from that, I miss being with her.

Chapter Eighteen

It is Saturday, the day I am to leave my parents' house for the second time. The two departures could not have been more different. The first was after the wedding when Joey and I got married. It was a joyous affair, and as we were leaving for our new home, there were many tears shed by the family.

Joey and I had planned to have the wedding at our new home. It was finished but needed to be fully furnished. Joey said that could be done long before the wedding. We planned a small event with one or two dozen people or so plus my immediate family. We can rent chairs and a large tarpaulin tent, and the cooking can be done outside.

Traditional Hindu weddings tend to be costly, but if we did it the way we planned, we would minimize expenses. The numbers would be small and manageable. It was sheer joy planning this with Joey. We planned, were serious, then breaking up with laughter, then serious again, then rocking with laughter again. Joey was not a great believer and neither was I, but we thought this would be good for validity and social perception. He planned on inviting his fellow teachers at the school, and my family would be there, of course. It was neat, proper, and expenses manageable.

We went to my parents' home to inform them of our plans; it did not go as we thought it would. Somehow, they all seemed ready to do battle. My mother was dressed in her cheap gaudy finery, my brothers in long pants, my sisters in blouses and skirts, their idea of formal wear. My father was armed with his glass and bottle of rum. Joey and I walked over the small wooden bridge and through the rickety

wooden gate. We were happy, smiling. That lasted until we saw them gathered

in the bottom-house. I knew the warning signs, of course. I stiffened, and Joey turned to look at me quizzically. I felt sorry for him, and rage towards these people. Most of all, I felt ashamed. This is the family into which I was born, and they sent me to school in order that I fetch to them a husband with money. I was trained to be one thing above all things: servile. Yet, I was curious about the scheme that I knew was already hatched.

We sat on the wooden plank which served as a bench. My mother began:

"Ayuh two look like yuh in a good-good mood. What goin on? Somebady getting baby or what?"

"No, ma. We decided to get married. Babies will come after," I answered, keeping my voice even, composed.

"We glad that yual at least come tell we," my younger sister, her voice betraying her bitterness.

My father poured himself a generous drink, quaffed it, screwed up his face as the liquor bit, then spoke:

"I glad yuh come tell we. I will give you a proper Hindu wedding. I got to ready up this house nice-nice. After all, is me first daughter getting married."

"Well, pa, Joey and I agreed that we will have it at our new house. It will not be a big affair: just a few people—two or three dozen or so of family and friends. It will be much cheaper if we did it there. For one, we will not have to renovate the house since it's new."

"So, what yuh tellin we, Rose? You and Joey done decide where to do the wedding and who to invite?"

"Well, yes. We talked about it at length, and it makes sense. It will take all the confusion away from you, but we hope you will help with the more religious aspects like the ceremony itself." Joey said in his calm, sweet way.

My father had already poured himself another drink, gulped it, and was about to speak. My mother broke in:

"So what you two telling we on this nice-nice afternoon that Krishna heself gee we? Ayuh two siddung and gyaaf, come up wid ayuh plan and just come fuh tell we. Like we is nobady fuh Rose? Me mek she, me feed she, we send she school, we pay fuh she food and clothes, we bring she up proper, but we not good enough to get involve wid she wedding? Me first daughter." Then came the tears, as I knew they would come. She clung to one of my brothers who was muttering: "Ungrateful, Ma. Just ungrateful."

My father piped up, misty-eyed and beginning to slur:

"Yuh know what people guh say, Rose? All me friend them at the estate? This whole neighbourhood? You know wha dem guh say? Dem guh say, 'Watch Ramdass! He kyaan even pay fuh married he own-own daughter. He nah even get one pot fuh piss in. He tolerate slackness in he own house. What kind man dat?' That is what dem guh say about yuh father. Is dat how we raise you Rose? For this boy who you just know yesterday, you forsake yuh mother and father. You own-own family who sacrifice fuh you. That is wat dem guh say, Rose."

With the help of the rum, he was getting louder, more aggressive. Courage in a bottle. My brothers will take their cue from him. Joey will be at risk. Our wedding, our happiness was at risk. If this did not stop now, it will get much worse. That was the pattern

Joey spoke up: "Okay, sir. Tell us what you want to do and maybe we can come to some compromise. But let me be clear: I do not tell Rose what to do. That is not how things work with us. We discuss and we decide—together. But tell us your ideas—all of you." He spoke politely but in the manner of a teacher speaking to a set of Grade 8 children.

I could see the change in my parents' faces. The boys, as usual, followed suit, the girls as blank as ever. They were quiet for a while, then my father spoke up:

"We think is right that the wedding do here. Rose is we first daughter, so is right. We know that we gat to work lil bit pon the house to make it nice. The two boys will do all that. Bridge. Gate. New paint job and such.

"Of course, Rose and I will buy the material like–"

My father cut Joey off immediately:

"Not one cent from you! Not one! Is me daughter. Me house. Me family. We stand all expense. ALL! Yuh understand me, bai?"

"I understand you perfectly. We understand, don't we Rose?"

"Yes, we understand how it is going to go. I understand only too well, Pa." I was being caustic, of course. This pride, this flatulence-filled ego of these people. Arrogance based on nothing at all. I knew that Joey will end up spending much more than on raw material. They will rob him blind. I understood that well.

The wedding was two months away, so there was no time to be wasted. Joey and I spent the time getting our outfits and speculating on how things were progressing on the family home front. I was uneasy, and Joey felt my unease more keenly than he let on. We finally decided to travel to see for ourselves what progress was being made.

As soon as I stepped out of the hire-car, I saw how much progress was made in the past month with another month to go before the wedding. Unsurprisingly, there was no progress whatsoever. None. The thin wooden bridge was just as rickety as it had always been; the gate was barely attached to the hinges; the yard was over-run with bushes and weeds and vines; the house was unpainted and just a shabby as ever. My family was sitting around in the bottom house gossiping and laughing. Nothing had changed. I could hear the air leave Joey's body as if he had been gut-punched by Mohamad Ali.

It was early in the morning–about ten or so–but my father had his favourite company: a glass and a bottle of rum. One of my brothers had a bandage around his right forearm; the other got up as soon as we appeared and hobbled to greet us. He was using a piece of wood to steady himself, so serious was the injury to his leg. My mother was screeching about something or other; my sisters were gazing blankly into space. Nothing had changed there either.

Before Joey could say whatever polite thing he was going to say, I said to them,

"What the fuck is going on? Where are the preparations that you said you were going to make? Why are you people just sitting around gyaffing and laughing?"

My mother immediately took offence:

"You nah even say good maanin and yuh start cuss! Is dah how we bring you up, Rose? Like yuh gat no training and no respect? In front of the boy too! Wha he gun thing bout we, yuh own family?"

"I know what Joey's thinking, I'm sure. What happened to all thing fat talk about you people doing everything to prepare for the wedding? What happened to 'we eldest daughter'

and 'what people gon say?' And what about 'not one black cent'? And for all the big talk, nothing is done. Not one shit!"

"Forget what we will think, lady. Anybody with half a brain who looking and listening to you people will say that you are real low-class people. That is what they will say!"

My father swallowed his rum, coughed the raspy cough of the chain-smoking alcoholic, and started:

"You gat no cause to come here and insult we, Rose. You was always like dat. Always disrespecting you own father and mother and brothers and sisters. Always like dat."

My mother had already started to turn on her well of tears, always ready to let it flow except when she was being beaten by my drunk father.

"Rose, you nah know what we had to go through for the last month. You nah know the sufferation we suffer hey."

"Tell us what happened, please," Joey, polite and composed as always asked.

My mother began her tale of woe: "This boy start fix the bridge. He get wood and everything, then he fall down from the bridge and bruk he hand in two place. We had to rush he to Georgetown hospital. Them do X-ray and all kinda thing. TWO place he bruk. See how he hand deh?" she took her time to catch her breath from the pain of recounting their pain.

I thought: There was no sign of wood for the bridge, so that was a lie. His arm was simply bandaged rather than placed in plaster-of-Paris. Lie.

"So what happened to your other son? Looks like he broke his leg too. I noticed that he's limping badly."

"Ow bai. At least you ask. He binna go buy paint fuh paint the house. He buy can-can paint and hang them can pon he bicycle handle. Car come from nowhere and knock down the poor bai. Me think he foot bruk, but he nah like hospital, so he just stay like day."

"What happen to the can-can paint?" I asked.

She suspended her whining and whimpering to let out a long suck-teeth. Then turned back to Joey:

"Rose father try to help, but you know how he sickly. He gee his best years to that sugar estate, then dem let he go when he can't work no more. Life, eh? Me tell yuh. Life cruel." The tears flowed again.

The old man–starting to hiccup from his early morning rum–chimed in:

"Life, I tell you. Life!" He took another swallow. "Dem two gyaal try fuh help, but dis nah woman work. Dem nah able. Dem deh behind dem buddy hand and foot."

It was all hogwash. An arm broken in two places, hospitalization, but no plaster-of-Paris. Wood for bridge, but no wood in sight. Paint bought, some accident, leg injured but no bruising, and paint missing. The old man "giving his whole life" to the sugar estate, then they just "let him go". No mention that he was caught being drunk on the job several times and was fired because of that. The girls "trying to help". All hogwash, all lies. But she was clearly

winning Joey's sympathy, and I did not want to interfere with that and look like a bitch in the process.

Joey put his hand on her shoulder comfortingly. "It's okay. It will all turn out okay. I only wish we had heard of this before, but that is water under the bridge now."

"Yes, what done, done, son." She gave him a hearty hug. I wanted to gag. "Son"??? "Son"? She never even called her own sons "son".

She was pulling out all the stops. I was distressed at Joey's gullibility. And yet, his innocence was one of the things I love about this man. He is gentle and kind, and he looks upon the world with the eyes of a child. He did not know these hypocritical people, and I hoped he never gets to know them. I was relieved that he was so wrapped up in his sympathy for these liars that he did not see the scorn with which I was looking at them. Their foolish pride, lies, and hypocrisy had put our wedding at risk, but I vowed to try to hold my tongue.

Joey turned to me: "Rose, may I speak with you for a minute? Excuse us, please." To my mother and father.

"Rose, we will need to return to our original plan, with adjustments, of course."

"What do you have in mind, Joey? What adjustments?"

"Well, we had planned to finance the entire wedding, right?

"Correct...at our home."

He smiled, "Ah! That's one of the adjustments. We will accommodate their wishes and still have our wedding."

"Joey, Joey, Joey, sweet Joey, do you really those people will be okay with a few dozen people as wedding guests? Oh gaaawd, wha people guh seh?"

Joey could not contain himself. He grabbed me close, buried his face in my shoulder and shuddered with laughter. I was stroking and patting his head. It must have seemed to our audience as if he were crying, and that I was comforting him. My mother and father got up and came over.

"Wat he crying for? Ayuh will married, he nah gat fuh worry." Assured my father.

"Nah worry, son. Yuh daddy and me guh take care o everyting. Nah cry. Rose, look after the bai nuh!" my mother chimed in, almost sincere.

Joey surfaced from my shoulder for air. Tears were running down his face. He gulped for air and went into my shoulder again. He was shuddering again with laughter. My mother, now patting his head, shouted to my sisters:

"Gyaal. Why ayuh just siddung deh. Bring one cup water fah dis poor bai, nuh!"

The two rushed away to bring life-saving water for the poor bai. I decided to add fuel to the fire by doing the "shhhh...shhh...shhh...", the sound we make to comfort children in distress. It had the desired effect: my mother started crying as if someone had died, my father rushed to the comfort of his rum bottle, my brothers froze, and my sisters were each holding out cups of water.

At this display and as a reaction to Joey's reaction, I felt the laughter rising from my gut. I pushed my face into the side of his head, trying to stifle the laughter that I felt coming. I held up my hand, then pointed to the gate, and then held up my forefinger to signal that we needed a minute. I tugged Joey, to whom I was now attached to the cranium towards the gate, over the bride towards the side of the road. Joey excavated his face from my shoulder and I quickly turned his back to the audience, He was still shuddering with laughter, spitting out "Ow son! Poor bai!" My laughter was here now, so it was my turn to turn my back on them: "Bring wan cup water fuh dis poor bai, nuh!"

We eventually regained our sanity and wiped our faces dry with Joey's handkerchief.

"Okay,,,okay, Rose. Enough now."

"Yes, yes, Joey. We must be serious now, but poor bai..."

Upon which we began another fit of laughter. Thankfully, that came to a relative quick end.

"Yes, Joey, adjustments, what adjustments?"

"Well, we finance everything, but the venue will be here. We pay for the repairs and the paint job to the exterior of the house."

"Which means that the expenses will be much more than if the ceremony were to be at our house, right?"

"Right, but we will keep the peace between us and them."

"And they are to benefit by having their house improved."

"Yes...but peace, Rose. Peace."

"Listen, Joey. You are a good man, the best man I have ever known. I also know that you practically built our home—"

"I will hire a team of people I know who will do it for me. They will not charge me too much. Many of them are my former students. If the weather holds, they can get this done in seven days, maximum."

"Okay. Let's talk numbers. From about two dozen to more than two hundred. Most of them for those people in their, for their fat egos. That's a lot of adjustments, huh?"

"Yep. True. Ten times more people, but I understand their point that thisnis their first child to be married. It's a big deal for them. I know that they are doing it more from pride than for you."

"You got that spot on—"

But what choice do we have? After all, this is our wedding and for us it's about us. Me and you, Rose."

"Yes, but where does that leave us with money?"

"I promise you Rose, my love, we'll be fine."

"One condition, Joey. One."

"Tell me."

"I will be clear to them that we are in charge here, not them. We!"

"No, you. You are in charge. I'm the 'poor bai, remember?"

"So we start from scratch with one month to get everything done, right?"

"No, Rose, we started by seeing the funny side of this. We still have our whole left-time ahead to recall this, tell our children and grand-children about this, and give them the gift of laughter."

"You are a kind and wise man, Joseph. I love you for that. But you do tend to be overly generous."

"Hey gyaal, is better than being mean and bitter, no?"

"okay, okay okay. Time to go back into the hyenas' den."

And back in we went, over the rickety wooden bridge, pass the gate on failing hinges, and into the bottom house. There they were, something like concern sketched on their faces. And, for the first time in a long time, I felt a pang of sympathy for them. For all their lies and pretensions, their hypocrisy and superficiality, for all their greed and selfishness, I felt something for them. I became almost gentle:

"You all listen to me carefully. I will say what I have to say and we will leave. There will be no discussion. None! Joey and I will stand all the expense for the wedding. We will have a team of men come tomorrow and fix up what we tell them to fix. You will not give them any instruction or else they will simply take their tools and leave, and we will hold the wedding at our home and you will not be invited. Joey and I do not want to be mean to you, but you have interfered with our lives enough for now. We love you, but this is the way it has to be until after the wedding. If you need anything after that, we will try to give it to you. We promise you that. But for now, just enjoy your house being fixed up and made nice. Do you understand, Pa?

"Yes, Rose. Me hear yuh."

"Good. Ma, you understand me?"

Tears again. She nodded.

"Good."

"The rest of you. Understand?"

The girls said "yes" together as if they were in a primary school classroom. The boys nodded.

"Okay then. You, just take off that stupid bandage! And you, throw way that stick. Nothing wrong wid you all." I said pointing to one then the other.

"We coming back in one week to see how the work going. Pa, cut down on the rum for now, okay? Don't stop, but cut down."

"Okay Rose," came his compliant answer.

We left, hailed a taxi and went home. Joey was quiet all the way, and I worried that I upset him with the way I treated them. As soon as we stepped through the door, however, he yelled out:

"Yeees Miss!" in the fashion of primary school children in response to their teacher. And we again broke out into laughter. On looking back, I see that laughter was something that Joey and I had in abundance. Our home rang out with it, was enlivened by it. I see now that I took it for granted, this laughter. So many people do, those that are blessed enough to have it.

Joey and I showered and went to bed. I felt close to this man, safe, contented. There was nothing or no one else I wanted. Just this. Just this. He took my hand and placed it on his erection. I pulled up my night dress, removed my panty and got on my back. He climbed on me and pushed into me. I lay there, passive, as always. I did not know any other way. It was over in a minute or two. Joey, spent, looked at me as I smiled up at him. I was happy that he seemed fulfilled. He kissed me, rolled over, and slept. I cuddled close to him, ran my fingers through his thick black hair, and slept the sleep of the truly fortunate. Just this.

We returned to my parents' house in a week. The work was almost done: a nice bridge; a grilled gate; the yard free of weeds; the fence fixed; the house almost completely painted in off-white. We were delighted; my parents more so. The foreman of the group, Joey's high school friend, assured us that all will be done in three days if it did not rain. It did not rain.

Just two weeks and a few days remained before we were made man and wife. Joey told me later–in front of my family–that his friend refused to take money except for the material. I was relieved.

Joey paid for everything and had arranged every minute detail. In addition to having the house and yard transformed.hr had hired the pandit to officiate, making sure that a list was made of all the required ritual material. He had people to cook; got all the utensils needed; and had all the food material bought: bags of rice, bags of flour, dozens of pumpkins, spinach or bhaji, catahar; bags of potatoes, mango achar. He also got people to cut and wash hundreds of lotus leaves or purayan leaves as we call them. People ate out of these rather than out of plates. He also bought six sheep and liquor for the day after the ceremony–the kakan day when meat and liquor were allowed according to Hindu custom.

It all went well, and even my family behaved with some decorum. It was a happy event. Joey and I left officially for our home.

And now here I am again, leaving but in very different circumstances. Alone, with nowhere to go.

By 11 a.m. the next day, Saturday, I was packed, dressed, and out on the road hailing a taxi. There were no goodbyes. They just sat there are glared at me as I struggled with my three suitcases. The taxi driver, a big-bellied, unshaven fellow, was grunting as he hoisted my suitcases into the trunk. I turned back for one last look at this house to which I shall never

return. The weeds had returned, the fence was falling apart, the house seemed dilapidated, its inhabitants lazy and angry. I hoped they go to hell.

I instructed the driver to take me to a hotel named Tropicana. It was reasonably priced and acceptably clean. They had a restaurant that was separate from the bar. I booked in, and told the driver to wait a few minutes. I wrote a note to Steven telling him where I was and that he should please come and see me so that we may speak. I put the note in an envelope, sealed it, addressed it to Steven, went back down and asked the driver to take this and leave it with the soldiers at the university gate. I was insistent that he should take it right away in case Steven went there over the weekend. I knew he was due to meet with Lewis on Monday, but I hoped and prayed that he would get it today or tomorrow. I paid the driver and sent him on his way.

Chapter Nineteen

I spent the Friday night nursing a cut on my forehead and a nasty headache from the fall down the stairs. Saturday and Sunday, I spent stewing about the whole sordid incident, their cowardice of waiting until my back was turned before one of them—the eldest brother, most likely—did the kicking. I was humiliated. I have never been asked to leave a home before much less having been literally kicked down stairs. I tried to plot ways to exact revenge on the entire lot of creeps.

I kept going over the whole thing. Over and over again. I went to Rose because I was terrorized and confused by the choices that Comrade Lewis had put before me. Join them for opportunities; don't join them for pain. I was hysterical when I went to Rose, and she was good at trying to get me to work through it. Her intelligence attracted me to her. Then her display of shy innocence made me want her; the desire was uncontrollable. Then the quarrel about time and place. Then the squad of idiots. And my being kicked down a flight of stairs. My humiliation for which they will pay most dearly. I do not yet know how or when, but I feel this dreadful certainty that pay they will.

My disappointment was also that Rose did not even defend me or herself. She cowed before them. I feel that I must decide if this that we have is worth keeping or abandoning. I feel sure that she is still there, that she is too weak to leave. They will keep her for the money. To resolve this, I must find a way without going to that place.

Then my thoughts turned to Lewis. I will go see him as commanded, but I am still not sure what I will say if and when he sees me. If he does not see me, then I know that my life will take a turn for the worse, worse than the last few days; if he chooses to see me, then he may be giving me the benefit of the doubt. One way or another, my life will not be the same.

On Monday morning, I drove to the campus, slowed down as I passed the soldiers at the gate, waved and shouted:

"I have a meeting with Comrade Lewis. One of them waved back, and I took that to mean "carry on". I drove to the back of the campus where Lewis had set up his headquarters. The big soldier was there and wordlessly pointed me to a seat. I sat, took out two books and sheaves of paper from my bag and started to work on a

paper that was due at the end of the week. But the whole idea of doing that there in front of these people was to show that I was a serious person, one who had no time to waste. I was there at 8:30 a.m.; Comrade Lewis called me into his office at 11:30 a.m. By getting my work done while waiting, I had made a small point; by having me wait for three hours, Lewis had made his. His point was bigger, simpler: he was the boos; the boss can have you waiting as longs as he wants.

The tall soldier beckoned me with his index finger. I rose, shoved my stuff into my bag and went in.

Lewis remained seated, did not offer to shake hands, gesturing instead for me to sit. He did not look up, seeming intent on the sheets of paper before him.

"I'll be with you in a few minutes, Comrade," he uttered nonchalantly.

Rather than sit their gazing and fidgeting, I decided to examine his "office". It was bare, except for a large, framed photograph of the party leader. His picture was ubiquitous: front page of newspapers; telegraph posts along the broken roads; all offices; all public spaces; all business places. Afro-Guyanese fellow in uniform, but he was never in any uniformed service. Closely cropped hair, round head, bulging eyes, a goatee. He was somewhat attractive, although the fake uniform detracted from his attractiveness. He was a lawyer by profession or had a law degree from somewhere in England. I looked at the eyes again, and in it there was both humour and menace, a man who would laugh while shooting you in the head.

I glanced back at Lewis. He was looking at me closely.

"What happened to your forehead, Comrade?" he asked with interest.

"Comrade, Comrade, Comrade," I said with a half grin, "Women! Lordy, Lordy! The husband came in, Comrade."

Lewis erupted in laughter, slammed his palms on his desk, stood up from the sheer force of the laughter, and came round the desk. He slapped me in the shoulder as if to congratulate me.

"Now, THAT's my boy!!! My man!" He was shouting, laughing, slapping my back all the while. Then he moved in front of me and sat on the desk, his face close in a conspiratorial manner:

"Steven, lemme tell you. I have found myself in such positions too many times to count. Same story, man!! And I gat me bruises too, yuh hear."

"But Comrade, leh me tell yuh, it hurt like hell, man!"

"Listen to me boy! Pussy always come wid pain, yuh hear me? Always. Dat's a fact of life, boy. Stone cold fact." He sat back for a few seconds, then,

"The only kinda pussy dat don't come wid pain is the kind yuh gat to pay for. True!"

I replied in the manner of a confidante:

"Comrade, why pay for fish when they gat nuff-nuff in the sea?"

Again the belly laughter. We were friends it seemed.

"Yuh right! Damn right! You know, Steve, I heard about you and the girls on campus, you know. I can name a few if yuh think I lyin'..."

"Is okay, Comrade. I know them."

"Okay...okay, boy. Enough fun and games...for now, eh?"

"Right, Comrade, brass tacks."

"Boy, you ain't know what yuh talkin' bout...is gold tacks!"

I laughed: "Sounds good to me, boss!"

He liked that...boss. I was on firmer footing now. The rubbish talk about women had given the breakthrough, although some of it was true. But it was an important topic to keep in mind when it comes to any future interactions with Lewis.

"Now, Steven, were you clear about the benefits that you will have if you join us in this fight to win the campus?"

"I don't want to get this wrong, so permission to recall some?"

"Sure, sure."

"I will assist the party wing on the campus by identifying the trouble-makers and opposition elements here. Having found them, I report directly to you."

"Correct!"

"I play a leadership role as far as the campus is concerned."

"Yes."

"I will have my expenses taken care of and win prizes upon graduation. I will also be assured of a scholarship to go abroad for studies, all expenses paid. I return upon completion of any degrees and serve the interests of the party and Comrade Leader."

"My safety on the campus is assured."

"Yes...but your safety outside is also assured, Steven," he said pointing to my forehead.

"Let me put it this way. If anyone hurts any one of our own, it will not end well for them. Inside or outside the campus. You get my meaning?"

"I gat ya, boss!"

"The future will be bright for you, Steven. I will personally make sure of that. My influence is not limited to this university campus. My reach is national. I have the ear of our Leader. If you play your cards right, your future will be bright. New car. House. Travel and studies. Money...lots of money. And power. You will hhave power."

"And these are rewards for my commitment to the Party, to Comrade Leader...and to you, of course." He was pleased by this last part...commitment to him.

After you prove your loyalty, we will give you a side arm for protection. There are times when that comes in useful. My man out there will train you in its use, of course."

"Thank you, Comrade. Thank you."

"You will be expected to report to me each week, clear?"

"Yes, Comrade. But may I suggest something."

He was interested. "Suggest anything."

"If I am to report to you every week, it should not be done here. It would be too obvious, I think. Maybe an off-campus place would be better. You will not be surprised by the number of prying eyes in this place, the gossip that goes on in and out of classrooms."

"Brilliant, Steven! Brilliant. We can meet in my office at the army base in the city. More discrete."

"The second suggestion, Comrade, with respect."

"Mmmhmm?"

"You need to do something about this office. The visual, for one, is bad. The back of the campus implies that your presence here is not legitimate, that you are almost hiding. But we all know that you have as much authority here as the Vice-Chancellor. Get an office that is more centrally located, I think."

He put his hands under his chin and thought for a minute.

"I like your thinking, Comrade, but you are wrong. This location allows me to operate outside of those prying eyes you were talking about. To make me more central would be to make our activities more visible, and that could prove problematic."

"Okay," I responded, "but yours is also an office where people can be persuaded to do the right thing. This office is too bare: it marks you as someone who is just an enforcer, and we both know that you are much, much more than that. At the very least, bring in some bookshelves and stock them with books. You

are a reading man, a learned man, not just some soldier in uniform, but an educated soldier in uniform."

"Now there's an idea, Comrade Steven. Excellent. Perception can be important. I promise you that by the end of this week, this office will be transformed. Good stuff!"

"I think I am clear about my general role, Comrade. Is there anything else that you will need for me to do?"

"Yes. There is a meeting of the student council next week. You will be there to listen to who is with us and identify who is not. Recommend corrective action to me. See how things go, make your sentiments known, and announce your candidacy."

"Got it, Comrade! Is there anything else?"

"Well, just two things. First, there is this: he removes an envelope from his desk drawer and pushes it towards me. This is just an incentive, just a small taste of what is to come."

The envelope was unsealed, and I peer inside. Money. Almost two thousand, I guessed.

"This is a lot, Comrade."

"This is the tip of a very large iceberg, Steven. Very large."

I put the envelope in my bag. I belong to them now. My path is now set and there is no backing out now—not without dire consequences anyway.

"One more thing, Comrade Steven. A woman left this for you at the gate on Saturday." He handed me the sealed letter. I recognised Rose's handwriting.

I hesitated, unsure if I was meant to open the note here and relay its contents to him."

"You don't have to read that now, Steve. Take your time. We will meet again next week. I want to know how your first meeting went."

"Thank you, Comrade. I stood almost at attention, and left the office."

The secretary was pleasant to me now. The big soldier gave me a wink of approval. He was on my side now. I felt good. On my way back to my car, I started to think about those people and the kick down the stairs. My revenge will be as sweet as it will be prolonged and final. I also realized with some surprise that my walk was different, with a new swagger. I was on a path where reversal was not possible, but where it led, I could not fathom.

I sat in the car for a while, then opened the envelope from Rose.

My *Dearest Steve*,

I was put out from what I thought was my home. I am staying at the Tropical Hotel in town. I'm in room 111. Please come and see me as soon as you can. We really do need to talk and I really want to see you.

Love,

Rose.

"My Dearest", "Love"? Maybe I ought not to be reading too much into this, but I cannot help but feel that she has been conquered. It is almost lunch time. I am flushed with money and more certain than ever of my own power. This note, it seems to me, to be a plea and an implied apology.

I leave the campus. The soldiers at the gate either waved or saluted. They know. I smiled. Suddenly, it is all falling into place. Yes, I have been bought, but who in this life has not been bought at some point or another? No, not bought, just rented. We all need to make compromises if we are to survive, must we not? This is a small and temporary compromise, and I will make up for it later. The people that deserve to be punished will be punished. Those that deserve to be helped will get help.

Right now, though, I must focus on this woman. I drive towards her slowly, carefully. I walked right by the receptionist with my new-found swagger. She looked at me, but made no attempt to stop me. I get to 111, knock softly, waited for a few seconds. The latch clicks, door opens, and there she is, all neatly dressed.

She did not even wait for me to enter, but rushed at me:

"Oh Steven! My sweet, sweet Steven," she blurts out, tears in her eyes. She kisses my face, my eyes, my lips. I keep my hands to my side.

"Hi, Rose. I'm glad to see you too," I said unconvincingly, I'm sure. But she was too moved, too emotional to notice. "Were you going out? You're all dressed up."

"No no, my dear. No. I was just going to lunch in the restaurant. Are you hungry? We can have lunch, or you want to come in for a while?" She was asking this while tugging me into the room.

"What do you want to do, Rose? It's up to you."

"I want what you want, Steven. Whatever you want," she breaths out, looking at me in the eyes, her face turned up to mine.

"I want to fuck you! That's what I want!"

I was pleased that she looked horrified. "Lock the door!" I commanded. She did, her back to me. I pushed her up against the door, hard. She was about to speak, but I put my hand over her mouth, turning her around to face me. And there it

was, the thing I wanted to see: fear. I saw fear, and I was excited by it. I torn her dress off, ripping the fabric from neck to her waist. She was wearing a black bra, black panties. I tore at the panties and threw her onto the bed.

"Please, Steven—please—"

I put my hand over her mouth again and forced her legs apart. I pushed myself into her. She grunted with pain. I pushed again, and she grunted again. I ripped off her bra and squeezed her breasts. She cried out:

"No, Steven, not like this, please—no—"

"Shut up, Rose!"

She tried to kiss me. I pulled my face away, pushing all of me into her. She whimpered. It must have been thirty minutes of this. Grunting and whimpering. Then I was spent. I got off her. She turned her back to me, sobbing, whimpering.

I wanted to say I'm sorry. I wanted to ask her to forgive me, to explain myself to her. I wanted to be gentle, to hold her in my arms and comfort her as I have done for the past few months. I lay on my back immobile, trying to get my arm to move to touch her shoulder, but I lay there frozen. The compassion and humility that I thought was part of my fundamental make-up lay curled in me, unmoving, as if broken in the breach. I felt that I was suffocating in a sea of tears. I could not surface. I was drowning. The tears overflowed and ran down the side of my face.

Instead of reaching out to Rose, I got up and dressed.

"I'll get us something to eat from the restaurant," I said in a stranger's callous voice. She still had her back to me, naked, still shivering, sobbing, sniffling.

I sought out the key to the room and took it with me. I ordered lunch from a waiter:

"How long will this take, Comrade?"

"About ten minutes or so, Sir." I looked at him, and he saw something in my eyes that caused him to change:

"I'm sorry, Comrade," he corrected himself. I nodded to accept his apology. He was an older man, his curly hair the colour of salt and pepper. He was from a time before we changed the way we, as an independent country, now addressed each other.

"Bring me a beer while I wait." He went off and returned with the beer. I was a non-drinking man, and the beer tasted bitter in my mouth.

"I can bring your meal to your room, Comrade."

"No. I'll take it myself. Don't bother yourself."

"As you wish, Comrade. Would you like anything to drink with your meal, Comrade?"

"Yes. Two cokes."

The meals and drinks came in a tray. I paid him and gave him a ten-dollar tip. The man looked at the tip in astonishment.

"Why, thank you Si—Comrade. This is very, very generous. Thank you," and gave a modest bow. I realized that this would be almost his entire salary for the month. Also, we in this country had not yet learned the politeness of tipping those that serve us.

"Don't worry about it, Comrade. You will see me here again."

"I look forward to it, Sir. I really do." I let the "sir" slip this time.

I took it to Room111.

She was sitting up, braced against the bedstead, a sheet drawn over her to the neck, her eyes wide and almost empty, her face very puffy. Her knees were drawn up to her chin. She looked quite unlike the composed, demure, pretty Rose I knew.

I smiled at her, and there was a flicker of recognition in her eyes, as if she recalled a memory.

"You must be hungry. Eat. I got lunch for you." Nothing. No movement.

"Well, whenever you're hungry, your lunch is there." I moved her plate of chicken chow mien onto the bed from the small desk. "I'll go ahead."

Still no movement. The restaurant had forgotten to put two sets of cutleries, so I took the only knife and fork and started to eat. I had my back to her for a few minutes, thought it was a bad idea to do so, and turned around. She was in the same position, unmoving, gazing, wide-eyed.

I got up and moved to the bed and picked up her plate:

"Eat!" I shouted, "Now!"

She took the plate and ate with her fingers, scooping up the food, pushed it into her mouth, then turned her hand over in her mouth as if the throw the food onto her tongue. I've never seen anyone eat like that. She scooped, turned, threw the food into her mouth almost continuously, hardly chewing.

"Good. Now you're being good."

I finished up my meal. She was finished before I was but still clutched the plate. I seized the plate from her hand and placed it atop mine on the small desk. She had returned to her posture: covered with a sheet from toes to neck; knees drawn up to her chin; hands folded around her lower leg.

"Now you go and shower. Take as long as you like, but leave the door open. You will feel better after your shower, and you will be fresh and nice." She did not move.

"Now!" I barked. She jumped, kept the sheet around her, and walked slowly to the bathroom. I waited for some thrity minutes and I could hear the shower still running. I went in it check and there she was sitting flat under the stream of water, the sheet still wrapped around her.

"What are you doing woman? Have you lost your damn mind? I reached to take the sheet away, but she clung to it fiercely. I slapped her at the back of her head, not too hard. She let go of the sheet.

"Now stand and take a proper shower!" She stood, the streaming water beating on her head. "Now use the soap and get clean and fresh. Gosh! Don't you think it's a bit too late to be concerned about your modesty? This is just stupid! Now hurry up!" With that, I yanked the sheet from her and dropped it on the floor of the bathroom. I sat on the bed and awaited her emergence. I thought of my new-found friend Comrade Lewis. When we chat next, I will tell him about this episode. He will laugh that full-bellied laugh of his. He will definitely approve. Together we will bend the entire campus to our will. I am confident of that.

She emerges, towel tightly wrapped around her. Eyes cast down, she moved towards on of her suitcases to clothe herself, I suppose. As she bent to open the case, I was seized by this need to break her again. More tales for Lewis, I thought.

"You," I growled, "Did I tell you to dress?"

She shook her head, eyes still fixed on the floor.

"Get into bed!" I commanded; my voice low. I imagine my voice to be militaristic. This is mere practise. She hesitates, slightly.

"Now!" I bark.

She climbs into the bed.

"Tell me something, girl. Who goes into bed with a wet towel? Who?"

"Remove the towel!" I instructed. Then I removed my clothes and lay beside her, both of us naked. I could feel her tense up expecting the same treatment she got earlier. I decided to change my approach. My end? My end, you ask? Well, since you asked so nicely, I will let you know. My intention was to achieve total submission, total, unquestioning obedience.

"Come close to me, girl." I held her shoulder and turned her entire body to face me. I put my arm under her head and embraced her. I put her head on my

chest and stroked her damp hair. If anyone were looking on, they would think it we were a couple cuddling lovingly. They would be making a dreadful mistake.

I spoke, almost tenderly:

"I know I've been pretty harsh with you. I know that, but I cannot apologise for my harshness. I also know that you miss your late husband and your two babies. I know, I know..."

At the mention of Joey and the two children—her loss—she started to sob, slowly at first, then she started to shudder as the grief or longing took hold, then she began to wail. I remained quiet for maybe five minutes. She needed to exorcise those ghosts so that I can have complete control. She must also severe all ties with those who are alive, for now: he idiotic family, for instance.

As her wailing continued, I held her more tightly, suggesting closeness and care and affection. Then I made the "sshhh...sshhh" sound that we use to comfort crying babies. She responded by lifting her face to look at me. I wiped the tears from her face and kissed her lightly on the forehead. Her eyes were starting to focus, the crying fading to almost a hiccup sound. I felt that she was now malleable.

"It would be a good beginning for you to not be called that name they gave to you. I do not want a woman who comes with thorns and who has any connection to people of very questionable character. I will let you know.

She nodded.

"Good girl...good girl." I uttered. She almost smiled. I looked for any sign of that cynicism that so often comes with an almost-smile. There was none. I smiled at my victory. I think of my strategy in terms of concentric circles, my expanding sphere of influence, my billowing power. This thing with this woman is the innermost circle, domestic, if you wish. Then the university, then outward to national, encircling the nation itself. But first, this.

"Your name from now on will be Raina. That is the name You shall call yourself, that I shall call you, and the name by which you will be known. Got it, Raina?"

She nods. "Do you like it?" She nods again. I am fully aware that she has not uttered a word since I forced her onto the correct path.

"You may speak. Say 'Yes, dear, it's nice.'"

She nods again. I grab her face and squeeze it.

"Yes, yes, dear. It is very nice." She mutters. I keep squeezing her face.

"I-I love it."

"Good, good. I am happy you love it, Raina." She kisses my chest.

"From now on, Raina is mine. But, of course, I will call you by whatever name I want. I will sometimes call you my bitch or my slut or my whore, and you will still love it. Understood?"

"Yes, my dear. I love it all. All."

"Who owns you, Raina?"

"You own me. You!"

"Remember that. I own you. You are my property. Right?"

"Yes, my dear. I love it that I am your property. I am yours, you own me."

This arouses me, and I move her hand to feel my growth, my fullness. She looked up at me, her eyes liquid.

"Go down and show me how much you love all of it." She goes down and does what I enjoy. She looked up at me for approval. I smile, "Good girl. You're a good bitch, Raina." She groaned with the effort. She wanted to please me, and I am pleased. The sex was different from the earlier punishment, and she responded as I knew she would. She showed pleasure with enthusiasm.

We were both exhausted. She drew close, her legs draped over mine, her arm around me, her head on my shoulder. As I was drifting off to sleep, I said:

"Listen. I have money, and I will take you shopping for new clothes tomorrow. A new you with a new name, with a new owner, with new clothes to please me."

"Are you sure you have money, my dear?"

"I'm sure, Raina. I'm certain." What she said next surprised me:

"I have money too, and I know that what I have is yours."

"Okay, Raina. I will permit that. We will talk later when we return from shopping."

And we fell asleep. It was the first time in our relationship that we had spent the night together. I slept restively, awakening every hour or so, sitting on the bed, thinking. I look down at her prone, sleeping body, asleep from exhaustion, I suspect. This is nice, I thought, but it is not to be mistaken for some idea of domesticity. Not for me. I will keep her as long as I need to, as long as she serves whatever purpose I deem that she is to serve. I also think of my impending meeting of candidates. There will be many of my fellow students there, and Lewis will have his spies. He did say that I am to listen, learn, then announce my candidacy, but there were no instructions as to how to go about this or what to say. This in itself is a test as to how I will conduct myself, and I must take time to prepare. Of course, Comrade Lewis is sure of himself and thanks to my appeal to his sense of lewdness, he has no idea of my own ambition. He will never know that until it is too late.

Chapter Twenty

My sleep from three to seven is unbroken, and when I opened my eyes, she is sitting up in bed looking down at me. She is smiling down at me:

"What?" I asked through clenched teeth, not wanting any bad breath to escape my mouth.

"Nothing. It's just that you look so peaceful when you're asleep."

"Hmmm." I respond. There is no need to open my mouth to make that sound. I smile back. I get out of bed and rush to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I have no toothbrush, so I use hers. It is an intimate thing that, using someone else's toothbrush. It is like using someone else's towel, intimate. I've never done that before, use someone's toothbrush or towel.

As I brush, I think of those many scenes we see in movies in which couples awaken from sleep and chat and kiss without brushing. I always wondered at it. Don't they have bad breath? Maybe white folks don't, maybe it's just us. I grimace at my own image in the mirror.

I go back to bed, my mouth now ready to be opened:

"Good morning, Raina."

"Good morning, my dearest. I hope you slept well."

"Yes, I did. Got up a few times, but that not unusual for me."

"But you got some sleep."

"Yes, yes I did. We will drag on some clothes and go down for breakfast."

"Okay, dear. But no shower?"

"What did I say, Raina? Drag on some clothes and down for breakfast. Did I say 'shower'?"

She straightened and got herself into some clothes, applied some powder on her face and neck, brushed her hair, and was ready.

I got into my clothes from yesterday, and we went down to the restaurant. It was almost deserted. There was one man in a corner table, fresh shirt and tie, knife and fork, eating toast and two boiled eggs, and bacon. He was reading the local propaganda sheet we called a newspaper. I thought he may be someone here for business. The way he used the cutlery made me think that he was from America. Knife in right hand, fork in left, cut into an egg, dropped the knife, transferred the

fork to the left, and scooped up the egg with the fork in the right hand as the knife lay abandoned on the plate. Then he grabbed the bacon with his fingers and bit it in half with a crunch. This was a crude man, the kind who will take money over morals without a moment's hesitation.

There was another couple, grey-haired, plump. The man wore a shirt-jack that our president had decreed to be our national dress. His heavy jowls and considerable paunch showed that he was well-fed. His wife, equally fattened, was more refined. Her hair was nicely braided, with beads, her face kind. They were connected, these folks...party people.

I chose a table from which I can see them. To get to me chosen table, I had to walk by the table with the couple. I was sure to say "Good morning, Comrade" as I walked by, Raina in tow. The woman looked up and smiled and returned my "Good morning, comrade." The man nodded.

We assumed our seats, mine to the wall so that I may observe the whole dining area. Raina had her back to everyone and everything. She can observe me. The couple arose to return to the counter to have their plates refilled. They did that several times before we had finished our breakfast.

As soon as we were seated, the receptionist that I had tipped appeared. With some ceremony and in a voice loud enough for the room: "A very good morning to you, Comrade. Welcome. What will you have this morning?"

I smiled: "Good morning, Comrade. I'll have two sunny-side up, two toast, coffee with cream and sugar, and orange juice. Thank you."

He turned to Raina who gazed at me. I said: "She'll have the same, thanks Comrade." She sighed in relief.

The receptionist-turned waiter said, just loud enough: "I shall be sure to have fresh-squeezed orange juice for you, Comrade."

The production had the desired effect on the audience of three. The crude fellow put down his oil-stained newspaper and looked more closely, trying to read the situation. The plump couple put their heads closer together, whispering conspiratorially, occasionally glancing across to my table.

It was not difficult to guess at their thinking. Who is the chap? He's too young to be a "big one"; maybe he's the son of an important government man? He's the wrong colour, but there are some Portuguese who are close to the Comrade Leader.

The receptionist returns with a tray and sets out our breakfast with some flair and an airy:

"Enjoy, Comrade."

I glanced at Rose—Raina—and smiled at the quizzical look upon her face. I smiled at my own joke: Ah! The power of a generous tip! I dug into my breakfast with relish.

I paused and looked across at her.

"Okay. You can ask." She shook her head.

"You have my permission to ask, Raina!"

"Okay dear. Please tell me what's going on. I'm curious. Please."

I laugh out loudly, almost aggressively.

"Finish your breakfast. I will tell you in the room."

"Okay dear."

I had finished my meal, and she was but half-done. I became impatient:

"I said to finish your breakfast! Are you hard of hearing?" I growled quietly. She began to quiver, but put her head down and wolved down the food. She was not yet done, but I got up to leave. She got up quickly, still chewing, and followed me out of the dining area. I employed my new swagger. As I passed the ample couple, I said:

"Enjoy! Have another serving by all means." I smiled down at them.

We passed by the receptionist on the way to the room, and I slipped him a twenty-dollar note.

He smiled but stuttered: "You don't have to, Comrade. It was my—

I cut him off by putting my index finger over my lips. He snapped to attention. I turned back to see if she had noticed. She did.

I used her key to open the door. She followed me in.

"I'm sorry to be so slow, my dear."

I raised my hand as if to slap her, and she cowered, covering her face.

"You must obey me, When I tell you to do something—anything—you do it quicky and without argument. That is what is required of you, understood?" I was barking.

"I will. I will obey, I promise. I swear."

"I hope so, Raina. For your sake, I hope you obey." The tears started to well up in her brown eyes.

I know she expects to be hit. I grab her behind the neck and pull her to me, and I kiss her on the forehead. She looks up at me, almost with gratitude. She smiles and grabs me around the waist, hugging me with all her might, her head against my chest. I allow this for almost a minute, then gruffly:

"Okay. Okay. Enough of this huggy-huggy stuff. You and shower and dress. We will go shopping for dresses for you."

She instantly releases me and heads for the bathroom. I sat on the bed and pondered my plan for the day. Having settled upon a rough plan, I went into the bathroom and got a towel, came out again, and stripped. I sat on the bed again, waiting. For one thing, I will not use my car.

She eventually came out, wrapped in a white towel.

"Choose a dress and get ready."

"Yes, my dear."

I showered quickly, dried off, and went into the room. I was loath to wear the same clothes again, but there was no choice. Raina was dressed. She went into the bathroom again to apply some powder upon her face and lipstick. It was tasteful, I admitted begrudgingly. She came out, her arm spread wide, modelling, awaiting my approval.

"Very nice," I said, "Come here."

She came close, "Raise your dress." She did, up to her thighs.

"Higher, I want to see your panties." She obeyed.

"Closer," I ordered. She came close, I felt up her legs and pulled down her underwear. She raised each foot for me to get it off.

"Do you want me to wear another one, dear? Does this not please you? I will get another if you like."

"No," I responded, "no panties at all."

"But..." I looked sharply at her. She stopped. She was going to object. She would never have gone out in public without underclothes.

I brushed my hand lightly against her public hair. It was thick, curly. She looked at me and ran her tongue over her lips.

"You want, huh?"

"If you do, then I do. I want to please you. Always."

I liked that. She was pliant, obedient. I unzipped my trousers and exposed my member, held her head, and pulled her to it. She did what she had learned, what she had learned only last night. Then I turned her around and took her from behind. I pushed hard. She grunted. I satisfied myself.

"Did I do well, dear?"

"Yes," I breathed. "Now wipe me off and go get cleaned up. She followed instructions. "Be quick!"

She returned and put on her pair of flat black shoes.

"Don't you have other shoes? One with some heels?"

"Yes, dear. I have a black, red, beige."

"The black pair with heels."

"Anything to please you. You are my life, always."

I nodded. "Good girl."

I made sure the room was locked, and we went out of the hotel into the mid-morning sun. There was a set of taxis there, all the drivers outside their vehicles, hustling passengers. Then I noticed one driver who was in his driver's seat. He was reading a book, seeming to pay no attention to anything except to whatever he was reading. My choice! A reader, no less. One expects to see teachers reading, students reading, any professional person worth anything should be reading. Not cops nor soldiers, nor cane-cutters, not taxi drivers. But here we are, a reading taxi driver.

I pointed this out to Raina and we moved to the car.

"Good day, Comrade," I say cheerily, "you free?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Good. I take it that you know the town well and can take me around for the rest of the day, maybe until six or so."

"Yes, Sir. Born and bred here. And I am at your pleasure for as long as you need me."

I get into the front passenger's seat and she gets in the back.

"What's your name?"

"Monty…my name is Monty," he says pleasantly. He is thin, wiry, middle-aged, greying hair, glasses. His fingernails are well clipped.

"Okay, Monty. How much would you charge to take us around town for the day. There are times when you will have to wait though."

"Anything you and the missus need, Sir. I am at your service."

"How much?"

"I am sure you will be fair, Sir. Give me whatever you think is right."

"Okay. The usual Guyanese thing…and we end of giving you more than we should."

He laughs. I liked him immediately.

"Where to first, Sir?" He is insisting on "sir".

"Take us to be best female beauty shop first. Hair cut, make-up, that stuff."

"Right away. I know the perfect place." And off we went. Monty was a cautious driver, and I appreciated that. And he certainly knew the city. He stopped at the

beauty salon (they got the spelling right—too many places boast of being "beauty saloons—so that gave me some confidence.

"Do you mind if I accompany you for a minute, Sir? I know these people and want to insist that you and the missus be given the best treatment possible."

"That would be great, Monty. Thank you, but stop calling her my 'missus., please. She is with me, but not my missus."

I could see her embarrassment, but no real reaction.

"Of course, Sir."

We went into the salon. It was clean, with the usual "beauty chair", wash bay, hair blowers, and other paraphernalia.

Monty spoke to one of the girls:

"Hey Marie. How yuh doing, girl? Where Alice. I gat special customers fuh she."

"She at de back, Monty. Me gon bring she."

She went to the back, and within a minute, Alice breezed in. She was a big girl, pretty and pleasant. Monty introduced us:

"Alice, this is my special customer. He brought miss here for a do-over."

"Sir, this is Alice. She owns and operates this place. You are in the best hands in town."

"How can I help you, Sir?"

"Nice to meet you Alice. I want you to make my girl here as pretty as you can. Cut the hair, to start with. Close cut, just over or above the ears. Hair just over the forehead."

"Would it be helpful if I show you some pictures?"

Yes. Yes, good idea."

"Come here, Raina. Let's take a look. She obeyed, having been almost ignored all this while. We flipped the pages of a binder of white women. One with blond hair caught my eye.

"This! This is it. What do you think?" I asked, turning to Raina.

"I love it dear. Just love it." She has learned what to say.

"Make her like this, but not blonde." I laughed. They all laughed dutifully. Raina giggled, putting her fingers over her mouth. I wanted her again.

"Oh Alice, light make up. Manicure and Pedicure too. The works."

"You wish is my command, Sir."

I liked the deference. And when Raina looked at me, the pride she felt was obvious. Her man was the one with the power is what she was thinking. Her owner.

"How long will this take, Alice? I have a few things to do, so I will leave her with you. How long?"

"About two, maybe two and a half hours."

"Okay. Raina, Alice will take care of you. I'll be back as quickly as I can."

"Yes, dear. As you wish."

I was going to ask how much this would cost, but thought better of it. Big ones never ask about price. They just pay.

"Okay, Monty. Let's go."

We jump into Monty's car and I tell him to take me to James Street, Kitty. We arrive, and I tell him I'll be fifteen minutes or so. This lower flat, two-bedroom place is my rental. I grab a small suitcase and begin to pack. I needed suddenly to sit. I am stricken with an inexplicable doubt, self-questioning.

Two days. In two days, I have changed into something unrecognizable: violent, crude, power-hungry, craven, callous. I have never been those things. But if it took just one kick and one meeting with Lewis to bring these things out in me, then those things must have always been there, lurking behind a veneer of civility and decency, even honour. I have been treacherous to Joey's memory, but he is dead. I am saving his wife by making her my own. It is a kind of rescue from her grief and from those assholes in that house. They will pay. Of that I am certain. I admit to myself that I have just tasted power. I love it already. Two days of it, and I am its willing hostage, like Rose is my willing hostage. I love it. Love. Love.

It seems as though the truth of my confession of love of my new self was made, a vision of my malignancy was revealed. The university was the mere first step. I will control that campus politically. Soon, Comrade Lewis—used judiciously—will need to make appointments to see me. He will appear and disappear at my pleasure and convenience. I will be shown the appropriate deference by administrators, lecturers and students alike. I will move with the speed of a poisonous serpent. And this will just be the start of my rise.

I snap out of my reverie soon enough and pack the suitcase quickly. Toothbrush and toothpaste, briefs, sleeping clothes, cologne, hair brush, two shirts and trousers, and other things that I think are necessitates. I count the money—the pittance in relative terms—that Lewis has given me. I say relative because for a senior secondary school teacher, two thousand dollars is four times his monthly salary, a fortune; to the political leader, it is mere pocket change. I have not spent much, but I need to be much more careful since I have no idea when a new inflow will come

and from what source. There will be some spending today, of course, but I will try to spend as little as I can.

It occurs to me that Raina and I can move in to my small place, that instead of taking my suitcase there, I should be bringing her stuff here. Yet, there is the appearance of things. If you act big, you must appear to live well, and this place does not fit the bill. I could lose my absolute control of Raina, and that could result in the failure of my initial experiment in dominance. It's a gamble, I conclude.

I take the suitcase to Monty's car. He sees me and immediately exits the car and takes the suitcase from me and places it in the trunk.

"Thanks, Monty."

"Don't worry about that, Sir. This is my job. I try to do it well."

I am pleased by this, this dedication to one's profession, even if that job has been foisted upon you or taken on because it is something you want to do. How many teachers teach because they are called to it, for instance? It is about motive, really. Money and power are obscene motives, but they are the most frequent ones. My own motives are impure, and I know it. But the end of acquiring money and power (and I mean power in all areas: domestic, school, university, job, community, nation) will enable me to reward the good and punish the bad.

"Okay, Monty. Let us go to a store where I can get some shirts for myself."

"Right you are, Sir."

"And Monty..."

"Yes, Sir."

"How much do I owe you for the day? What would be a fair amount?"

"Oh Sir. I don't know. Anything you say is fair will be fair to me."

"How about five dollars? Is that fair?"

"It is fair, Sir," he responds, his eyes fixed upon the road. He seems disappointed.

"Okay, Monty. Five it is." I have every intention of giving him ten. I know that I will have uses for him in the day or weeks to come.

We drive to a clothing shop, and I buy three shirt-jacks to wear to my student union meetings. I must dress the part of the party man, after all. I but one white, one blue, one beige. I also get six handkerchiefs. I also buy two pairs of shoes, one black, one brown.

We drove back to the hair dresser's salon. It was already two hours, but I dawdled for a few minutes outside. I looked at people, trying to read their personalities from the way they carried themselves. Of course, I paid much closer

attention to the girls. The men were easy to assess. Men almost always are: the would-be bright boy; the would-be tough guy; the would-be sweet man or dandy; the would-be con-man or thief, neat and easy. Except for the last one, the rest will invariably end up to be failures at whatever they want to do or be.

The women were a different kettle of fish. In five to ten minutes, there were several that passed me by as I leaned against Monty's car, my arms folded. They were of many ethnic groups: the Indian girl, clutching her purse, timid; the African, self-assured, daring; the Amerindian, quick, keen; the Portuguese, wearing her superiority as if it were part of her wardrobe; the odd Chinese, quick-stepping, busy, thin. And then the various mixtures, the ones that I found most attractive. Almost without exception, they were pretty, graceful, bronze, desirable. Many of them made eye contact with me, a suggestive and welcoming smile playing at the corners of their lips. In response, I nodded or winked. Monty was there but six feet from me, in an almost at-ease position. My man-servant/bodyguard/chauffeur prop. Were I not so singularly focussed on my task, I would have had female company for the next few weeks.

I turned to Monty and nodded that we should go in. Alice and her girls were just putting the finishing touches on Raina. Her back was to me, and I caught only a quick glance of her in the mirror. Alice noted my arrival with her smile that was more triumphant than winsome. Alice reached out her hand, open-palmed, and reached it out as would a footman would so that a royal person may step out of a horse-drawn carriage. Raina put her hand into Alice's and arose from the chair. Raina turned around to face me. My mouth fell open. She was a vision, a beauty such as I have never before seen. I felt the breath leave my body, my eyes widened involuntarily. This was not Rose at all, not the woman that I've known for almost two years now. This was Raina, my queen, my property. She beamed at my reaction, then blushed with all the shyness of a new untouched bride.

Her hair was cropped short, just over her ears, her perfected rounded skull shown to full advantage. There was a slight, sloping bang over her forehead. The subtle make-up heightened her cheek bones. The lipstick was of a light pink, the nails an identical pink. The mascara was of a bluish hue that stood in relief to the slight eye pencil around her eyes. Her eyes glistened, she was radiant.

I absorbed it all with the thirst of a desert for a slight rain. It was minutes before I found movement, voice.

"Lovely. Just lovely. You have done well, Alice. Really well."

Raina moved in small steps to me, and it was with some effort that I dragged my mind away from devouring her.

"I want to fuck you right now," I had put mouth as loosely as I can.

"Why don't we go back and do the shopping tomorrow, my love?"

"Monty, we heading back to the hotel now. We will postpone shopping for tomorrow."

"Very well, Sir."

He held the back door open for Raina and seemed to hesitate closing the door. I took this as a sign that I should get in with her. I did. We were back at the hotel in short order, and he stopped directly in front of the entrance.

"Should I bring up the luggage, Sir?"

"Yes, please, Monty. Should I pay you now or leave that for tomorrow."

"You do not have to worry about that, Sir. Tomorrow will be fine."

"You sure? I could well go missing tomorrow, you know."

He laughed: "Some people do just that, Sir. You are not those people. You are different. You are a classy person."

Raina and I walked to the room with Monty in tow with the luggage. "Just leave it at the door. I'll take it in."

"Are yu sure, Sir—

"I'm sure. I'll see you at 11 tomorrow morning."

"I'll be there, Sir. No worries."

I unlocked the door and fetched the luggage in. I dropped the luggage and looked at Raina again. In the car, I had run my fingertips up her legs. She quivered like a bird under my fingertips. I touched the hair in her middle. She shivered, the goosebumps obvious.

She came up close to me, her face lifted to mine. I ran my hand lightly over her hair, held her chin and kissed her on the mouth. She returned the kiss with a new passion. Then she turned her back to me and braced against my front. She could feel my arousal.

"Will you hurt me, my love? Please do not hurt me more than you have to, please. I want more than everything in the world to please my man. Please you."

"Then show me how you want to please me."

She got to her knees and unzipped my trousers, removing my full self. She took some of it in her mouth, as I looked down at her lovely head. She gazed up at me, "Do you like that, my darling?"

"Yes…yes, I do. Do you like it Raina?"

She stopped, looked up at me, "It is big. Really big. When you give it all it pains. It hurts. Make it smaller, can you?"

"I'll try," I lie. I was getting more excited.

"I want to hear your pain. That pleases me greatly."

She removes her dress and bra and goes into the bed. She covers her nakedness with a sheet, freshly changed. She turns upon her tummy. I undress and join her. Her face is turned away from me.

"Look at me Raina. Let me look at you." She turns her face to me. "You look wonderful. Beautiful. Brand new. I feel that I'm in bed with a virgin, shy and scared but uncertain of what she knows will come. I love it, my sweet thing."

"I feel brand new. I am your virgin. And I am shy and terrified. I cannot contain all of that." She nods to my erection under the sheets. I remove the sheet from her upper body and brush my fingertips over her spine. She writhes and quivers. I am barely touching her. I run my fingertips over her lower back, she moans. Reach between her legs; it is very moist. I kiss her back, sitting astride her: more moans, louder moans.

"Oh God! God!" she screams into the pillow.

"No. Do not hide your face. I want to hear you. Your sound, all of it."

"I have never ever felt like this. Never ever."

I turn her over and kiss her breasts. It is the first time that she has allowed that. Her back comes off the bed. I make love to her, slowly, gently, never thrusting myself fully into her. I tell her to climb on me. She does. She rides, screaming as she reaches her climax too many times to count.

"Oh God! What is this? I love you! Love! Love!! I love—then she falls forward, her head hitting my nose hard.

"Raina! Rose! Raina! You okay?" I push her off and rush to the bathroom. I soak a small towel and wipe her face. Slowly, she comes to. She smiles up at me:

"What happened? I fainted?"

"Yes, you fainted. It's okay now though. Rest a bit."

"Ok. I want to please you, only you. You own me, you know."

"Rest now. We will continue this after you rest a bit." She turned on her side, her face to me. I got her a bottled water, and she sipped it slowly. Her face and lips and nostrils were all puffy from the effort, the strain. She was dozing. I pulled on my clothes and rushed from the room to see if I could get some Coca-Cola and ice.

Thankfully, my friend the receptionist was there. I bade him a quick "good day, Comrade" and asked him if he could have six small bottles of Coca-Cola and a bucket of ice to our room.

"Right away, Comrade."

I returned to the room. Raina was still snoozing. Within minutes, there was a quiet knock on the door. The receptionist had brought the drinks and ice. I took them, gave him some money, thanked him and shut the door.

I poured half of a bottle of the dark, fizzy drink into a glass filled with lots of ice. I woke her up and had her sit up. She drank the entire glass and asked for more. I poured the rest of the drink from the bottle. She quaffed that.

She giggled her girlish giggle and said, "I was really thirsty."

"Yes, you were. You were dehydrated, I think. And the hard physical activity caused you to pass out. Okay, you lay back and relax. I'll have a shower. I have your juices all over me." I smile.

She giggles again, "I'm sorry, my love. I'm—"

I cut her off: "Don't you apologize for this. It was worrying, but you were truly new. I loved it, being the first."

"And the last, my love. The last, I swear. No one else will ever touch me. Ever. I swear it. I swear to God." She is serious. I believed her.

"I hope not Raina. For both our sakes. Remember that you swore to be obedient. Never forget that." The fear was still there, as it should be. I could see it return behind her eyes. I decided to back off a bit.

"But you relax. We're not done yet. We will enjoy your newness some more."

She smiled again, with relief.

I retire to the bathroom and showered. As I was drying off, I realized that we did not have lunch. That may have contributed to her fainting spell. Of course, I preferred the delusion that she was new, virginal, untouched.

I exit the bathroom, the almost white hotel tower around my waist. She was up and seated on the bed. I told her about our not having had lunch:

"Do you want me to have lunch brought up or should we go to the dining area?"

"Well, I don't know. Whatever you want is what I want."

"Okay then. Get yourself up and shower, we'll go to the restaurant. Do not get your hair wet. And do not wash off your make-up. Refresh your lipstick."

"Yes, Sir!" She answered almost with mockery, I thought. I moved threateningly to her.

"I did not mean it like that. I promise. It was respect, not rudeness. I'm sorry."

"You need to be careful when you address me, girl. You know full well the consequences of any shit coming from you."

"I am sorry, my darling, my love, my beloved. I'm sorry. Never again. Never."

"That's better, Raina. Much better. I do not want to be angry with you. Just be obedient and respectful."

"May I go and shower now, dear? Now that you point it out, I am hungry."

"On with it then. Chop, chop!"

She hops out of bed and heads for the shower. Finished, she goes to one of her suitcases, then stops abruptly.

"Which dress, my love?" She holds up two, one pink, one blue.

"The pink."

"Okay. Panties or no?" She asks coyly, suggestively.

"No. You're with me."

She comes up to me and kisses me on my neck.

"One day, you will know how much I love you. I will do anything for you. Anything at all."

"That's good, my Raina. Remember that always."

"Of course I will. You know I do not break promises."

"Okay. Let's go, we can talk over lunch."

We head out to the dining area. It is empty. I order chicken chow mien and tell her she should have the same. She nods.

"I can eat a horse, my love," she says, matter-of-factly. I laugh.

"I will not slaughter a horse for you, Raina!" She breaks out into a bubbly laughter. It has been a long time since I heard her laugh like that. She still looks lovely, girlish even.

"You sound happy, Raina. Are you happy?"

She was chewing, but she glanced up from her plate and nodded vigorously, "Mmmhhmmm."

I laugh, "Don't choke now. Chew and swallow."

I continue, "Listen. I have some money, but it is going quickly. We'll put our meals on the room tab and pay when we leave."

"Can I say something?" She asks, timidly.

"Sure, Ask away."

"We have never spoken about money before, and I'm glad we are talking about it now. I am glad that you have money, but I too have money. What I have is yours, of course. I will certainly pay for it all if you allow me."

"Where is your money, Raina?"

"Well, I have about two thousand with me. It's in the room in one of the suitcases. I will give it to you when we go back."

"Good. And the rest?"

"In the bank, my love. It's safe. Don't worry your bright head with that."

"I know you mean well, my sweet, but you cannot tell me what and what not to worry about! Understood?"

"Of course, my love. I'm sorry. What I have is yours, you know that. I am yours."

"I'm glad you understand. When the bill comes, you will sign for it and book it to the room."

"Yes, my love."

I was suddenly impatient. "Are you finished?"

"I am. I cannot eat more."

"Good. I want to fuck you!"

She dropped her fork and was up before I was. We walked quickly to the room, passing the receptionist.

"All is well, Comrade?"

"All is well. We'll tend to the bill this evening, Comrade," but we did not slow down. My clothes were off before we hit the bed, before she had time to remove the dress. I was on my back. She raised up her dress and sat on me. She was moist, but eased me into her. I pushed in, hard. She screamed for the pain:

"God!! Fuck me!! It's so big...fuck me with it!" I obliged. Again she had multiple orgasms, screaming, swearing, begging, crying, calling for God. She was sweating, saliva streaming down her chin. It was endless. I did not want her fainting again, so I pushed her off and shoved her onto her back, satisfying myself.

We lay there exhausted. I was breathing hard; she was gasping for air. It took her a while to find words:

"I did not know it could be like this. I never ever thought it could be like this. I'm in heaven, my Steven. Seventh heaven."

It occurred to me that this was the first time she had called my name in days. She turned on her tummy and placed her chin on my chest, looking up at me.

"I was never this selfish, was I? But all I want to do is to please you, to do whatever you tell me to do. I will serve you for the rest of my life. I love you. I love you."

"I love you too, Raina." I knew I was lying through my teeth, but I had triumphed. This conquest was final.

"I have an idea, my darling. You want to hear it?"

"Sure. Speak."

"You told Monty we'll go dress shopping for me tomorrow. First, I'd like for us to go to the bank. My account will now be our account. Ours. Is that okay with you, my love?"

"It's okay with me, Raina," I said readily.

"Oh!" And with that exclamation, she jumped on the bed, hopped a few times and jumped off, rushing naked to her suitcases. She dug into one and excavated an envelope. This will pay for all our expenses easily. She gave me the envelope.

"See? I keep my promises to you."

"That's a good thing. It must continue."

"It will, I promise. You tell me to jump into the river and I'll do it."

"Maybe I will. Maybe, but not now." I laughed. She giggled.

She had no idea. None. I almost felt pity for her, but I was beyond feeling pity now. Pity was before the kick, the humiliation.

Chapter Twenty-One

We dozed off. When I finally stirred, it was already dark. Raina was still sound asleep. I did not bother to awaken her. I felt all sticky around my middle and upper legs, so I went under the shower. Afterwards, I put on some clothes, took the envelope she had given me and put it deep into my suitcase. I went into the dining area and ordered tea.

I needed this time alone to think, plan or re-plan. The kick down the stairs, my garrulous meeting with Lewis, my breaking her spirit until her subservience was assured. Tomorrow, it's the bank and shopping. I wondered how much she had in the bank. It had to be a few thousand dollars, at least. Five, six? That will be needed soon. I felt comfortable in terms of money, but there can never be enough of that. By tomorrow, I will know precisely her financial state. She knows absolutely nothing of mine. And it will remain that way.

My thoughts turn to the Student Union meeting next week. I cannot afford to play that by ear. I must chart out how I will need to conduct myself. I know that I cannot simply sit there and merely absorb what was being said, as Lewis instructed. I must make an impression, to persuade people that I can and will lead. I must also convince students that I will be serving their interests while at the same time making clear to the Party people that I am loyal to them and the Leader above all else. Fine line, indeed. My true intentions must be concealed at all cost.

"Good evening, Comrade. You are quite late tonight." The voice of the hotel receptionist breaks into my reverie. So much for peace and quiet, I thought, but I answered pleasantly:

"Good evening, Comrade. Yes, a bit late. I nodded off in the afternoon and lost track of time. How are you faring on this good evening?"

"As good as I can be, Comrade. As good as I can be."

"It is the best that one may hope for, eh? And how is the family, if I may ask?"

"They are well, Comrade. My eldest is in high school and my daughter is now in first form. They are doing very well, although the boy is already being distracted by the girls," he says with pride. "My wife teaches in a primary school and is nearing retirement age. Like most people, money is scarce…which is why I work long hours. I'm not complaining, mind you, but it takes time away from the family. But we do

go to church each and every Sunday as a family. That keeps us all close to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and to each other.

"I understand, Comrade. The children need guidance to navigate a world that can be quite cruel. They need their father."

"Oh, listen. I need to settle the bill from yesterday's late lunch. Would it be too much trouble to ask for that now? And I'd like two cheese rolls and two pine-tarts , if you can get them to do that. I will have one here with tea and three to take back to the room."

"I will get that for you in quick order, Comrade." He marched away to do as I asked. Within minutes, he brought back the bill and pastry, one on a saucer and three wrapped. I signed the Room number and scribbled by initials.

"Wonderful, Comrade." I peel off twenty dollars and gave it to him.

"Comrade," he says with a voice thick with gratitude, "You have been the most generous guest we've had here for a long, long time. More than generous."

"Thanks, Comrade. I know that these are trying times. And what price can we pay for efficiency these day?"

"If I may ask, Comrade, how long will you be with us?"

"I have not quite made up my mind on that count, but at least until tomorrow night. I do not foresee getting what I have to get done before that. But, do not worry, I shall be sure to let you know. You have been very very kind to me."

"Thank you, Comrade. Sometimes all we need is some appreciation for what we do. And you have more than shown appreciation. I certainly hope that we see each other again."

"I am sure we will, even if I have to drop by to say hello to you."

"Ah! I would love that. And I'll be sure to get the girls to clean up your room, change the sheets, and put in fresh towels."

"Thanks, Comrade. I'll be down for breakfast in the morning."

"I'll be here at around 8:30. It will be my pleasure to serve you. Good night, Comrade. Sleep well."

"You too, my friend. You too."

This is a good chap, I thought. He will vote for the Party always. No matter how hard life is under this government, black people will vote for a black leader, especially one with the charisma as Comrade Leader. Indian will always vote for an Indian leader. That fact has always been and will always be the undoing of this country. And when there is poverty—and there is much of that here—they flock to church or temple or mosque, hoping to get help from some invisible source. And

because I belong to neither group, I will not be subjected to suspicion of racism. My name and complexion will make me seem neutral, independent of ethnic ties. The economic hardships are made much worse because of the blatant corruption in the Party. My moral corruption will be an advantage as I climb the ladder.

I finish off the pastry and tea and headed back to the room. Raina was in exactly the same position as when I left. I brought back the pastry in case she awakens and is hungry. She can have that with the soft drinks that are still there. She will, I am sure, interpret this to mean that I care about her deeply. Women always invest the greatest significance to the least meaningful gestures.

I strip and went back to bed. I drift off to sleep thinking about five or six thousand dollars in the bank. My fortune.

Chapter Twenty-Two

My eyes quint open to see her face hovering over mine. She was running her fingers through my hair.

"Good morning, my dearest."

"Good morning," I respond, smiling.

She had already showered and sweet-smelling, dressed in one of my tee-shirts. I kiss her hand and hurry off to the bathroom to brush my teeth. When I return, she was bracing against the bedstead, a pillow supporting her back. She had settled on a laughably suggestive pose: arms behind her head; tee-shirt drawn up just enough to reveal partially her red underwear, her legs tightly crossed. I smile widely at the thought that she must have tried several poses and settled on this as the most seductive.

"My, my," I say, "someone is up early and looking as lovely as ever."

"All for you, my love. Thank you soooo much for getting the pastry for me. I had two and left one for you, just in case you are hungry. You are the most considerate man in the world. I love it."

She stretches out her arms, and I go to her to be embraced and cuddled against her breasts. I am hungry.

I remain in her embrace for a while and then pointed to my watch:

"It's almost 8:30 dear. We should go for breakfast, dress, and off to the day's adventure."

"Yes, of course, my heart. But the adventure begins at the bank. Is that okay with you?"

"It is okay with me." I control my desire to ask her about the amount of money in the bank. Soon enough, I thought.

"You know, Raina, tonight will be our last night here. We will move in to my place. I will save quite a bit of money, and I am sure our diet will be much healthier. The place is small, but you can make it comfortable."

"Yes, my love. If you decide, then the decision is made. You are right, as usual. Every place needs a woman's touch. I will please you in all ways. Maybe we can go later today and see what will be needed to make it a nice place for us. A home until we have our own house and home as husband and wife."

"We'll see about that. Let's see how the day goes. One way or the other, though, I've decided that this will be our last night here." I was evasive because I was alarmed by this husband-and-wife nonsense. Where the hell did she get such an idea?

"One step at a time, Raina. Understood?" I say this gently but with the realization that "understood" will remind her of being too forward. And it worked.

"I did not mean to overstep, my love. Forgive me. Forgive me? Please?"

"Okay. Now get dressed while I shower."

"Which dress would you like me to wear, love?"

"Wear the pink one. And wear underwear." Then to bring some levity, I said:

"I would not want to get excited in a clothing store…or the bank." She laughed loudly and slapped me gently on the shoulder.

"You are a naughty, naughty boy."

I laugh and went off into the shower. We go for breakfast. Raina has only coffee, while I have a wholesome breakfast. My receptionist is there, as usual. We greet each other as usual.

Raina spent the whole time looking at me and smiling. Between mouthfuls, I ask:

"What? Why are you smiling?" Gently.

"I love the way you handle the knife and fork. It's so—so civilized. I hope you teach me."

"I will, dear. Be assured. When we go out on our social engagements with the elite, you must carry yourself correctly, including using the cutlery properly," I say jokingly.

"The elite! The elite, the big -wigs. I like the sound of that, my darling." And she laughs.

I was not joking though. Not at all. I finished my meal, get the bill, and signed for it so that she may see that I have authority. I checked my watch. 10:45. We walked out of the dining area, and I gave her the key to go to the room.

"I'll be there in a minute or two."

"Yes, my darling."

I walked out to the entrance of the hotel, and there was Monty, smiling and ready to roll. I promised myself that once I get to where I am going, I will have at least two people in my employ: Monty and the receptionist. I will pay then well and treat them with the respect they deserve. They were both much older than I am, but they will obey me at all times.

"Good morning, Sir. I trust you and your lady are well?"

"Good morning, Monty. Yes, we are okay. I'm glad you are early. It says a lot."

"Thank you, Sir, I appreciate that."

"We'll roll out in five minutes or so. I'll be back."

I went to the room. She was sitting demurely on the chair, waiting dutifully.

"Monty is here already, so let's roll, sweet-cheeks." She blushed at the term of endearment, and we went out to the car. We both sat in the rear seat. She took my hand, and I gave it her. She placed my other hand on her leg. I squeezed it playfully, suggestively.

She greets Monty in a business-like way, and I tell Monty that the lady and I need to go to the bank.

"Very good, Sir. And which bank would that be, Sir?"

I felt foolish at not knowing and not having asked her, but she piped up:

"Sir would like to go to the Royal Bank of Canada."

"Very well, Miss."

I noticed that the car was newly cleaned inside and polished outside. Another good sign, another plus for Monty. In not more than five, we were at the bank. Raina asked to speak to the manager. She told him what was required: I am to be joint holder of the account; she needed a new bank book that should carry both names. We both handed over the required identification documents. The manager disappeared for a few minutes. She took my hand again and placed it on her upper thigh. The manager returned, all hurried, and filled out a few forms.

"The new book will be ready in a few minutes, Miss, Sir. Meanwhile, please sign here, here, and here. I signed first, she signed after me. I was getting excited, and forced myself to control it. The fellow left again, and she kissed my cheek. She has no control, this woman, I thought. But that was a good sign.

Then the manager returned and gave the book to me.

"Will there be anything else, Sir? Miss?"

"I think that will be all for today, Comrade. Thank you for your efficiency." I replied. Raina also thanked him. We returned to the car, the bank-book in my shirt pocket. I turned to her:

"Should I look at it, Raina."

She nudged me with her elbow, "You are such a sweet tease sometimes, you know. I love it. Of course you should look at it. You own me so you look at me. Now you own that, so you should look at it. Double ownership." She laughed and I joined her laughter. She is happy, excited. I opened the book: my name, her name

(or her former name), the account number, name of bank, and address of the bank. All hand-written in a neat script. I turned the page, and gasped at the figure:

"Jesus, Raina! Am I seeing what I'm seeing? Is this right? Jesus!"

I was looking at the figure: 348,000 dollars!! A fortune!

She drew herself closer to me, one arm behind my back and the other on my crotch.

"You like?"

"Jesus! I don't know what to say. I just don't."

"You like though, right?" she repeated.

"Yes, Raina. I like. I like."

"Now we can spend!" She exclaimed.

"Okay, okay. Remember? Don't get carried away," I say, hypocritically.

"At least, now you can buy us a nice house, if you wish."

"Yes, maybe. One step at a time."

She reached up and kissed my neck. Monty broke in:

"Where to now, Sir?"

"We'll go to the best women's store in town, Monty. Dresses for my lady."

She beamed: "Oh, I love that," she gushed, "I am your lady. All yours."

"Don't start, my Raina…or else I will postpone the dress-shopping and take you back to the hotel. So don't—"

"Whatever you wish, my love. Anything you want."

"We go shopping for dresses for you. That is what we'll do."

"Okay, deary." She pretended to pout. I laughed.

We spent the next few hours with her trying on dresses and modelling for me. Upon my approval, the clerk was instructed to put it aside. Twelve dresses in all, various styles and colours and lengths. I also told her that she will need new underwear, two negligees, shoes, perfumes, creams, and such things.

We were now being fussed over by six female clerks, two of them very attractive. They were all trying to catch my eye. Money is the ultimate magnet. Money and power, and they go hand in hand. But this was not the time for that. It was precisely the wrong time for that. I did not even take the chance of tipping them. At the end of it, I was exhausted. Raina was floating. I had already spent four hundred dollars, an amount I would have thought to be insane just hours ago. I wondered how much Comrade Lewis earned. I smiled wryly at the thought.

After shopping for her, we went to the men's store. I bought three shirt-jacks and three trousers, three pairs of socks, and two pairs of shoes. I insisted that Monty

go in with us to the men's store. He stood there, watching, wordless, stoic. I admired that.

I told him to take us back to the hotel, but to take the rest of the day off. I instructed him to keep the stuff we bought in the trunk. I took one bag to the room.

"I want you here at eleven tomorrow. Come to the room. We have some suitcases. We will go to my place tomorrow." I gave him fifty dollars. He responded with:

"But, Sir, this is way too much. Way, way—"

I hushed him. He stopped his protestations and made a slight bow.

"Thank you, Sir. You will be blessed."

"I hope so, my friend. I hope so. My journey is now beginning, and you will come along for the ride."

He smiled, "I am ready, Sir. Just say when and where."

"Don't worry, I will. Be sure of that."

Raina added her bit, "Isn't he a lovely man, Monty? Isn't he?"

"He is the best, Ma'am. The very best."

I was as pleased as she was, but I feigned annoyance.

"Okay. Enough of this nice guy stuff, but thanks anyway."

She winked at Monty, and we went into the hotel room.

It was four o'clock, too early for dinner, and I was too tired to eat. Raina said she was hungry too, so I said:

"Look, you go down to the receptionist. Tell him he should send up a chicken low mien for me and a chicken fried rice for you. Also four bottles of Coca-Cola and an ice bucket. Also find out his name. Comrade what? Tell him, we'll sign for it this evening."

She repeated my order and went off. By the time she returned, I was sound asleep. She awaited the arrival of my order and had the receptionist (Babb, as I learned later) bring the meals, drinks, and ice bucket into the room. I slept through all of it.

Raina had her lunch and came in to bed with me. She slept. We were up at seven, ate in the room, I had Raina put the tray outside the door, showered, and went down for coffee and pastry. Over coffee, we talked:

"Raina, I must thank you for the money. I will certainly put it to good use. Now that you have given that to me, I promise you that it will not be wasted on frivolity."

She responded: "I did not give anything to you that was not yours, my love. I see it as an investment in our future. I promised to obey and I will. If you choose to discuss anything with me, I would welcome that, but you are the man in this relationship and you make the decisions."

"Good. We will leave for my rental tomorrow, and you should make what improvements you think are appropriate. We will spend a few months there. I have one year of university left, and I must concentrate. I will look around for a nice house, but I do not want the confusion of moving into a new place while I am concentrating on studies."

I continued: "The more pressing matter is this: do you realize the we have changed? The people we were just days ago are gone, and we are who and what we are now. There is no going back for you nor for me."

"I know, my love. I know. You have changed, and I wanted to ask you what brought on the change, but I was afraid. If you did not bring it up, I would have left it alone. But how do you think I've changed?" she asked softly.

"You are more giving, more accepting, more affectionate. You are less wilful. You are also more passionate, more open to new things."

"That, my darling, is because you have taught me. I have learned, but I know that I have more to learn. I have made promises to you, and I will keep those promises for the rest of our lives together. I have never felt like this before in my life. About anything and anyone. I am totally dedicated to you, my love. Completely."

"That is good. I do not want arguments in my life, in my home, especially not with you."

She smiled at this: "You will get no arguments from me, my sweet. For the first time in my life, I feel alive. When those people put me out—threw me into the streets, really—I was forever changed. I have already disowned them. I never want to see or hear from any of them again."

The conversation was going better than I thought it would, so I decided to tell her everything:

"Those very people have triggered my change as well. Do you remember how they kicked me down the stairs like a dog?"

She started to cry. I stopped her:

"Don't you cry. Not one tear, do you hear me?" She wiped away the tears immediately.

I softened: "They are not worth one teardrop from you. Not one! They are nobody to you. I am the only one. Clear?"

"You are right, my love."

"They will pay for that humiliation. They will pay for humiliating you as well. I will make them pay. Do not ask how. Do not ask when. But they will pay dearly, and you WILL see them again, but they will not like it at all. There is always a price to pay for cruelty. After that incident, I met with Comrade Lewis."

She looked up quickly, with either surprise or alarm. I held up a hand and continued:

"We got on better than I ever thought possible. We are alike in many ways, Lewis and me. I decided to join them. I will run in the elections on their platform. But I have my own ideas, my own ambitions. I will take what they offer—the scholarships, awards, and so on. But those things will be stepping stones for me. Yes, I have changed. I will find ways to crush anything or anyone in my way. And your duty is to help me."

"I will do as you ask, you know that, don't you? No matter what, I will be behind you."

"Good. I am happy that we had this chat. I have a meeting next week to announce my candidacy. I will need alone time to prepare."

"I don't suppose I can come and cheer you on?"

"No, you can't."

"Okay, my dear. I will be out of your way, but I must make sure you eat and sleep well. That is my duty."

"It is your duty, and you will do your duty, I know."

She reached her arm out across the table, her palm upward. I took her hand. I squeezed it, hard. She made a slight sound at the pain.

"Yes."

"Yes? Yes to what, girl."

"Yes. Take me to the room and do with me what you want."

I do, and she had her way aboard me. She did not pass out, but came close to it three times. I had to make her rest in between. I observed her keenly as she lost herself in self-fulfilment. She more than deserved that. Her obedience, her money. My money now.

She fell into a deep sleep. I lay there thinking about the money and about the meeting next week, the meeting where I will announce my candidacy.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We were up by eight, did our bathroom necessaries and went down for breakfast. I told Comrade Layne (Raina had got his name, as instructed) that we will clear the bill which should include breakfast. He insisted that the breakfast was free. All finished by ten. We then packed, and I swept the room to ensure that nothing was left behind. I kept the bank book in my pocket. Monty knocked on the door at exactly 10:30 and took down our luggage. It took three or four trips. We left for my place in Kitty.

As we drove off, Raina said: "We were not here long, but I will miss this place. It is now part of our history. Isn't that so, my love?"

"Yes," I said edgily.

She glanced at me and took my hand, as if she would calm me down. I did not say anything, but I never liked the idea if packing and moving and unpacking. I reached to touch the bank book in my pocket and felt more settled.

She and Monty unpacked and fussed, but she assumed leadership, giving directions and counter-directions. Raina made a list of the things that would go towards making the place more appropriately appointed. I removed myself from all of it, got into my car and went to the university. I thought of telling Raina that I was going, then thought better of it. I am not about to start explaining myself to anyone; it would create a precedent I would not have. I will come and go as I please and any objection or question will be dealt with.

I drive along the public road that ran behind the seawall. I turned left into the campus road, drove into the campus without even glancing at the soldiers at the gate and went directly to the back of the campus to Lewis's train-carriage office.

"Good day to you, Comrades," I said to the two women that served as secretaries. I took a seat. The women were quite fetching in their dark green uniforms. One Indian, one African, both curvaceous, nicely breasted, neat. One got up, knocked, and went in to Lewis's office. He came out almost immediately, the secretary in his wake:

"Comrade! My man Steve! Man of the hour!" I stood and took his outreached hand. For some reason, he seemed flustered, but his effusive greeting seemed sincere.

"I'm sorry they had you waiting, Comrade."

"I did not wait long at all."

"You should not be waiting at all, Comrade." Then he turned to the two girls:

"Listen to me, you two! This Comrade in never to be kept waiting! Never! You hear me?" He was shouting, showing his authority.

They both stood at attention:

"Yes, Major!" they said in chorus.

As we were about to enter the office, he said loudly:

"Comrade, it look like I gat two dankey wukkin for me!"

We entered the office and he closed the door. I said:

"They may be donkeys, Comrade, but they are rideable donkeys. Very, very rideable…no saddles needed!"

Out came the full-bellied laughter. It seemed to ricochet off the walls. I laughed. I had already found his sweet spot, the way I had found Raina's sweet spot. For her, it was her neck and her lower back. For him, it was bawdy talk about women. Easy stuff, I thought, pleased with myself.

"You are something else, you know! Them girls on this campus in danger I tell you." We laughed like two pals. His was genuine; mine was not. As his laughter ebbed, I glanced around the office. The photograph of Comrade Leader still held centre stage, of course. But he had added some pictures of landscapes, one of snow, another of daffodils, all foreign, all cheap, all tasteless. There was a framed photograph of his wife and three children. The thing was turned outward for some reason.

"Ah, I see you've made some improvements, Comrade."

"I'm glad you noticed. You like?"

It is the second time in a couple of days that I was asked that. I lied:

"I like. It makes the office seem more friendly. People can be lulled into a false sense of security. Very clever, Comrade."

He leaned back in pleasure at the compliment.

"Listen, Steven. We are friends. I wish you would call me by my first name when we are outside the earshot of others. Please call me Rudolph."

"You honour me, Rudoph. Thank you."

"You are welcome, Steve."

I decided to take the initiative and go to business:

"I'm here to get your thoughts about this candidacy thing next week."

"Hah! Straight to the work at hand. I like that about you, Steve. You have a wonderful sense of humour and then straight to business. I admire it."

He continued: "I will not lie to you. Next week will be the hard part, announcing your candidacy and winning it. But we will make sure that there are no challengers, although you never know when some asshole breaks ranks. So be prepared for it. But I think the going will be clear sailing for you. Remember that you have the whole party apparatus on your side. Be confident and say what you need to say to close the door on this shit. I will have our people there, of course. But be prepared with a nice speech. Do not read, talk. You are good at it, the best on this campus."

I remember Monty: "He is the best."

"Okay, Rudolph. You know I will do my part. You know that, and that should be conveyed to the leadership. But what about the elections themselves when I run against the opposition chaps. I know them. They are sharp, you know. Can I win in the elections?"

"Seven, Steven, Steven. My young friend. For a young man—what 23, 24?—you know a lot. But you have much to learn, my boy. Lots to learn."

"Which is why I am here to you, Rudolph. I am here for you to guide me, my friend." He is pleased by the compliment. His eyes narrowed into a squint, into what he thinks a learned man should look like.

"I told you that the hard part is next week, and that ain't so hard…not for you, anyway. Elections? WE decide the outcome of any election in this country, Steve. WE do! People can vote until they are blue-green, that does not matter. You get me?"

"I get you. I get you. That is a relief. I will be prepared for next week, be assured of that. Oh, who will chair this thing? Who will introduce me?"

He smiles his wise, knowing smile. The squint again…all thought, all wisdom. The teacher, the guru.

"My dear boy, we got that covered like a baby in winter. A chap name Kwame will chair and introduce you. He will get his script by Monday. This is coming from ON HIGH, my friend."

"Wow! Is Comrade Leader that interested in this place?"

"Steve, I will tell you this in confidence. Comrade Leader has his eyes on EVERYTHING! The man is a miracle, I tell you. I can also tell you that he has his eyes on you. I told him about you, and he seemed pleased. Personally, I want you to

be president of the Student Union. But we cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, you must be assured that you have the full weight of our Party with you."

"I am glad I came in to see you, my friend. I have to think of a way to show my thank, some token of my gratitude."

"Don't be silly, man! None of that is necessary. We are just doing this for our country, for our Leader."

"Okay, Rudolph. Should I come back on Monday or Tuesday for a pep talk. The meeting is on Wednesday."

"You can come whenever you want, man! I enjoy our chats, and I enjoy being with bright people. You, especially."

I enjoyed the flattery, although I wondered why he felt the need to flatter me. I had to think that through. I decided to end it the way we started.

"You know, Rudolph. I have to tell you that the next time I come here, I'm leaving with one of your donkeys."

He laughed loudly, "Well ride on cowboy!" We left the office, his arm draped around my shoulder. I glanced at the two lovelies, give them a knowing wink. They smiled their availability. Women are good at identify power, I thought. I was not joking about taking one of them with me when next I come here. It occurred to me that Comrade Layne, the receptionist, will see me again, soon enough. My problem was which one would I choose first.

I went to the library, got a book on Greek mythology and read for a while. I liked the library. I knew exactly where every book was to be found. It was not as if I had to work to memorise their location. I would not have made the effort. I just knew. When a new book was put on the shelves, I would know just by walking past it. I like to remove them from off the shelf and smell them. I liked the smell of new books. Now, I liked the smell of new money as well.

My reputation as someone who was intimate with the library fed into my fame. New students often came up to me and asked where they may find this or that book. If I was surrounded by other students, I went into my act, especially if the inquiring student was a female that was pleasing to me.

"So you want this or that book by this or that writer, do you?"

And, almost invariably, the fresh young thing answered:

"I'd be so grateful."

"Well," I'd say, "You walk into the library, go to the index cards, look for the name of the book or the name of the writer, get the number, go to the right floor and follow the numbers until yuh find what you're looking for."

The people around me always laughed. The questing girl would go off humiliated. I was sure to follow later, however, and find the book with her. Then I'd take her to a close-by motel. If no one was around me, I'd take the girl find the book, and then do what I do. It was strange, but instead of being despised for such awful behaviour, my reputation and popularity only grew. I had quite the reputation for being very bright…and very lascivious. Of course, my looks did not hurt: fair-skinned, well-built without being muscle-bound, not too tall or too short, always well dressed.

That popularity and reputation was now paying dividends greater than sex, although I did plan to have some fun with Lewis's two uniformed peaches. It was almost sunset when I got into the car and drove home. Raina heard the car coming into the driveway and appeared in the doorway. For some reason, I felt queasy.

She was smiling so sweetly that I vowed to make the effort to be nice.

She walked quickly towards me and hugged my tightly. I returned the hug, but without her enthusiasm.

"You look nice, Raina."

"Why thank you, my dear."

She took my hand and led me into the apartment. It was much neater, much cleaner, and there was a nice spell coming from the kitchen.

"What's that smell?" I asked. It sure smells good."

"It is the smell of your first home-cooked meal since…"

"Since forever," I finished the sentence, "But there is an even better smell."

"I made us a few home-made rolls to go with the pepperpot."

"My goodness, Raina. Wow! You have—"

"Cooked for my love, my man."

"Do you want to shower first, then eat or?"

"Yes, yes…shower first." I showered, noted the fresh towel, and went into my bedroom which I hardly recognised as well. It was well made up. The dresser had my bottles of cologne and deodorant and other things neatly lined up. And her perfumes and so lined on the other side. The dresser sparkled. The mirror was without a single smudge. Bed made up with fresh sheets and pillow cases. The wardrobe was nicely arranged, shirts, shirt-jacks, trousers, and less formal wear. Briefs and socks in one drawer, tee-shirts in another, and Brushes, combs, and other things were in the top drawer. She looked at me while I explored my own home.

"You have been a busy little bee, my dear."

"I sure have, Monty helped. He cleaned the top of the wardrobe of twenty pounds of dust or just about twenty. But Come see this..."

She grabbed my hand and led me into the small kitchen. The stove sparkled, the dishes gleamed, the saucers shone. The pots and pans an cutlery were all packed neatly into cupboards and drawers.

"Okay," I teased, "I have to get a pair of sunshades to protect my eyes from the sparkle of everything. I hardly recognised the place. It was altogether lovely, clean, organised.

Then I looked at the dining table. It was already set for supper, a small flute vase with flowers in the centre.

"Now, do tell me my bright man, does this please you? The woman's touch?"

"It is amazing, Raina. Just amazing. It's a brand-new place. And in just one afternoon?"

"As I said, Monty was a big help, so half of the praise must be kept for him. He even polished and brushed your shoes. Did you see?" I had missed that, but I was as pleased as punch.

Even the small desk was now neat, although I noted that she did not mess with my papers too much, although they were set in neat piles. I opened the top drawer and noticed the still-unopened white envelope with the money she had given me. The bank book was still in my pocket. I removed it and placed it with the envelope. I must find a more secure place for this, I thought.

"I was careful not to play around with the material on your desk."

"This is all just lovely, my dear. And you also had time to cook, bake, and dress and make-up yourself beautifully. You look delectable." I kissed her on the mouth.

"I thought I would leave the second bedroom for tomorrow. You will need to give me some money to get new sheets, mosquito nets, dressers and a wardrobe for that. I also told Monty to come back tomorrow so that we can go and get some other things: new curtains, new pots and pans, new plates and saucers, new kitchen knives, and new cutlery. We'll also need to stock up on groceries. If you are too busy, I can do it with Monty."

"We'll see. I may have some time, but I'll be sure to leave money with you."

"Are you ready to eat, my darling?"

"In a few minutes, Raina. Let's sit and enjoy what you have accomplished here in just one afternoon." We sat on the sofa and she drew close to me, her legs drawn up beneath her. I hugged her. I was pleased.

I decided to volunteer a bit of information: "Oh, I went to see Comrade Lewis this afternoon."

"Oh!?" she seemed surprised. "How did that go, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It went very well indeed. He was actually happy to see me."

She laughed, "We talking about the same Lewis who tried to bully you the other day?"

"Yep! The very same Comrade Rudolph Lewis."

"Is that his name? Rudolph?" And she laughed out loud.

She started to sing: "Rudolph, the red-nose reindeer, had a very shiny nose…"

I could help but laugh along with her.

"It was strange. He was extremely friendly. He was full of flattery, saying that the Party had big plans for me. He actually said that Comrade Leader was asking him about me, that the great man was keeping a careful eye on the campus and on me especially."

"Keeping an eye in a good way?"

"Yes, he made it sound that way, anyway."

"Wow! You believe him?"

"I don't know what to think, really. I doubt that he actually spoke with Comrade Leader and about me especially. But then why would he lie about that? No reason that I can think of. But then that would explain the flattery, how I am free to see him any time I wish, that I am very popular on the campus and could be president of the student union. He actually screamed at his secretaries—two soldiers—because they kept me waiting. But I waited for no more than fifteen seconds. And he walked me out with his arms around my shoulders."

"But you will be careful, right my love? Please be careful."

"Of course, I am being careful. But if even half of it is true, then my future could be very bright."

"Yes. If it works out well, our life could be much easier and safer."

I noticed the "our" in her statement, but said, "Yes, easier and safer. Which is why we will stay here until the dust settles on the campus. I only have one year left, so I doubt whether too much harm could come from this. I'll see. In the meanwhile, I will keep an eye out for a nice piece of land upon which to build a house or if there is a nice property for sale. It would be easier, and we could just furnish it and move in."

She got up excitedly and hopped into my lap, kissing my head. She was still worried, however:

"Should I be worried about your safety, my love? Nothing bad can happen to you. Nothing would matter to me. Nothing."

"Raina, you should worry about nothing at all. Nothing!"

"If you say so, my sweet, then I will worry about nothing except making you happy."

"Very good. Now about supper."

She jumped off the sofa and went into the kitchen. It was always a small kitchen, but with two people, it seemed crowded. She set out the meal, my first in a long time, as Raina had pointed out. As soon as it was set out on the table and she sat, I dug in.

Pepperpot is an indigenous dish from our Amerindians, our First Nations. It is usually reserved for Christmas and New Year festivities. Now, here I was almost breathing it in during August. The freshly baked home-made bread completes it all. I have neither in years. I was suddenly aware that my plate was empty, almost clean. Raina had hardly touched her meal, staring with pleasure at my devouring of her cooking.

"You wish some more? You look as if you enjoyed it."

"Yes, please. Just a little."

Off she went, then placed a fresh plate with the food before me. I cleaned that out as well. She finally got to her meal, smiling with her triumph. Her first meal in her new home was a resounding success. That I enjoyed it was everything to her. Enjoy it I did.

After supper, we had cups of tea. She asked, her voice silky with suggestion:

"Do you have plans for the rest of the evening, my darling?"

"Not really, I'm bushed. We've had two really hectic days. I will try to make some notes for this meeting on Wednesday, but I'm really beat."

"In that case, my sweet, I will just freshen up and ready for an early night." She turned to go. I called her back,

"Dang! I almost forgot. You will need money for tomorrow," and I gave her four hundred dollars.

"This is more than enough, and you will keep what is left in case you have to buy anything else when I'm not home. I will go with you tomorrow. I think I'll buy a nice pen for Lewis."

"Sounds wonderful," and she went off to ready up for bed. I was left gazing at a blank page, my pen poised over it. My mind drifted to the two girls in Lewis's office. The page was still blank when she returned. She was dressed in her new negligee,

white, cotton, almost transparent. I could see the bush through the fabric. She braced her middle up against my arm,

"I'll be in bed, my love."

I was aroused, and she could see it.

"You may be tired, but Mr. B is not," she giggled, hand over her mouth.

"Wait! Who is Mr. B?"

She giggled again, and pointed to my crotch.

"I'll be in soon."

She left for bed. I gave up on my note-making, went to freshen up, my masculinity almost fully erect. I was impatient and climbed into bed without drying off completely. She was propped up on the bed, reading E.M. Forster's A Passage to India. I took her hand and put it on Mr. B. She put away the book and stroked it.

"Get on your back!" I commanded. She obeyed. I climbed above her and put myself into her mouth. She did as I taught her. Then I pushed myself all the way into her mouth. She gagged, pulling away.

"It's fucking chocking me. It's down my fucking throat!"

"Rub him all over you face! Do it!" She rubbed him over her eyes, her entire face, and took him back into her mouth.

"Anything you want! Anything. She was touching herself, fast and hard. I moved away and looked at her, her mouth wide open as she climaxed.

"Oh God!! What are you doing to me?"

Take off your clothes. She did. I put her legs over my shoulders and pushed into her. She was screaming loudly, climaxing over and over again, cussing nastily, calling for God and Jesus.

I emptied myself into her, finally. Her legs were trembling as if the had a life of their own. I looked at her; she was drenched in sweat, brow furrowed, shuddering, gasping for air. It took a long time before she could speak. Her voice was thin when she did:

"Do you think I will ever get accustomed to this? Ever?"

"I hope not or else I will give you up," I said jokingly…half-jokingly.

"Please don't say that, please don't. Please, I'm begging you."

"Then don't get accustomed to this."

"You know I will do anything you say. You know that. You know you own me, don't you? Don't you?" She was clinging to me almost in panic.

"I'm starting to believe you, Raina."

"I will never have another man. Ever. I am yours and yours only until I die."

"Good. Good girl."

"I will go get cleaned up. You made me make a mess." She put her hand on my face. "I will bring a towel and clean you up as well.

"Good Raina. You are so good."

She clambered out of bed unsteadily and went to the bathroom. She returned with a damp towel and cleaned me up, then left again to clean herself up. She returned with a dry towel and spread it over the wide wet patch on the sheet.

"You see what you made me do? You beautiful beast, you!" She was playful, happy.

"Now I'll have to buy more towels and sheets tomorrow. I'll spend out your money!" she laughed. I was pleased too. "My money". I was pleased at that. I own her. Satiated, we fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Monty showed up at 10:30nas instructed. He stood almost at attention beside the car, his shirt crisp, the seams on his trousers sharp.

"Good morning, Sir. Good morning, Ma'am."

I returned the greeting with equal formality and got into the back seat. Raina said good morning airily:

"Today I'm going to spoil him, Monty. I plan on spoiling him each and every day."

Monty: "Yes Ma'am."

I looked at her sharply, put my mouth close to her ear and whispered:

"Don't be a stupid skunt. He's my employee, not your fucking friend. Clear?"

"I'm sorry, my love. I'm sorry," she whispered back.

Tears were welling up in her eyes, and she whispered: "I will learn, my darling. I promise to learn to behave as I should."

"Okay," I kissed her eyes. She forced a smile.

"Tell Monty where you want to go." She was too frightened to speak, so she dug into her purse, brought out her list, and handed it to me.

I instructed Monty what we needed to get and he took us to the relevant stores. On the way to the stores, I thought of how far we'd come. From her indignance at being called stupid to her cowering apology now. I was satisfied.

When the store clerks started circling like buzzards, I said to her:

"Raina, my dear, tell these people what you need." She glanced at me for assurance, I nodded. And she began talking to them. I took her hand as we walked around the stores. She was recovering.

"You're doing well, dear." She smiled.

In one department store, I told Monty to stay with her. I went in search of a nice pen for Lewis. The gifts section was quite far from where I'd left Raina and the driver. I was doing my best power walk now that I was unencumbered. I looked around for the most attractive store clerk. I identified her. She was shapely, soft reddish curls on her perfect head, upright, well made up, neat, refined features, pretty. She was a product of some of the most fabulous ethnic mixtures we have in

this country. I guessed at some Portuguese, African, Indian, and Amerindian. She met my requirements.

"Good morning, Comrade."

She returned my greeting with some indifference.

"How can I help you, Comrade?"

"First, it's how MAY I help you...not can but may."

"Very well, Comrade. How may I help you?"

"I am looking for a nice pen. Show me the most expensive pen you have for sale."

"The *most* expensive?" She looked up. She was beginning to take me in now. Money talks in this place. And these store clerks, how much do they earn per month? Forty, fifty dollars? Around that, I suppose.

"Yes, the most expensive."

"Please come with me, Comrade."

"Of course," I responded. I followed her. Nice, rounded behind, wide hips, slim waist, muscled calves, seductive sway to her gait. This, I thought, is not a donkey. This is a well-bred filly. I smelled her perfume in her wake. Cheap, the kind that burns the nostrils. I winced.

We go to a showcase filled with pens. She opened the sliding glass at the back of the showcase and, very carefully, removed the beautifully-boxed pens.

"How much are these, um—what's your name?"

"Zenyatta...my name is Zenyatta, Comrade."

"So, how much...not that it matters too much, Zenyatta. That's a beautiful name, by the way."

She ignores my compliment: "It's 80 dollars for this and 99 dollars for the marine green."

"Which one do you like?"

She chose the more expensive one, of course. "Then that's the one I like as well."

She smiles. I wonder if they work on commission as well. I asked:

"These are Parker fountain pens, correct?"

"Yes, Comrade, it's a Parker 51. You've chosen a most beautiful pen."

"That may be, but I also choose the most beautiful item in this entire store."

She knows I'm referring to her. She smiles and blushes:

"You are too kind, Comrade."

"Yes, so I've been told." I laugh and so does she.

"I'm presuming that you have the ink that goes with the pen?"

"Yes, Comrade."

"Good, I'll take two bottles of the ink, please. But first, I'd like for you to remove the pen from the box and hold it in the writing position…as if you were writing to me."

She did as I requested, holding it upright. She had beautiful, tapered fingers. The manicure was somewhat crude. She pares and paints her own nails.

"You have beautiful fingers, Zenyatta. But we do need to take you to the best manicurist in town. How about a manicure and pedicure, my dear?"

"You would do that, Comrade? Why would you do that?"

"Of course I would…for you. How much do you cost, Zenyatta?"

"I'm not for sale, Comrade—" She was offended, and I was quick to apologise.

"I'm Steve, and it is my singular joy to meet you," I said, reaching out my hand. She gives me hers and we both linger before releasing hands.

"I will be in front after work, Zenyatta. It's a red car. We could just go for a drive and have a chat. I really did not mean to offend you, and it will be my honour to get to know you." I returned to business before she could repudiate me.

"Please wrap it as nicely as you can and include the wrapping in the total price."

"Oh, the wrapping is free, Steve. It's no charge."

"A gift from you?"

"If you want to say that, Steve."

She calculated the total price, went away to wrap the box and ink. As she turned away from me, she looked back, smiled:

"I will not be long, I promise."

"Good, I like people who keep their promises, Zenyatta."

In short order, she returned with the gift-wrapped pen and ink.

I paid and give her twenty dollars. She smiled widely:

"Oh, you are very generous, Steve."

"Yes, so I've been told." We both laugh, and I touched her hand.

"So, what time should I meet you outside?" I asked, feigning confidence.

"6:30. I'll be there at six thirty."

"Good, see you then, my lovely one."

"Bye," she waved, elongating the bye.

I make the rather long walk back to Raina and Monty. He had already made several trips back to the car to put the bought items in the trunk.

"Are you just about done?"

"Yes, dear. Just one or two more things and we're done."

"I bought a pen for Lewis. It's a nice one."

"Did you buy one for you?"

"No. Maybe later when things are more settled."

"Don't you worry, my sweet. By tonight everything will be nice and settled." Of course, she misunderstood me.

Soon, we were back at my flat. I told Monty to help her set things up. I retreated to my bedroom with a pen, paper and a book. I locked the door behind me. At five, the paper remained blank, the book was unopened, the sound of "nicing" up the flat was still conspicuous, and my mind was still full of Zenyatta.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I got out of bed at five, showered, and put on a fresh shirt and trousers. On my way out, I stopped for a minute, looked around, Around expressed my pleasure:

"Great job, Raina. Good work, Monty." They both smiled at my compliment.

"I have to go out. I may be back late."

Raina: "What would you like for dinner, dear?"

"Anything, really. You choose," and I was through the door, feeling for my keys.

I was at the front of the department store ay 6:29. Zenyatta appeared ay precise 6:30 p.m. She spotted the car even before I could get out. I raised my hand, she half-rose hers and walked briskly towards the car, opened the door and got it. She did not seem to be anxious to rush towards me as it was to rush away from the scene before she was seen.

"Good evening, Zenyatta," I said cheerily.

"Good evening."

"How was your day after I left?"

"Much the same as usual. Very few customers these days, you know. A lot of us are hearing talk of 'redeployment.'" That means they can just send you anywhere they please.

"Yes, I've heard the term used here and there, but not so often at the university."

"Ah, so you're a university boy, huh?"

"Guilty."

"You are lucky. I could tell you were some kind of bright boy." I laughed.

"Hey, Zenyatta, are you hungry? We could go get a bite to eat…and chat at the same time."

"Sounds wonderful. I did not have lunch, so I could do with something to eat."

"Good. Good. I know just the place. The food there is pretty good, I hear."

I drive to the Tropicana. There was my receptionist, Comrade Layne. He greeted me effusively:

"Ah, welcome, Comrade. I hope you are well. How may I serve you, Comrade?" He shook my hand all the while and bowed all the while he was shaking my hand.

"We'll dine."

"Of course, Comrade. Please follow me. He led us in:

"Any preferences of tables, Comrade?"

"We'll have the one at the corner."

"No problem. Get us a menu."

"Right away, Comrade. Meanwhile you may want to decide on drinks." Layne bustled off for the menu.

"What would you like to drink, my dear?" I ask.

"Oh, I'd like a rum and coke, please."

Comrade Layne returned and gave us each a menu with some ceremony.

"A rum and coke for the lady, and a Heineken for me, please. Be sure the beer is very cold."

"Of course, Comrade." And off he went in his busy way.

"Wow," she says, "you must be very important. Very few people get that treatment, you know."

"Oh? I did not notice."

Layne returned with a tray. The waiters—three of them—just stood at their stations.

"Please send one of them to get me if you need anything else, Comrade."

"I will. I will"

I raised my glass and said "cheers". She raised her glass, clinked mine, and had a sip.

"You must be someone important, huh?"

"Really? Do I seem important?"

"Well, the way you are treated with such respect by the manager himself. And the way you carried yourself in the store today."

"Does that make me important?" I laughed.

"Either you or your father."

"May I be excused, Steven? I need to freshen up a bit."

"Of course, and I made a slight wave to the female waiter who hustled over." Escort the lady to the ladies, please."

I stood just before she did, moved around and pulled back her chair that she may stand.

"Aaah. Such a gentleman." The waitress showed her the way.

I signalled another waiter and told him to inform Comrade Layne to have the lady's rum and coke refreshed.

She returned and I stood again, helped her into her seat, then resumed mine.

"See? A true gentleman."

I simply laughed.

Comrade Layne came in with a tray and her refreshed drink.

"Thank you, Comrade," I said, "when we are ready to order, I shall send word."

"Very well, Sir." He dropped the comrade. I wondered why.

I turned my full attention to the beauty before me.

"Now, my lovely lady, tell me about Zenyatta—"

"Qualis," she filled in.

"So, Zenyatta Qualis, about 21 years old, works in the gift section of a department store. She does not go out much. Correct so far?"

She laughed: "Yes, but I'm 20. And I must tell you that I've never done this—go out with anyone. And I am not a prostitute. I'm a humble girl trying to make a living to support her dad and mom and my little brother, Alex."

"I did not mean to imply that at the store, Zenyatta. I was trying to be funny, and it just came out in the most foolish way. I'm sorry."

"I know, but I needed to make that clear to you."

"You have been very clear."

"You support your dad and mom?"

"Yes."

"Please tell me about that, supporting your family."

"Well, my father was a heavy-machine operator in the sugar estate at LBI sugar estate. He was in an accident on the job and broke both his legs. It took him eight or nine months to walk again. The estate gave him a small severance and let him go. He still walk with a bad limp and uses a cane to get around. He cannot operate heavy machinery any more, can't lift heavy things any more, so he's just home."

"And your mom?"

"Well, she was a housewife, but then had to start a small food stall in front of our house. She sells bake and salt fish, channa, and bara. It helps a bit."

I was genuinely curious: "How much does she earn per week?"

"I'm not sure. She makes eight to ten dollars per week, I think, depending on sales."

She was starting to get teary-eyed and I reached out my hand to comfort her. She took it. I squeezed it gently to convey my concern. I changed the topic. Are you ready to order?

"Yes, I am. I'm starving."

I snapped my finger. A waiter rushed off to get Layne, and he bustled in.

"You need me, Comrade?"

"Yes, the lady is ready to order. What is the best thing on the menu?"

"I would recommend the sweet and sour shrimp, chips and greens. The fried fish and chips is also very good."

"How does sound to you, my dear?"

"They both sound very good. I can't decide though."

"Then she'll have both. If there are left-overs we can arrange for it to be ready for take away, right Comrade?"

"Of course, Comrade. Anything you wish."

"I'd like to have chicken and chips to have here, and two to take away. Also one chicken fried rice and one chicken chow mien to take away."

"Lovely, Comrade. Your meals will be ready in fifteen minutes or so. The take away will be ready whenever you leave."

"Great. You wish another rum and coke?"

"No thanks. Just coke, please."

"You heard the lady, Comrade. Tall glass of coke with ice to have with her meal."

"Yes, Comrade. All coming right up."

"Gosh! It sounds like you own the place!" She said, forcing a smile.

"I would never be able to run a business, for one thing. But I do want to go back to your home situation, if you don't mind."

"There is no more to tell, really."

"Okay. Well, let me ask some questions then."

"Ask away."

"Can your father do any kind of office work?"

"Like what. He can't type, for sure. He reads a lot and can write, but he's very good with numbers. I got an A in Mathematics because he coached me in Algebra, Arithmetic and Geometry. He's a lot better at mathematics than my teacher, I think."

"So he can function in the accounts department as a clerk, maybe. Desk job, but I don't know anything about the salary there."

She was interested: "I am not going to sit here and lie to you, Steve. The money is important, but at this point, anything would be better than him staying home and feeling like a burden on me and my mother. Anything."

"Listen to me Zen, I don't know anyone at the sugar estate…any of the estates, for that matter. And I can make no promises to you, but I can promise you that I

can look into this. It may take some time to get results, one way or the other. But I promise to try."

The tears were coming now, streaming down her face. I got up, went across to her and held her. She was sobbing.

"Okay. Okay. Let us be hopeful. I will do my very best." I comforted.

"Do you want to lie down for a bit."

"You are so kind, but no. I must get home soon or they really start to worry. Thank you. Thank you." It was easy to see that she was genuinely grateful. And she did not see my motive about getting a room and a bed.

"What time do you usually get home?" I asked gently.

"About eight or eight thirty, depending on when I can get a hire car." She took a serviette and dabbed at her eyes and clears her nostrils.

"Okay, you are not too late. I will drive you home. Don't worry."

She had told me she lived in a small housing scheme not far from the campus, so I knew the way quite well. I signalled for Comrade Layne. He was his usual prompt and attentive self.

"Comrade, please have them pack the food to take away. Get one of them to take the food to the car. I have to get this young lady home soon." I gave him the keys to the car.

"Right away, Comrade."

I turn back to her, "One more question, since I need as full a picture as I can get."

"Please ask me anything you like."

"Okay. I don't want to be intrusive, but how much do they pay you at that place?"

"Oh, sixty dollars per month. I take home fifty after taxes," she said matter-of-factly.

"Okay."

"May I ask you something, Steve?"

"Sure, ask away," I said mimicking her. She laughed.

"Why are you doing this? At first, I thought it was just to get me into bed. But you are different. I've never been with anyone, and that person will have to be very special."

A virgin, I thought excitedly. I chose not to address directly the issue of her never having been with a man:

"Well, at first I was attracted to you, physically. But there was something else in your eyes, a kind of pain, maybe. I was not sure, to be honest. I was attracted and curious. I wanted to get to know you, not just pick you up, as they say."

"Yes, but why are you helping me? Us!? You have just known me for three hours or so."

"I am not helping you and your family. I said I will *try*; there is a difference. As to time, let me ask you this: don't you know people who have known each other for years and years and years…but they really do not know each other at all? So how well you know someone has nothing to do with time. It is about your instinct, your feelings. No?"

"You are so right! I really never thought about it like that."

I slip a twenty to Layne, and we go to the car.

"Listen Zen, I will meet with someone on Monday and try to get something done to give your family some relief. I will meet you outside the store at six-thirty, same spot. I hope to have some good news then."

She takes my hand and kisses it. I hoped it was a kiss full of promise.

I continue: "Oh, and tell your parents about this too. If something positive comes about from my meeting on Monday morning, things will happen fast. Your dad, especially, should be ready. Clothes, letters of recommendation, and so on."

She directs me to the house. It is small. There is a garden in front, narrow bridge. There is a shaky wooden stand by the roadside in front of the house.

"Why don't you come in and meet the family? They will be pleased to meet the person who is trying to help."

"I don't think so, my beautiful Zen. I have a few more things to get done before tomorrow. Maybe next time, okay?"

"Okay, Steve. I look forward to seeing you on Monday after work."

"Yeah, me too, In the meantime, hold on to this. This is for your parents, not for their daughter." I laugh.

"But—"

"No buts, my sweet girl. Just get them prepared."

She reached across and kissed me on the cheek, then hurriedly stepped out of the car, closed the door, waved, and went into the yard.

I wave back and drive off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I drove into the yard, got out, and put my key into the latch. There was Raina, fast asleep on the sofa, one foot still on the floor. Clearly, she had passed out from exhaustion, poor thing. I look around at the flat. It was transformed: new curtains, new pots and pans, hung upon the wall of the kitchen, a new table cloth with my new plate and cutlery at the ready. It was now a lovely place although a temporary one. It only now occurred to me that I ought to have spent some time looking for a good, ample piece of land and or a house that was appropriate. I must go in to the bank to create a new account in my name, and transfer two hundred thousand into that account.

I woke her as gently as I could. She squinted then opened her eyes.

"Aaah! You're home. Good. You okay?"

"Yes, I'm home. Yes, I'm okay. The place looks fabulous. You are a miracle worker, girl."

She smiled at the praise and sat up.

"I will get your dinner heated up and set out for you. I don't even remember falling asleep. I wanted to wait up for you, my sweet."

"No need for all of that. I'm accustomed to cold food. I will get it myself and put the rest in the fridge. You need to go to bed, Raina. After a day like you've had, even Hercules would be tired."

"You sure. I could do it."

"I'm sure. Up and to bed." I lifted her up and guided her into the room and to bed, still dressed. She curled up and fell into a slumber. Of course, I was not hungry, but I put the food into the fridge and packed the plate and cutlery away. Women tend to get foolishly suspicious if a man comes home late and does not eat. I will have to conjure some reason why the food was untouched.

I poured out a glass of water, added ice, and sat at my desk. I unlocked my top drawer, removed the bank book and the white envelope containing the two thousand dollars. Everything was as it should be. I made a quick note on what had to be done on Monday. What needed to be coded was coded, just in case:

1. Lewis & Parker
2. TM

3. Prep for M
4. ZQ
5. Lib

I put the scribbled "todo" list into the drawer and locked it. I thought of ways to get the weekend to pass by. Maybe I'll take Raina for a drive, but where? I'll think of something, I assured myself.

I changed into my pyjamas and slept soundly. By the time I opened my eyes again, it was eleven a.m. I could hear Raina bustling in the kitchen. I willed myself out of bed and went into the bathroom to brush. She came into the bathroom, all cheery:

"Good morning, Mr. Sleepy-Joe."

"Good morning, Sleepy-Jane."

"I noticed you did not touch your food last night. You did not want to eat without me, huh? I'm sorry, I just fell asleep."

"Yeah. On the sofa. I had to put you to bed."

"Thanks, dear."

"I am making pancakes and eggs for breakfast. Ready in five. Since you did not eat last night, you must be famished."

"Yeah, I'm a bit hungry."

We had brekky. I complimented her again on the transformation of the flat.

"Maybe you should thank Monty, as well. He deserves your praise; he woked hard."

"Did you pay him?"

"Yes, my love."

"How much?"

"I gave him ten dollars. Is that okay?"

I ignored the question, instead, I said:

"Shower and get dressed. We're going for a drive."

Excitedly, she sprang up, and went off. I sipped at my coffee, thinking of Zenyatta. This drive was my way of burning a few hours off the weekend. I also thought of Wednesday. There was much riding on that, and if I were to be honest I would confess that I am petrified of even thinking about it. It was this fear that kept me from actually planting myself at my desk and preparing. I hated the idea of being impromptu, of winging it, but I should not seem scripted.

She was out of the shower and getting dressed. I shouted at her:

"Wear a short dress. Nothing under…understand?"

I did not see nor did I want to see her reaction. I did not care. As I was entering the shower, I heard her response like a fading echo:

"Any you wish, my darling." I thought: I have to put a stop to this "dear" and "love" and "darling" and "sweet". It was grating on my nerves, even though I knew that it was coming from a place of deep affection.

I got out of the shower and got dressed. She was on the sofa, waiting patiently, her knees close together. Modesty. I said:

"You look nice. Very nice, but don't say a word and spoil it." She said nothing. Her obedient silence put me into a good mood.

"Let's go."

We drove towards the east coast, the road that runs parallel to the seawall, behind it, sheltered or hidden by it. I saw the sign for an exclusive area, Bel Air. After we turned in, I glanced down at her legs. They were placed tightly together. I reached across and ran my fingers up and between them, but she kept her legs tightly together. For some reason, I was pleased.

"We'll just drive by some of the houses. We'll see if we like any and if it's for sale."

"That's a grand idea, dear. Trust you to spring a nice surprise. I think you should consider a place with a nice, big study for you."

"You're right about that, Raina. A place where I can be alone and work in peace."

"Yes, yes. Where no one is allowed without your consent…not even me, maybe."

"Right again. No one." I could sense that she wanted me to correct her or adjust what she said. But she said what she said, and I agreed whole-heartedly.

"What I'm looking for is a nice house with nice yard space."

"Well," she chimed in, "let's hope there's one for sale."

We drove around Bel Air three times, stopping and starting. There were no for sale signs. Such areas seldom advertise themselves. Selling to escape the country is always an inside deal. The rich are sneaky in that way.

"Notice there are no for sale signs?"

"I sure did. No one is selling."

"I'm sure there are people who are selling. I will discuss this with Comrade Lewis on Monday and see if he has any insights or advice. He always knows the inside stories."

"Yes, he's a big government man, after all."

I headed out of the area and drove farther up east.

"We're not going home, dear?"

"Nope. I'm looking for fruits and fish. They sometimes sell by the roadside and the prices are very reasonable. You know how to cook fish, right?"

"Oh, you are such a tease. I really love it when you tease me. Of course I can cook fish," and she giggled her girlish giggle. She knew by now that I like it when she does her girlish act. She knew that it rouses me. I looked down again at her smooth legs, still tightly held together. I reached down and squeezed her leg. She giggle, then "ouch'.

I was tempted to turn around, but thought that it might be good for this to continue for a while longer. We encountered a fruit stand, and I pulled over to the side of the road. I look at her and saw her looking at the fruits set out on s wooden stand. She is awaiting my instructiom:

"Let's go," I said.

She opens the door and approaches the stand with me. A middle-aged woman is tending the stand. I bid her good day. Raina remains quiet. The woman returns my greeting. There were mangoes, genips, sapodillas, star-apples, bananas, and oranges. Raina may have seemed dressed like a fashionable "town-girl", but she asked in the way of the country side:

"How yuh ah sell dem, Aunty?"

The woman rattles off the prices per parcel for each fruit and added:

"Dem sweet-sweet. And fresh. Abee pick dem dis maanin from abee garden."

Raina seems to ponder the facts while tugging at the hems of her dress, pulling them down.

"You can choose what yuh want, boss. Me guh gee yuh one extra. We bought mangoes, sapodillas, star-apples, bananas, and oranges. Raina squeezed one mango and decided it was no good. The woman replaces the one bad one with two of the fruit that seemed firmer, fresher. I paid, put the plastic bags of fruit in the back seat.

"Thanks," the woman said as she pocketed the money into her apron. I turn the car around and head back towards the city.

"They were pretty cheap."

"Yes," I said, mimicking the woman, "and dem sweet-sweet."

Raina laughed, covering her mouth. There were no stands with fish.

"You could get Monty to take you to Stabroek Market to get fish, if you like."

"I'll go as soon as he comes on Monday."

As we passed the scheme where Zenyatta lived with her parents, I glanced in trying to identify the house. I wondered what she was doing. Helping her mother, I suspect, in some house-hold chores.

"Do you know how to drive, Raina?"

"I can drive, but I do not have a driver's licence."

"Okay. We can work on that later."

We drove back in silence, and I thought that getting her a licence can be troublesome. If I used Monty to take me to some clandestine meeting, she can use my own car to track me down. So, I will make no effort to get her any such thing.

We returned home and took in the fruits from the car. She was about to unpack them, when I said:

"Later. You do that later. Right now, I want you in bed."

I make love to her with unaccustomed gentleness, all the while pretending that she was a virginal conquest. To her credit, she played her part. We both got up and headed to our respective tasks: she in the kitchen; me at my desk. I unlock my top drawer and took out my list of things to be done on Monday. I added details:

1. Lewis & Parker-Candidacy and having me nominated to run as president of the SU rather than just representative of Arts Faculty (Staff); house to buy; needy family...job at LBI sugar estate.

2. Prep for M: key points for meeting on Wed. Soldiers and purpose; free speech; academic standards; infrastructure; new student union building; better bookstore and gift shop; restaurant with freshly cooked food every day, three meals per day; a new student social club with drinks; an area for prayer with a fulltime religious leader; an indoor gym, etc.

3. ZQ: Afternoon meeting.

We have supper and went to bed relatively early. Sunday I spend thinking quietly about what could be said and what omitted in terms of national politics.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I was on the campus by nine-thirty. I go directly to Comrade Lewis's office, the nice gift-wrapped Parker 51 pen in my possession. The big soldier was there; he snapped too attention. The two secretarires were there, sipping coffee, but stood erect as I walked in. Lewis had these people well trained. More importantly, they paid respect to me.

"Is Comrade Major Lewis available?" I asked without breaking my stride into his office.

"Hah! Steve, old friend. Good morning to you."

"Good morning, Rudolph, my dear friend. Do you have 30 minutes or so to spare?"

"Of course, my boy. Anything for the man of the moment. Anything."

"First, I have a small token of my friendship and appreciation for you."

"Really? Oh Come on Steve. You know you did not have to!"

"Yes, I know…and that made it more imperative that I express my appreciation for a man who gives generously without expecting anything in return."

He rubbed his palm together in pleasure. I ceremonially handed him the gift-wrapped box. He shook it, tried guessing, then gave up.

"Do open it, Rudolph."

He did as I asked, and as he saw the pen, he exclaimed with pleasure:

"Steve…WOW! This is a Parker 51!! Man, it's a Parker 51. This is the best present I've ever had. The best, my friend."

He came around the desk and gave me a bear hug.

"Oh," I added, "I got two bottles of Parker ink just in case."

He filled the pen with ink using a small lever at the side, cleaned the nib, and wrote his signature on a blank piece of paper.

"This thing can write by itself, man! Thank you, thank you, thank you. I promise that I will cherish this. I suspect that this is very expensive, and I feel badly that I got nothing for you. You threw me for a loop! Hey, what a way to begin Monday morning! This will be a special week, I'm telling you that."

"But, Rudolph, I need to ask you to do me a big favour for a poor family." I told him the situation with the Qualis family. I told him of the father that was

simply abandoned by the sugar estate when he injured himself, that he was home walking with a cane, but that he could serve productively in the accounts department. I also told him that Mrs. Qualis had a little stand by the road in front of their house, selling bara and such things. They need help, Rudolph. I wish we could help."

"Is this Qualis with us? Is he a supporter?"

"Oh yes. Yes, he is."

"Which estate?"

"La Bonne Intention," I said, using the French pronunciation.

"Ah, I like that... '

"La Bonne—what?"

I repeated the French pronunciation and told him what it meant. He called in one of the secretaries:

"I want you to find out who is in charge of LBI sugar estate. Call them immediately. Tell them it is me."

She left and returned within minutes:

"The General Manager is Comrade Rangasammy, Major."

"Good. I will call him back now. Dismissed, private."

Lewis delayed for a few seconds to gather his thoughts. The man wants a job in the accounts department, right?"

"Correct!"

He dials and asks for Comrade Rangasammy. Then in his most authoritative military voice, he speaks:

"Comrade Rangasammy, this is Major Rudolph from the Guyana Defence Force. I need you to perform a duty for us."

I could imagine the poor fellow on the other side of the phone being frightened out of his wits. Lewis outlined that case briefly, and instructed that Comrade Qualis must be given a position in the accounts department. Then, still on the phone, he looked at me and asked: "When do you want him to start.?"

"I can get him to go in to the Comrade tomorrow morning at ten. He should be able to start asap."

"You heard that Rangasammy? Comrade Qualis will be in your office at ten tomorrow. Set him up to start by Wednesday. Understood?"

"Good. I will be visiting you when I have the time. We can have a good chat and I can look at your operation there. But I will have one of my secretaries call you on Thursday afternoon to make sure that all is well."

"Okay, Steve, what's next?"

"I was thinking of our plan for Wednesday. I realize that my candidacy is for the Faculty of Arts rep, but you had mentioned something else in passing that stuck with me."

"Yes," he interrupted me, "why do you think I mentioned it in passing, as you say? You're thinking about stating your intention to be President of the Student Union!"

"Exactly." I exclaimed.

"I mentioned it like that to gauge your interest. We can arrange to have that done on Wednesday. Not only Arts, but the whole damn thing. We can work together to bring this whole campus on board. I will brief Kwame about how it will go. Leave that to me. Our Comrade Leader will be pleased. Of course, you know that under Comrade Leader that position comes with significant perks."

"Perks? What perks? I did not know about that at all."

"You see my young friend? You still have much to learn," and he laughed. "I will brief Kwame about how it will go. Leave that to me."

"Well for one thing, you will have a house, a car with a driver, a body guard, maids, groundsmen, and guards at your gate, and two secretaries. Not those two outside though! All of that is the usual." We laughed at his "not those two outside". I pretended to be upset, but he got that easily.

"I'm taking it that I will choose my people, providing they are loyal to the Party, of course."

"Yes, yes, of course. They will be working for you and given a good government salary."

"Sounds wonderful, Rudolph. Together we will get this campus in tip-top shape. About the house, though. Remember I have just one year left, then I suppose I would have to give up the house, right?"

"You know, I never thought of that. Maybe…I really don't know. I could find out though."

"You are my friend, Rudolph, so I must tell you."

He leaned forward, "Tell me."

"I drove around Bel Air on Saturday. I liked some of the houses there, but I have no way of knowing which is for sale or not. Do you have any suggestions?"

"It's a nice area. I know quite a few people in there. I will send out feelers and get back to you by next week. No problem."

"I was thinking that I could take a loan and pay down a part, then use the housing allowance to pay off the rest in a few years."

"It sounds like a good plan, Steve. But do you want to put yourself in debt at this young age? Houses in that area are very expensive…a bit more than one hundred thousand, I suspect. And remember, with this Student Union Presidency, we did promise you a scholarship to study abroad, remember?"

"I do, Rudolph. I do."

"Then what happens to the house when you are away? Think about it. Hear, let's deal with Wednesday first, then we look more carefully at this. But I will still send out feelers, you don't worry about that."

"Will do. Will I see you on Wednesday at the meeting?"

"No. That would not be appropriate, but I will have our people there to support you. You just say the right things. Win them over, man! And when this is over and all things are in place, I will give you a nice present."

"Hey, you don't have to do any such things."

"We'll see. We shall see."

"What else do we have?" he asked with genuine interest.

"Nothing that I can think of, but I will go and make some points that must be addressed on Wednesday."

"Good, if you think of anything, remember I'm here."

"I cannot thank you enough, Rudolph. Really!"

"Don't worry about it. Let's just get this thing done."

He walked me out as usual. I sat in the car for a while trying to digest the implications of our conversation. It was all good, I thought. It occurred to me that Lewis was depending on my getting this position, and not just for the sake of friendship.

I left the campus and drove into town for the bank. I did as planned: opened a new account in my name and transferred two hundred thousand dollars into that. Our joint account had one hundred and forty-eight thousand. I still had four or five hundred from what Lewis had given me, and the two thousand in the envelope was untouched. I will tell Raina about the transfer when the time is right. I was not worried.

I was impatient to give Zenyatta the good news regarding her father. I will also try to see what could be done for the mother…and for Zenyatta, of course. I can employ my own people who will earn government salaries. For Zenyatta, I could add a bit to the salary. At the very least, the government will pay more than the

department store. If she gets one hundred per month in total, there would be no need to help her mother. Maybe she could continue to sell her snacks. We shall see. The house issue sounded uncertain, but having a driver, guards and those things sounded most promising. Much depended on how I performed on Wednesday. I was a little less nervous that the deck was stacked in my favour.

I headed back to Kitty and Raina. She greeted me warmly and proceeded to set out my lunch. I sit at the desk for a few minutes, unlocked the drawer, and put the bank books in. I ate and told her I was going in for a nap.

"Okay dear," she said, "I will keep noise to a minimum.

"Very good."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I was up at four-thirty, brushed, showered, and change of clothes. I put a handkerchief in my back pocket and made sure I had money. Raina was reclining in the sofa reading. She looked at me,

"On my! Another meeting, I suppose. You are going to get sick with all these meetings." I listened for any irony or sarcasm in her voice. There was none.

"Yeah, but I can't give up now. I may be back late, so don't wait up for me."

"I'll stay awake as long as I can, dear."

By the time I got in the car it was almost 5:45. I was where I should be almost thirty minutes early. I fished out a book from my book-bag at the back seat. I remembered that I will need to dedicate much more time to my studies in this, my final year. I have been paying almost exclusive attention to politics, finances, Raina, and now there is Zenyatta. I must keep up my GPA if I am to be admitted into a UK university, although my student-centred activities should also hold me in good stead. I must find some way to balance my academic ability with my leadership potential. This promised scholarship to study abroad depends on both.

I was about to turn a page of Joseph Conrad's Nostromo when she emerged from the front entrance of the department store. Short, quick steps as if she was hurrying away from something or hurrying towards something or someone. I preferred to think it was the latter.

I reached across and opened the passenger side front door, and she slides in.

"Hi there," she greeted.

"Hi, my lovely Zen. How was work?"

"Oh, much the same as any other day. Slow. People do not exactly have a great deal of money to spend these days."

"That's true, but we hope things will improve."

"Yes, let's hope."

"Are you hungry?"

"Just a bit, you?"

"Not really, but having dinner with you is good anyway." She smiled at this.

"And how was your day? Adventurous, I suppose," she was teasing.

"It was busy, I think I can say," I teased back. It dawns on me that she knows very little about me, except that I appear to be someone significant or something who imagines himself to be significant. It will all come to light eventually.

She does not ask where we're going. She knows. I pull up and park immediately in front of the hotel entrance in the NO PARKING zone.

"I suppose you're allowed to do that, huh?"

"Do what?" I feign ignorance.

"Park in the no parking spot, I mean." I just laughed.

We go in, and I greet Comrade Layne as I would an old friend.

"Your usual table, Comrade?"

"Absolutely, Comrade."

We take our seats. Layne waited for a minute for us to get settled.

"Drinks, Comrade?"

"Yes. What will you have. Zen?"

"I'll have a Coke with lots of ice, please."

"And I'll have a beer, Comrade."

"Very well, Comrade," and he disappears to get the drinks.

"Zenyatta, I have some news," I announce with pretend glumness.

"Uh oh! That does not sound too good. Do tell."

"First, your dad. He is to report to the General Manager of La Bonne Intention Sugar Estate tomorrow morning." I use the French pronunciation to impress. She gazes at me intensely, I continue:

"The fellow's name is Rangasammy, Comrade Rangasammy. He should simply tell the secretary that he is Comrade Qualis to see Comrade Rangasammy. Nothing more. He should be in a shirt-jack and trousers and take all his documents. He is to mention no names, but simply say that he was told to come in to Comrade Rangasammy."

He mouth was slightly opened and her gaze more intense:

"Do you mean...?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I mean. He should begin work in the accounts department either tomorrow or Wednesday. I am sure he will be informed about things like salaries and such, but I cannot tell you the details."

"Oh, Steven! I could just kiss you!"

"Do feel free to do that," I said flippantly.

She got up and came across to me and kissed me full on the mouth. A real kiss, full of promise. I responded in kind. I saw the waiters and waitresses watching.

"Sit next to me. Across the table is too far away."

She changed seat and sat to my left on the chair to which I pointed.

"Is this better?" she asked.

"Much, much better."

"But how did you do this? When...?"

"I just a meeting this morning and arranged this." She grabbed my hand and squeezed it. Her calves and knees were pressed against mine under the table. I am close now, very close, I thought.

"You will never know how grateful I am, Steven."

"Oh, I'm far from done, dear Zen. Far from."

"What else do you have planned in the beautiful head of yours?"

"I do not want to speak out of turn, Zen. But I am very optimistic."

"Does it involve me?"

"Of course it involves you! But I will be able to tell you more by Wednesday afternoon. Day after tomorrow. Just be patient a while longer."

"I think you know that I am very patient."

"Good. Are you ready to order?"

"Yes, but Steve...can I ask you one little favour? Please..."

"Sure, ask."

"Can I take mine to go? I am anxious to go home and tell my dad the good news. And I have to get up his clothes and make sure his documents are in order. Please."

"Of course. Order whatever you like for yourself and your mom and dad."

I signalled for Comrade Layne, and she gave him the order to take out.

He turned to me: "And nothing for you, Comrade?"

"Not tonight. I need to attend a meeting in an hour."

"Very well, Comrade."

"Oh, Layne...you may bring me another beer and another Coke for the lady."

"Right away, Comrade."

Zenyatta looked at me as if she were doing so for the first time:

"They treat you with such respect, such—"

She could not think of the word or did not want to say it.

"—deference? Is that the word you were looking for?" I smiled.

"I do not even know that word. Fear, almost. I don't know." She was sincere, pure of motive.

"I prefer deference," I said, keeping the smile, "It's rather like an extreme form of respect."

"So, you're somebody who's important, huh?"

"Well, *some* people think I'm someone important," I said, again keeping it light.

"Well, I can tell you here and now that you're important to *me*." The joviality had left her voice.

"If you were the only person in the world who thought I was important, I'd be happy, Zenyatta." I lied, my voice made to be low, sincere, serious. She squeezed my hand again.

Layne returned to say that our meal was ready and packed. I gave him the keys for his waiters to pack the food in the car. I finished my beer, and we walked out hand-in-hand. And there was Monty. Shit, I thought. He was walking towards me in that purposeful, square-shouldered, soldierly way of his. He stretched out this hand to shake mine, bowing respectfully but nor obsequiously:

"Good evening, Sir. I trust the you are well, Sir."

"I am very well, Monty. Look, I need to talk to you. Tomorrow afternoon or early evening."

"Of course, Sir! I am always here for you, Sir." Then he opened the door for Zenyatta and then my door. He waved as I drove off.

"Wow! See what I mean? Some person comes up to you and bows, as if you were a prince. See?"

"Maybe I am a prince…in disguise," I laughed loudly.

She laughed too, then added, "I think the only person in this country that people treat like that is the president himself."

"Maybe I am the president!" I laugh again.

"Or maybe the next president, huh?" We both laugh.

"I wish you did not have to go, Zen."

"Me too. Me too. But you understand that my father has to be prepared. We cannot let you down. We will not ever let you down after all you've done."

"It's okay, my darling Zen. Really. It is a pleasure for me to make life just a little bit easier for you and your family. I'l see you tomorrow, of course."

We drew up in front of the house, and the parents and her brother were waiting and watching. She leaned over, kissed me on the cheek, and got out off the car. I waved at the family; only the brother waved back.

I drove back to my flat slowly, unwillingly. Raina was up. I was earlier than I thought I'd be.

She opened the door and hugged me:

"My man is early. Now I'm happy," she gushed. I hate people that gush, but I lied:

"Yeah, it's a relief for me when meetings are short. University people are famous for their endless meetings. They are all in love with their own voices, you know."

She laughs, "If you say so. I've never been to one of those. Hey, I hope you're hungry. I made cook-up rice and fried fish. It's really good. I thought you were going to be home much later, so I ate already. I'm sorry."

"No, no. I'm glad you ate. I'll eat in fifteen minutes or so after I wash up. After I'm finished eating, I have some stuff to do. I really do not want to be disturbed, Raina."

"Gosh," she whimpered, "I was hoping we could chit-chat a little. I'm home alone all day with no one to talk to. It's lonely, you know."

She was getting teary-eyed, and I was slightly remorseful:

"Look. Don't start crying! Just don't. This is not what I want when I come back to my own place."

One tear rolled down her face, and she quickly wiped it away:

"I'm not crying, my dear. I'm just happy you're home. I miss you, you know."

"Okay. I suppose we can chat for a while, okay?"

She skipped away to the kitchen, and I went to freshen up for dinner. My meal was on the table by the time I was done. I asked for coffee rather than tea, and she obliged, She say on the chair next to mine, and—like so many people that actually prepare meals—asked:

"How is it?"

I responded: "It is very good. The best, if you ask me."

"We are almost out of fish, though. Maybe if you have time tomorrow morning, you could spin me by the market and I can get some."

"Yes. I'll take you at 8 a.m. or so, then I will come back and rest some more. It all depends on how much I get done tonight. Day after tomorrow is this meeting to elect the candidate for each political party. It may very well decide my future, so I need to examine all the angles. It could be very tricky, but I hope to do well."

"I'm sure you will win, my dear. I have confidence in you."

"Thanks, Rana. Pity you're not voting huh?"

After I was finished, she cleared the dishes. I sat on the sofa, and she joined me after having done the dishes.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"Oh nothing, really. Just talk about this and that…you know, the way normal couples do."

"Well, you know that we're not the typical couple, right? The very thought of being a 'normal couple' scares me. But I am concerned that you feel lonely."

"Yes. Of course, I do my chores at home: I keep it clean; I cook; I do laundry; I press clothes; sometimes I go to the Chinese shop at the head of the street; I sweep the yard every other day. But it is the same thing day after day, and I do not talk to a living soul. No friends, no family. Sometimes I feel as if I'm the only person in the whole world, Steven."

"Listen Raina. There is an easy solution to these problems. You could go back to the place where you had to hide like a thief, where you could talk with the same family that called you a whore. You could have deep discussions with your drunk asshole of a father and that witch you call a mother. Then you could chit-chat with your two idiot brothers and your two brilliant sisters. And sooner or later, they will kick your backside down the stairs as well. It's quite simple."

Her face muffled up with the effort to stop from breaking out into weeping, but I could not seem to stop myself,

"Or…or, I could bring a sweet young thing in here and she could keep you company during the day and keep us both company during the night. Would you prefer that?"

She broke down, and fell to the floor crying loudly the way you'd see some people grieve at funerals. She curled up on the floor. I sat on the sofa and looked down at her curled-up body, heaving with sobs. I did not reach down to offer some kind of comfort. It was as if all the tension and rage that I was feeling for the last few months had reached a point that it could not be controlled or contained. It just erupted. I was sorry for her, but my rage would not allow me to demonstrate that.

We, each of us contains a monster that is always at the ready to rise up, use us for malevolence, and then consume us whole. My monster was arisen; it was unleashed. Whatever good that was in me, whatever capacity I had for simple decency was overwhelmed by the force of this thing, this beast.

Raina had crawled on all fours to the sofa. She went on her knees and placed her head upon my lap. I felt myself getting hard. I took her front paw and put it on me to feel the hardness. She stroked over my trousers. The beast slapped her behind the head, and as if she knew what was required, she zipped down the trousers. I pushed into her mouth down her throat. She gagged, making a vomiting sound. I pushed more and she gagged more, turned her head and threw up. She tried to move away, to recoil. The beast would not let her go. He growled:

"You like this, whore?"

"Please don't, I beggin yuh, please! I love you."

He grew more excited:

"Beg me! Beg for more! Beg, bitch! Beg for more!" He snarled.

"I beg you!"

"For what? What yuh beggin for?"

"For more! More! I beggin for more."

He grabbed hold of her hair and pulled her while she was on all fours into the bedroom.

"Good answer! And more is what you will get!"

He pushed her onto the bed, he knees still on the ground. He ripped off her panties, exposing her buttocks. My belt was off. The voice of gravel snarled:

"Make one loud noise and it will be very bad for you." Her head was turned sideways, her eyes wide and bloodshot. The belt cam down on her rump hard, and a large welt appeared. She made an "Mmph" sound. Then it came down again and again. Blood. She was making a chocking sound, a gag, and then a hiccupping sound. Between the lashes, he kept saying:

"So you like to complain huh Rose?" More gags and "mmph" as the belt landed.

Her eyes were rolled back in her head, mouth wide open, saliva running down the sides of her mouth.

"More? More?" She shook her head.

"Any more complaints, Rose? Any more bitching like a whore?"

She shook her head and managed to stammer out: "Ne-ne-never."

"Right, no more complaining or else…"

She nodded. He pulled her up into kneeling position and pushed himself into her mouth until he was spent. Spit, sweat, and blood.

"That's it for tonight! Now go into the other room and sleep." She crawled off on all fours into the second room. He followed her and closed the door. He could still hear the whimpering sounds.

I found myself under the shower, humming a song that I did not know. Then in my bed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I was awake by ten. I was surprised at my nakedness since I seldom slept unclothed. I felt across for Raina. Nothing. My arm ached; I was hungry. I hoped she was preparing breakfast. I pulled on a pair of boxers, rushed and went out into the small kitchen. No sign of Raina nor of breakfast having been prepared.

I made myself a cup of coffee and buttered two slices of bread. I grabbed a book and read while I ate. No sign of Raina. It was not hard to see that she was not in the flat. I decided to look into the second bedroom.

"Oh, there you are!"

She was in a posture that I've seen her before after a rather torrid session with me: curled in a corner, knees up beneath her chin, sheet covering her up to her neck. Her eyes were blood-shot, her face swollen, her entire body shuddering. This time, however, she looked tilted, like a boat about to capsize. She looked much worse, the fear in her eyes almost too much to look upon. This time, as well, she was still wearing a dress.

"Are you okay, Raina? What have you done to yourself?" "Come, take my hand and I'll take you into the shower. Come."

She hesitated for a few minutes while I reached out my hand, palm upward. She eventually put her hand in mine. It felt like a bird. I pulled her up as gently as I could off the bed. There was a large wet patch on the bedsheet and on the back of her dress. I put my arm around her waist to steady her and we went into the bathroom. I reached in and turned on the shower tap, expecting her to undress. I turned around and she was just standing there, eyes blank.

"You want me to undress you?" She just looked in my direction with those blank unseeing eyes.

I unzipped the back of her dress and let it drop around her ankles. I led her towards the shower. It was then that I saw the state of her buttocks: red, raw, bruised, welts.

"Raina! Jesus! What the fuck is this? Who did this to you? Who? Talk!"

I was shouting, but she did not speak. Rather, she pointed one finger at me.

"Me? Me? I did this? Me?"

She nodded, the tears coming as with a life of their own.

"You're crazy, girl."

I showered and dried her, being very careful with her wounds. I put some antiseptic cream on the wounds. She winced but said nothing. I put on a loose nightgown.

"Lay on your side," I instructed. She obeyed. I got her some orange juice, and held the class while she sipped. I insisted that she finish it off. She did.

"Do you want me to boil two eggs for you?" I asked. She shook her head.

"Raina, I have to meet some people today, so I'll be away for a few hours. I'll try to be back as soon as I can." She looked in her wide-eyed, unseeing way into the distance. I lay beside her for a while; she whimpered at what I thought was the pain.

"Don't worry. I'll go by the drugs store and get something for that," I said, pointing to her buttocks, "I'll apply whatever they give me when I return."

"The last thing I remember from last night was you complaining about being lonely. We were sitting on the sofa and I fell asleep. That's it. Did you do that to yourself to get attention, Raina? Did you? If you did, that was terrible. You know that, right?"

She said nothing. But she surprised me by putting her thumb in her mouth and sucking on it.

"That's new. I've never seen you do that. Did you hurt yourself, Rain?"

She shook her head.

"Okay. Okay. One of these good days you will tell me what happened to you."

She just stared ahead in the distance, but pointed a finger at me.

"It looks as if you're blaming me for something, but I don't know what. For being too late to save you? Did you have someone in here?"

She shook her head, pointed, staring into the distance.

"Okay. I have to shower and go out. I'll be back as soon as I can with something for your wounds."

I got up and put two eggs to boil anyway, then showered, changed my clothes, and went off. I drove to the pharmacy and got an ointment they recommended for the wounds. I had enough time to meet with Monty and then with Comrade Layne.

I drove directly to the hotel. Monty, dependable as always, was there in his car reading a book. I parked in the no parking spot, by which time Monty was out of his car and walking towards me.

I got out of my car, took his outstretched hand, acknowledged his slight bow, and said:

"Would you like a beer? Let's go inside and have a beer."

"As you wish, Sir."

The bar section had people in there, babbling, slurping. I led the way to the dining area. One person was eating, and I went to my table, comfortably far away from the lone diner. I gestured to the chair opposite,

"Have a seat."

Monty sat, but shifted nervously. Them it occurred to me that he was thinking that I was about to bring up seeing me with Zenyatta. I smiled,

"No, it's not about the girl, Monty."

He breathed more easily immediately. I signalled the waiter to come,

"Bring us two beer. And tell Comrade Layne that I will need to speak with him when my guest here leaves." He gave me the "yes, Comrade" thing and went to fetch our beer.

Monty took the chance to speak, "I think you already know that I am discrete, Sir."

"Yes, I know that, Monty." The waiter arrived with two beer and two mugs. He poured mine, leaning the glass slightly to avoid too much froth. Monty poured his own beer.

"Let me ask you Monty. How much do you earn on average driving that hire-car?"

"Oh, Sir. Well, not counting your generous self, I earn between thirty and forty per month after gas. On a really good month, I may get up to sixty."

"Okay. If...*if* I were to offer you a job to drive for me full-time, would you be interested? Don't say anything...just let me finish."

"Of course, Sir. Of course."

"Remember, the "if" okay?" He nodded.

"Nothing is certain right now, but *if* I were to offer you the job of being my full-time driver, you will be paid by the government. I have no idea how much they pay, but whatever it is, I will put the rest up to one hundred and twenty dollars per month. Whatever I put would be tax free, of course. You would be required to drive me to the university when required. I have a few classes still to take and meetings that I will have to attend. I will have a good idea of when I'll be done with classes and meetings, so that you'll be there to pick me up and take me where else I need to go. I am hoping the government will provide the car—an official government car—which you will care as you care your own car. Government vehicle, so you will go to any petrol station and sign for the gas, etc. There will be times, of course, that you

will be asked to do some driving to do grocery shopping and other errands. Clear so far?"

"Very clear, Sir."

"Good. I will also ask that you serve as a bodyguard when I'm out in public or among people we don't know. This should come naturally to you since you are a former army man."

Monty laughed: "Army man? How did you know that, Sir? I never told you about my time in the army."

"I laughed along with him, "You walk like an army man, a half-walk, half-march. You also stand at ease when we go shopping. You also do not look directly at me when I'm in public; you always look around me. And then there is your dress, always neat, seamed trousers, well-pressed shirt."

"You are a remarkably observant young man, Sir. I knew you were brilliant, but brilliance and observation together is rare. It would be my honour to serve in both capacities, Sir." I did not think Monty was flattering me. He was just stating what he thought.

"Of course, Monty, I will count on your discretion and confidentiality at all cost and at all times."

"Understood, Sir."

"Now back to this "if" of ours. This may not come about at all, but I am very optimistic. We will know for sure by the end of tomorrow." If it does, you will be required to sign a contract with the government. I will try to swing it so that the contract is for a year, if you wish. I don't think you'd want to be bound to them, and you may end up working for someone you do not like."

"Whatever you think is best, Sir. I trust your judgement."

"If you have any questions, I'll answer them by tomorrow night or Thursday morning. Thank you, Monty. Let's hope things go well."

Monty got up, shook my hand with the slight bow.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Oh, Monty. On your way out, please ask Comrade Layne to see me for a few minutes."

I glanced at my watch. It was already five-thirty. I did not want to be late for Zenyatta, so my talk with Layne will be brief, I thought. He showed up:

"Ah Comrade Layne. Do sit," I gestured to the chair upon which Monty sat.

"Thank you, Comrade. How may I be of service?"

"Well, I am hoping that I could be of service to you for a change, Comrade."

He smiled, "Comrade, you've already been more kind to me than any other customer in this place. To ask for more or to expect more from you would make me greedy."

I laughed. I knew that my more-than-generous tips would yield dividends. Like everything else, loyalty can be bought.

"Comrade, I want you to tell me about this job of yours. Briefly."

"Comrade, I work six days per week and half day on Sunday. I serve customers, run the front desk, and manage the bar and restaurant staff. It is hard work, to be honest with you, Comrade. But the salary is good—

"How much?" I ask, crisply.

"Eighty dollars per month, Comrade."

"And tips?"

Layne smiled: "Comrade, tips are almost always given to waiters and waitresses, especially to waitresses. The highest tip that I've heard of was five dollars. Apart from you, I have never received a tip in my four years here. That is the nature of this business."

"I understand," I say. Then I went through the routine of "If":

"If I were to offer you a job to work exclusively with me, *if*..." His head jerked up,

"If I were to do so working five days per week and the odd Saturday if I have guests, would you think about it. Don't answer, just listen. If this were to come to pass, I will pay you one hundred and fifty dollars per month. You will be on the government payroll, but the salary will never amount to that figure. I will make up the rest from my own pocket. You will be in charge of all staff—five or so—kitchen staff, maids, groundsmen, and so. You will arrange menus for meals and have them served or choose to serve them yourself. It will be only for me and maybe one other person. I would expect uncompromising loyalty, confidentiality, and trustworthiness. If all of this happens, what would you say?"

"Comrade, even without much of that, I would be honoured to serve you. If this happens, I would be foolish to turn it down. I will never let you down. Never!"

"Good. I know nothing for sure at this moment, but I will be tomorrow night. The other thing that needs to happen is that I will need to find a very nice house in a very nice neighbourhood. I suspect finding that will take time, but I'm on the look-out."

"Forgive me for interrupting, Comrade, but may I say something?"

"Sure...what's your first name?"

"Quincy...Quincy Layne, Comrade."

"Okay, shoot."

"A friend of mine told me of a new housing area that has been built. He tells me that the houses are more like mansions. The houses are far apart, with huge lawns and paved driveways, but Comrade Leader is reserving those for his closest people, ministers and such. Maybe you'd be interested."

"What's the name of this area?"

"*Elegwa Park*...EP, as my friend called it."

Quincy gave me directions to the place. I thanked him, "See Quincy, you're already working for me," I laughed.

"From your mouth to God's ears, Comrade."

"Okay. I have go to now to get my new friend. I'll be back soon. Keep my table, will you?"

"Of course, Comrade."

I drove to the department store with five minutes to spare. Zenyatta appeared, a big smile on her face. Her walk towards me was unnoticeably unhurried, almost seductive. She got into the car, leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

"Good evening, Mr. Miracle Worker."

"Good evening to you, Miss Gorgeous," I responded.

"How was your day, my love?" I asked, hoping she would take note of the term of endearment.

"My day is already much, much, much better. My love? That sounds like heaven to me. Did you mean it?"

"Of course I meant it. I don't use those words lightly, you know."

"I'm happy that you used it. You already know how I feel, don't you?"

"I just hope. Men who think they are sure of women are but fools."

"Mmmmm. True, and you are not like any other man. None."

I parked in my usual spot, passed by Quincy with our usual exchange of greetings, walked to our usual table, and sat in our now-usual chairs, Zenyatta close to me. Quincy appeared:

"The usual, Comrade? Miss?"

I looked at her. She nodded, "Yes, please."

"I'll be back in one minute," and off he went.

"So, my Zen, why were you smiling so broadly?"

"You know, I just knew you were going to ask me that. I knew it. For three reasons: first, seeing you makes me want to smile because seeing you makes me

happy and excited; second, my father came to see me at the store after his interview with Mr. Rangasammy; third, the gossiping girls at the store were full of gossip about my mystery man with the red car."

"And I am happy and excited when I see you to, my Zenyatta. But tell me what your father had to say."

"He said the interview went very, very well. He said that Mr. Rangasammy hardly looked at his documents, as if the decision to hire him was already made. He said that the man asked about his family and such small talk, then took him to the accounts department and showed him the desk where he was to work from tomorrow morning. He went through some of the accounting things that my father was to be doing, and that was it."

"Sounds good, then. Really good."

"Thanks to you. I have never seen my father so happy, Steven. Never. He Came straight from LBI to tell me. He did not even tell my mom about it. But he was insistent that I be sure to tell you how grateful he was. So I've told you." She chuckled.

"And your gossiping co-workers?"

"Oh, you know how they are..."

"No, I don't actually, so tell me."

"They wanted to know who you are. They thought you were very handsome. They wanted to know if you're rich or if you're from a rich family, and...well, you know..."

"I don't know...again. And what?" I said jovially.

"They wanted to know..." She blushed a deep red and took hold of my hand.

"Go on. Don't be shy, my sweet one."

"They wanted to know if we had...you know...done it."

"Aaah! If we had made love as yet." I teased.

"Yes."

"And you said?"

"I did not say anything. I just smiled and went about my work."

"We both know that we will make love, and I wish I could just order a room to be prepared for us immediately. But not tonight."

"Whenever you are ready, please know that I am here. No one will ever touch me, no one but you. Please know that, as God is my witness."

"My Zen, my very own Zenyatta. I believe you and trust you. Know that. Please let me explain."

"If you wish to explain, I will listen. I will always listen to you, my beloved."

"Tomorrow at one o'clock, I have a meeting that may very well determine the direction of our lives. Regardless of the outcome, we will be together, but this meeting will decide how well we live. The two of us, your parents, and several other people. I do not want to say too much now, but I can tell you that you will live a fairy-tale life with me. Tomorrow I will get you and tell you the news. Just less than twenty-four hours."

"I was so very anxious to see you today, my Steven, my heart. Now, I am anxious about tomorrow. I will be thinking about you and praying for you the entire day."

"Good. Then I feel more confident of a positive outcome."

She reached towards me and kissed me on the mouth. She did not even know how to kiss, and I loved it.

"It's—it's the first time I've ever kissed a man. I mean, I kiss my dad on the cheek and my brother on the cheek, but not this. I am sure you're laughing at me, but…"

"I am not at all laughing at you, my dove. I will guide you in these matters, teach you how to please me in all ways. And I will please you, I promise."

I reach for her face and pulled her to me and kissed her. She groaned with pleasure at the sensation. Then she tasted her lips and placed her trembling fingers over her mouth as if she wanted to preserve the sensation.

"Gosh, my legs are trembling!" Her face was radiant.

I laughed, "That means true love, true desire, my Zen."

We ordered dinner for her and her brother, mother and father. I also ordered two for me to take back to my place. I chose for us not to eat here tonight. I instructed Quincy to put the food into the car.

As we walked by him, he wished me good luck. I said thank you, and we were in the car. I headed east up the coast,

"Hey Zen, have you hear of something called Elegwa Park? It's a new thing, I hear."

"Oh yes, I heard about that. The girls at work were chattering about it…a series of mansions for only the most important ministers in the country. Rich and important people. The girls said ordinary people are not allowed there."

"They may be right, but we'll see, my darling. We'll see."

We pulled up in front of the small house, she reached over and kissed my lips.

"Please convey my congratulations to Mr. Qualis. See you tomorrow."

"I'll be thinking about you. Nite nite."

I bade her good night, waved at our audience of three. The threesome waved back enthusiastically. I head back to my flat. The lights are all on, so that may be a good thing. I grabbed the food and the ointment and opened the door.

"Raina! Raina, are you here?" No response. I check the bedroom. She seemed asleep, but in exactly the same position as she was when I left hours ago. She was sucking furiously at her thumb. I let her sleep.

I set out my meal, ate it, did the dishes, and went to my desk. I unlocked the drawer and extracted my list of talking points. I reduced the list to two points; the first will be points made during the meeting, the second afterwards, if I get a chance or when I get a chance to meet with Lewis. I will follow Lewis's advice not to read, but to speak almost extemporaneously. The way Comrade Leader does. At points I will be engaging; at others I will talk over their heads in excellent English that we tend to admire in this country.

1. Lewis & Parker-Candidacy and having me nominated to run as president of the SU rather than just representative of Arts Faculty (Staff); house to buy; car, driver and other staff for me.

2. Prep for M: key points for meeting on Wed. Former student union presidents; students must decide what is in their interest rather than be told that this or that is for their own good; we must have a voice about the administration of our campus; current and future students will gain or lose by what we decide here today; soldiers and purpose; free speech; academic standards; infrastructure; new student union building; better bookstore and gift shop; restaurant with freshly cooked food every day, three meals per day; a new student social club with drinks; an area for prayer with a fulltime religious leader; improved sports and exercise facilities, including an indoor gym, etc.

Stephen DaSilva

I go into the bedroom again. Raina is still asleep on her side, thumb still in her mouth. I removed the thin sheet I used to cover her and raise up her loose night gown to above the waist. The right buttock seemed to have taken the greater amount of the beating. I applied the ointment I got from the pharmacy as gently and as generously as I could, leaving the area exposed so that the wounds may absorb the ointment. She made sounds of pain, so she is somewhat aware.

Back to the kitchen, I set out a small portion of her food and put the rest in the fridge. She can eat that tomorrow. The two eggs I had boiled were still there, so

I placed them with the rest of the food in the fridge. I made a pot of tea, then took her meal into the room.

"Raina. Raina. You need to wake up and eat something." No response. I shook her shoulders, but got no response either. Then I removed the thumb from her mouth. It came out with a pop in much the same way as when one uncorks a bottle of wine. She blinked, looked at me, then closed her eyes again trying to replace the thumb into her mouth.

"No Raina. You have to eat, then I will give that back to you."

She made some indecipherable sound, and I was tempted to let her go back to sleep. I checked her buttock. The ointment was almost fully absorbed.

"Come on. Sit up. I will feed you." Her eyes flickered, then opened, then she shut them again, I felt my patience being drained.

"Raina! Up now! Sit up!" I was louder, more insistent. Her eyes flew open.

"Good! Now I will help you sit up, but keep your weight on the left side." I pulled her up so that she was in a half-sitting position. I grabbed the plate and spoon and put it to her mouth:

"Open!"

She did, and I shovelled the food in. It was almost done.

"Good girl. Now stay right there. I will get some tea." I went quickly into the kitchen, poured a cup, put sugar and milk, and took it back. She had not moved. I put the cup to her mouth and she sipped until it was all done.

"Very good. You will be better in no time. You want to go back to sleep?" She nodded, and I eased her back onto her side and replaced the thumb. She sucked away and drifted off to sleep.

I cleared up the plate and cup, washed them, poured myself a cup of tea and went back to my desk. I grabbed Joseph Conrad's Heart Of Darkness which I borrowed from the university library. I owned maybe twenty books of my own. I could not afford to buy them, so as soon they were assigned, I rushed to the library to borrow before anyone else could. I vowed to have a library that would be the envy of anyone in this country. I read until quite late, then went to bed.

Chapter Thirty

I slept more soundly than I'd slept in a week. I awoke refreshed with the candidacy meeting on my mind. I felt confident, but I was aware than the line between confidence and over-confidence was the line between winning and losing. I got out of bed, then noticed that Raina was not there. I was alarmed, rushed outside, and there she was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. I went back into the bathroom, brushed, and went out again.

"Good morning, Rain. It is nice to see you up and about." I kissed her on the cheek, but she did not utter a word.

"Do you feel better? Even a little bit?" She nodded.

Before too long, breakfast was laid out: two sunny-side-up, two slices of bread, buttered, and a piece of cheese. I ate at a leisurely pace. She did not sit with me nor did she have breakfast with me. Instead, she went into the shower. I finished eating and waited for her to get out of the shower. When the sound of rushing water stopped, I gave her a few minutes to dry off then went in to the bathroom. She had the towel around her.

"Get into bed and get on your tummy. I will apply that ointment again. It seems to be working well." She got in on her tummy, as I instructed, but with the towel still wrapped around her.

"You have to remove the towel, Raina." She did hesitantly. I got the towel and made sure that the area was dry before applying the ointment. I found another loose dress and told her to wear it.

"Do not wear under-clothes. I will get some more of that ointment and hope it can prevent scars. Have you had brekky?" She shook her head.

"Relax a bit, then get up, have brekky, and come back to bed. It would be good to lay on your tummy or your side." A nod from her.

"I have that meeting today and will be away until very late. I'm sure there will be post-mortems after, one way or the other, win or lose." She did not react.

I went back outside, read a bit, then headed for the shower.

By the time I got out, my newly-ironed shirt-jack and trousers were laid out on the bed, together with matching socks, a new handkerchief, and a new brief. My shoes were at the foot of the bed. I dressed and brushed my hair, applied some

cologne, and went out. I thought I looked really good: clean, neat, professional, handsome.

I kissed her on the head:

"Thank you for doing this, Raina dear. Even though she's not well, she still does her work. I'm proud of you. Wish me luck!" She nodded. I felt my pockets for my keys and money, collected my notes and off I went. I was still feeling good, confident.

I drove slowly, and it was five minutes to one when I pulled up in front of the modest building they named the small lecture theatre. It was where most faculty meetings were held. Even the University Council, the highest body at the university met here to rubber stamp what Comrade Leader decided. I hoped for a small audience—maybe forty or fifty—since it would be more manageable. I entered the building to cheers. I was surprised. There were about a hundred people there, many faces I knew. I waved to the cheering crowd as if I were some celebrity or famous politician.

The lone fellow on stage waved at me to come up to the stage. I climbed the three stairs and walked towards him:

I reached out my hand and before he could say anything, I said: "Comrade Kwame, I presume. Yes, Comrade Lewis spoke well of you."

He laughed, pleasantly, almost obsequiously: "Welcome Comrade DaSilva. This is an honour, indeed."

"Thank you for your warm welcome, my dear Comrade. I hope we will be friends after all of this is done."

"I am sure of it, Comrade. Positive."

He showed me to the chair to his right. I sat at the high table which was covered with a white cloth, Kwame in the centre. The chair to Kwame's left was yet to be occupied. It was already ten minutes after one. Kwama looked at our watches at the same time, then we looked at each other. He asked:

"Should we begin?"

"On whom are we waiting, Kwame?"

"Oh, the Faculty Staff representative who was asked to oversee the elections. His name is Dr. Roopnarine."

"So we need supervision huh?" I asked caustically. Kwame smiled his pleasant smile. I liked Kwama immediately.

Kwama spoke into the mike:

"We are awaiting the arrival of Dr. Roopnarine who I hope will be here shortly."

At 1:15, Dr. Roopnarine showed up. Medium height, aquiline face, greying hair, rather thin, wrinkled blue shirt tucked into a well-worn jeans, brown belt drawn tightly around the waist such that the waist of the jeans was bunched up, sneakers. He walked in from of the high table, stretched out his hand to me, I shook it but did not stand. Kwame was about to stand and shake his hand, but—following my example, I suppose—sat back down again.

I suspected that the students in the audience would notice our reactions. We students always looked closely at lecturers, male or female. Kwame spoke into the mic:

"Good afternoon, Comrades. I apologise for the late start, and he looked at the lecturer who could not appear less interested. There were students in the audience that shook their heads. Kwame continued:

"We are here to nominate a candidate to be the student representative for the Faculty of Arts. We will also be confirming our elected candidate to be President of the Student Union. Before I open the floor for nominations, I'd like to remind you that the elections for the SU president will be held one week from today. I encourage you to turn up and vote." He paused, then:

"I hereby declare nominations for the stated position open. Do we have a nomination?

A girl from the back of the room shouted: "I nominate Steven DaSilva."

A male voice, equally loud: "Seconded!"

"Are there any other nominations?" A silence fell upon the crowd.

"Are there any other nominations?"

Another girl to the from, whom I knew well shouted:

"I move that nominations be closed!"

"Seconded!" Came another female voice.

Kwame: "It has been moved and seconded that nominations be closed. Those that agree, say 'aye'".

The entire room, it seemed, screamed "Aye".

"Are there any 'nays'?"

The room went quiet.

Kwame: "I hereby declare Comrade Steven DaSilva to be the Representative on the Student Union for the Faculty of Arts by unanimous vote. I also declare

that, by unanimous vote, our candidate for President of the Student Union is our very own Steven DaSilva!"

The crowd went wild with cheers and hoots. Kwame let the noise go on for a while. Dr. Roopnarine got up, shook our hands offering me congratulations, and made his way out. Kwame asked the crowd:

"Friends, don't you think we should demand some words from the next president of your Student Union?" The crowd responded with a resounding "Yeeah!" followed by "Speech! Speech! Speech!..."

Kwame gave me the mic. I waited for a few seconds, allowing the adoration to wash over me. I held up my hand and they quietened down.

"Mr. Chairman, my fellow students, my friends, my comrades. I am lost for words at the love I have been showered with today. I am deeply grateful and deeply humbled. I honestly did not expect this kind of reception. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"I will not keep you long, but there are a few things that I need to say, if you will permit me." Another round of cheers and hoots. I continued:

"First, I have no doubt that you noticed the presence of a faculty member on stage here with us. I am sure you noticed that he was late. I was told that he was here to "oversee" our elections. I must say that I find that to be offensive to us as thinking university students. It was insulting to you, and I find that to be intolerable. That practice of treating us as if we were primary school children in perpetual need of supervision must stop."

More cheers, more hoots...and some "is blasted eye-pass!"

"As president of our SU, I promise to have this colonial practice ended. Our government pays them to teach us not oversee us. This is not Bookers Sugar Estate!"

"Second, I want to address the presence of soldiers on our campus." I felt the crowd tense up immediately.

"We need to remember two things: 1. They were sent here upon the express instruction of our President. In those instructions, Comrade Leader was clear that they were here to protect us. That was clear. Of course, many of us find the numbers to be almost overwhelming, so I will speak with the top brass and have the numbers reduced. I will also ask that those soldiers who are a bit too enthusiastic be assigned off the campus. I am confident that Comrade Leader, himself a university person, will take our feelings into consideration. That is the kind of man he is...considerate and intelligent."

I felt the tension leave the crowd and a new chorus began: "Comrade Leader! Comrade Leader!..." I allowed that to go on.

"I will also ask our Great Leader to please take a few minutes and visit us, maybe even speak with us for a few minutes. After all, who is giving us free education? Who built this campus and who keeps it going? Who pays the faculty and staff?"

More of "Comrade Leader! Comrade Leader!"

"That is correct, our Leader and his government! So this campus is also his, and it would be good for him to see how his university is functioning."

Loud cheers was the response.

"You know, for some years now, we have had student unions and SU presidents who go to these meetings and suddenly become dumb. They are too terrified to speak o our behalf. No more! We will make our demands known to the administration and we will have Comrade Leader himself in our corner!"

"We need a better bookstore; we need a better cafeteria; we need better sports facilities!"

And those are things that we will have! And if our Comrade Leader so desires, we will have a new Student Union Building. These are *some* of the things we will work towards. There are more improvements I have in mind, but I cannot reward the affection you have shown me by boring you to tears.

My fellow students, once again, you have my gratitude.

I handed over the mic to Kwame, stepped down from the stage and shook almost every hand in the place, hugging many along the way.

I was at the exit when one of Lewis's men approached:

He whispered: "Comrade, the Major was hoping to have a few minutes with you."

"Of course. I will always have time for my friend Rudolph. I'll be there in five minutes."

Chapter Thirty-One

I drove to the back of the campus, but remained in the car for a minute to breathe. I was shaking, but could not figure out why. It took some effort to gather myself. I stepped out of the car and walked into Lewis's office. I almost jumped out of my skin with the cheers and yells and clapping and noise. The two secretaries were hugging and kissing me, the big soldier was slapping me on the back, Lewis was pumping his fist in the air and crying out "My boy!!" and "What I tell yawl?!" He lifted me off my feet. They seemed high, but there was no sign of liquor anywhere.

I took bow after bow after bow, thanked them all, and shook their hands. The two secretaries were especially aggressive in their affection. They came to each side of me, hugged, and moved my hands to their behinds. Firm, I thought. They both whispered, unashamedly, "We still waitin', you know. You choose who goin first. We don' mind."

Rudolph stepped in to "rescue" me:

"Arite. Arite. Lef' de bai alone now. We gat big things to deal with now."

With his arm over my shoulder, he guided me into his office. I realized only then that there was much more to this than meets the eye.

He sat and I sank into the chairs on the front of his desk.

"Okay Steve. Let's take a minute to settle down. You look as if you need it."

"I sure do, Rudolph." I closed my eyes and put my head back for a minute.

When I sat back up, Rudolph was looking at me, smiling.

"Better?"

"Oh yeah. I needed that. It's quite a bit to absorb."

"I know, kid, I know. But there is a bit more…and you will like what I have to say, I promise."

"Okay. Good news is always good. Shoot."

"First, since you are, in fact, the president of the Student Union of the only university in our nation and since you are a member of our political party, I was asked to formally present you with the Official *Executive* Party Card."

"Thanks, Comrade."

"Please do not thank me for any of this. This is coming *directly* from the Minister of Home Affairs upon the orders of Comrade Leader *himself*. Clear?"

"Clear, Comrade." I had the feeling that this officiousness was because this whole thing was being taped. I mouthed the question, "taped?" He nodded and put his forefinger over his lips. I nodded.

"Further, Comrade DaSilva, you are required to meet with the Honourable Henry White, Minister of Home Affairs, in his office on Friday instant at 9:30 a.m."

"Yes, Comrade."

"In the meanwhile, I have been ordered to give you a list of the privileges you will enjoy at the pleasure of His Excellency, the President. You will open the envelope as soon as you leave this office. Should you have any questions, you will direct them to the Minister of Home Affairs during your meeting on Friday. You may not direct any questions to me, Comrade."

"That concludes our meeting, Comrade. Welcome to our Party."

"Thank you very much, Comrade."

Lewis got up, went to his chair, fiddled with something under his desk that I presumed was a recorder. He was drenched with sweat. So was I.

He blurted, "Fuck, man! That was tough shit. It's the first time I've been asked to do anything as big as that."

"Well, you can imagine how I'm feeling. Good thing I didn't fucking faint, Rudolph."

"Yeah…two virgins."

We laughed raucously.

"I need a cold beer, man!" he said.

"Yeah, me too."

We walked out of his office and went directly to his car. The big soldier was already in the driver's seat. Another plain cloth person was in the front with him. We were in the back. In two or three minutes, we stopped in front of a rather nondescript house. The soldier knocked. The door opened, and the two of us were led into a well-appointed room."

"Two of your coldest beer, Comrade," Lewis barked at the uniformed waiter.

The beer arrived. Lewis drank his in one gulp. I sipped, aware that I had to meet with Zenyatta.

"We can talk freely here, Steve," he said signalling that another beer be brought for him.

"What's in the envelope, Rudolph?"

"Lots of great things, boy. Lots! You can open it now or later, as you wish."

I fished the envelope out of my pocket, but before I opened I opened it, I asked:

"Hey Rudolph, what's in this for you?"

"I will be promoted to the rank of Colonel on Friday afternoon. There are benefits to that, I can tell you."

"And what is to happen when I meet with the minister on Friday?"

"I really don't know for sure, but I suspect he will have you sign a contract of some sort and swear you in. I don't know for sure. Open the fucking thing, man! I want to know too."

I opened it. One sheet of paper with a list of "entitlements" upon taking the Oath of Allegiance. I read out loud:

"Comrade Steven DaSilva is entitled to the following upon the orders of our President:

1. A full scholarship at any university in the U,K. to read for a degree in Constitutional Law. The scholarship covers all expenses. He must be admitted by that university and provide proof of admission. The scholarship includes allowances for his partner if he so wishes.

2. He is to be given any house of his choice in any location of his choice, providing that location is within driving distance of the capital city.

3. He is to be given an official vehicle of his own.

4. He is entitled to have in his employ no more than ten (10) persons. While he has the discretion of hiring and firing whomsoever he wishes and for whatever purpose he deems necessary, they must include an experienced chauffeur and two qualified bodyguards. These people will be paid by the government according to the government schedule. The government shall provide armed soldiers for around-the-clock security of his property and of his person while he is in said property.

5. He is entitled to three sidearms and rounds for those as he wishes. The rounds may not exceed two hundred (200) per sidearm. The Ministry of Home Affairs is to provide training in the use of these firearms, if training is deemed to be necessary.

6. He is to receive a salary of fifteen thousand dollars (15,000) per month in local currency. This allowance is to be free from taxes.

It is signed by the Minister of Home Affairs for the President."

"Better than I thought, Steve. Much better."

I tried to speak, but the words seemed to get caught in my throat. I coughed. Rudolph signalled for another beer each for us. I sipped.

The words came out: “Fucking shit!”

“Damn right, fucking shit! Now you’re officially a BIG ONE. A young big one too! Don’t forget your friends, you hear?”

“Never! I’ll never forget about you, Rudolph. Who started all of this, eh?”

He pointed to himself and I pointed as well.

“Rudolph, I got this virgin I have to deal with tonight, so I go home for a shower and a change of clothes, if it’s okay with you.”

“Boy, you aint got to ask my permission for one shit, you hear? I can still advise you though. And first piece of advice is to keep that envelope safe. Second, don’t be late for Henry White on Friday. He can get ugly. Third, go ride that filly!”

Uproarious laughter from the two of us. He gave the soldier orders to take me back to my car. The plain clothes man stayed behind.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was almost five when I got home, only to remember that I did not get the ointment for Raina. She was sitting at the dining table when I went in. I asked her to iron a fresh shirt for me and that I'll be back in a few minutes.

I returned as she was ironing the shirt. I rushed into the shower and put on fresh clothes. I decided to leave the entitlement letter in the locked drawer. She was back at the dining table.

"Did you eat something, Raina?" She nodded.

"Good. I want you to apply the ointment before you go to bed. I will be very late if I'm home at all tonight. It's been crazy all day and I think the whole of tonight as well. But don't worry, it's crazy in a good way."

She just gazed at me. I left for the hotel to see Monty. I screeched to a stop in front of his car. The usual handshake, slight bow, and so on.

"You look excited, Sir."

"Yes. Yes. The thing we talked about yesterday. It's all a go! We start work on Saturday."

"That's wonderful, Sir. Wonderful!! Great news!" He was almost hopping with joy...and relief, perhaps.

"It is. I'll be back with Zenyatta in a few minutes. Go in and tell Quincy Lane that it's a go. Same thing. Tell him to prepare a good room for me. Extra towels. Extra sheets. Ice in an ice bucket....the works. Got it?"

"Got it, Sir!"

I drove off. I was ten minutes early. I tried to remember the entitlement letter verbatim. I was usually good at remembering the written word, but my excitement got the better of me. All I could remember with any clarity was the ten people I can employ. A driver. Two body guards. That leaves seven. I'll discuss this with Zenyatta. As I thought of her, she appeared. Quick walk, big smile. Beautiful. Graceful. I wanted to devour her there and then. I got a hold of myself.

She hopped in the car. I pulled her to me and kissed her...a long, deep kiss. She responded amateurishly, but willingly.

"I love you, Steven. I will love you for the rest of my life, no matter what."

"And I love you, Zenyatta."

I drove quickly. I was newly confident now that I had the Party Card in my wallet. We walked quickly into the hotel. Quincy nodded and handed me the key.

"Everything as you instructed, Comrade. I also had drinks put in the small fridge. Enjoy."

Zenyatta looked shell-shocked. We went up to Room 315. I opened the door and lifted her up into the room. It was as a new husband taking his wife into their home after the wedding. I put her down gently.

"Are you thirsty, my love?"

"No, my heart. Not yet."

I took her top off, slowly. She unbuttoned my shirt. She reached behind her back and snapped open her bra. I had never seen such beautiful breasts, upright, firm, full without being large. It was the colour of burnished bronze.

"My God! You are beautiful." She blushed a deep red, her eyes downcast. I undressed her and stood back. She really was a vision. My eyes lingered on the thick brown curls between her legs.

"Let's go into the shower, my love."

I removed my clothes and put her before me as we went into the bathroom. She was perfect. This is perfection.

"You are perfect, Zenyatta. You are perfection."

"I am yours, my lovely Steven."

We showered. I touched her curls, soft. I washed her and she washed me. When she reached down, there was a quick intake of breath.

"O God! It's…it's…My God."

We dried off and I led her onto the bed. I brought a new white towel from the bathroom. I knew what was to be done, and I was happy that she knew nothing at all. I kissed every inch of her perfect body. She arched her back and moaned. I brushed my face on her thick brown curls. She moaned and purred.

"Kiss me all over, my woman." She did, then stopped and looked at my manhood, long and rigid.

"My God! This is…"

"It's okay, my love. It will be okay." She kissed my feet.

I put her on her back and put the new towel under her. She pleaded:

"Please don't hurt me…I beg you, please don't hurt me."

"I will, but just a little. Just a little."

I put myself into her, slowly. I had to use some force to get in. All the way in. She opened her mouth to scream, then bit her lower lip. Blood was coming from

her lip. Her eyes were wide with the shock of it. I came into her with all the fullness of waiting, of expectation. Of expectation surpassed.

Her face was wet with sweat, beads of sweat forming on her forehead. The sweat was pouring down between her breasts. I held her tightly. I took the towel from beneath her. It was soaked through with blood. Through and onto the sheets. I put the soaked towel beside the bed.

"Did I hurt you much?"

"It hurt, my love. But I loved it. I have given you myself, my most precious gift."

"I know, my Zenyatta. I know, but it will hurt less and you will enjoy it much more. I promise." She kissed me, and tasted the blood from where she had bitten her lip. We lay in each others' arms for a long time. Quietly, peacefully. She kept touching my chest, my neck, my face. Then, suddenly, she started crying, sobbing.

"What's the matter, Zen. Tell me, please. Are you hurt?"

She smiled and cried at the same time.

"No, no. I'm not hurt, although I'm really sore down there. I'm just so happy, my Steven. I love you so much that my body cannot contain it. So much, so very much. You are my whole life, my darling. I can't explain it. I just can't."

"It's okay. I understand, my sweet girl. My very own Zenyatta." She put her head upon my chest, remained there, and got on her tummy and looked at me as if she would drink me in.

"Are you thirsty?" I asked.

"A little."

I made to get out of bed, but she held on to me,

"No, my love. It's my duty." She said, with all the sweetness and sincerity and purity that this world could offer.

"Well then, my Lady. At least this once, let's both get the drinks. Well, you get the drinks from the fridge and I'll get some ice, especially for your lip."

"What's wrong with my lip?"

"You bit down on it hard. It bled a little, and I don't want it swelling up."

She got the drinks, I got the ice and put them in the glasses that Quincy provided. I applied some ice to her lip.

"Can I tell you something, my love?"

"Of course, tell me anything, everything."

"Last night, I told my parents that I love you."

"Oh darn! Talking about your parents, they will be furious if you're late, no?"

"I told them. They were not upset last night since they know. They will worry though. But I want to stay with you tonight."

"I want to stay with you tonight and every other night, my Zen. But we need to send word that you will not be home tonight."

"Okay."

I went to the phone and dialled zero

"Comrade Layne?"

"Yes, Comrade."

"Quincy, I want you to send Monty up with a writing pad and pen, please. I will call back and have you send up dinner."

"Of course, Comrade."

Monty was up to the room within minutes. I instructed him to stand at ease outside the door, I told Zen to write a brief note explaining that she was with me, that she was very safe,, and that she will be home tomorrow by noon.

Then I told her to write to her supervisor that there was an urgent issue to which she must attend, to please forgive her absence and that she will be at work on Friday.

Quincy had the presence of mind to send two envelopes into which we put the letters. She addressed them. I told Monty to deliver one immediately to the Qualis family. The address was on the envelope. The second was to be delivered to the department store early in the morning.

Monty was as reliable as any person I know, so Zenyatta and I rested easy. I picked up the phone again and ordered dinner from Quincy, with instruction that he should bring dinner up himself. I also asked him to send one of his waiters to buy two toothbrushes and a tube of toothpaste. I gave him five dollars for whomsoever he sends. I told him that we'll be down for breakfast at eight or nine.

When all of that was done, we sat on the side of the bed. She had noticed the towel with her virginal blood on it.

"Did all of that blood come from me? Do you think that something is wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong, my love. You just bled a lot. When the hymen gets ruptured upon your first intercourse, the blood may be a little or a lot. In her case, it was a lot. I folded the towel and put it away carefully.

"In many cultures, that is kept as a memento of your first time. It will be ours to keep if you wish. It may well provide guidance for our daughters."

"I like that, my love, 'our' daughters." We both smiled the smile of two people in love.

"You really are a man of action, huh?"

"Well, my love, when action is required, we act quickly and decisively, but let's get back to your conversation with your parents."

"Well, as I said, I told them that I was in love with you. That you are a kind and generous man."

"How did they react?"

"They asked if I was sure, and that they did not want to see me hurt in any way. They admitted that they brought me up to make my own decisions, to be independent in my thinking and careful in my actions. Of course, they were both aware of your generosity to them. After all, it was you who got my father his dream job sitting at a desk and doing numbers. Then the dinners, and taking me home on time…except tonight, that is." She laughed, and it was like tiny bells.

"Oh, they also wished to meet you to thank you in person, although we both know where they will go with this."

"They sound like wonderful parents, Zen."

"Is he being treated well at the sugar estate? Is he satisfied with his salary?"

"You've made him the happiest man in the world, my love. He is already thinking of saving up and doing work on the house."

"Okay. That may be done faster than he thinks. One never knows, eh?" I smile.

There was a knock on the door. Dinner.

"Go have a shower. Shut the door, but do not lock it."

I wrapped a towel around me and answered the door. It was Quincy:

"Good night, Comrade. I brought as you ordered."

"Great. Tomorrow I will take a drive by Elegwa park to see if anything interests me. I think it will be wise for you to work through to the end of the month. You will be working exclusively with me by the start of the next month."

"We will go into greater details later."

"As you wish, Comrade. If there is anything else, please let me know. I will stay at the desk until eleven or so in case you need me."

"Excellent, Quincy,"

It was only ten or so. The whole night lay ahead. I opened the door and joined her in the shower. Afterwards, we wrapped ourselves in our towels, sat on the bed and ate.

"Of course, you've already realized that with all the wonderful happenings over the last few hours, I did not have a chance to ask you about your day."

I kissed her, and she wiped a bit of ketchup from my lip with her fingertip, then put it in her mouth. I laughed out loud.

"I will have to deliberately leave some bit of ketchup on my lip, so that you can take it off." We laughed again. I cannot remember the last time I felt this happy, this comfortable with anyone.

"Come on, Mr. Big Stuff. Tell me about your day."

"It went way better than I expected." I recounted the whole tale.

"I wanted to bring the entitlement letter with me so that we may discuss it, but I did not want to take a chance of losing it. And I was too excited by what I knew would happen tonight. This heaven that we're in right now. The truth is that I really need to get your help to think it all through. I will also need Monty's and Quincy's help on practical matters. For that, I will need the items that the Minister outlined. We can meet and work through it item by item."

"Yes, my love. Be methodical. But I would suggest you find a meeting place that is more private and more comfortable than here. Don't you agree?"

"I agree fully, although I did not thing that far, honestly."

"Well, thank goodness that I am very organized, so I can help there. With your permission, I can organise a place and time when we can get together. I could discuss this with Mr. Quincy initially, but you need to give the okay."

"To you, it's Quincy. He will be working for us. So it's Quincy, not Mr. Quincy."

"Nice. You make me feel like a boss already." She laughed her sweet Christmas bell laugh, small, sweet, pure. "Seriously though, I do feel a greater sense of responsibility since I met you. Now I know I will have to play my part in getting you ahead…and keeping you safe." She continued:

"Tell me, my darling, what do you remember from the list?"

"It's all a jumble. I was too excited, but I do remember that I'm allowed to employ ten people who will be on the government payroll."

"Then let's start there, my sweetheart. What are the positions that must be filled?"

"The letter makes it clear that I must have a driver for the government car that I'll be given."

"A car? You'll be given a car…a government car at that? Wow!"

"It gets better. Just wait."

"Okay, a driver is a must. And I take it that Monty is it, correct?"

She got up from the bed and got the notepad and pen. I admired her calves, perfectly shaped, beautifully muscled. She noticed, "Sweetheart, I really doubt that we can keep our focus on business at this point. She kissed me and moved my hand to her breasts. We make love again, and she climaxed more than eight times, each more intense and more loud than the last.

After a long while, both of us fulfilled, she rolled over on her back and gazed at the ceiling. I asked if she was okay.

"What was that? What happened there, Steven? I've never known that. Ihad no control over my own body. What was that? Is this how it is supposed to be?"

"Yes, this is how it should be when you're in love."

"Was I too loud?"

"You were perfect, Zenyatta."

"Do I please you? I want to please you, only you."

"You please me, Zen my love. And I know from your sounds that I please you."

"You'd be shocked at the number of women who have never had orgasms, although they've been in sexual relations for years and years and years. Sometime forty to fifty years."

"That's truly incredible. I'm sorry for them."

We lay there again, cuddling, exhausted, happy. We dozed off and awoke at one a.m. I shook her awake,

"Zen. Zen darling," I coaxed gently.

"Hmmm?"

"We should get up. She was awake. I was dreaming about us."

"I hope it was a nice dream, my love."

"Oooh, it was. But reality is even better."

"I think we should dress and I should take you home. I will come and get you at around eleven or so in the morning. We have some work to do tomorrow. Wear a nice, comfortable dress, please."

"Okay, my love."

We were up and were out of the room in twenty minutes. Zenyatta was sure to fold the towel upon which she shed her blood and put in a bag. I advised her to place it in an airtight bag as quickly as she could. I stopped by the front desk and told the attendant that Comrade Layne should be informed that I shall be back about mid-day tomorrow. I returned the keys, and he seemed to know better than tell me about payment.

We drove quickly to her parents' place. Too late for the welcoming committee. She kissed me a long, lingering kiss.

"I miss you already, my Steven."

"Tomorrow will come soon enough, my love." I waited until she was in the house. She waved from the front window, blowing kisses. I waved and drove off.

I went back to my flat and went straight to bed. Raina was asleep, thankfully. I fell asleep instantly, my trousers still on.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I was up early. Raina was up earlier. I brushed, went out and asked to have a coffee. She was preparing breakfast. I knew that I will have to find a way out of this entanglement, but that must wait. I took the cup of coffee to my desk, took out the list, and copied it by hand onto a lined writing pad. I put everything back in the drawer and locked it.

I had breakfast and a second cup of coffee.

"Did you apply the ointment, Raina?" She nodded.

"Good. Do the same today after you shower."

I showered, dressed in a new shirt-jack, new trousers, socks, handkerchief, and shoes. I go back to the desk and get the notepad on which I'd written the list, and I collected the white envelope. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that she was unconcerned about my movements.

"I'll be back late, I think." The nod was the reply.

I drove directly to the hotel. It was almost nine. Quincy was there, of course. I paid for all things last night. Finished, I asked him if he had a few minutes for coffee.

"Of course, Comrade."

We sat at the usual table. I told him that I need a meeting with him, Monty and Zenyatta to discuss some issues.

"I do not want to do that here. It's too public, even in the dining area. Can you think of a place that is quiet and private?"

He thought for a while and then, "I know just the place. Newly opened, so no one is there. Quiet, clean, decent. Fits the bill, I think, Comrade."

"Okay. We will all meet here at 4. You and Monty will go in his car, and Miss Zenyatta and I will follow in mine. I know you will have to take thirty minutes off."

"I'm looking forward to this, Comrade. To working for you."

"Good. See you at four then. I will tell Monty about it now. He will be driving me around in my car for a few hours, so do have someone keep an eye on his."

I go outside. Monty is there, as usual. The usual polite greeting, crisp clothing as usual. I tell him that he should lock up his car, that Quincy will have someone

keep an eye on it, and that he will drive my car for the next few hours. I gave him my keys.

"You, Quincy, Miss Zenyatta and me will meet at four this afternoon. I have some details to iron out. We will go get Zenyatta. I'm going to take her shopping for some nice clothes."

"As you wish, Sir."

We pull up to the house at 10:30. It was the first time that I was seeing the house in daylight. It was not as shabby as it seemed: neat, well-kept yard, flowers in front, fruit trees at the back, signs of a vegetable garden at the side. The house itself was of wood and in need to a few coats of paint.

Her mother came out, crossing the narrow bridge. I step out of the vehicle, feeling a bit uneasy. Upon seeing her, Monty got out of the car and took up what I assumed was a defensive position. Zenyatta's mother was an attractive

woman, light-skinned, clean but cheap dress, slippers. Her hair was neatly combed, greying at the sides, about mid-forties, I thought. She was light on her feet. I reached out my hand, but she ignored it and gave me a warm hug instead. I hugged her,

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Ma'am. I bid you a very good morning."

She released me from her hug and unapologetically sized me up.

"Good morning, Mr. DaSilva…or should I say Comrade DaSilva?" she was having fun.

"Steven is fine, Ma'am."

"Good morning, Steven. I am Zenyatta's mother."

"You are? My goodness, I thought you were her elder sister or cousin." She laughed a great, big, good-natured laugh.

"I see why, now I see why."

"See what, Ma'am?"

"Now I see why she is in love with you. Good looks, classy, good language, charm….mmmm…yes, I can see why."

Then there was a quick about turn to seriousness, "Steven, thank you for what you have done for my husband. We are all grateful, truly. But I also beg you. I beg you, please don't hurt my baby girl, please. She is a good girl. She has always been a good, kind girl. Please care for her, treat her good. I swear to you, Steven, she will be faithful to you. That girl never had so much as a childhood boyfriend, but she gave herself to you. I ask you as a mother who loves her daughter more than I love life. Don't hurt my daughter."

"Ma'am, I was happy to help out. And I will continue to do so for Zenyatta's family, I promise. I promise you that I will care for her, that I will take care of her. I came today to get her because I want to surprise her by taking her shopping. She has also suggested that we call a meeting with some key people this evening. I love her, and she will be part of everything I do. I will not hurt her, I promise you.

I'm also sorry that it has taken me so long to meet with you. I will be sure to come in to meet with you and Mr. Qualis, and young Qualis as soon as I can."

"Zenyatta's father likes to pretend that he's strict, but when that girl give him one look, he freeze up like ice cube. Oh, and that girl too like surprises." She laughed again. I smiled.

Zenyatta appeared. A vision. She rushed up to me and unabashedly kissed me on the mouth. I glanced at Mrs. Qualis. She seemed pleased at our open demonstration of affection. Zenyatta had a bag with her.

"Mrs. Qualis, would you be upset if Zenyatta spends the night with me?"

"Steven, when this girl makes up her mind, she makes up her mind. She has the right to decide, but thank you for asking."

"Thank you, Ma'am. She will decide, I'm sure."

"I have a meeting with a Minister of the Government tomorrow morning. I hope that will be a quick meeting. If it is, we will be here in the afternoon. I look forward to meeting Zenyatta's father."

Zenyatta kissed her mother on the cheek, "Bye, Mommy. I'll be home tomorrow, okay."

Monty opened the rear door for us to get in, then he moved around to get behind the wheel. I kissed her as the car moved off.

"You look positively beautiful, Zenyatta."

"You too, my darling. Did you notice I brought a change of clothes? See? I learn quickly."

"I did notice the bag. Yes, you certainly learn quickly. We have some time, so I'll take you shopping for new clothes. Monty knows the town better than most people. He knows where to go."

"Are you sure, Steven? You know..." and she rubbed her thumb and forefinger together to avoid talking about money in front of Monty.

"It's okay, really. You get whatever you want."

"Did my mom tell you that I love surprises?"

"Yes, she sure did. She is a very nice lady. And she is very straight-forward in saying what she has to say."

"Yes, all of us are like that. Alvin, my brother, is a bit shy though. So the plan is to do some shopping, then what?"

"We can relax a bit and then we have this meeting you suggested between you, me, Monty and Quincy. Quincy has identified a quiet, confidential place."

Oh, excuse me, Zen. Monty, do you know of a new place called Elegwa Park?"

"Yes, Sir. An exclusive area with huge houses for government ministers and the like. It's on our way if you would like to drive by."

"Zen, what do you think?"

"A tour of the rich people area? Why not? No harm in living vicariously." She said, smiling away and rolling up her eyes.

"Girl, you gat some words, you know." I laughed.

"Okay, Monty, let's go take a look and dream. Zen will pick out one or two she likes." She broke out in a loud laugh, slapping her thigh with what she thought was my joke. Even Monty was having a chuckle.

We drove into Elegwa Park. It was indeed a sight. Zenyatta breathe in sharply, and I was wide-eyed. Mansions indeed, each one different from the other, large, beautifully landscaped lawns, good distances between the mansions, wide driveways for a fleet of cars, high fences, sturdy gates with guard huts. It was, as reputed, an exclusive area.

Zenyatta piped up, "My darling. We should go before we get arrested."

"But you did not identify which one or two you like, my lovely."

"Okay. Any one, any two. I can just close my eyes and point and that would be the one I like. Monty, please tell your boss we should leave before people call the police!" Monty chuckled again.

"Everything seems finished, but no occupancy as yet. No cars in driveways, no people." I observed.

"It's probably because no one can afford one of these palaces, my darling." She rolled her eyes again.

"Okay. Okay. But we can dream, no?"

"Dream on, my handsome," she quipped.

And on we went to shop for dresses and jeans and night clothes and such things for Zenyatta. I bought two shirt jacks (one light green, one cream), a pack of briefs, and a pack of white handkerchiefs for myself. All the while, Zen was painfully aware of the money being spent. I could hear her counting in her lovely head. We were done by three o'clock, and I suggested that we go into the hotel dining room for a quick snack and something to drink.

Zenyatta did not want to eat, but she was thirsty. We had two Cokes each, with lots of ice in tall glasses. She started to talk about the amount that I spent:

"You realize, my darling that I appreciate your kindness, right?"

"Mmhmm," I responded.

"But I must say that this is quite exorbitant, wouldn't you agree?"

"If you say so, my Zenyatta. Maybe I'm just trying to impress my woman."

"You have already impressed me, Steven. Your kindness, your generosity, your way of thinking about others, the way you treat other people…"

"Thanks, my Zen," I felt the blood rushing to my face.

"Zenyatta, we have about thirty minutes before we take off to our meeting, so I need to get this out quickly: I have a hand-written copy of the list. Here it is, my love. My entitlements, as they call it.

She read, her eyes getting wider and wider.

"All of this is to be yours? Lord!"

"No Zen. It is to be *ours*! *Ours*! I want you to hand in your notice tomorrow. I want us to work together. I will need you to be my northern star. The seas of politics can be treacherous, and only few can truly be trusted. You, above everyone, is who I trust. Even your Mom swears that you will always be faithful to me. She meant domestically. But I think this would apply to our professional life."

"Do you really need me, Steven? In both or in either capacity, I mean."

"I want and need you in both. I love you as much as you love me."

"If you think that I should submit my resignation, I will, of course. But I am at a loss to see how I can be of assistance to you in the professional area."

"Trust me, my love."

"I am trusting you with my life, Steven. I am trusting you with my body, heart and soul. You know that already."

"Then we will draft a letter to whomsoever is—was—your boss tonight."

"Okay, my love. Hey, I wonder what those gossiping girls will say," and she burst into a joyous peel of laughter. We both did.

"Okay, my Lady. It's time we go. We will follow Monty and Quincy in our car. You keep the list. I will ask you for it later, if necessary. I will need to take notes, so the writing pad will be useful."

"Or I could take notes for you, if you wish."

We leave, Quincy joined us. I tasked Quincy if he could arrange to have the room ready for us when we return.

"That has been done already, Comrade."

"Great!"

Quincy joined Monty in his car, and Zenyatta and I followed. The place was just outside of town, not far from the university campus. I was not aware that the place was there.

We entered, and Quincy led us to a private room. Zenyatta sat to my right; the two men sat opposite us. Quincy asked us if we would like to have drinks. We all ordered Cokes.

"I'd like to welcome my Zenyatta, and my friends Monty and Quincy. Miss Zenyatta has the list of what our government calls my entitlements list. The major item that is of concern to us tonight is employment. I have discussed some of this with each of you already, but it all bears reiteration. I am permitted to employ and dismiss ten people. Three are mandatory: An experienced driver and two bodyguards. The bodyguards will be given sidearms for the protection of myself and Miss Zenyatta. I've already identified Monty as my driver, but I'd also like to have him serve as my chief bodyguard. Would you agree to that, Monty?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"I've also identified Quincy to be my chief-of staff. He will be in charge of all staff whether permanent or temporary. All staff, except for my driver and bodyguards. Quincy will be answerable only to me. Do you agree, Quincy."

"Yes, Sir!" He followed Monty with the "Yes, Sir".

"Miss Zenyatta Qualis will serve as my senior personal advisor on all matters, if she agrees.

"Yes, Sir," she blushed as she said that. I smiled and held her hand.

"Everyone will be asked to sign contracts with the government and will be paid according to the government's payment schedule. However, I will personally ensure that whatever the salary may be, I will add to it to a sum no less than double what you earn in your current positions. I have already discussed this with Monty and Quincy. Zenyatta and I will settle upon a figure soon. Any questions, thus far?"

"That accounts for three people. We still have seven more to go and in what capacity. I need your input here. Any thoughts of the second bodyguard? Take your time to think carefully. We are talking about a position of trust and responsibility."

"Our home will have around-the-clock armed army personnel, so Monty and the other bodyguard will be focused on their jobs. Any thoughts?"

Zenyatta spoke up: "Monty is a former army man. What rank, if I may ask?"

I nodded my consent for him to respond:

"I was a Lieutenant, ma'am."

"Is there anyone who worked under you who you can trust implicitly?"

"There is only one man who fits the bill, Sir, Ma'am. His name is Jeff Gordon, Sergeant. A trustworthy and responsible man, a man of protocol and a crack shot."

"Are you in contact?"

"Yes, Sir. He is now attached to a private security firm."

"So you are recommending Gordon?"

"I would, Sir."

"Then make contact and arrange a meeting, please." I noticed that Zenyatta noted that on the writing pad.

"Yes, Sir!"

"Good. What are the other positions and any recommendation?"

Quincy: "You will need at least two full-time maids if you have a large residence, one full time cook, three full-time groundsmen/handymen depending on the size of the grounds. I will be responsible for serving meals and drinks, so there will be no need for full-time waiters, except for special occasions, of course."

Zenyatta: "That's a total of nine personnel. I'd suggest that you leave the one vacancy and hire if the need arises."

Quincy: "I think that is wise counsel, Sir."

Monty: "I agree as well, Sir."

"Okay then. For the positions of..." I looked at Zenyatta. Two maids, three groundsmen/handymen and one cook."

"Exactly. I am open to recommendations from you all."

"Just to inform you, I will be meeting with the Minister of Home Affairs at nine thirty tomorrow. I'm pretty sure he will want to go though the list after my swearing in. Finally, in terms of salary, your employment begins on Monday, regardless of anything else."

"Any questions, comments? This has been very helpful, thank you. I will expect you at 8:30 tomorrow, Monty. We will go with my car." I stood, and everyone stood promptly."

We returned to the hotel. It was 5:15.

In the car, I asked Zenyatta if she was hungry. She was "a bit". We went directly to the dining area. It was deserted. Quincy, good man that he was, stayed back in case we needed him. I ordered fish and chips; she ordered chicken low mien.

"Do you know that you are a natural leader, Steven?"

"Sometimes, but not always. Good leaders lead by example, and I have been known to set very poor ones." I was being honest. With Zenyatta, I must always be honest.

"But that realization itself is one that proves you are a natural leader."

"My Zen, my dearest. I promised your mother just this morning that I will never hurt you. I will try to be truthful always, but I suspect there will always things that I must keep to myself. I think that is part of this thing in which I find myself. If you know everything, you could get really hurt."

"I know that I do not know much about the world, my love. You may even say that I am an innocent, but I do sense things and I tend to trust my senses. If you absolutely must keep things from me, then you must. But I hope you will keep your word to me."

"Girl, your parents have raised an exceptional human being. I feel as if I'm talking to someone of your mother's age rather than with someone as young as you."

"I would advise that you never bring up age in front of those two love birds. Just before you walked into the store with that arrogant swagger of yours, I told them to act their age. They're always holding hands, and hugging and smooching. I found it gross…until you."

"Then I am even more grateful to them. You were wonderful at this meeting. You supplemented me. We will make a good couple, Zenyatta."

"I think so too, my darling. I still find it weird that I am using words like darling and love and sweetheart. I've never used them."

"Stop it! We do have to eat before we head upstairs. You make me want to have you here and now."

"We have to eat, my man. See? That's strange coming from my mouth."

"I love your mouth. It's perfect, really."

"Thanks, my darling. I like it when you tell me nice things. I love your tenderness…well, almost always. Last night proved that I can withstand anything."

The food came, thank goodness.

"Tomorrow I want you to remain here until I get back. Draft out your letter of resignation in the meanwhile. Monty will take it in. Tonight we pay full attention to each other."

"Sounds good to me."

We dug in. She knew we had to get off the topic. She said:

"I was amazed by that place. What is the name again?"

"Elegwa Park. Yes it is a wonderfully set out place."

"Maybe we can save up and have a place like that one of these good days, huh?"

"Yeah. Your right. One of these good days."

We finished and went up to the room. On our way, we bade good night to Quincy. We both stripped off our clothes and went into the shower. I held her from behind kissing her shoulders and back. She turned her head to me,

"Show me, teach me how to please you, my love."

I felt myself grow hard and told her to get down and put it in her mouth. She had no idea whatsoever. I raised her up and soaped her beautiful body. She soaped mine. I dried her off; she dried me. We went into bed. I kissed her breasts, her mouth, her neck, everywhere. She moaned.

I got on my back, "Now please me. Suck him." She went down, and pushed her head downward. She got the rhythm. "Take the whole thing in your mouth." She tried.

I turned her on her back and entered her, "Move your waist with me." She moved. I thrust deeper and faster; she moved faster, her mouth wide open from the pain and pleasure.

I withdrew and turned her on her belly. I went behind her and pulled her behind up. She turned back and looked at me in puzzlement. Her behind in the air, I entered. Hard. And out it came,

"Fuck!" she screamed. "Fuck!"

I was excited now and went deeper and harder.

"It fucking hurts, it's too deep."

"Curse more! More! Come on!"

"Fuck me like a horse. Rip my pussy, my love. O God, you're gonna kill me. Kill me. Fuck me."

She was shuddering from her orgasm, screaming, crying, whimpering. Over and over the shudders came. The screams. The cursing. I came hard in her, but stayed in there. She continued to shudder for a long time, her eyes closed, her lips and nostrils swollen. I got off, breathing hard.

"Are you okay, my love?" She held up her hand asking me to wait. She pointed to her throat. I thought she was thirsty. I hurried off the bed and got her a Coke, raised her head. She sipped. I gave her another sip. Then she shook her head not wanting more. Her belly and breasts were heaving. I got a small towel soaked it and mopped her wet forehead and drenched body. The heaving slowed, and she finally spoke,

"I could not breathe. I thought I was dying, my love. It was so hard, so painful, so wonderful. God! You're amazing."

She raised herself up and kissed my eyes and neck and mouth. She looked into my eyes with those lovely hazel eyes, her brown curls clinging to her scalp,

"I love you, Steven. God, I love you in every way possible. I cannot live without you."

"Zenyatta, if you are ever unfaithful to me, I will kill you. I swear it."

"And I swear it, that will never happen. And even if some demon causes that to happen, you will not have to kill me, my love. I will kill myself from shame. I can never be that treacherous. Never."

"Let's get engaged, Zen!"

"You cannot tease me like that, Steven. Please don't do that. Please!" She was starting to cry. I kissed the tears away.

"I am not teasing at all. Let us get engaged."

"God, are you serious? Am I dreaming?"

"I am deadly serious, and you are very much awake." She hugged me so hard that I thought my ribs would crack.

"You're strong girl."

"I am stronger than I look, my darling."

"Good. You may need to be, my Zen."

"I will be, I promise."

"Just remember that. Remember that you said that, okay?"

"One more thing: I love it when you curse in bed. I just love it. It excites me. But I never want you to curse anywhere else. Not in out sitting room or dining room or kitchen. Nowhere else. Okay?"

"I promise you, my dear heart."

"Will you be engaged to marry me, Zenyatta Qualis?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. A million yeses."

"After my meeting, I will take you home tomorrow and help you with the bags, but I will not come in. I will return at about five or six when your dad should be home and ask for your hand in ceremony. In a proper way."

"It sounds too good to be true, my love. My dad and mom will be over the moon. I hope he does not cry and embarrass me." She laughs. We laugh.

"Go bring the list will you, please. I want to show you something again." She hopped out of bed and walk her walk to get the entitlements list. Look again at the first one. Read it. We both look at the list as she reads:

"Comrade Steven DaSilva is entitled to the following upon the orders of our President:

1. A full scholarship at any university in the U,K. to read for a degree in Constitutional Law. The scholarship covers all expenses. He must be admitted by that university and provide proof of admission. The scholarship includes allowances for his partner if he so wishes.

2. He is to be given any house of his choice in any location of his choice, providing that location is within driving distance of the capital city.

3. He is to be given an official vehicle of his own.

4. He is entitled to have in his employ no more than ten (10) persons. While he has the discretion of hiring and firing whomsoever he wishes and for whatever purpose he deems necessary, they must include an experienced chauffeur and two qualified bodyguards. These people will be paid by the government according to the government schedule. The government shall provide armed soldiers for around-the-clock security of his property and of his person while he is in said property.

5. He is entitled to three sidearms and rounds for those as he wishes. The rounds may not exceed two hundred (200) per sidearm. The Ministry of Home Affairs is to provide training in the use of these firearms, if training is deemed to be necessary.

6. He is to receive an salary/allowance of fifteen thousand dollars (15,000) per month in local currency. This allowance is to be free from taxes.

"I have one more year to finish my degree here, then they will grant me a full scholarship to go to the UK to read for Constitutional Law. I do not know why…as yet. Maybe Henry White will bring it up, but I don't know. Of course, I will have to keep doing well in my studies *and* working as president of the student union if I hope to be admitted by a UK university. It will be unwise to get married before then, I think. But the scholarship includes travel and allowances for me *and* you!"

"Both of us will go? You will take me?"

"Don't be a goose, girl. Of course, you have to come with me. Do you think I'll leave without you? You've got be crazy! Never! We'll be married before we leave."

She jumped up on the bed and danced and sang, "We're getting married. We're going to England. We're getting married! We're going to England! Hello, ol' chap, my name is Mrs. Zenyatta DaSilva. Do meet my husband, the Honourable Steven DaSilva." She stretched out her hand, palm downward, to be kissed.

"Of course, I will be wearing those long white gloves like actors in the movies."

"Okay. Okay, Miss Julie Andrews. Settle down." She danced some more then cuddled up to me.

"The question is will you be willing to wait for a year?"

"Now who's being a gander. I would wait a thousand years for you. I really would."

So that's settled then. I was about to ask her which shirt-jack I should wear, the light green or cream, but she was fast asleep. I covered her and kissed her slightly open mouth. She smiled in her sleep, the sweet sleep of the innocent. I turned off the light and slept uneasily.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I was up at six; Zenyatta was up before me. She was busy preparing my clothes for my meeting with Henry White: light green shirt-jack and a black trousers on hangers; black belt; shine shoes and matching socks; handkerchief; notepad, etc. I lay there looking at her walking around with precision, every detail considered. She finally noticed that I'm awake and rushed and jumped onto the bed. She kissed me all over my face,

"Good morning, my heart. Good morning, my love. Good morning, my life. Good morning, my Steven. Good morning, my fiancée."

"Good morning, my darling Zenyatta. You're early."

"I was up, showered, dressed, admired you, got everything ready, including documents and folders. I hope I did anyway. Should we go down for breakfast or should we have it sent up? Do you prefer tea or coffee with your breakfast? I have to learn everything."

"Slow down, my love. Calm. Calm."

"You're right, of course. One has to be calm and composed before big meetings. Not that I would know, but..." I pulled her to me and covered her mouth. She was stifling her laughter.

"Easy, girl. Eeeasy."

She calmed down. I told her dial zero and order breakfast brought to the room. She did. I was showered and dried with my towel still around my waist. It was only six forty-five, but Quincy was already there and he brought up the tray himself.

We wished each other good morning and informed me that Monty was already there. I was pleased.

"That's good. Both you and Monty. Good."

"I will get the tray later, Sir. Just leave it outside the door if you wish."

Zenyatta brought the tray from the desk and placed it on the bed. Breakfast in bed. Finished, I got up and checked the documents in the folder: Writing pad, list, pen, and the white envelope, unopened. I opened it, gave Zenyatta one hundred dollars to pay for whatever we owed the hotel.

"This is way too much, my love," She protested.

"I know, but you hold on to the rest, just in case you need it."

Then we lay there for a while, quietly. I stroked the soft curls on her head. It calmed us both down. I got out of bed, brushed again and dressed. Zenyatta lay there propped up on the bed looking at me get dressed. When I was done, I turned to her,

"Well?"

She hopped out of bed, fussed a bit with my hair, pulled down the hems of my trousers, brushed her fingers over my face, the stepped back and examined me from head to foot.

"Steven DaSilva, do you know that that you are the most handsome man in the world?"

"So I've been told," I joked. She laughed.

"You're gorgeous, my love."

"Thank you, my Zenyatta. I won't be too long, I hope."

"I'll be here, my love. You will be great, I know it."

I kissed her and left. I heard the bolt click on the door behind me.

I was downstairs by eight-fifteen. Monty opened the back door of my car and I got in,

"Monty, do you know any good jewellery store nearby?"

"Yes, Sir. About three to four minutes away. I've never been there, but I hear they are good."

"We have some time, let's go."

They had just set up and opened. We went in. and it took me all of a minute to see what I wanted: a diamond ring. Gold, with a large diamond. It was simple, elegant, very expensive-looking. I asked the price, and the man behind the counter began about karats and such things about which I knew nothing and cared about less. It looked lovely and it was as expensive as it looked.

"Please put it in the nicest box you have."

"Of course, Comrade."

He placed it in a lovely black velvet box, red velvet interior. I paid, and we left. I gave the small gift bag to Monty, "Hold on to this for me. Be careful with it."

"Of course, Sir. To the Ministry?"

"Yes."

We were there by nine. Monty got out, opened the door for me, I got out, walked through the large gate, and went to the armed police security.

"Good morning, Comrades. My name is Steven DaSilva, and I am here to see the Honourable Minister." One of them approach me—a constable—ready to pat me down. The sergeant—clearly the Commanding Officer—stopped him.

"Stop, Constable. It's okay. The Minister is expecting Comrade DaSilva."

The constable froze and apologized. I nodded with a frown, feigning annoyance.

"I will accompany you myself, Comrade."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

We went up three flights of stairs, turned left, down a corridor, left again. There was a row of chairs, and I was invited to have a seat. There were two police officers in khaki uniforms, brass on their shoulders, their hats on their knees, nervous. They glanced at me. I nodded, insisting on seeming calm and comfortable. The sergeant went in and whispered to the secretary. She nodded, got up and went into an office.

9:18 a.m. I was early. She came out in quick order, "The Minister will see you now, Comrade DaSilva."

I got up, nodded to the two officers, and followed the large woman. She opened the door and shut it behind me. Large office, large desk, sofas, a large wooden table with folders. The man behind the desk was looking at some papers, seeming intent. He looked up at me and stood. I braced, my hands to my sides, my folder in my left hand, soldier-like. He reached across the desk, and I stepped forward, my own arm outstretched to take his. I bowed respectfully. The man wore a big small on his Hitler-like moustached face.

"Comrade White, my Honourable Minister, it is my singular pleasure to meet you, Comrade. Singular honour."

He beamed: "Comrade Steven DaSilva! It is good to finally meet you. We've heard lots about this good-looking boy who is now one of us. Sit! Sit!"

He pointed to the large sofa, came around his desk, and sat on the same sofa. He was a surprisingly small man, maybe four feet seven or eight inches. It was surprising to me that this could be a vicious man. I pushed that thought aside quickly. I delayed sitting until he was seated. Protocol, respect, I thought. He took note, clearly.

"They were right, you are a good-looking boy. I'm sure the girls are going crazy on that campus." He laughed, reminding me of Lewis. I smiled widely, "Well, dear Comrade, I try." More loud laughter.

"I like you already, man! I know you will serve me and our Comrade Leader well."

"I will, Comrade. I am here to serve you and our Comrade Leader."

"Okay, good. Now, tell me what you think of these generous benefits that I have given you. Hold on…let me get a copy!" He got up, picked up the phone and shouted into it: "Bring that list about DaSilva for me!"

The large woman was there in seconds, gave Comrade White a sheet, then exited.

"Now, Comrade, is anything unclear?"

"Not really, My Honourable Minister, but can you say when the car will be available?"

"Now if you wish. It's downstairs. You can have it washed and polished later or my secretary can arrange that here and you can get it tomorrow."

"What do you think is best, Comrade."

"Take the fucking thing now, man!" He laughed again, and I joined in.

"Okay, Comrade."

"What else? Ask now, boy. Don't be scared…you are one of us now, you know!"

"Comrade, I was hoping that you would give me a place at Elegwa Place. I was really, really hoping."

"Which one?"

"Anyone you please, my Minister."

"Okay. I'll give you a medium-size one. When you leave, you tell that girl out there to show you the plan and you choose a medium one. It will be in your name, but you will need to give me a token…say 50 because I like you. You have to furnish it yourself."

"Thank you, my Minister. You are the best, I must say. I can have it by noon tomorrow."

"Good. Confidential. Give it to the girl outside. She also has all the paper-work ready, so you don't need to come in to me."

"Just to let you know, my Minister, that I've already selected my ten people, if that is okay with you."

"Good, but that is not really my concern right now."

"Is there anything you want me to get done, Comrade?"

"Yes! Get that fucking campus under control. I hear you wanted fewer soldiers. Okay, but get it under control. Anything else?"

Just one more thing, Comrade." He nodded, impatiently.

"Can I ask for your guidance and advice when I need it? This is something I will cherish."

"Of course, boy. Of course. If there is anything you want done, just tell Lewis and he will get it done. But you can come to me for advice and guidance. I will make the time. One of these good days, I will come to that campus and check on you. Okay. Stand. Raise your right hand and say after me:

I swear to God that In will be faithful to Comrade Leader and the Party without question. I swear this upon my life and the life of my family and loved ones."

I repeated the Oath.

"Good. Now go and do your job. Talk to that girl and get the details worked out. You are dismissed, Comrade. I will see you again soon…maybe me you and Lewis can have a drink sometime."

"Thank you my Most Honourable Minister. You have my undying pledge of loyalty."

"Good. Make sure of that, you hear me."

"Loud and clear, Comrade," I said, went to attention and turned for the door.

"Oh, DaSilva, save two sweet things on that campus for me, and he laughed. He was not joking at all.

"Consider that done, Comrade!"

I wanted to run out of the office. I knew I was sweating, so did he. I walked with as much confidence and went out.

I walked to his secretary's desk:

"Comrade, I'm sorry to take up your time, but our Honourable Minister asked if you could show me the plan for Elegwa Park so that I may choose a medium-sized home. He also said that you have all other paper-work.

"Yes. She rolled out the plan. It was neat, clear, with numbers for each mansion. I chose Number 7, Zenyatta's birthday date, November 7. It was a medium or what for them was medium.

"Okay. First, sign this: it was a copy of the Oath I just took. You will have ownership papers for the house tomorrow. You will get all the keys tomorrow. You can pick up the car now. It's downstairs. The Sergent will give you the keys. Employment paperwork and all other paperwork is in this folder. Have them signed and witnessed as soon as you can so that they can get on the payroll. This here is

your contract with us. Your payroll will be put in place by the end of the day. Sign it here. You can authorise someone to pick up your check at the end of each month."

"Wonderful, Comrade." I said, pleased as punch.

"And you should have something for me, right? Yes, by tomorrow at noon, latest."

"I hope so. And hear me good...you better don't fuck up, you hear. That man in there will end your ass in a minute, you hear me."

"I understand, Comrade. Thank you." She saw my fear, and smiled.

I went down three flights of stairs. My legs felt weak and I was shaking. There was a row of chairs, all empty, on the ground floor. I sat for a few minutes and put my head in my hands. It was 10:30. I had spent only one hour upstairs. It seemed more like twenty-four hours. I forced myself to settle down.

Somewhat more steady now, I went out to the sergeant. He stood at attention and asked me to follow him. He showed me the car, big, black, new but somewhat dusty. It was under a shed to the east of the building.

"This is a top security vehicle, Comrade DaSilva It has red and blue lights in front in case you have to get through traffic or in an emergency. We can install sirens if you wish, but I would not advise it."

"Okay, Sergeant. No sirens." He gave me the three keys to the vehicle. I was beginning to feel large, significant, a big one. I walked back with the sergeant, went to the gate and signalled Monty to approach. He crossed the road from my car and came. I gave him the keys and turned to the sergeant:

"Sergeant, this is my driver. He will get the car. Please instruct one of your constables to keep an eye on my car~~the red one—across the road. My driver will be back for it soon. One of them showed Monty to my official vehicle and he drove it to me. He got out, opened the back door for me with much flourish, and I got in. They opened the gate.

"Take me to the hotel, please, Monty."

"Of course, Sir."

"I want you to park this up at the hotel on my spot, get a hire=car and come back for mine."

"Yes, Sir! And the ring, Sir?"

"You hang on to that. I will need that this afternoon. If you have time, have this car a washed and polished."

"Yes, Sir. This is a beautiful car, Sir. The best car I've ever driven."

"Yeah, it's very nice."

On the way back to the hotel, I realized that I did not have the bank books. Later, I thought. Right at that juncture, I wanted only to be with Zenyatta.

I walked up the stairs, beyond tired, walked unsteadily to the room door, knocked. Zenyatta opened it, and I collapsed into her arms. She shut the door quickly and half-fetched me to the bed. I sat on the side of the bed, and she held me tightly. I could not control it. I sobbed. I wept. She was hugging and kissing me, wiping my tears, making that comforting sound:

"Ssshhhh, my love. I'm here, I'm here, my love. Sssshhhhh. It's all going to be okay, my love. No matter what it is, it's going to be alright. We're together in all things, no matter what."

She removed my shirt and put me to lay in the bed. She lay beside me, holding me.

"I'm sorry, my Zen. I'm sorry."

"It's all okay now, my sweet Steven. Close your eyes for a few minutes."

She soaked a towel in the same way I did just last night. She wiped my face and my chest and belly. I dosed off. I awakened and looked at my watch. It was three in the afternoon. I had slept for more than three hours. She was still there, looking at me sleeping.

"Lord, Zen! What happened? What did I do? Did I hurt you, my love?"

"Ssshhh," she shushed me again, "You just had a moment. I think you were stressed out or just exhausted. Maybe bad news, but none of that matters now, my dearest. You're just fine now. We can talk about it later if you wish. I called down and told Quincy that we decided to stay a little longer. He was fine with that. But you must be hungry. I will call down and ask Quincy to send up some soup. Just plain chicken soup. Just remain in bed. I'll just phone down and come right back.

She did, getting a Coke on the way back to me, "Drink this, my love." I sat up and drank the whole bottle.

"Aah, that's good. You were dehydrated. More Coke?"

"No thanks, my gorgeous Zen. I feel fine now, but I am a bit hungry."

Before too long, Quincy was at the door with a tray, an ice bucket, and a bowl of soup. Zenyatta took the tray through the half-opened door, thanked Quincy, and closed the door. She placed the tray on the desk, "Do you want it now or let it cool for a minute?"

"Two minutes. You should have let Quincy bring in the tray. Allow people to do their job, my darling."

"Yes, but I was not sure you'd want anyone to see you in bed at this time of day. So just to be sure."

"I am in love with a woman who thinks! I do love that...my thoughtful Zenyatta."

She smiled widely, "That's me," and she did a low courtsy. She brought the bowl and fed me. I was full by the time it was half-finished. She drank the rest and put the bowl back on the tray.

"I think you will feel more refreshed if you shower, but let's allow the soup to digest."

"Come here and let's hug-up, woman." She skipped and slid into my arms. "I want to tell you about my meeting with the Minister, Zen."

"If you wish to my love, even if it's not so good news, it is my duty to listen."

"Oh, it is excellent news. It went better than I expected. Then I realized that I had left everything in the official vehicle. He was very friendly, although I knew that he could turn nasty if he was displeased with anyone. I signed the contract and such things, and brought back a bundle of others that need to be signed. We'll look at all of it when we come back from your parents."

"Are we staying here tonight?"

"Yes, we are. We will come back and I have to go out for a few minutes and be back quickly."

I got up and showered. While Zenyatta was having her shower I got on the phone with Quincy. I told that we will be spending two or three more days, that he should have the room refreshed after we leave. He should also send Monty up to me in thirty minutes and instruct him to bring the folder I left in the car and transfer everything into the official car. I suspected that Quincy had already seen the new car. No one really knew any details about my meeting. Even Zenyatta knew only things in vague ways. I wanted to surprise her.

Zenyatta was dressed by the time Monty came up with the folder. I took it an told him we'll be down in five minutes. I told Zenyatta that she should leave some of her new clothes in the car or get fresh clothes from home.

We went down. Monty was standing beside the big, black now-gleaming car. He held the back door open for me and Zenyatta. She, gazed at the car, looked at me, her hand over her mouth, looked at a broadly smiling Monty, then back at me, hand still over her open mouth:

"This—this—this is yours? This?"

"No, it's *ours*, Zenyatta. Ours!"

"My goodness gracious me! This is too much, my love, too much... ."

"Yeah, it's a lot, isn't it?"

While she was getting in, I signalled to Monty by pointing to my left ring finger. He nodded and patted his pocket. Take us to 7 you know where. "I know it, Sir." I got in; she was too busy admiring the interior of the spanking new machine.

"Just Wow!" She held my face and kissed me, "This was today? This is why it went better than expected?"

"Yes, this is why too."

She was feeling the leather seats, looking at the dashboard and buttons that were unfamiliar to both of us. Monty drove slowly, and I said to him, "Afterwards, we're going to Zenyatta's parents' home."

"Yes, Sir."

The sun was down in the west, but it was still quite bright. Monty turned into Elegwa Park. Zenyatta was too busy admiring the interior of the car to notice where we are.

I said, "Your birthday is November 7th, right my love? Well, it's my new favourite number, you know." She laughed.

This is it, Monty. She was still admiring the car when Monty stopped, got out of the vehicle, and opened the door. I stepped out and asked if she was coming,

"Oh! Here?"

"Here, Zenyatta. Out you come!"

She stepped out. I pointed to the mansion, "Do you like that, my love? It's number seven."

"It's stunning, my darling, but—"

"It's ours. This is our new home, my Zenyatta." She froze and grabbed my hand.

"This! This?"

"Yes, this is our new home. We will have to furnish it, but it's ours."

"My sweet Jesus! Am I dreaming again, my Steven? Don't wake me up. Just don't. Let me dream some more, please."

"This is real, my Zenyatta. Real!"

I looked at Monty. He has his mouth wide open, his eyes big with wonder. No words came from him. Zenyatta started crying, and I held her as close to me as I can.

"This is a miracle. It is just a miracle. Look at that! Look! A palace! Steven, look at that! Monty, do you see it? Do you?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I see it. Your new home is more than beautiful, Congratulations Ma'am. Congratulations, Sir. It's beautiful."

"I'll get all the keys tomorrow and we can decide on furniture. We should go now, my love."

"I want to stay here...for my whole life."

"You will, but right now there are things to get done. In you go, my love."

Monty opened the door again. She got in, I followed. Soon we were in front of her parents' house. They were standing there, puzzled at the car. Monty, clever man that he was, opened her door first. Zenyatta stepped out and ran in to her parents. The four of them were hugging each other. Zenyatta was crying and holding their faces. I delayed for a while, standing by the narrow street with Monty. He passed me the small bag with the velvet box. I removed it and put the box in my pocket.

"Should I bring in the bags, Sir?"

"Not yet. Let them have a few more minutes."

"Sir—"

I looked at him, and he leaned his head to direct my gaze to the neighbourhood. Practically the entire neighbourhood was out looking at the car. I smiled and waved at them, and they waved back readily. One neighbour actually came up, bade us good evening and asked if he could take a peek inside the car. Monty looked at me for permission, and I nodded. Monty opened the door for a minute or two and closed it again. The man explained to me that he was a mechanic but he'd never seen anything like this. I simply smiled and asked him to excuse us.

"Of course, Comrade. Have a great evening."

"You too, comrade, You, your family and our neighbours." He went away happy, giving thumbs-up to the others.

"This will be the gossip for a few days, Monty."

"You're right, Sir."

I walked in front of Monty into the yard. He remained a distance away, facing outward, vigilant. I was hesitant, uneasy. Zenyatta noticed and came to me, held my hand and shepherded me to her family.

"Daddy, this is Steven DaSilva, the man in love."

"I'm honoured to meet you, Comrade." He shook my hand.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Qualis. And honoured."

"This is my mom, Marjorie. Mommy, this is Steven—"

"We met, we met,,,," and she gave me a polite hug and kiss on the cheek.

"This is my brother."

He reached out his hand, "I'm pleased to meet you, Comrade DaSilva. I really like your car."

"Well, if your mom and dad agree, then my driver can take you for a drive soon, okay?"

"Wow! Mommy, you hear that?"

"Boy, I ain't deaf yet, you know." We all laughed.

"Maybe Monty could take him to see the house as well, my love."

"Monty could take everybody to the house after it's furnished, I think."

"Would you like to come upstairs, Comrade?"

"Just Steven, please, Mr. Qualis."

"Well, it would be nice if you call me Rober or Bob, whatever you like…Steven. Shall we?"

They led the way up the stairs, Zenyatta holding my hands all the way. We sat on the sofas, her mom and dad on the smaller ones and Zenyatta and I on the larger. I patted on the apace next to me for her brother. He looked at his mom and she told him to go sit.

"Anything to drink, Steven? We have Coke, Cream Soda, and beer." Her mom asked.

"I'll have a cream soda, if you don't mind. It's been a while since I had one of those." Zenyatta got up and got glasses while her mom got the drinks. Zenyatta poured mine and hers.

"Steven, I want to thank you personally for what you done for us regarding the sugar estate. Thank you."

"It's a small thing, Robert. Don't mention it. I really think I should be thanking you for raising a truly wonderful daughter. She means the world to me, and I've already promised her mom to take care of her. I promise you, Robert, the same. I really came to tell you that I plan—with your blessings and consent—to do that for the rest of my life."

Her mom and dad held hands, and Zenyatta said, "See Steven? See? I told you that they're always lovey-dovey. Now you see it."

"It's a lovely thing to see, really. I wish more couples were like that, I really do."

The father spoke up: "Steven, I have to tell you that you can have our blessings, but consent? No…Zenyatta? That girl makes up her own mind. She decides and gives consent to herself and to us most of the time." We all laughed, and Zenyatta protested weakly, "Yawl mekkin me look bad." More laughter.

"I believe you, Robert." She slapped my leg, "Don't bother with these people, Steven." And we all had a good laugh. I sipped my cream soda.

"If you don't mind, Madge and Robert," and I stood. They looked at me quizzically. So did Zenyatta and her brother. I thought that they thought I had to go. I continued:

"If you don't mind, I will ask Zenyatta to be my fiancée." I reached into my pocket, got down on one knee, opened the velvet box removed the diamond ring and placed it on her left ring finger.

Zenyatta began to cry, the mother and father rushed and hugged her, the brother looked at the ring. Everyone was crying. I felt myself getting emotional. The parents rushed and hugged me. Zenyatta got up and kissed me on the mouth.

They settled down a bit, then the Marjorie looked closely at the ring,

"This is beautiful, Steven. You have great taste, and very *expensive* taste too. Bobby, look at that rock!" The father came closer to examine his daughter's engagement ring.

"It looks frightfully expensive, Steven. I've never seen a ring as beautiful as this one, Madge. This is more than two years' salary for me."

"Yes, it nice, nice, Zenny." His sister hugged and kissed him.

I sat down again and looked at them cooing over their daughter and her ring. Robert looked at me again,

"I am sure Zenyatta deserves something as beautiful as this, Steven, but I would encourage you to be careful with how you're spending money. Madge can give good advice, if you want."

The mother broke in, "Leave them alone for now, Bobby. I'm sure Steven knows what he's doing. And it's for his fiancée, anyway."

Zenyatta sat closer to me, her lovely head on my shoulder. Bobby asked if we had set a date for the wedding. Zenyatta looked at me. I felt that he was somewhat worried about the expenses and if they would ever to afford the expenses that would be incurred.

"Well, "I was speaking to everyone, "I have one more year to finish at the university, so we both thought it would be best to wait until I graduate. I also have become the president of the student union and that will take up much of my time. I will have to balance those two things. Zenyatta will help, of course as my fiancée and as my senior advisor. She'll be paid well, although we have not settled on the precise amount. We hope to decide tonight."

Madge: "It sounds difficult, Steven. But I know that Zenny will be fully supportive. She has always been like that, you know.

Zenyatta: "Tell them about the scholarship, Steven."

"Yes. The government is offering me a full scholarship to study law in England. We plan to get married after graduation and before we leave for abroad. Of course, I will have to keep performing my best to get into a good UK university. Our government will handle all expenses: tuition, living allowance, travel to and from home, and so on. I will also find out if Zen will be able to do her own degree, so she will also be advancing herself. Oh, and my salary will be put in the bank every month. It's a really good salary, so we should be building a good nest egg for when we return. We may even ask Robert to help us to invest in more property, if you feel comfortable with that."

"I will help in any way I can, Steven, you can be assured. We both will, won't we Madge?"

"Of course we will."

I turned to Zenyatta: "And if you think it's a good idea and would not put a strain on him, we could authorise your dad to collect my salary every month and deposit it in the bank. If he agrees."

Robert: "That's putting a lot of trust in people you just met, Steven. A lot."

"True, we just met, but I know Zenyatta, and I know how she was brought up."

"Thank you for putting so much trust in us, Steven," her mother added.

"One more thing: the house. We will ask you and Marjorie to oversee the house and see that things are as they should be there. I will leave my red car with you for your use."

The brother: "You mean we will have your red car? Can I drive it?"

I answered: "That will be your mom and dad's decision. You will have to turn sixteen and do all the driving tests in order to get a license."

"We will try to find a couple of hours and take the family there to see the house."

"Nice," said Marjorie, "Is it far away?"

"Oh no. It quite close by actually. It's in Elegwa Park, Number 7, Zenyatta's birthday."

"You mean that exclusive place where they say only ministers and are allowed."

Zenyatta: "Yes, daddy. Gosh! You should see the place! It's a mansion, mommy."

"Yeah, we heard about it, but we never even went there."

"You will, soon enough," I smiled.

"In the meanwhile, it getting rather late and we have to get going, right Zen?"

"Yes, time flew by. I'll just grab some things. Daddy, please ask Monty to bring in the bags. Ask him to leave my new clothes in the car." Take him with you so that Monty can show him a bit of the car.

"Okay, Zen." They went, Zen went to get her clothes. The mom and I were alone. "This is lots of good news for one night, Steven. It will be hard to digest all of this in less than a month."

"It is a lot. And you are thinking that some bad news are around the corner, no?"

"Yes, that's what I was thinking. That is the way life tends to go, but whenever that comes, I know that my daughter will not leave your side. I know that about my daughter. When she is committed, that commitment does not waver. She has always been that, always."

"And I've come to see that too, Marjorie. Only yesterday, she played an important part in making decisions about staffing for our home. Strange, but we were the youngest at that meeting, Zenyatta was the youngest. I really hope she does a degree in the UK. She's bright, and all she needs is the opportunity."

"I hope she gets that opportunity too. We could never afford that for her. If she gets her degree, we will be the happiest parents in the whole world."

"I cannot promise youm Marjorie, but I will try to make that happen."

Zenyatta returned with her clothes and put some of the bags from our shopping in the room. A few bags with clothes were left in the car. We said our goodbyes at the gate with hugs and kisses.

Zenyatta waved to them before she entered the car, "We'll be back before too long." I waved. Monty closed the door and went behind the wheel.

I leaned over to Zenyatta and whispered, "Do you think I ought to have given them some money?"

"I really don't think so. They might have been embarrassed."

"Okay. Then next time, you will give them privately."

We went back to the hotel and Monty and I carried the bags. I kissed her, noted it was past ten-thirty. I asked her to order dinner to be brought up, and told her I'd be fifteen or twenty minutes.

Monty drove to my flat. I told him to wait on the road, and I walked into the yard. There were no lights in the flat, and I surmised that she was asleep. I used my

key, opened the drawer, removed the bank books and locked the door on my way out. I left the drawer unlocked. We drove back to the hotel.

"Monty, I will leave some papers in the glove compartment. They are for my eyes only, okay. Get some rest. I will need you at nine tomorrow morning, okay."

"Yes, Sir."

I kept my own bank book with two hundred thousand in it, climbed the stairs, and knocked. Zenyatta opened the door and jumped into my arms:

"I missed you," with kisses galore.

"I missed you too my darling. Did you order dinner?"

"Yes, dear. Just did. It should be up before too long."

"Zen, I think I'll have a shower before it comes, is that okay with you?"

"Sure it is, but I'm not coming in, just in case," she said coyly. I laughed and went off into the shower.

Dinner arrived just as I was putting on a light shorts and tee-shirt. We sat on the bed and ate happily. Zenyatta placed the dishes on the tray and left them outside the room door. I turned my attention to the folder. I began going through them while she showered. I placed her contract above the rest. She returned and hugged me from behind, kissing my head.

"That was a lovely visit with my parents. They really liked you, you know."

"I hope so, Zen. I really liked them. They are good, kind, honest people. And funny too. I think they were surprised that I offered to authorize them get and deposit my salary when we go away. And it is a great salary, $15,000 per month. That will all mount up if we are away for four or five years, so it can be considered savings of maybe one million. We could live off that."

Her mind, clearly, was still on her parents' reaction. I left the money thing alone for the while.

"Not to mention overlooking the house and having the red car. Everything just bowled them over. Hey, it bowled us all over. I, for one, was bowled over several times. I mean, I like surprises, but these were miracles, each one was a miracle, my love."

"And, my darling Zenyatta, there are a few more to come. Not really big, but big enough. For instance, I need you to sign this. It's a contract which will officially name you my Senior Advisor at a salary of five hundred dollars per month."

"Five hundred? That's ten times more than what I earned!"

"Yes, but it's a hundred times more the responsibility," I laughed.

She signed it. I continued:

"You can uplift your cheque at the end of each month beginning this month. But I really do not want you to spend any of it. Save it, please."

"This is very generous, my love. Maybe I can use a small amount to help my parents. You know, with renovating the house and such things."

"That's entirely up to you, my sweet girl. But I was planning on giving you some each month to give to them. So that could be on me…therefore on us."

"Am I our Senior Advisor or are you mine?" and she broke out into almost hysterical laughter.

"Girl, if we did not have work to do, I would take you into that bed and ravish you!" I said, half-jokingly.

"Then I would pass out like last night and you'd have to be taking care of me," she responded.

"That's exactly my point, Zenyatta." We laughed.

"So to work! I have Monty's contract here at two hundred per month, and Quincy's at 200 per month. This is all subject to government approval, of course, but I do not foresee any problems."

"And the other nine employees?"

"The forms are all here for ten people. You will get them all signed as they come in."

"I'm on the job, my husband-to-be!"

"You're really tempting me, you know." She laughs again.

"We have work to do, my love. Work first, joy later," she responded with pretend bossiness.

"Okay. Back to business. You will handle the contracts. If there are interviews, we do them together. Hopefully we get it all done before the week end is over, including the bodyguard and house-folk. Tomorrow morning, I'll go and get all the keys to the house and be back. Then we'll go to the house and make a list of all things needed…which, I think, will be everything. I want you to dress casually—jeans, sneakers, tee-shirt, okay?"

"I will, my love."

"Good. It will be a tiring day, I suppose, but it's our home, right?" She kissed me on my mouth, and I began to be aroused. She saw it."

"Then what?" she asked, trying to distract me. She succeeded.

"I suspect that the whole day will be spent shopping for things for our home. We will take Monty and Quincy with us."

"What about money? We're talking about loads of money to furnish a mansion like that, my darling. Loads of money."

"I will give you the money. Do not make that into something you worry about, my Zenyatta. My queen gets everything."

"This is the other miracle, I suppose?"

"Yep. Take this envelope. It should have two thousand in it. Open it, dear."

She took the envelope, opens it, her eyes wide again, "Lord, Steven, it's two *thousand* dollars in here!"

Here is the bank book. She took it, flipped opened the page, and sat flat on the floor. She gazed at it for what seemed an eternity, then:

"This can't be right, it just cannot. Two hundred thousand dollars? Two hundred thousand???"

"It's right."

"But how…where…?"

"That, my love, is a national secret," I joked.

"But for shopping tomorrow, I will give you more cash. Tell me, Zen, does the department store have furnishing and appliances for homes?"

"They do…some nice stuff too, although your taste might be different."

"Stop with the yours and mine, please. It's our taste."

"Right! *Our* taste! They have most things there…and I can get twenty-five percent off."

"Good. I want to see the faces of your gossipers. It will be fun for me."

"You're a naughty little boy, you know that?" She slapped me on my shoulder.

I dragged her off to bed and we held each other and fell into blissful sleep. The lights were still on in the room.

Chapter Thirty-Five

She awakened me with kisses on my forehead, cheeks, lips, and chin,

"Good morning, my angel from heaven."

"Good morning, my love," I responded, "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty-five."

She had already showered and dressed. I was up instantly, rushed to the bathroom for my morning ablutions and shower. Zenyatta came into the bathroom as I was under the shower. She pulled aside the shower curtain lightly, poked her head in, puckered up her beautiful lips for me to kiss them. I obliged,

"I love you, Steven DaSilva."

"And I love you, Zenyatta, truly." There were droplets of water on her face.

I dressed formally and we went down to breakfast in the dining area by 8:30. Quincy was already there. WE had a rather hurried breakfast, and I told Quincy that he will be needed today for the entire day, that I will be going out for about an hour and that Miss Zenyatta will have him sign a formal government contract as soon as I leave.

"If you have any questions that she cannot answer, I will do so upon my return," I said with a formality that I knew would be needed at the bank and at the Ministry. I added,

"Please give her a knock at 9:30 and she will provide the details of the day. I'll be back by 10:30, I hope," I added needlessly.

I gave Zenyatta a kiss and the room key and went out to Monty. The big car was there, he gave his habitual greeting, and he opened the back door for me. I told him to give me the stuff from the glove compartment. I unlocked it and passed the bank book and a few papers to me at the back.

"Where to, Sir?"

"The bank, please."

Off we went. I went in to the same manager, told him that "we" needed one hundred thousand dollars in cash. He looked at me questioningly. I feigned being annoyed:

"Now, Comrade!" I snarled. "And I need that in two envelopes with 50 each."

He asked me to fill a withdrawal slip which he filled out. I did. He left with an "excuse me for a minute, Comrade" and he was back in three minutes with two brown envelopes.

"Would you like to count it, Comrade."

"No," I responded curtly, "I trust you."

"Thank you, Comrade," he said with a slight bow and forced smile.

Monty was his usual vigilant self just outside the manager's office. We went to the car and went straight to the Ministry. The cops on duty rushed to open the big gates, we drove in, and Monty parked directly in front of the entrance.

There were six or seven people there in the waiting area, looking rigid with fear. I wondered how often people are here for good tidings. I walked past them and straight to Comrade White's big secretary.

"Good morning, Comrade," I uttered.

"Good morning, Comrade DaSilva. I have all the papers ready. Here is the deed of ownership for your home, please sign here as having received." I signed.

"The car papers. Sign here." I did and she gave me a bunch of sparkling new keys. Each key was labelled.

"Permit papers for three sidearms with two hundred rounds each. These may be picked up at the police HQ. I can call ahead and alert them that you are under way."

"Thank you, Comrade. That would help."

"I hope you will submit the personnel contracts as soon as possible."

"I will, hopefully by mid next week."

"Good. And you have something for me?"

I gave her one of the brown envelopes.

"That you for your efficiency, and please thank Our Honourable Minister for me."

"I will," she said, then leaning forward, she whispered:

"Just don't fuck up, boy. For your sake and the sake of the sweet lil ting you gat."

I was alarmed. The bitch was threatening me and Zenyatta. I wanted to slap her across her ugly fat face. Instead, I smiled and whispered back to her,

"We will meet again, Comrade. Bet on it." I turned and walked out, now feeling the blood drain from my face. Going down the flights of stairs, I heard myself hiss, "I'll kill that bitch, I swear." And having brought that to life by speaking it to myself, I felt better, elated even.

It was 10:25 when we exited the gates of the Ministry. I was running late, but with the threat from that bitch, I felt the firearms were necessary.

"Let's go to Police HQ, Monty. Put on the lights, I'm in a hurry. He put on the red and blue lights that blinked at the front and back...on the front grill and the bottom of the front windscreen and the bottom of the back windscreen."

The policeman at HQ gate opened the gates quickly. I like those lights, I thought idly. Monty pulled up in front of the armoury and walked quickly around to hold open my door. I stepped out feeling important. I went into the rather small place and gave them the papers. The sergeant began to talk about training and practice. I cut him short,

"Sergeant. I have no time for this. Just give me what the Minister has ordered you to provide and I'll be on my way. And put it all in one box!"

"Yes, Comrade! Right away!"

I signed for the pistols and round, then signalled to Monty to get the box. He did. On my way out, I turned back to the deflated sergeant:

"I'll have my Chief of Detail check this. I hope it's all here as instructed!"

"It's all there, Comrade. All there. We were called."

I walked out. Monty opened my door. I got in. He walked around briskly, put the box in the seat beside him and we headed back to the hotel, lights blinking. I glanced at my watch when we arrive: 11 a.m.

"Monty, what's the position with Gordon?"

"He's ready when you are, Sir. He's loyal, I swear to you."

"No need for that, your word is enough. How far away is he? I can have him here in thirty minutes, Sir."

"Good, put the box in the trunk and get him to me here in the dining room."

I did not like the idea of Monty being away, not after that threat. I walked up the stairs slowly, trying to regain composure. I knocked softly on the door. Quincy opened the door in seconds. Zenyatta was sitting at the desk. She got up quickly and rushed to me. We hugged. I may have hugged too tightly or frantically. She leaned back and looked at me squarely in the eye,

"Are you okay, my love?"

"Oh yes, yes. I was hurrying to be on time...and still ended up late. I got delayed a bit at Police HQ. I collected the sidearms and set off for Gordon. He will be here in thirty minutes or so with Monty."

"No wonder you look flustered. Just calm down, my dearest. I explained everything to Quincy. I think he knows better about what's needed than I do, but we all need to see our home. He also signed the contract."

"Any questions for us Quincy?"

"Absolutely no questions, Sir. But please allow me to thank you and Miss Zenyatta for the very generous salary. I am truly grateful. Thank you."

"No problem, Quincy. None at all."

"I'll be down in thirty minutes. When Monty and Gordon arrive have them sit in the dining room, please. Call me and let me know."

"Very well, Sir." He bowed to us, Monty-style went out closing the door with hardly a sound.

Zenyatta said, "I think he will be very good for us, my love. I have a good feeling about all of this."

"That's good, my Zen, I trust your judgement above any other human being," she blushed, "But I need for you to be very guarded. Always be aware of your surroundings and who the people are that surround you. Do that for me, please."

"Something is wrong! My instincts were right. Please, my love, tell me."

"Nothing is wrong. It occurred to me when I was at the Ministry that White can be a very nasty man. I became scared for you. I just over-reacted to a thought. It's been a hectic few days for us…and they will probably be hectic like this for a few weeks."

She sat on the side of the bed, "Come here, my love. Come into my arms. In my arms you're safe, and in yours I am Wonder Woman." And we hugged each other on the side of the bed.

"I love you, Zenyatta. I will love you until I die."

"Shush, you goose. No talk of death. We are now just beginning. I'm so happy, I think I'll explode."

"Okay. Don't go exploding on me, please." And there was the laughter, our laughter, like raindrops on petals.

"I love you, my heart, my Steven."

We talked about simple things: beds, rooms, kitchen, living rooms, garages, small things, big things for a new couple. The phone rang. I answered.

"They're here, spot on time. Bring the folder, we'll do this together. Gordon has to get to know you…and me."

We were downstairs in the most unhurried way, strolling into the dining room. Both gentlemen stood at attention upon our entry. Monty spoke,

"Mr. DaSilva Sir, I'd like to introduce you to Sergeant Jeffrey Gordon."

"Miss Zenyatta, Sergeant Gordon."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Sergeant."

"Nice to meet you, Sergeant Gordon," said Zenyatta. She was remarkably collected, this girl.

"Please have a seat, gentlemen," she said after we were seated. She was almost regal, my Zenyatta.

Gordon was about five-seven or eight, swat, muscled, neat.

"I suppose Monty has filled you in?"

"Yes, Sir. I am aware of what is required. The Lieutenant has briefed me quite thoroughly, Sir."

"You and Monty—let's forget the ranks for now—will be our bodyguards. You will be working exclusively for us while being paid by the government. You will be given government-issued sidearms with adequate ammunition. We will expect you to carry at all times when on the job. Once we are in our residence, it will not be necessary for you to be there, except when you are expressly instructed by either Miss Zenyatta and/or myself. You will be required to share chauffeur duties from time to time as required. Am I being clear, gentlemen?"

"Yes, Sir!" they answered in chorus.

"Our residence will be guarded around-the clock by army personnel. We hope that you will keep an eye on them." Zenyatta added.

"Yes, Ma'am!" in chorus again.

"Tell me about the two of you. Briefly."

Gordon looked at Monty. I pointed to Gordon, four fingers forward, thumb in palm. They looked surprised. Zenyatta was surprised too by my military attitude.

"Monty and I served in the army for years, Sir. Monty was my superior officer, the best I've encountered. We trust and respect each other in all ways. If I may speak frankly, Sir,..."

I nodded,

"...we both will give our lives in your service, you and Madam. We are loyal soldiers. We always were and always will be, Sir! Ma'am! I believe us to be men of honour, and we pledge to be honourable to you and yours."

"I concur, Sir!" Monty said.

"Any questions for our detail, my love?"

Zenyatta: "No my dear. I think we all understand each other very well."

"Any questions, gentlemen?"

"No, Sir!" in chorus.

Please sign the contracts. Your job begins immediately. Zenyatta presented them with the contract. They sign. She collects them and stands. The two soldiers snap to attention. I rise.

"We'll be down in a few minutes. Monty will drive us; Gordon and Quincy will follow in the red car. Quincy will give you any non-alcoholic beverage you wish. Oh, and Quincy, do have someone reliable to refresh the room."

Quincy, from a discrete distance, said, "Yes, Sir."

We left for the room, hand in hand. She put the folder neatly on the desk. I gave her the brown envelope with fifty-thousand in it, and she puts it carefully in her purse. She also has a writing pad.

"For our home to be furnished. Spend as you see fit, my love." She reached up and kissed me.

"I have the keys for your mansion."

She saluted in the worse manner possible, with her left hand over her eyes. "You'd be locked up for that salute, woman!"

"Well, I'm not the one with military training, you know! You see how those boys looked at you? Dang! Like a General! My General!!" I laughed. I knew that she will have questions.

Monty opened the door of the black car for us, and we got in. Gordon was behind the wheel of the read car; Quincy was the co-pilot. We sped, lights going, to Elegwa Park. I took out my wallet and made sure my Party Card was there.

We arrived at 7 Elegwa in about fifteen minutes. Monty had the keys to the gate. We drove onto the broad, paved, curved driveway. From the outside the glass was dark. I suspected that one could see out but not in. Monty opened the wide front door into a large foyer of marble floors that could easily serve as a reception area for social events. There were eight crystal chandeliers in the high ceilings of the foyer. Five tasteful columns that seemed not to be intrusive. A large door led off the foyer; it opened out into a truly beautiful study, already equipped with shelves, a massive mahogany desk and large leather chair. The natural light that fed into the study were perfect for reading. There were two large bathrooms, a very spacious kitchen, equipped with a large fridge, a large freezer and a very large stove (it may have been two joined together), a huge walk-in pantry, countless shelves and cupboards with pull-out drawers with wheels and tracks. There was a sturdy back door that opened out into a very large, landscaped backyard, a large pool. A paved path led to the back door, for the purposes of deliveries, I supposed. There was a

modest structure that I supposed was quarters for live-in staff. We walked through the lower floor twice since Zenyatta demanded it. Her eyes were everywhere, especially raise to admire the high curved ceilings.

"This is straight out of the movies," she whispered. This place inspired whispers, I thought. Quincy was scribbling furiously on the writing pad. He was even drawing what looked like diagrams.

We walked up the curved stairs to the upstairs. There was a long, curved balcony upon which one may look down at the foyer. Five bedrooms, all self-contained. The largest was especially well-appointed. It was already fully furnished, including a large king-sized, four-poster bed, large dresser, built-in closets, large mirrors, bedstands and reading lamps. Off that was a modest office. The master bedroom was sound-proof too.

"You will have to have custom-made curtains for these windows, Zenyatta," I quipped.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head, sweetheart. Quincy and I are the specialists in these complex matters." She retorted. Quincy smiled broadly into his writing/drawing pad.

Monty and Gordon reported that the fences are well lit and secure. The neighbouring houses were some one thousand yards away. The nicest part, they said, was that the glass of the house was of the best plate glass they've seen, practically bullet-proof. The garage could hold five cars quite comfortably. The live-in quarters were comfortable. Six small bedrooms, all furnished with single beds and a small dresser. One kitchen with three medium-sized fridges.

I told Monty to bring the box with the firearm box into my study. Gordon remained with me. Monty lay the heavy box on the desk. I told them to examine the weapons. It should be three .38 pistols and 600 rounds in total. Gordon reported that they were in very good shape but needed to be cleaned.

"Okay. We need to get gun oil and holsters. What kind of holsters?"

"It would be better if we get shoulder holsters, Sir. We will have jackets to conceal them. I would suggest you keep a waist holster."

"Sounds good. Remind me and we could go into the gun store…or one of you will go if we are caught up in this shopping thing. Meanwhile, load your weapons and tuck then in. We need to be careful on this trip. Keep a very close eye on Miss Zenyatta! She cannot get hurt."

"Yes, Sir!" Chorus.

Zenyatta and Quincy were making their way down the swirling staircase when we were coming out of the study.

"I think we're ready, my love," she said, kissing me on the mouth. I think that she seemed more at home than any of us. I could see that the three men were dazzled by the place. Monty locked up and kept the keys. We assumed seating positions in the two cars. I instructed Monty to turn off the red and blue lights.

Our first stop was Zenyatta's former department store. As soon as we entered the clerks—the gossipers—flocked around her. Gordon stepped in between,

"Please ladies, keep you distance until Miss Zenyatta asks that you approach."

"But we know her well, Comrade. I understand miss, please keep your distance until you are asked to approach!" Harsher now.

Zenyatta told them it okay, that they are doing their duty. Three of you can accompany me though. And the entire expedition began. After three hours of going from section to section—kitchen stuff, foyer, study sofas and chairs, curtain material, beds and mattresses, copies numbers of sheets and pillow-cases, pillows, etc., and with what seemed like the entire place seeming to teem with twittering, fluttering female clerks, tugging at her, examining her ring, trying to extract gossip and some subterfuge. They all seemed to be vying to be her friends. I was becoming restless, the threat still ringing in my ears.

Quincy and Zenyatta were still possessed of boundless energy, and Gordon and Monty had either decided that it was safe or had given up, but he was never more then three feet from her. I signalled to Gordon with my four fingers pointed straight to him, thumb in, and moving my arm from pointing fingers to four fingers and thumb formed into a cone to the top of my head (the signal for one soldier to approach a superior officer), I gave him two hundred dollars to get the holsters, gun oil and ammo belts of some sort for them.

Gordon informed Monty and took off for the items. He was back in an hour and informed me that the items were in the car. They amounted to one hundred and twenty-five dollars. I told him to hold on to the change. I think Gordon recognized that I was becoming somewhat agitated. He whispered:

"Miss Zenyatta is safe, Sir. She has the Lieutenant with her. Nothing to worry about. I looked at his square, reassuring face:

"Thank you, Gordon." I felt better.

All the while, I had kept a discrete distance from Zenyatta and Quincy, but when I saw the fellow who I was sure was the General Manager arrive, I moved a bit closer to listen to whatever exchange may occur.

"Hello, Zenyatta," he said haughtily.

"Hi, Mr. Scott. Good afternoon. I trust you are well?" He ignored that.

"I understand that you're spending a boatload of money," he was almost mocking.

"Oh yes. For our new home."

Monty had moved in a bit closer. Scott was clueless. It was obvious that he was trying to impress the girls while bullying Zenyatta.

"New home, huh? Well, you're certainly coming up in life, girl."

"Maybe, but you should ask my husband about that if he wants to talk to you."

Monty was beginning to seem menacing, so I stepped in with Gordon,

"Is there a problem here, Zen?"

"O no, my love. Mr. Scott here was just observing that I'm coming up in life," and she laughed mockingly.

"Comrade Scott. I am Steven DaSilva, Miss Zenyatta's husband. Do you have a problem? Lieutenant, Sergeant, Scott here seems to have a problem. Maybe we could help?"

"Oh no…no, no, Comrade. No problem at all. I was just chatting with my old employee, Zenyatta here."

"Listen to me Scott. Carefully now. If you ever refer to my wife as your employee again, I will have you cleaning the fucking streets, you got it? That would be after Miss Zenyatta's security detail puts you in the hospital though."

Monty chimed in for good measure: "Should we take this chap outside, Ma'am, Sir? It would be our pleasure."

The fear in his eyes was priceless. The tears were starting to come. I was having fun, the two men were frighteningly cold, matter-of-fact.

"Scott. Here is some advice. Apologize to Miss Zenyatta and speak to her like you would a very rich and powerful customer…because she is. Come on!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Zenyatta. We are at your service…all of us. I'm sorry for any slight that may have occurred. I'm so very sorry."

"Are you okay with that, my love? Do you think he's sincere or should a lesson be taught to him about arrogance?"

Zenyatta: "Scott is a nice fellow. Sometimes he does tend to be something of a bully to these girls. I do, however, think that he will never be arrogant and bullying again. I accept his apology."

"Okay then." I nodded to Monty to let go of his neck. The girls seemed happy though scared. "Is there anything else you need to get?" I asked Zenyatta.

"I think we're just about done, my love. Quincy, do you think we need anything else at this time?"

"I don't think so ma'am."

"Then, we'd like the total please, with our customary 25%n discount and delivery to our home in *Elegwa Park*, 7 *Elegwa Park*".

The gasp at the address was only too audible, and there were one or two "shit". This Zenyatta, I thought gleefully.

I turned to Scott, "Scott, help to get this done quickly. And arrange for delivery immediately."

"Right away, Comrade."

He and one of the supervisors tabulated the bill, thirty-five thousand dollars, after the percentage off. Zenyatta reached into her handbag and counted out the money. She gave one thousand dollars to the supervisor as a tip for her and the girls, then,

"No, two thousand," Zenyatta said triflingly. The supervisor took it gratefully. It amounted to a month's pay for each of them, I supposed.

"When is the earliest you can have this delivered, Scott?" I asked.

"Well, Comrade, it's a lot to get packed into trucks, then unpacked and placed wherever in your home Miss Zenyatta instructs them—" I cut him off,

"When?"

"We can get some there this afternoon at about 6 p.m. and the rest tomorrow morning, Comrade."

I looked at Zenyatta, "That would be okay. Quincy, you and Gordon will be there to see that all is well."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Everyone will be on deck in the morning at 8 a.m."

"Yes, Ma'am."

With that we walked out of the store, Monty in front, Zenyatta and I hand-in-hand behind him, Gordon bringing up the rear. After him Scott, the supervisors, and the girls came after like a trail of smoke. They were all on the sidewalk as Monty opened the back door of the big black car for us to get in. He shut the door, got into his seat, put on the red/blue security lights and we left, the red car trailing us closely.

In the car, Zenyatta finally released her pent-up laughter. She blurted,

"Monty, Monty, Monty!" and laughed more loudly.

"What yuh mean, 'Monty, Monty Monty'? Yuh mean Zenyatta, Zenyatta, Zenyatta!"

Monty was cracking up in front. Zenyatta was laughing and slapping her thigh and mine in delight, and I was having a good old laugh as well. "All is well with the world," I thought. Browning!

At the hotel, I instructed Monty to invite the two gentlemen in to have drinks with us. We were still having a good laugh at Scott and the rest. This started a series of recounts, each adding to the other. Even Quincy joined in. We had of drinks and guffaws. Zenyatta led the charge, which added glee to the whole thing. I could not contain my own loud laughs, Zenyatta holding my hand all the way.

After the laughter died down, I became serious but informal for a minute,

"Hey Monty, Miss Zenyatta should give you and Gordon some money to get security overcoats, don't you think?"

Before Monty could reply, Zenyatta said:

"Of course I will. How much do you think you'd need?"

"Maybe twenty dollars, Ma'am."

"If it's more, do let me know. Also, we should give the gentlemen their salary in advance, love. Don't you think? Because they will have to wait until the end of the month and we should never allow our people to go without."

"I agree. What say you, gentlemen?"

"That would be most kind, Ma'am, Sir." said Quincy. Since the dining area was almost empty, she counted out two hundred each and handed it over and asked them to sign as having received the amount and for what period. She also gave twenty dollars to Monty for the jackets. I informed her that they will be carrying shoulder holsters (showing where it will be worn), and I'll have mine on my hip.

She nodded, thought for a few seconds, then said: "For a small fee, I could train you people, you know." Everyone erupted with laughter.

"Oh, Quincy," she added, "when do you think we will meet our prospective maids and such?"

"As soon as you like, Ma'am. Tomorrow, if you wish."

"Okay. Would two in the afternoon be okay with you, darling? We could be at our home in the morning, come back and have lunch, then see the maids and so on."

"Sounds good to me, which means that Quincy and Gordon will see that things are set up this afternoon and we'll be there tomorrow."

"Perfect, Ma'am, Sir." The three agreed.

Gordon stood at attention: "Permission to leave, Ma'am, Sir."

Quincy asked for an excuse to leave. Monty went to see them off (probably with instructions) and return to take up his station at the door of the dining area.

Zenyatta and I sat for a few minutes and chatted about maids and groundsmen and such lofty things. Then she said,

"How about if we ask my mom and dad to come help out, my love?"

"Do you think that it's a good idea to have your parents to come to your home to work?" I asked.

"Steven, my love," she quipped, "you just met these people. They would be over the moon that we are making them part of our life, our settling down, our home. They would be there in a heartbeat."

"Okay. Then send Gordon for them on Saturday or go with Gordon, if you prefer."

"Let's go upstairs, darling and...well...shower." Giggle.

We went up. Showered together, began love-making in the shower and continued in bed. After Zenyatta regained her speech, she mumbled, "What a day! What a day! Thank you, my sweet, sweet Steven. The man I will spend my whole life loving."

"Yes, my love, it has been quite a day indeed. I was almost sorry for poor Scott though," I mocked.

She gave one protracted suck teeth:

"I tell you, that man was always a fucking asshole. I was happy when you taught him a lesson."

I looked at sharply. "But we're in bed, my love."

I broke down in laugh once again and slapped her hard on her perfect backside.

"Are you hungry? I'm very hungry, my darling."

We rinsed, dragged on clothes, went down and had dinner. On our way back, I saw Monty leaning on the car.

"Zen, go up, I'll be there in a few minutes."

She kissed me and started up the stairs.

I went out to Monty. He straightened up immediately.

"Good night, Sir. All is well?"

"Yes, but I do want you to go home and get some rest. We've had quite the day, and I think the next few weeks will be just as hard."

"That's okay with us, Sir. I want you to feel safe, and I want you to know that Miss Zenyatta is safe with us."

"Thank you, Monty. No matter what happens, make sure she's protected."

"You have my word, Sir! I'll swing by 7 and check on things. I'll be here by eight if you need me."

"Good. Hey Monty, do you think we should get two short-range walkie-talkies for you and Gordon?"

"That's a brilliant idea, Sir! Brilliant!"

"Then we'll get it tomorrow. Remind me."

"I will, Sir. Good night to you and Miss Zenyatta."

He waited until I re-entered the hotel and started up the stairs. Then I saw him enter the car.

Zenyatta was waiting for me as usual. She rushed up to me as if she had not seen me for a year.

After we changed into our night clothes, she said,

"You know, I was thinking about someone for your secretary. I know this girl. We went to school together. She is very bright, from a very poor family, and she needs a job. She lives not far from my parents' home, so we've known each other from childhood. She's a good person. Muslim, neat, well-spoken. Would you consider her?"

"She sounds good, but can she type?"

"Oh yes. She earns her few dollars typing letters for people and even a few essays for university types."

"Good, bring her to see me."

"Thanks, my dear heart. I'll get to her as soon as we have time."

"Yes, yes, yes...but is she pretty?"

She jumped astride me and pretended to choke me. I pretended to gag. I rolled her over and kissed her long and hard. Laughing, we fell asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Zenyatta was up before me again, and I opened my eyes to see her smiling down at me again.

"Good morning my sunshine," she said in the most bubbly manner.

"Good morning, my Zenyatta."

I went off into the bathroom, brushed, showered, dressed, and we went down to breakfast. Zenyatta had two rolls with butter and a slice of cheese with two cups of coffee. I had two sunny-sides, two slices of toast and two cups of coffee.

Monty was already there, of course. We were in the car, and off to Elegwa. She had her folders, money in the brown bank envelope, and the writing pad with Quincy's scribblings and diagrams. Monty informed me that the army personnel had already taken up their position since last night, two at the front gate and two at the back. They all took turns at walking around the compound each hour.

We drew up at the gate, and I introduced myself to the soldiers. They were formal and polite, young. I noticed their self-loading rifles, long guns that used 7.62 mm rounds that were capable of firing 450-500 rounds per minute. I informed them that their walk-around should not be every hour on the hour, but sometimes forty-five or fifty minutes. The walk around should vary since intruders could predict their pattern of "walk-around". They answered in the affirmative and I asked Monty to monitor them.

We drove into the driveway and stopped in front of the large front door. Quincy opened with his morning greetings and then showed us the items that came in yesterday evening. Everything in the kitchen was packed neatly already: pots, pans, knives, plates, teacups, coffee mugs, cutlery. The dining room had a beautiful oval table of mahogany with matching chairs. Twelve chairs. The dining area was off the foyer and next to the kitchen.

Quincy said that the master bedroom as already prepared and was ready for Miss Zenyatta's approval. I walked into the ante-chamber of my study, already set up with a desk, an electric typewriter. I walked by the ante-chamber—which I supposed was the secretary's office—into the study itself which remained with just the large desk and my leather chair. I told Zenyatta that we will have to get as many good books as we can from the university bookstore and from other bookstores around

town. I also needed two chairs for guests and a set of sofas. She said those should be here this morning. I was satisfied.

We went through the back door, went passed the pool and into the maids' quarters. That looked set as well, save for the kitchen equipment. They will arrive this morning, I was told. I saw Gordon talking to the soldiers. He waved and came striding across. He was informing them of more refined security protocols that must cater to guarding people instead of dead buildings.

The foyer was still bare. Upstairs, the bedrooms were all set, save for dressers. Zenyatta had taken the upstairs. I told Monty to collect money from Zenyatta and that Gordon should go into town to acquire the walky-talkies, security jackets, and whatever was decided on last night. The red car was soon heading out the driveway.

Things were coming together rather quickly, I though. Zenyatta agreed and suggested I should thank Quincy. I did and asked about the maids and cook to be interviewed today. After noon at our convenience. I asked about groundsmen. Quincy said he will be arranging those by tomorrow. The rest of the stuff from the department store was already being unloaded out back.

I told Monty to arrange to have large, framed photographs of Comrade Leader, the Minister of Education, and the Minister of Home Affairs for my study. That will be done by Monday or Tuesday, he said.

It was thoughts of the politicians' photographs and the university bookstore that brought me back to the reality of university life. The elections were next week, and I had done nothing at all to mount even a mock campaign. I swore at myself for being so carried away. I must re-focus immediately. Then there was the Raina issue that I must erase quickly.

I went to Zenyatta,

"Zen, darling, it's only eleven. I think I'll take a spin to the campus for a few minutes. I'll be back as soon as I can and get you to go back to the hotel for these maid interviews. Going to the campus is important. I'd completely forgotten that Student Union Elections are next week, dammit!

"Of course. Go. I'll handle things here while you're away."

"Listen to me, stay in the house while I'm away, okay? Gordon will be back soon. I have to take Monty. Give me 500 to take with me just in case. She dug into her handbag and gave me the money. I stuffed it in my pocket."

Zenyatta seemed slightly alarmed, but there was no time to explain. I signalled Monty and we drove quickly to the campus, directly to the back. I noticed posters

with my pictures all over the place. Lewis's two girls were still there, and I said hello and walked past them and knocked on Lewis's door.

"Hey Rudolph man. I'm sorry. I really am, fuck it."

"Hey! Calm down, will you. Sit!" I slumped down into the chair.

"What's got your panties all in a knot?"

"With all that's going on, I forgot about the elections next week. I just forgot. I'm sorry, my friend."

"Well, you fucking lucky that I'm here, aren't you? I arranged everything: posters, flyers, campaign teams to talk to students…look, we both know none of this shit matters. We count the ballots here, so you win. But we need to at least make a show. Turn up next week and make a few speeches. We'll get people to attend. Just be here and talk your sweet words. If you did not show up next week, that would have been a big fuck-up, but here you are, and you must be on camps every day next week until after the elections."

The expression "fuck-up" brought back with full force the threat from the fat woman.

"Hey Rudolph, how serious is it when someone up there warns you about fucking up or else…?"

"It's serious, Steven. Take it seriously. But I'm telling you its under control. I hear you're setting up nicely. That is important, but this is important too. We'll talk more about this next week. Monday. I'm here to help you, but show your damn self! We clear?"

"Yes, we're clear. I'll be here by 9 a.m. on Monday."

"And don't show up with the big car. Use the red one, and come without your bodyguards."

"Got it! See you Monday. He got up and walked me to the front door with the arm around my shoulder in the usual fashion. I suspected this was more for the two girls than any demonstration of affection at this time.

I got back in the car and we took off back to 7. Lewis knew everything! Everything! About the car, Elegwa Park, everything. I'm sure he knew about Zenyatta too. And about Raina. Jesus! I put it all at the back of my mind for now.

The soldiers opened the large gate and we drove in. There were groundsmen there already grooming the lawns. That had to be Zenyatta or Quincy. There were too many people having to save my ass. That must end…NOW! Calm. I must be calm.

I breezed in seeming without a care in the world. Zenyatta, typically, looked straight into my eyes, clasped my face and kissed me on the mouth. She knew that something had shaken me, but not what.

"Let's so in the study for a minute, love." She led, I followed, "Okay, tell me what's wrong."

"I forgot about the campaign completely. But Lewis handled it for me. I will have to show up there for most of the week and make some speeches."

"Okay. Concentrate on that and I concentrate on this. I've got this end covered, don't even worry about it. I've already got the groundsmen working. I got some men from my neighbourhood to come in with promise of full-time work. They were happy."

"Thanks, my love," I said. I kissed her lovely mouth. She smiled and we went out to the car to head back to the hotel. Zenyatta let me be quiet on the way back. Her holding my hand in the back seat was comfort enough.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

By the time we arrived at the hotel, there were seven people outside, seeming to wait for us. Monty opened our door and we got out. They all greeted us "good day" which Zentatta returned with her habitual pleasantness. Sill preoccupied, I nodded. We walked straight into the dining area, sat and ordered coffee. Monty stood by, awaiting instructions. Zenyatta was waiting on me to settle down, still grasping my hand assuring me by her touch. I loved her. I loved her more than I love breathing.

She smiled, "Take a sip, dear. It'll get cool."

I sipped, "You're baby-sitting me, huh?"

"Well, you're my baby, and I am sitting with you, right?" Her attempt at levity. I smiled.

"I have my folder and writing pad and pen at the ready, my darling."

"So I see, so I see, Miss Efficiency. Whenver you're ready, have Monty send them in one at a time."

She signalled Monty to send in the applicants for cook first. The first person was tall, brown, somewhat slender, grey hair pinned back. She entered the dining area, stood still for a second or two to survey the place, and walked hips swaying towards us. She reached out her hand to me, then to Zenyatta. We shook her hand:

"Hello. I am Mrs. Carter."

My nerves grated. Zenyatta looked at me, "Do tell us a little about Mrs. Carter, please," Zenyatta asked with layers of politeness.

"Well, I was the chef at Freddy's Dining for many years—"

Zenyatta exclaimed: "Oh that place on Regent Street?"

"The very same, my young Miss."

I'd had about enough. I said with as much acid as I could command: "Lord, imagine working—or eating—in a place like that, my love. So, *Mrs.* Carter, when were you fired?"

"Oh, no. Not fired. I just had enough of the new manager they hired. I walked out of the place two weeks after they hired him."

"Gosh! I suppose they will have to close down that business, huh?" Zenyatta proclaimed to me directly. Then to her, "*Mrs.* Carter, I don't think you should be wasting any more of my time. Goodbye. Lieutenant, see this woman out, please."

Mrs. Carter scrapped back the chair and huffed away. Zenyatta put her head on my shoulder and laughed, mimicking:

"Hello. I'm Mrs. Carter," cracking up. It took a few minutes for her to regain her composure.

The second person was also female, middle-aged, dark, clean, neat, polite, she had her hands folded in front of her, nervous. Zenyatta invited her to sit.

"I am Miss Zenyatta and this is Mr. Steven DaSilva, our employer. And you are?"

"Good day Miss. Good day, Sir. Thank you for seeing me. I am Melissa Moore. I am applying for the position of cook."

"Do tell us a little about yourself, Melissa."

"Well Miss, I was the chief cook for two restaurants in town. I can have references if you wish. I am forty-five. I have two children 16 and 15. I'm a single parent."

"School-aged children. One is writing CXC right?'

"Yes, Miss."

"Tell us some of the foods you cook."

"I cook the usual Caribbean dishes like stews, curries, cook-up rice, chow mien and fried rice, pepperpot, steaks, lamb chops, pies like meat pies, pumpkin pies, shepherd's pie, apple and other fruit pies, soups, and so on. I also bake breads and pastries and finger foods."

"Anything to ask Melissa, love?" Zenyatta asked, trying to bring me into the conversation.

"No, dear. You're doing wonderfully well so far."

"If we hire you, you'd mostly cooking for two people and maybe a little extra for the bodyguards and our small staff."

"That would be fine, Miss. But if you have large gatherings, I can do that too. Anything you wish. I must say that I hate a dirty kitchen. I'm fussy about that, Miss."

"That is very good. I hate a dirty kitchen…well dirty anything," and she laughed. The woman liked her.

"Anything else you want to tell us or ask?"

"I don't gossip, Miss. I tend to keep myself to myself and out of other people business."

"That's good to hear." I said. Zenyatta squeezed my hand with thanks.

"Melissa, how about if we give you a month try-out, then we decide about a permanent position?"

I decided to join her: "Melissa, we'll expect you to work six days per week, half days on Saturday. If we have any special occasions, you will be paid extra. How much salary are you expecting per month?" I softened my tone significantly.

"Sir, whatever you're comfortable with," she responded.

I laughed: "I like your attitude, but tell us, nuh."

She was bashful on this point, as most people are, I supposed.

Zenyatta: "Let's say 100, a rough figure?"

"That would be great, Miss. I'd appreciate that very much."

"What sayeth the boss," she teased me.

"I'd say one fifty, but I'd insist on trustworthiness, punctuality and dependability."

"One hundred and fifty, Sir? That's nuff-nuff money, Sir.

"Can we depend on you to be honest, on time, and dependable?"

"I promise you, Sir. I swear to you, Miss."

"Good. One month try-out then permanent if it works out, and one fifty per month."

"Is that okay with you, Zenyatta?"

"Yes, my dear one."

"When can you start?"

"Any time you want, Sir."

"Good. You start on tomorrow then," I turn to Zen for agreement, she nodded, "8 a.m."

"One more question, I said, "would you need an assistant?"

"I never had an assistant, Sir."

"Okay, if we find that you do need one, Miss Zenyatta will find one."

"I stand, Zen stands and shakes her hand, "Welcome to our family, Melissa. See you at eight in the morning."

"Thank you Miss. Thank you, Sir. Until Monday, have a great weekend."

"Zenyatta, you are wonderful at this. I think I'm just getting in your way. I realy do." In response she kissed me on the cheek and signalled to Monty to send in the nest female. This went on more or less the same way. By the time it was done, we

hired two groundsmen and three maids. They were all to begin work tomorrow. It was just the secretary left.

"How much cash do we have left, dear?" I asked.

"Just over eighteen hundred. Do you want to go up and check it?"

"No, my love. The estimate is all we need."

"Do you want something to eat? I'm not hungry, but you should eat something. You look drawn."

"I'm not hungry either, so maybe we should go back to the house and check on things there. We can return and have dinner here or anywhere you like."

"Let's go, my dearest one."

We went back to the house which was bustling with activity, with Quincy and Gordon making what seemed like all the right decisions, putting the right things in the rights places.

Zenyatta seemed most pleased. She asked, "Do you think it's taking shape? Our home? Is it looking like our home?" She was very excited, understandably so. I was excited as well, but there were things nagging at me, an uneasiness that I could not seem to shake.

"It's looking like our home, my Zenyatta. It's our home, indeed." I said.

And she skipped and hopped and bustled and seemed to be everywhere at once. I signalled for Monty to join me outside. I braced on the car.

"Are you okay, Sir? You seem...well, off."

"I'm fine, my friend. Just fine. That woman is making me dizzy though. Isn't she amazing? Isn't she the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?"

"You are perfect together. I have seen many many couples together, but never a couple as perfect as you two. You were made for each other. Perfect."

"Thank you, my friend. No harm must come to her. None!"

"I have given you my word, Sir. No harm will come to her...nor to you. We are here to make sure of that. Just know that."

"Thank you, thank you. I needed that, I really did."

"It will all be okay, Sir."

We went back in. She flew to me, "Where *were* you? I thought you got away from me. I thought you changed you mind."

I held her tightly against me and kissed her, "That, my love, my Zenyatta, will *never* happen. *Never*!" I felt the tears come from my eyes. She drank them.

"I love you, Steven. More than air!"

"Me too Zenyatta. By God, me too."

And we clung to each other for a long time, right in the centre of the large foyer, under the high ceiling. It seemed that the whole world was still, that nothing existed apart from us.

"Do you want to see the kitchen? Quincy has set it up nicely." Without waiting for my answer, she tugged at my arm and pulled me into the kitchen. I love the innocence of this girl; I love the purity of this woman. Gosh, she is everything. Everything that matters, I thought.

She danced around me on tip-toes, "Well? Well?"

It's fabulous. Everything sparkles. It's so neat. This is you outside of you."

She looked at me quizzically, "Me outside of me? What a peculiar thing to say! But I like it. Explain it to me!"

"I will. Later."

She showed me the entire lower part of the house. It was all beautiful.

I told Gordon and Quincy that they were doing wonderfully well, much more than we had any right to expect from them. They smiled widely. Gordon said,

"Sir, the good part was that Monty wasn't here to mess up we wuk!"

Monty replied, "Boy, you lookin fuh it, yuh know." Everyone laughed.

I announced to them that Miss Zenyatta had hired a cook, three maids, and two handymen.

"I believe we should be moving in by Monday if things go well. For the next few weeks, I really think it would be a mistake for any one of us to relax. No one should let down his or her guard. That should be conveyed to the soldiers out there as well. We will wrap up for the day after you've done doing what you're doing now. Monty will take Miss Zenyatta and I back to the hotel. Gordon will take Quincy home and join Monty at the hotel."

"We'll all be here at 8 tomorrow. No lateness, Zenyatta! Thanks everyone.

She gave me an light elbow to the stomach. Everyone laughed. It felt good to hear laughter so frequently. All is well, and all will continue to be well, I tried to convince myself.

On our way out, Zenyatta asked if we could pop by her parents' house so that she may have them come tomorrow.

"Okay, but make it a quick word with your mom and we go back to the hotel. I won't come in. And, Zen, let them know that Monty will come get them around 8:30."

"You're just darling, you know that. Just my darling."

"I know, I know." She grabbed me around the waist and hopped into the car.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

When we arrived at the hotel, we went to the room to freshen up. Or, more precisely, Zenyatta freshened up with a shower and change of clothes. She wore a pretty light blue dress, loose, knee high, modest. She carried it well. I brushed and combed my hair. By the time we went down, everybody was there, including Quincy who had a few loose ends to tie up at the hotel. Zenyatta and I were happy that he was in the company, and we told him so.

Zenyatta asked us all if we'd like a beer. Everyone, except Gordon, said yes. Zenyatta and Gordon had Coke. We raised our glasses to the work that was done. Zenyatta insisted on making a speech. The men fell quiet:

"I know that I am maybe the youngest in our group, but I have always said what Truth I feel. The truth is this: this man, Steven DaSilva, who sits beside me is the first man I have loved and he will be the last. You all know that by now, I think. I am thankful that he loves me. I am thankful for each of you, and I have come to see you as friends. I know that each of you has a job to do, but to me you are more than people that we employ. You are as close as family to me and I depend on you to keep us safe and healthy, especially Steven. Keep him safe. If there is any way that we can help you, I hope you will feel free to come to us. Thank you, Quincy. Thank you, Monty. Thank you, Gordon."

There was a resounding "Hear, Hear" from the men. Quincy stood and raised his glass, "To Miss Zenyatta and to Mr. DaSilva. Cheers." All the men stood. I looked down at Zenyatta, and tears were rolling down her cheeks. Gordon got a nod from Monty and a wordless encouragement to speak from Quincy. I held her hand. Gordon stood:

"Ma'am, Sir, gentlemen, I realize that I am the latest in the group, but I have felt at home with you from the start. On behalf of Monty, Quincy and myself, I thank you. I pledge to stand between you and any danger always. To us! Cheers."

Another round of applause and toast.

Zenyatta: "I think *someone* here should buy us all dinner!" she looked at me.

I said: "Yes…*you*!" The laughter again. It was as refreshing as rain.

We each ordered and had our meals. They talked of work to be done tomorrow, about the new staff, about cleaning the mansion from top to bottom,

and on and on the prattle went. I enjoyed it all, despite the dread that I could not seem to overcome. I told them that Monty will be going to get Zenyatta's parents to help us and join us for what will be our first meal in our home. We all said we'll see each other at # 7 tomorrow. Eight a.m. Monty said he'll be here earlier waiting downstairs.

Zenyatta and I sat for a while longer in the dining area and then headed upstairs. As soon as I locked the door, she turned and held my hands in hers. Standing a foot away, she asked: "Will you tell me what it is that is worrying you, my love? Will you?"

I wanted to tell her everything. Everything! But so much damage will be done. I will lose her, I knew I would. It would break her heart. The damage will be irreparable. Instead, I decided on a half-truth:

"My Zenyatta, my sweet one, this love I have for you is the purest thing I have ever known in my entire life. Nothing has been like this. It's true that I'm worried, but small things have become big thigs for me how that you are with me. I'm worried about not having been on campus. I'm worried that my absence could cost me the presidency, and so much depends on it. Everything depends on that. I will be on campus for several days next week, and being away from you worries me. It is all very worrying to me."

She tilted her head slightly to the right, looking at me directly in the eyes,

"Steven, I believe you. I truly do, but you are not telling me everything. I am not going to insist, but I hope that you will tell me the whole thing eventually. I love you, my darling. Nothing changes that. Nothing and no one!"

I hugged her and kissed the soft curls on her head.

"Zenyatta, I want you to be in my arms the entire night. Stay with me, always. Tell me about tomorrow then all other tomorrows for all our days. Tomorrow first, please."

We change into night clothes and got into bed.

"Tomorrow," she begins, "we will go to our home early in the morning. The maids should be at work as should the cook. I like her. I would have told her to make us breakfast, but in that entire huge house, there is not even an egg."

I could not help it, "Fuck! I completely forgot about groceries. See? I forget simple but important things. You will be marrying a really dumb man, Zenyatta Qualis."

"If I'm to marry a dummy and if that dummy is you, well I will marry you right this minute. Right now! Because I know that I'll be marring the only man for me."

"Same for me, my life."

We changed into our night clothes and were just about to climb in whne she stopped:

"I just realized—now that we're talking about groceries—that the only kitchen things missing from our home at this point is...groceries, meat, fruits, veggies, greens, and such."

I added: "You're right, we're almost done setting up—apart from readying the bedrooms and other things upstairs. It's just a matter of cleaning and spreading sheets, bedroom and bathroom things to do. With at least two maids to do that while the third one dusts downstairs."

Zenyatta: "We can ask my cook, Gordon, Quincy and my mom to go out and buy what's needed. They can do that in a few hours. I know my mom would love that.

"Which means, my Zenyatta, which is to say...

"We can move in tomorrow!" we said together. We danced around together, jumped and hopped and yelped. Rather like excited children.

"I'll start packing up here now-now." She exclaimed.

"I'll help. Tell me what to do."

"Just get bags and suitcases and leave them on the ground. Then get into bed and watch the expert at work. Do not get in my way."

"Can I at least go and shower and get back into my night clothes?"

"You may, after you get the cases," she said, with feigned haughtiness.

By the time I was out of the bathroom, she was all movement. I lay on the bed and watched her move—fluid, graceful, efficient. All papers and folders were placed neatly on the desk; things money were placed in her handbag. My clothes separated clean from worn from new; hers in the same fashion...she was still at it when my eyes closed. I opened them again at about six thirty. She was up, showered, dressed.

"Good morning, my precious one," she purred.

"Good morning, my dearest Zenyatta," I returned, "Did you sleep at all?"

"I did. I was in bed about an hour after you slept."

"Good. Everything's packed, I see."

"Yes, my love. I thought we might have breakfast here one more time, pay our bill, and head home."

"Okay. I'll just shower and get dressed."

My clothes were set out on the bed when I exited the bathroom. We were down by 7:30. Monty was there, of course. We gave him the keys, told him to put

our stuff in the trunk of the car. Zenyatta asked for the total bill as we had breakfast. She paid and got the receipt. We were at 7 at exactly eight. The maids, cooks, and groundsmen were outside the gate waiting. The soldiers opened the gate for the car. Monty instructed them to let the people in after they took the names, time of entry, and that they should record the times of departure.

We got out of the car. I looked back at the clutch of people walking up the driveway. Their eyes were wide with disbelief at the relative splendour of the structure and the grounds. They were all frightened, but I knew that would pass soon enough as they got accustomed to their work environment.

Quincy and Gordon were there at the entrance to greet us. They emptied the trunk, and Zenyatta instructed them to put the various bags where they belonged. She gave me the papers and folders and suggested that they should be put in a locked drawer of my desk,

"We should get all staff to sign their contracts, love."

"Of course," I agreed.

I instructed Gordon to get Zenyatta's parents:

"Please tell them to bring Zenyatta's things as well."

The cook was getting acquainted with the kitchen. One maid was assigned to help her wipe every surface clean. Quincy asked Zenyatta where the other maids should begin. One was assigned to dust and wipe what I hoped would be my secretary's office as well as my study. Zenyatta took the other upstairs. I presumed it was to set up the bedrooms. Monty was outside showing the handymen and groundsmen about.

I felt contented, almost happy, being outside of it all, observing the bustle, the work. I felt above it all, yet in control of it all. It was dizzying, elating. I was just twenty-four years old, with the woman of my dreams, a home of my own, employees, power, and I was still on an upward path, with Zenyatta by my side. Of course, there were some bits of mess to be taken care of, but those will be dealt with in short order. Constitutional Law? Why? Raina, a serious impediment. I must appear to campaign seriously next week. Money! I need to be more careful with that. And that fat bitch at the Ministry is a problem.

"Somebody's day-dreaming! Of me, I hope." Zenyatta voice, soft and sweet though it was, startled me.

"Yeah! I'm always thinking of my Zenyatta. Always!"

"And who else?" she teased, "The university, to be honest. The campaign."

"Oh, how can you lose? How? Our love will take you to a clear win. Don't worry, my darling." She gets up on her tip-toe and kisses me on the mouth. I grasp her waist, feeling her hips wide beneath my hand. She smiled knowingly.

Monty came in to say that Mr. and Mrs. Qualis just came through the gates. Zenyatta grabbed my hand and pulled me out the front door. Her father stepped out of the front seat. Gordon opened the back door for her mother. They were looking at the house from top to bottom, from right to left and left to right.

Her mother skipped up to her exclaiming:

"My God! I never ever see something like this in my whole long life. This is something from dem movies, Zen. Look at this *palace*!" Zenyatta beamed with pleasure and pride.

Robert Qualis seemed to find it hard to walk and look at the same time. He hugged his daughter and his wife the tears rolling down his face in a stream. I stood aside with Gordon to give them some time to have their moment. Zenyatta was crying with both of them. I glanced at Gordon. The man was crying! I looked at my feet to save anyone any embarrassment. I felt myself tugged hard and then engulfed in their embrace. Marjorie was kissing me on both cheeks; Robert was holding my head; and Zenyatta was grabbing me around the waist.

Her father stuttered out, "Madge, look at this compound! They can build *twenty* houses in here alone! I can *sleep* on this grass. Zen, this is *heaven* you all gat here! *Paradise*, I tell you, Steven!"

"Wait until you see *inside*, daddy!" She dragged them by each arm into the house. I followed in their wake; Gordon remained outside. I waved him in. About six feet in, Zenyatta let go of their hands. The two parents froze, and she walked in front of them and turned around, screaming,

"*Look* daddy! *Look* mommy! Look!" as she extended her arms to embrace what was at that point the whole world. The two people stood there, wordlessly, gaping in wonder. Robert leaned on his wife; he may have fallen if Gordon had not grabbed him and led him to a sofa nearby. His wife sat with him, both looking incredulously at their daughter. Zenyatta was a school child again, showing off her report card that confirmed she was first in the class, first in all things. They sat there and watched their daughter and drank in her surroundings. He mother found voice:

"Robert, dis nah real! We dreamin' bout we lil girl, bai. We dreamin' bout we baby girl."

"Yes, Madge. We dreamin' fuh true-true."

Their daughter forced herself in-between her parents on the sofa, draped her arms around each of them and pulled their heads towards hers. The maids, cook, and Quincy looked on teary-eyed. This, I thought, is what family should be. I smiled; Gordon looked at me and grinned. Monty walked in and started to report something or other, took in the scene and stopped. For a few minutes, I felt that we were safe, flanked as I was, protected as we were, by these two solid, dependable men. It was full thirty minutes before they moved again to other parts of the lower part of the building: dining area; secretarial office; study; kitchen.

They finally wound their way up the stairway towards the bedrooms, each self-contained. Only the master-bedroom had a jacuzzi. Quincy and the maid upstairs followed along. I thought about getting foodstuff. At that rate, though, there is little chance that Zenyatta's mother would be ready to go food shopping for what, at best, would be a very late lunch or early dinner. Quincy, it seemed, was of like mind. He came out onto the inside balcony and looked down at me. I told him to get Zenyatta. She ran down the staircase:

"You needed me, my love?"

I was thinking about the grocery shopping for lunch.

"Ooops! I forgot completely. I got too excited. I'm so sorry, my darling."

"Don't apologise, you silly thing. I enjoyed you and your parents' reaction. It was precious, and I will always remember it. But it is already almost lunch time and you have a lovely home but nothing in it to eat." I bellowed with laughter at my joke. Zenyatta hugged me hard also breaking down in laughter. I saw Quincy leaning over the balcony, then her parents, all three with a quizzical look on their faces.

"I was just telling your daughter that she has a cook but no food for the poor woman to prepare food. That she has a big fancy home with nothing to eat inside. Now she wanna squeeze the life outta me."

"Look, you all don' bother wid dis man, yuh hear. He done half-crazy."

They were all hooting with laughter up there. Her mother shouted down,

"You two is two of a kind, I tell yuh!"

Zenyatta called up to her mom:

"Mommy, you want us to make a quick shopping run? Me you and Melissa can go, if you want. We want to cook for the first time in our home. Leh we go, nuh."

"Yes, yes, yes. I'm coming wid you."

"So Robert, you're stuck with us here in this house."

"I'm good with that Steven."

Gordon took the ladies, and we took a walk around the outside. Monty and Quincy lead the way on the tour. Zenyatta's father was particularly taken with the garage space and the various lawn-care machines the men were using to manicure the lawns. He was also impressed by the staff quarters and the high, sturdy fences. I trailed along, then excused myself to get the various contracts signed by our staff. The men were still not finished their tour when I was done with the contract signing. Everyone seemed pleased with the salary and conditions.

I sat at the dining table and asked the maid for a Coke in a tall glass with ice (we had cases of Coke and Cream Soda). Now that I was alone, the shadows that followed me attacked aggressively. I put my head in my hands. Zenyatta may be in danger for all I know, although I know that Gordon would have protected her with his life, as would Monty. Her mother may be put in danger as well…that fat bitch at the Ministry, I thought, could find ways to harm Zenyatta. An innocent like Zen would attract the deepest malice in them.

I must find a way to check up on Raina, to move her from my former flat, even if I have to give her everything in it. I may have to empty and close that bank account. Forty-eight thousand dollars. But how do I get her to leave the place? The campaign may be the easiest, although I must make good on some of my promises. I must concentrate on my studies, maintain my record. With my old flat and its contents, Monty or Lewis may be able to rid me of some of it. Monty is more trustworthy; Lewis can be more effective, more final.

Monty, Quincy and Zenyatta's father returned, and I told the maid to have them join me in the dining hall for drinks. One of the maids served Cokes. We chatted about the machines, the fence and parameter lighting, the lawns, and those kinds of things about which I had little interest. I pretended to be interested, but Monty knew differently. Zenyatta had been away almost two hours. I asked Monty to use the walkie-talkie to find out if all is well, just in case they were in range. They were; they were busy shopping. Gordon speculated that they would be back in under an hour.

There was a brief silence as we sipped our Colas. Zenyatta's dad took the chance to ask the question which I suspect was on his mind from the beginning:

"Is everyone here armed? It seems so from what I could see." The question was asked in a rather neutral way. Monty and Quincy looked to me. I was still trying to get my mind away from the shadows and engaged in our conversation. It took a few seconds before the question registered.

"Not everyone is armed, Robert. The soldiers on duty at the gate, of course, have their fire-power. Monty and Gordon are armed, as am I. We want everyone to be as safe as possible, especially Zenyatta. Honestly, she is our top priority." Monty and Gordon nodded solemnly.

"Steven, I can only speak as her father, but you will never know how happy we are that she found a young man as good as you. Madge and I thank God every night that our daughter has found happiness. We know that you will keep our baby girl safe from the bad people in this world. We pray for both of you, son."

"Thank you, Robert. We promise you that we will give our lives for Zenyatta. No harm will come to her when we are there. We promise that. I will try my best to be worthy of her and of your dear family." The two men nodded their heads vigorously in agreement.

We heard the car tires on the driveway and the bubbly talk of the ladies as they bustled in, each laden with bags. Gordon brought up the rear, ladened with more bags. Zenyatta skipped up to me and kissed me on the cheek.

"That was hectic but fun. Mommy and Melly had fun."

"I can see that, Zen. But did Gordon have fun too?"

"Yes, Sir! Although it was hard to keep up with the ladies."

I smiled and asked Zenyatta if there is anything she needed us to do.

"Just keep out of our way, my love. That's all."

Quincy followed the ladies into the kitchen, meaning to be helpful. He was expelled immediately. Monty, Robert, Gordon and I had fun at his expense. Quincy spread his arms in pretend frustration and went off to check on the maids. Within minutes, Zenyatta was being propelled out of the kitchen area by her mother.

"Steven, Robert, you all keep this girl out of our way!"

"Welcome to the gang of the unwanted, dear Zenyatta," I ventured. She came and clung on to me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The very first meal in our home was wonderful. Our family: Zenyatta, Robert Qualis, Marjorie Qualis, and me. It seemed like eons ago that I sat with family for a meal. Melissa and Marjorie attended to taste and presentation, no mean feat with such short time to put it all together. Gordon and Monty preferred to take their meal outside where they could keep and eye on any kind of threatening activity. I suspect that they also wanted to give us the chance to get more acquainted with each other—the Qualis family and me. Quincy served the meals in the order dictated by Melissa. He was the picture of formality, politeness and attentiveness.

The first course was of a garden salad with a simple dressing of lemon and vinegar. Zenyatta and her parents made short thrift of that. I was never one for leafy dishes, but I suffered through most of it. I looked up from my leafy chore, and there were three pairs of eyes all over me. I smiled.

"Did anyone notice that someone does not like salad?" Zenyatta's mother asked.

"Whoever could that be mommy?" asked her daughter.

They had a good laugh at my expense. With unmistakable irony, Robert said,

"Well, it does take some people time to know what's good for them, you know."

I enjoyed the ribbing. I still do not like salad. But the pleasant, playful mood was established.

The second dish was a cream of corn soup. I relished this, as did Zenyatta and her parents. "I've never had anything like this. This is wonderful!" Zenyatta proclaimed. "Mommy, you should get the recipe."

"She should," said Robert talking to me, "Madge's idea of a soup is to have lots of meat, sweet potatoes, eddoes, plantains, and other provisions in the soup. Typical Guyanese soup. Always delicious but very heavy."

"Does Zenyatta cook at all?" I asked.

Her mother seemed to find it objectionable that her could not cook, Any Qualis that cannot cook is a adopted Qualis. Steven, you will be fattened in no time at all. Just wait and see!"

Zenyatta looked at me squarely in the eyes and said:

"You hear that? You will clean your plate so clean that we will not have to wash the dishes."

"We will see about that, my love. Melissa will not be here tomorrow, so you will be put to the test."

"I'm ready! Prepare yourself for tomorrow. I will not object if you spend hours praising my cooking and begging for more." She took my hand reassuringly. I may not be as good as mommy yet, but I'm close."

Robert decided to get in on the act: "You girls should be honest about who's the best cook in the family. Be honest with Steven!"

"Who? Who is the best cook in the family, Robert Qualis?"

Zenyatta pointed to her mother; Zenyatta's father pointed to himself.

"You better say you're sorry right now, boy, or else you'd be coming to that big gate with yuh plate in yuh hand."

We laughed again. His bluff was called and it was clear that he was ready to fold.

Quincy brought in what I supposed was the main course. Lamb chops smothered in a cream sauce, with grated carrots on the side, and a spring of something green atop the carrots. It smelled heavenly and tasted even better.

"This is perfection!" I proclaimed. Everyone agreed readily.

Desert was of an ice cream with chocolate sauce. We devoured all of it. Quincy asked if we'll have coffee. We all said yes.

I told him to call in Melissa and we all sang her praises. We gave her a round of applause and she took a bow. I instructed that Melissa, the maids and Quincy should eat as well. They chose to eat in the quarters at the back, although Zenyatta suggested that they could eat at the dining table while we go to another part of the house to have our coffee. One of the maids had already taken coffee out to Monty and Gotdon.

Marjorie, as guileless as Zenyatta, asked:

"So Steven, the whole country knows that this is an exclusive area. Word on the street is that these mansions were for ministers of government and the like. But here are two very young people living here. Did they rent this place or allow you to live here until you go abroad to study?"

She was asking good questions, the kind that a thinking person would ask, especially if her daughter was involved. Zenyatta chose to answer:

"No, mommy. The house is in Steven's name fully. I think they are investing in him so that he can be of help to them later on. The big car as well. The ownership papers are with us already."

"I wonder what they expect you to do for them." This was Robert.

"This week we are having elections for the Student Union President. I will have to be campaigning from Monday. I dread being away from Zenyatta for most of the days next week, but Monty and Gordon will be here to keep her safe. The government has identified me for some reason to carry their banner, and these are some of the benefits. They seem sure that I'll win. I will feel better about my chances if I campaign as hard as I can."

I continued: "I'm very nervous about all of this because our lives might very well be determined by these elections. I really don't know. But I will tell you that nothing—nothing in the world—will separate me and Zenyatta. As you know, we plan to get married as soon as I get this degree and before we leave for England."

Marjorie, the practical one in the family it seems, asked:

"Are you sure of getting this scholarship, Steven?"

"Honestly, no. There are a few hurdles. First, I must keep up my grades for this year and win as many prizes as I can. Then hope that I get admitted into a UK university. At the same time I have to follow through on my promises to make life better for students at the university. This is why I thought that it may not be wise to get married now. I will have to focus completely on these things."

Robert: "Of course you're right about focus. None of us has had to do anything like what you're doing, Steven. But I can tell you from experience that marriage to the right woman has no rival when it comes to offering stability and focus." He reached out his hand and held his wife's.

Zenyatta chimed in, "But Daddy, a wedding is itself disruptive. Just the preparation alone would add to Steven's stress."

I saw Robert's point immediately, "Zenyatta and I really did not think along the lines that Robert is drawing. Does it have to be some grand wedding? Are we not living now as husband and wife? So what's the difference if we get married two or three weeks or a month from now? No religious stuff, no reception, just sign the official papers and invite family and very close friends to a celebratory dinner."

"I'm not telling you two to do this or that, you know. You are bother intelligent enough to decide. But it depends on what you want and how you feel," Robert added.

"I agree with my husband. Steven and Zen can decide on their own.," Marjorie added.

"Okay," I said, "Zenyatta and I will talk about this tonight and we will decide."

On that note, Steven and Zen, we should take our leave and head home. It was sheer joy being in your home. And taking part in your first meal. Sheer joy. We are grateful for what you have done for our family, Steven. And we are in your debt for what you are doing for our girl.

Zenyatta said, "I had Quincy and Melissa pack food for you all. They're already in the red car. You will see us before too long mommy and daddy." She hugged and kissed her parents, as did I, and she escorted them out. Gordon's food was also packed as were Melissa's, the maids and the groundsmen and handymen. Quincy and Monty were also given food to take home.

I told Monty to be here at two in the afternoon. For the first time, Zenyatta and I were alone in our home. It suddenly seemed very large; we felt very small.

Chapter Forty

We sat quietly on one of the sofas in the foyer. Zenyatta clung on to me tightly. There was a comfort in our silence, our togetherness. I broke it,

"Let's go out into the yard, my love. We really have not seen it at night, and it has not felt us."

We went out, hand in hand, and walked the yard. It was brightly lit, floodlights illuminating every corner. The lush grass, trimmed to perfection, seemed blue. Zenyatta took off her shoes to enjoy the sensation of the moist grass on her feet, twixt her toes. I followed suit. Then she broke into a sprint, her feet hardly touching the turf, her knees high. She was very fast, fluid, with the sprinter's perfect form, her dress riding up to her thighs. I marvelled at the power, the grace. After fifty yards or so, she turned and ran back to me. From four feet away, she launched herself at me, knocking me flat on my back and landing atop me. I rolled her over and kissed her hard on the mouth.

"You are crazy, girl! Just crazy!"

"I'm crazy! I'm crazy for you! You, you, you!"

We lay there, soaked, breathing hard, under the floodlights, looking up at the dark sky. We eventually headed back inside, clothes clinging to our skins. In our bedroom, we stripped,

"Let's try the Jacuzzi. I've never been in one, you know." I said.

"Oh, Steven, my dear boy," she said in a poor attempt at a British accent, "I've enjoyed Jacuzzis every day of my life!"

We filled the tub and went in cautiously. We lay there facing each other, not knowing what next to do. She pressed a knob and the valves began shooting the water all around us. We both jumped, then settled back in to enjoy the sensation of water beating against our bodies.

I waited until we were in bed before I brought up the topic:

"Zenyatta, what did you think about your father's ideas about marriage?"

"My beloved Steven, if it were up to me, I would marry you tomorrow. But I am not the one who has to be juggling many things at once. It pains me that I cannot help you with these things. I wish I could, but I know that I can't. My father made sense, though. We are together, we have our home, and we are in love. But he

knows full well that it is not their decision to make, My mom knows that too, which is why she was quiet through the discussion. The decision must be ours, and only ours."

"Yes, what he said made sense. If we were to get married within the next few weeks, how would that interrupt or distract from what I have to do? Maybe it would help, huh?"

"I know that I am here because I want to be with you. I want to be with you through everything, good and bad. That will never change, Steven."

"So you can't think of any way in which our marriage would be disruptive to the things I must do?"

"I honestly cannot. But I do not want to seem as if I'm pressuring you into something you're not ready for. This is one time when the decision must be yours, my love."

I stayed on my back with my arms folded behind my head:

"Okay, my sweet Zenyatta. I will decide. I have decided."

I turned to her and looked into her eyes:

"Zenyatta Qualis, will you be my wife in exactly one month from today?"

She climbed astride me and looked at me with those lovely light hazel eyes,

"Steven DaSilva. I will be your wife. I will be loyal and faithful to you, loving and caring to you. I pledge to dedicate my life to making our life together happy no matter the challenges." The tears were running down her face, but she wore a smile that warmed my heart. I kissed her with a tenderness that I was only recently aware I possessed.

We made love that night for the first time in our home. It was slow, tender, protracted, passionate, loving. We laid there afterwards, her head upon my chest.

"We could have got married as soon as I can be in touch with the Solicitor-General. As early as next week, my love. A month suddenly seems a long time away, but I do have a few loose ends to tie up, what with the elections and all. But you can take on the task of arranging everything for the wedding."

"Then you leave that to me, my love. I will enlist the two experts and Quincy and Melissa."

"Good. I think I will need Monty and Gordon. Of course, we will not have any religious element to this, and our reception will just be an extension of our dinner tonight, with a short guest list."

"Yes, Steven, but you will have to take a few minutes and help me arrive at our guest list, right? Thirty minutes at most. My guest list will be very short." She laughed.

"Maybe we can start the ball rolling by informing your parents tomorrow, and you can begin your planning then. Maybe."

"You, my love, are always full of good ideas. Yes, let's do that."

"Good, Monty will be here at 2 tomorrow and we can go to your parents."

With her head still on my chest, she fell asleep. I rubbed her scalp with my fingertips and listened to her soft, even breathing.

I thought of our conversation and about her reasonableness, her thoughtfulness. That was my Zenyatta, my gentle, kind, considerate, beautiful Zenyatta. She entered my life like an angel. I wondered if she could redeem me for the wrongs I have done, for the wrongs I knew I was about to do.

Chapter Forty-One

Monty was there at 1:30, by which time we were ready. We headed off to her parents' home. The Qualises had just finished lunch when we arrived.

Their greeting was warm and genuine. Zenyatta gave them the news, and there was a new round of hugs and kisses and tears. Even her brother cried. I held back until her mother pulled me into the tight family bunch. They were ecstatic. We went upstairs for drinks. Robert Qualis insisted that such an occasion required that we have a beer each. The two of us did; the ladies and Zenyatta's brother had Colas. Zenyatta never let go of my hand. Her mother spoke:

"The two of you have made this family proud and happy. Thank you, Steven. Thank you, Zen. The only other times when I was as happy was when Robert and I got married and when our children were born. This is right up there with those joyous days." She turned to look at her husband; Zenyatta squeezed my hand.

"Robert, our girl has become a woman. Our baby girl, our Zenyatta."

Robert nodded.

Then Marjorie looked at me:

"Steven, our daughter has given herself to you. And this family could not be happier with her decision. We are happy that you found each other. We thank God for that. Robert and I have lived longer than you two young people; we have seen more than you have. Let me tell you this Steven. Let me tell you this with certainty: You are marrying a woman who will always be loyal to you. Always. I have seen many many woman who go from man to man to man, jumping from here to there like crapauds. They have no self-respect. They are loose in their morals. I can tell you for sure that our daughter will never be like that. She has too much dignity and too much respect for her parents to be loose. Zenyatta has that thing which is almost absent in our world today: honour. That, my son, is a most precious thing. I beg you to cherish it. Be as faithful to her as she will be to you. We beg you."

There were tears in her eyes. Her lips were trembling with emotion. Robert Qualis hugged his wife. These were good people, I thought.

Zenyatta got up, releasing my hand, and went to her mother and father. She hugged them: "Thank you, Mommy. Thank you, Daddy. And thank you for welcoming Steven into our family. We are truly blessed to have a family like this."

I spoke, hesitantly,

"I promise you to care for your daughter—our Zenyatta—for the rest of my life. I will do nothing to bring hurt to her. I am sure life will test us, but our love and your support will help us to meet all challenges that life throws at us. And we will always stay as close to you as we can."

Zenyatta's father spoke up:

"Madge, you realize that you ain't even offer Steven and Zen something to eat, right? Gosh, girl!"

We laughed at his joke. Marjorie and Robert went into their kitchen and emerged with two plates of cook-up rice and friend chicken. As we ate, Zenyatta explained that since I will be very busy over the next week or two, she will need their help to organise the ceremony and dinner. We will get help from Quincy and Melissa, so we could send Monty or Gordon to get you and we all sit and plan the whole thing from beginning to end.

"Tomorrow, Steven?"

"Sure. I will need Monty with me, but Gordon will be free to do the run around."

"So we'll send Gordon to get you tomorrow?"

"Well, I have to be at work, Zen, but your mom will be there, I'm sure. I'll apply for the day off on Tuesday, if you need me to."

"That's good, daddy. So at least for tomorrow, we'll not have these two getting in our way."

Robert spread his arms out wide and said to me:

"You see, boy? You see what we dealing with?"

"I starting to see. But the nice part is that is less wuk fuh we."

"Good point!" Robert returned. Everyone cracked up.

"I do apologize, but we should set off soon. I have some preparation of my own to get done for tomorrow on the campus. Is that okay with you, Zenyatta?"

"Of course it is, my love. I'm sure these three old folks are ready to be rid of us."

"Who yuh callin' old, old lady? Her brother objected good-humouredly.

"You two travel safely, and get some rest." Marjorie said.

We left the Qualises and got back home.

"I'll get some stuff done in the study and be up soon, my love."

"Do you wish some tea or coffee, old man?"

"Go ahead, follow your brother and see where that gets you! But no thanks. I'm stuffed," I replied.

"Well, I'll shower and be in bed. If you need anything, please call up."

She kissed me and went upstairs. I watched her mount the stairs. She was a beautiful woman. Perfect. I went into the study and made some notes for the next day. Monty will be here at eight and I'll be in Lewis's office by eight thirty to be briefed for the day's events and what is required of me. I went upstairs. Zenyatta was still up, propped up in bed reading.

"What are you reading, my little owl."

"I'm reading Carl Jung. I really find his work interesting."

"Oh wow! Do we have a psychologist or psycho-analyst on our hands?"

"Hey, you never know, Mr. DaSilva. You never know…maybe."

"Yeah…for all we know I'll need a psycho-analyst by the time I'm done with this campus."

Zenyatta laughs: "Well, to earn my services, you'll have to marry me!"

"I will need to think about that, girl. If only you were as beautiful as Zenyatta, well…"

I was still shaking with glee as I went under the shower. When I got out, the towel around my waist, she was on her side, naked, a bronze goddess. I froze at the sight before me, this bronze goddess with the bedside light bouncing off her skin.

I looked at her, and she drank in my gaze,

"My God!" I muttered, "You are the most beautiful creature in the world. You truly are!"

"If I'm so beautiful, come be with me. Make love to me." I did as ordered.

By the time we awakened, dressed and had breakfast, Monty was outside. Everyone else were already busy.

Chapter Forty-Two

We were on the campus at eight-twenty-five, and I was walking into Lewis's office by eight-thirty. I breezed pass the two girls with a cursory "good morning" and got a "Hi handsome!" from one, and "hi good-looking" from the other. My quick glace at them showed them to be very homely girls, the same girls I had thought to be quite desirable. I smiled at the thought that Zenyatta had spoiled me for life.

I went into Lewis's office. He jumped up to greet me:

"Well, well, the big boy had come down to greet us lowly beings," he said with his full-bellied laugh.

"Okay, okay, Rudolph. You can tease all you want!" I said good-naturedly.

"What plan do you have for me today?"

"You have a campaign speech to make at one in the small lecture theatre. We expect one to two hundred people. You could stay with the usual topics, but make it known that you've already succeeded in reducing the number of military personnel on the campus by almost seventy-five percent. Name me and White. *You* got us to make the troop reductions. You should take a few questions. Your audience today will be mostly from the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences. Watch the social science people; they tend to be real shits.

"Got it! Anything else?"

"No man. What? You in a hurry?"

"No, no, no, my friend. I want to talk to you as my friend. About things outside this campus."

Lewis got up, moved around his desk and sat on the chair next to me.

"Talk to me Steven."

"Rudolph. I'm getting married next month—"

"What? Whaat you talking bout, boy?"

"Seriously. One month from today, short two days."

"Who is she? Someone from the campus? No! I would have heard about that. Who? Come on, man! Speak up, you got me wondering here!"

"Her name is Zenyatta Qualis. She—"

"Qualis? Qualis. I know that name from somewhere."

"Yes. You called the LBI estate to get him a job, remember. That's her father, a really nice, decent man."

"You love her? Is the family with us?"

He seemed almost frantic, as if I was about to disrupt all of his well-laid plans for me and for him.

"I love her more than anything in this world, Rudolph. More than anything at all," I answered.

"More than power?"

"Yes, more than anything."

"Okay, Steven. And what is she after?"

"Nothing, Rudolph. She's an innocent, I swear it."

"Is the family with us?"

"We never discussed politics. They are not a political family at all."

"Well, you're gonna marry their daughter, so they are in politics now. You know that, right?"

"I can bring them around. Don't worry about that, my friend."

"I hope so, Steven. Okay, this wedding. Tell me what you want me to do."

"I want you to contact the Solicitor-General and be a witness. We'll do that in the morning of August 13. No ceremony at all. But we plan to have a nice dinner at Elegwa Park. You *must* be there!"

"I guarantee that. I will call the Solicitor-General just before the thirteenth. Don't worry about that. Oh, what you want for a wedding gift?"

"Nothing, man. Just your presence."

"This dinner. You gonna have music? We can dance up lil bit."

"I did not plan on that, but Zenyatta is doing the organizing, so I'll ask her. But I would like some soft music during dinner. Where can I rent a good sound system?"

Don't worry about that, man! The sound system will be your wedding gift. We don't rent. We buy!" He laughs his laugh.

Then he asked, "How many people at this dinner?"

"Maybe twelve. I don't know."

"You gonna invite Henry White? That would be a good move. He will see that you settling down. Stable."

"Good idea, Rudolph. You're always right with these things, man."

I did think of inviting Henry White, but not to show that I'm settling down. This was one way to neutralize that bitch of a secretary that he has there. I wondered

if I should tell Lewis about that, but thought better of it. The farther I keep Zenyatta from any of this, the better.

"One other thing, Steven."

"Sure, Rudolph. Anything."

"What about that woman you were fucking? The woman whose husband died? Did you deal with that?"

"Shit, no! She is at my flat in Kitty. That has been worrying me sick, my friend. That woman is as mad as fuck. She is likely to do anything, man! Anything. But I don't know what to do about it."

"Then why the fuck didn't you tell me about it? Jesus, Steven! Fuck!" Then he seemed to get cold, remote, removed from everything. The cold political operator was now in control. He got up from the chair next to me, ramrod straight, and walked around the desk and sat on his desk, leaning forward on his elbows. I was as frightened now as I was the first time I was fetched into this office.

"Does anyone else know about this? Have you told anyone else about this?"

"Not really. My driver knows a bit. He knows that she was with me, that we were together, but he does not know the full extent of it."

"Do you trust him?"

"Yes, absolutely. He's a former lieutenant in the army, actually."

"Okay, that's good. So he knows how to follow orders."

"Yes."

"Do you still have stuff in that place?"

"Yes. Clothes. Books. Some papers."

"And to your knowledge, she's still there?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

"Does she work? Does she go out?"

"No, except to the grocery store nearby."

"Friends? Neighbours she talks to?"

"Nobody at all."

"What about her family?"

"They found out about me. It was a big blow up. They actually kicked me down the stairs, man! Then they put her out."

"And you did nothing about the kick?"

"Nothing yet. Not yet."

"Good. Don't do anything until you get the okay from me directly, got it?"

"Got it!"

"One last question: any money entanglements?"

I was dreading this one. I was dreading all of this, but the money thing most of all.

"Yes. We have a shared bank account. I removed some money and put it onto my own account. The joint account has about forty-five thousand in it."

Rudolph put his two palms over his face, then gathered himself,

"Okay. First thing tomorrow, you go into the bank and withdraw the money. Leave one thousand in the account. Keep the cash and bring it to me. I will have to use it to clean up this mess."

"I will."

Now listen to me carefully, Steven. Listen as if your life depends on it. Your life *does* depend on it."

"I'm listening, Rudolph."

"First, talk to no one about this. Two do nothing at all and do not go *near* the place. Nowhere near!"

"I understand."

Last thing. Forget about *all* of this, you hear me, boy? *All of it*! None of this ever happened. I will handle it all. Concentrate on what you have to do on the campus for the next few days. Elections are on Friday, but we must make a show of it."

"I owe you big time, my friend."

"Yes, you fucking do."

"Now go and prepare what you have to say to these people. Make it good. Just do that."

He walked me out of the office as had become the habit, his arm draped over my shoulder. This time, though, he gripped my shoulder until I thought the shoulder-bone would snap.

One of the girls spoke up:

"What happen sweet-boy? You quiet today, man. Like the Colonel get you bad or what?"

Lewis exploded: "Shut you fucking jaw, you jackass. I'll throw yuh skunt in jail for a month, you hear me? I'll get one platoon to fuck you every day until you can't walk again! Yuh hearin me?" She was terrified and went deathly quiet. I felt that Lewis meant every word.

I was glad to be out of there. And relieved that I had got it all out. I walked to Monty and told him I'll go to the library, that he should go to the small lecture theatre and park there. I'll be there soon enough.

"Yes, Sir!"

I arrived at the small lecture theatre five minutes before time. I was happy that Kwame was there to chair the meeting. I was surprised by the turn-out, about two hundred and fifty people jammed into the place. I whispered to Kwame that he should keep August 13 free for me. I promised to tell him why the next day.

Kwame introduced me in exaggerated terms and handed the mic to me. I spoke of the seventy percent decrease in the number of army personnel on the campus...even though I am not yet president. I was clear that I had spoken with Colonel Lewis and the Minister of Home Affairs, Comrade Henry White. They agreed to the reduction. I talked again about the Student Union Building run by students, about a much better cafeteria, about new sports facilities, and better staff.

All to resounding applause. I said that I'd take a few questions. As Lewis had predicted the social sciences people piped up:

"How will you find the money to put up a new building?"

"Well, it would take serious fund-raising activities and I would negotiate a loan or gift from the government to equal the amount we raised from fund-raising. We'll also approach the private sector to open franchises for which they will pay rent year-round—things like burger joints, stationary stores, clothing stores, gift stores. The university bookstore will be asked to concentrate on books. We will also activate the university alumni association here and abroad. We have been woeful in neglecting that. I have many other ideas, and I am not saying that we can implement them in the one year I have left. However, we can initiate several of these immediately and keep the others in sight for the near future. Remember, as well, that all of this will be administered, run and staffed by students—you, us!

The walls shook with cheers, and I chose to close it off. I thanked them all for coming, reminded that voting is on Friday, and handed the mic back to Kwame. I shook as many hands as I could on my way out, got into the car, and Monty drove off.

"Please take me home, Monty."

"Yes, Sir."

Monty opened the back door, and I tumbled out of the car. He caught me before I hit the ground,

"I've got you, Sir. I've got you. He half-lifted me into the house, much to the alarm of the four people sitting in the breakfast area. Zenyatta was first to get to me,

"Are you okay, my love?

Monty and Quincy walked me up the stairs, their arms under my arm pits. Zenyatta kept asking what happened while leading us up the stairs. Marjorie called to Melissa to bring up a bowl of ice and s small towel. She told the cook to make some tea with sugar and no milk. They lay me in my bed. Zenyatta put my head in her lap and patted my forehead with the cold towel. She removed my shirt, all the time making comforting sounds and assuring that it will all be well.

"Just rest, my darling. Just close your eyes and rest a while."

I hear myself say over and over, "It's murder, my Zen. It's just murder."

Zenyatta must have thought that I was talking about the difficulty of the campaign, "Don't you worry, my love. That elections will be over soon and then you will take some good rest. It's just two days more and then it's over. Don't you worry about a thing, my darling Steven."

"It's murder, Zen, killing."

"Shhhhhh. Rest, my sweet. You close your eyes and rest." The cold towel was applied over my eyes and forehead. Zenyatta wiped my chest. Quincy brought up some aspirin and Zenyatta made me drink them with the tea while Marjorie held my head up. I was dozing off when I heard Marjorie ask everyone to give me some room to breathe. She sent everyone out of the room. Zenyatta's face was the last thing I saw before I slept. Her face seemed to be under water.

It was eight hours before I regained consciousness. Zenyatta was still by my side, as was her mother.

"Thank God, you're awake, my dearest one. You had us all worried."

Within minutes, Melissa brought in a bowl of clear soup. Zenyatta fed me, and her mom fussed over me. I saw Monty and Gordon peer in.

"It's past midnight. Did no one go home?" I asked.

"No, my love. Everyone stayed. They took turns napping in the employees' alcove. Please do not worry about us, we're all concerned about you. Just lay back and let us spoil you. For me it's good practice," Zenyatta smiled.

"I love you, Zenyatta. No harm will come to you. None at all as long as I live."

"And I love you, Steven. With all my heart and soul."

"Okay, my two love birds, I will leave you and try to get some sleep," Marjorie interjected.

"Oh Marjorie, please tell Monty and Gordon they should go home and get some rest. I'll need them here at eight-fifteen in the morning."

"Sure. Gordon can take me home as he is going home."

"Zenyatta, it may be a good idea to get nice uniforms for everyone for our dinner, no? All, except Monty and Gordon."

"As you wish, my love. We do need to be careful with our spending though."

"Yes, you're right. But it is the occasion of our lives, so..."

"Well, my lovely man, when you put it like that...but right now I want you to rest. This campaign thing has really stressed you out, so rest." and she hugged me tightly, "I'll get you another bowl of soup. Back in two minutes, my love."

She fed me the soup and I fell right back to sleep. Zenyatta woke me up at six a.m. We had breakfast while one of the maids pressed my shirt and trousers. I was out the door at 8:15. Monty was there, of course. We drove to the bank. I got forty-seven thousand from the joint account and twenty thousand from mine. Twenty, I thought, would be much more than enough for the wedding events.

We went directly to the Rudolph's office. He was much more relaxed that he was yesterday. I gave him the forty-seven.

"This is for the ranks who will do the entire clean-up. It will all be done before tomorrow. Nothing to worry about, boy. Rest easy on this score. You have Rudolph Lewis on the job!" I was reassured.

"How are the preparations for the big event coming along?" He asked.

"To tell you the truth, Zenyatta is handling almost all of it. I'm simply to do the guest list. You, White, Kwama, Zenyatta's folks, and I'm stuck. Hey, Rudolph, after this speech today, come with me to White, man! You can persuade him to come to the dinner. Come nuh, man!"

"Boy, you are a pushy one, you know. But okay, I'll come. Pick me up after you finish yuh stuff."

I gave the same speech to a different audience. There was slightly less enthusiasm, but that did not matter. I told Kwame that I was getting married on August 13 and we plan a small dinner. I gave him the address—7 Elegwa Park—and he was suitably impressed.

"Comrade, you going up fast! I hope you don't forget your friends."

"Kwame, that will never happen. Depend on me."

Monty and I went to get Lewis and we drove into the city. Lewis gushed about the car. WE drove into the compound of the Ministry, walked pass the police. It seemed to me that Lewis's uniform intimidated them. I nodded hello; Lewis was studious in ignoring them.

On the flight of stairs up, by way of explanation, he said:

"I don't trust those fuckers for one second. None of them. Too easy to buy, too easy to turn."

We walked straight pass the row of red-velvet-covered chairs in the outer corridor that gave way to the Minister's secretaries' office. There were people there, two of whom I recognised: one judge from his photograph in the papers; and the Commissioner of Police. There were ten or twelve men there, and they all looked as if they were facing the gallows.

Lewis barked at the woman who had threatened Zenyatta:

"Go tell Henry that we're here!"

"Right away, Colonel."

She went in and emerged with a middle-aged man, and invited us in. The Minister was already up and half way across his office:

"Rudy!! My friend!" He rushed into Rudolph's arms, bracing his head to his chest. These two men are very close, I thought. This lasted a while. I stood aside slightly from the two friends in order not to intrude.

"Hey, Henry! You know Steven, right?"

"Yes, yes. We had a nice chat the other day. I have high hope for this boy, Rudy! High hope! And I know that you're guiding him in the right direction. I'm sure he needs that." He turned to me, "Boy, you better be grateful to this man, you hear. Give him the respect he deserves."

"Of course, Comrade White. Colonel Lewis has been guiding me, and I listen carefully to every piece of advice he gives. I listen to every single word he says."

Lewis grabbed me around the shoulders, "Steven, you call me Rudolph, man! You can call the Honourable Minister "Henry"...in private. What you say, Henry?"

"If you say so, Rudy. I good with that, man! In private."

"Thank you both for making me feel a part of something important. Thank you Rudolph. Thank you Henry."

"Arite! Good. Henry, we came to tell you that tjis boy getting married on August 13. I want you to come. Nothing big. No ceremony or nothing, just a simple dinner with family and close friends. The girl family, me, you and a few others. It's at the house you gave him...at Elegwa."

"Of course, I'll come. If you going, I going. I can pick you up on my way. What time?"

"Around seven or so," I replied, "Zenyatta will be delighted that the two of you are coming."

"What she name?"

"Zenyatta."

"What a wonderful name. First time I'm hearing a name like that. I will have to tell the girl that if you treat her badly, she can call me directly."

"You don't have to worry about that, Henry. I got him in line!" They laughed the laughter of friends. Rudolph asked:

"Hey Henry—contact-wise—you think he should invite anyone else?"

"You know, Rudy. It might be good to invite Teelak Ramroop. He will have to sign the scholarship papers for the boy, and I don't want to *make* he sign them. You should go and invite him now…I'll call him and tell he yuh coming." With that he skipped around his desk and dialled a number:

"Hey Teelak. Henry White. I'm sending two friends to see you in five minutes. One of them is Colonel Lewis. Don't get these men waiting, you hear me?" He got the answer and hung up the phone.

"Oh, Henry! What you giving the boy for he wedding? I giving he a nice music set."

"What you want, Steven? Tell me."

"It's really not necessary. It's quite okay," I stammered.

"Henry, don't bother with this boy. He ain't realize he now starting out. Just sign a cheque for he, man. 100 thousand or so."

"Rudy, this boy turning out to be very expensive. You want it now or at the dinner?"

"We're here now, man. Just sign the cheque." Lewis half-ordered.

Henry White went back around his desk and signed a check for one hundred thousand dollars. He omitted the name and told me to fill it in. I did immediately.

"Okay, Henry. Pick me up at six-thirty or so on the 13th." They embraced and we left.

In a few minutes we were at the Ministry of Education. Lewis marched into the building without acknowledging the security guards, the heels of his army boots like ricochet off the walls. He led the way up the flight of stairs, the break, and then more stairs to the Minister's office. He told the lone secretary that he was here to see Minister Ramroop. The Minister emerged from his office immediately, hand outreached to be shaken:

Colonel Lewis, this is a pleasure. It has been too long. Ramroop's face did not convey the friendliness of his greetings. Teelak, I'd like you to meet one of our rising stars, Comrade Steven DaSilva. He is the president of the student union at

the university, or will be by Friday it looks most likely. I reached out my hand to the Minister of Education,

"It is my honour to meet you, Comrade Minister."

Ramroop was fair-skinned, almost bald, in his fifties or so. He was plump, about five-seven, two inches shorter than I was. Lewis towered over us, his uniform and straight bearing making him into a more imposing figure.

"To what do I owe this honour, Colonel, Comrade DaSilva.

"Well we just came from Henry White who thought it would be nice to have you with us at Steven's wedding. Henry thought that it would be useful if you got to know the Comrade whose scholarship to the UK you will approve in a few months. And what better occasion that at his wedding? It's not a big affair: no ceremony, just a small dinner with close friends and his fiancée's family. Just twelve people or so."

"I will be happy to come, Steven."

"The address is 7 Elegwa Park, Minister," I said. Ramroop blinked at the address. Clearly, I was too young for such an ostentatious address.

"We have established the time at seven or so in the evening of the 13th."

"Perfect! I'll be there for sure."

"Hey, Teelak, Henry gave the young Comrade a cheque for one hundred thousand dollars for a gift. We all know how hard it is to start marriage life. So you may want to consider giving him and his wife something to help."

"Of course, Colonel. I cannot afford that amount, but I cannot shame my ministry. Give me a minute, please."

He left us. Lewis looked at me and winked mischievously.

Teelak Ramroop returned with a cheque for seventy-five thousand.

"I hope this helps to give you a good start."

"I really do look forward to being there at your wedding dinner."

"Thank you, Honourable Minister. See you then."

And off we went, Ramroop's cheque nestled in my pocket alongside Henry's.

In the car, I turned to Rudolph, "You were pretty rough with Ramroop back there, man."

"You think that is rough, boy? Jesus, you aint see nothing resembling rough, Steven. Nothing. This could be very rough business," and he laughed. That was his not-so-friendly laugh.

"You see, Steven, all of these politicians are aware that their power comes from one man—Comrade Leader. And that one man depends on his army to keep

everything the way he wants it. *We* are the source of his power; and *he* is the source of ours. Always remember that."

"I will, Rudolph. I will."

Steve, make sure you deposit those checks tomorrow morning, okay?"

"I will. Hey Rudolph, do you mind if Monty drops me home and then whisks you up to the campus?"

"Not at all. It will give me the chance to see your hut." We both burst into laughter.

We drive up to the gates which the soldiers on duty had already opened.

"Give me a minute to give these chaps a once-over, will you?"

Monty stopped the car and we get out. On seeing Colonel Lewis, the soldiers snapped to attention, their rifles braced at attention. Rudolph fixed various aspects of their uniform, accused them of being poor soldiers and disgrace to him. The fear in their eyes was as clear as sunlight.

"Listen, Sergeant. Corporal. Listen carefully. You have been posted here to protect a very important person. He is important to our Comrade Leader and he is important to me. If I hear of *one* slip-up, even God can't help you all."

With that, Monty pops me off, turns around and drives off to take Lewis to the campus.

Chapter Forty-Three

I rushed into the house to give news to Zenyatta. The planning committee was at work in the breakfast room. I hailed them:

"Good afternoon, dear Planning Committee members. Chairperson Qualis would you mind excusing Committee Member Zenyatta for a few minutes, please?"

"Of course," replied Marjorie in the spirit of things, "I think we can excuse her for five minutes or so."

"Thank you, Madam Chair. I will be sure to be back soon." Zenyatta chimed.

She ran up to me and gave me a big hug. I took her hand, and we headed upstairs into our room. We both jumped onto the freshly-made bed.

"I have news, good news," I said excitedly.

"Well, tell tell tell…"

Colonel Lewis and I went into the Minister of Home Affairs, Comrade Henry White…or Henry, as I now call him."

"My goodness. Pals, huh?"

"We went to invite him to our small dinner. Rudolph told him—"

"Rudolph?" she asked, puzzled.

"Lewis, girl."

"Oh, your *other* pal! Sorry."

"It was all very very friendly, I must say. So we have three top-level guests: Colonel Rudolph Lewis, the Honourable Minister of Home Affairs, Comrade Henry White, and the Honourable Minister of Education, Comrade Teelak Ramroop."

"Wow! That's a high-powered group. This dinner is now more than just a family dinner, huh? Now we'll have to re-work some things. Like the menu, the sitting arrangements, and so on. Oh, and with these people, it will cost us much more, I think."

"My darling Zenyatta, my beautiful my love, I'm not done with my news as yet," I said coyly, "you may have to adjust the menu, but I may be able to help with that. The seating arrangements should be quite simple, I think. The two of us together, where we always belong; the colonel by your dad and mom; the politicians apart from each other; and Kwame wherever you want him."

"Ha! You deliberately left out the expenses, my love. Or did you? You can ask my parents how expensive it is to raise a family…even a small one."

I pulled out the cheques from White and Ramroop, and gave them to her. She gasped:

"You have got to be joking! This is a fortune, Steven. My love, do you realise how much my father earns…even with his upgrade from heavy-machine operator to accountant?"

"I don't know exactly, but it's about five hundred a month, maybe?"

"No, my love, it's three hundred and fifty dollars. I probably have more than his life's earnings in my hand right now. Him and my mother's."

"Probably, my love. Probably. But times are changing. Things are different for us, and we will make it better for them, for everyone you care about."

"Why did they do this, my love? Why are they doing all that they're doing for you? They must want something." I could see the worry—and fear—in her eyes. I've seen that fear before. I never want to see it in Zenyatta's eyes again!

"To be honest, it was Lewis that almost forced them to give generous gifts to us. He did it in the friendliest ways though. They are all friends, really. He and Henry are very close friends. And I do think that they are investing in us for when we return from the UK if I get the scholarship…or when I get the scholarship."

Zenyatta was pointed: "I wonder what they expect? Okay, you will serve them and the country, but doing what?"

"You know, Zenyatta, now that you ask, it may have something to do with this Constitutional Law thing, but I'm not sure how as yet. But together we'll figure it out. For now, let us enjoy our love for each other, please, my sweetheart."

"We'll figure it out, my Steven."

"Tomorrow morning, we should go to a bank and open a joint account and deposit these cheques."

"Yes, we should,' she responded, "then you have to join us to re-organise everything, you hear me, Steven DaSilva?"

"I hear you, my wife." I was hungry for her, for us.

"We will have us tonight, my love. Right now, we have people waiting for us downstairs. Someone has to be responsible in this family." She laughs and dances out of the bedroom. I follow with longings of her.

Zenyatta dragged me to a seat in the breakfast room. Her mother, Qualis, Melissa, Zenyatta, and me. I asked that Monty and Gordon join the group. One of the maids went to get them.

"I sense that there have been developments, so it may be useful to have the bride and groom update us," Marjorie Qualis said, jokingly. The rest smiled.

Zenyatta signalled that I speak,

"I learned this afternoon that we will have as guests the Minister of Home Affairs, the Minister of Education, and Colonel Rudolph Lewis. I also invited a friend from the university, Kwame Collins."

Zenyatta added: "I think this means greater expense all around."

Melissa: "Yes, the menu will have to be updated to suit the big-wigs."

Quincy added: "And cocktails too. We may have to have two waiters as well. And all new uniforms."

"We may need to beef up security, Sir."

"Yes, we will. But I will get Colonel Lewis to do that for us. His personnel will be under your command." Monty and Gordon nodded.

Zenyatta and her mother settled the seating arrangements. Marjorie asked:

"And I take it that when we generate our new lists and costs, we submit that to...?"

"Zenyatta," I said quickly. She nodded.

It seemed all set, but I few things were discussed and Marjorie made a few more notes. Gordon prepared to take he and Quincy home. And Zenyatta and I were finally alone.

We were still sitting at the breakfast table. He said:

"Let's take a walk around the yard the way we did the other night."

"Sure," and we headed out. We walked to the gate and chatted with the soldiers,

"Is everything okay, Comrade? It seems very quiet."

"Yes, it is wonderfully quiet tonight. We're hoping it stays that way for many nights to come."

"Absolutely, Comrade," he replied, "We're here for you, don't worry at all. The Colonel just radioed in to make sure all is well."

Zenyatta and I continued our walk around,

"The lights are so bright that we can't even see the stars, my love."

"Well, one night, we'll just go out to look at them. Whenever you wish."

We walked, she removed her shoes again. Ran her brief distance again, and ran back to me, "I love you."

I responded in kind, and we went in. Zenyatta insisted that I put the cheques in a locked drawer in the study, and we went up to bed. A long shower together,

and I explored Zenyatta's lovely body again like it was new, unfamiliar territory. She explored mine until we were deliciously exhausted.

"Do you think you will ever be bored with me?" She asked, the question that every young couple asked, I suppose.

I feigned annoyance and pinched her bum. She jumped out of bed and attacked me playfully. It was good.

"Hey, my woman, don't forget you have work to do tomorrow."

She cuddled up to me, started saying something, and fell silent. I waited for her to speak, glanced down, and only then knew that she was out like a light.

Chapter Forty-Four

By eight-fifteen the next morning, Monty had us in the car and headed to my bank. I closed my account and accepted one hundred and eighty thousand in cash. I asked Zenyatta to wait in the car. On the short trip to the new bank, I counted out thirty thousand and gave it to her.

"That's fifty in all for wedding expenses. Would that be enough, you think?"

"Even with our new expenses, that should be much more than enough, my love."

"Well, just in case, we will have three-twenty-five in our joint account. You can come and take whatever you wish if I'm not free."

"Gosh! I just like how you say "three-twenty-five". Like it's three hundred and twenty-five dollars—which, not long ago would have sounded fantastic to me." She smiled at me.

"Me too, my Zenyatta. Me too." We held hands all the way through the tedium of banking. I passed the time joyfully admiring her hands, the perfectly tapered fingers, the smoothness of skin, the softness of her palms, the gold of her skin.

As the fellow behind the desk was filling out forms and doing what bank people do, she leaned across and kissed me on the cheek. It was such an innocent thing, a small thing in the eyes of the world, but it sent a wave of relief over me. And yet, I was aware of this cloud, this darkness hanging over me, hanging over my Zenyatta.

As the bank fellow was finishing up, I told her that we should go directly to get her mother and Monty could take us all on a quick tour of the campus,

"Have you ever been?"

"Once, on a school tour. I was in fifth form, a girl. It really was a quick drive through, and we saw some buildings, but no one really knew what we were looking at, not even the teachers. But then none of us had any idea of what a university looked like, so it was a very nice drive for all of us."

"Well, I cannot promise you a detailed tour today, but you will at least know a bit more of where I spend my time. It will be good, my love."

So we finished our banking stuff and headed towards her parents' home. We got her mother and went directly to the campus. I named every building to her as

we drove by: the small lecture theatre; the education building; the small cafeteria; the social science building; the natural sciences building; the large lecture theatre; the administration building; the bursary and personnel building; the engineering building; and the small building for Colonel Lewis's office. I explained some of the plans I had to Zenyatta and her mother. Her mother was quiet and Zenyatta asked a few questions about students and about why there were no medicine and law buildings. I explained that the university was just now growing.

"And these degrees are recognised by other countries, right?"

I gave the same feeble answer. She remained quiet and asked about Lewis's office where I told Monty to let me out. I kissed Zenyatta, got out, and Monty turned the car around to take the ladies home.

I walked into Rudolph's office, uninterrupted by his two girls. As usual, he was openly delighted to see me.

"Hey! The man of the moment himself!" Around the desk and big hug, "How are wedding arrangements coming? I called the Solicitor General, and he's all set for us on the big day.

I was more interested in the other thing, my flat and its occupant. I asked,

"Hey Rudolph, about that other thing...?"

"I told you not to worry about that, man! It's done. Gone, never to return. Ever."

I thought I knew what that meant, but I dared not ask. It was okay for me ask that something be done to remedy the situation, but too squeamish to hear about it. I felt ashamed, low, despicable. And yet, I thought of Raina's family and the lesson they must be taught.

I simply said, "Good."

"And the elections tomorrow is also settled, so don't worry about that either. You have friends, Steven. Always remember that."

"Maybe I should spend a few hours walking around the campus...just for the appearance of things. What do you think, Rudolph?"

"If you have the time, why not? Shake some hands, and such things."

"Okay, Rudy, I'll do that and I'll be here tomorrow by the afternoon for the results."

"I'll have a bottle of the world's finest Scotch when you get here."

I went out and Monty was already back. I informed him that I'll be walking around the campus. He immediately parked the car and walked a discrete distance behind me. He even followed me into the library; the library staff knew better than

to object to his presence. I was pleasantly surprised to find almost a hundred and fifty students in the place, reading in advance of the start of the new academic year.

By chance, I met one of my cousins, Lennox D'Aguiar, who was reading for his degree in biology. I told him about the wedding to Zenyatta. He was genuinely happy for me. He also informed me that his brother—Peter D'Aguiar, much my favourite—was coming in next week from Toronto. He gave me Peter's telephone number and suggested that I call him if I needed anything for the ceremony.

Monty and I left the campus soon after, and headed back to 7 Elegwa. I was excited to share the news of Peter's coming with Zenyatta and the planning committee. They were at the breakfast table, and I walked in with Monty and Gordon.

"Good day to everyone. I see that you're all at work, but I have some news that may please all of you. First, Colonel Lewis will be giving Zenyatta and me a "nice" music set as a wedding gift. I honestly do not know what that means, but I suspect that it will be good. He will send his people to set that up for us. I will ask Quincy and Gordon to make a run to the record store and buy a few tasteful classical music long-playing albums: Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, and any other of the famous composers like Wagner and Strauss. We don't want any kind of raucous music that will inhibit the meal or conversation. We will leave that noise to the run-of-the-mill bottom-house wedding, I think."

"The other thing is that I heard that my cousin, Peter D'Aguilar is coming in from Toronto next week. I plan to call him and ask him to bring some things for the dinner. Imported stuff that we cannot have here. I have Peter's number right here."

Zenyatta pointed out the obvious: "You do realize, my love, that we do not have a phone in the house, right?"

"Oh darn! I missed that completely. No one thought of that. I sure did not. I really thought that my Zenyatta was going to talk about expenses," I laughed. They all did, even as they approved of her frugality.

"Look, the phone is not a problem at all. I'll make the call from Rudolph's office. No problem at all. Meanwhile, Monty you can go in to the telephone company and have them install a line immediately. We will need the line out here, with extension in my study and in our bedroom. Use the wedding and Comrade White's attendance to get them moving right away. Do that now, Monty. Be as officious as you can." Monty left to get that done.

"But I do want to get back to the menu and what I can ask Peter to bring. Zenyatta, do you want us to discuss this first and then with the committee tomorrow? I'm fine either way."

"Thank you for asking, my love. It does show respect for me and for us. But I'm the least of the apostles here, especially when it comes to food. I will always defer to my mom, Melissa, and Quincy on these matters."

To my surprise, it was Quincy who spoke up, "It is appropriate that you decide, Miss Zenyatta. After all, you *are* the lady of the house, if I may be so bold to remind." Quincy and his butleresque formality, I thought.

"Lady of the House! Oooh, I like that! Lady of the House, Mr. DaSilva." She set everyone to twittering. I smiled.

"Quincy," I said with fake annoyance, "Don't look so pleased with yourself! You've started something that I will have to live with for the rest of my days, man!" Which started a new round of hoots.

Marjorie and Melissa had their pens poised over their writing pads. I took this as my cue to initiate a menu:

"I thought that our theme could be wild game. I can ask Peter to bring about fifty partridges, five dozen quails' eggs, a few bottles of champaign, and a case of singly-malt scotch…probably two MacAllan 18; five Glenfiddich; and five bottles of The Glenliver."

Quincy: "The Chevas Regal is the drink of choice for many now, Sir."

"Oh yes. That is Comrade Leader's drink of choice, I hear. We can have two bottles of that blended stuff, I suppose, but it will be badly outclassed, I'm afraid."

Marjorie muttered, "As if anybody would know the difference! For them, it's all rum!"

The others were too uncertain to join in Marjorie's irreverence, but I shared it.

"You are right, of course, Marjorie. But since this is our special event, we should be pleasing ourselves, I think." There were nods all around, save for Zenyatta,

"Well, I don't drink, so any of this is fine by me. Except, as we all should know by now, my Steven has probably selected the most expensive liquors he can think of."

"True, true!" agreed Marjorie. The rest had a good old chuckle.

"Okay," I said, "Here's my suggested menu:

Hrs Oeuvres

Garlic-butter shrimp

Baby tomatoes stuffed with blue cheese and/or aged Canadian Cheddar

White and Red French Wines

Garden Avocado Salad (with vinegar and lemon dressing)

French Onion Soup

Baked Partridge (pan-fried with butter, really) surrounded by quails' eggs.

Baked custard with chocolate topping or fruit (mangoes, papayas, etc.)

Zen, please make a list for me to convey to Cousin Peter. And let's hope he agrees to bring all of it."

"Steven," Marjorie looked up at me, "This may be a silly question, but I'll ask anyway. Will the government allow any of this into the country? I mean, we cannot even get apples, grapes and potatoes here."

"You know, Marjorie, that's a good question. However, I think we can swing it. Peter D'Aguiar is a frightfully rich man. And the rich and powerful have their ways of getting things done. I'll find out tomorrow and let you know if there are any problems. Oh, we should make an extra seat. Put him alongside White. I think you'll all like him."

"Steven, my love. You are full of surprises, my man. You certainly sound as if you know your fancy meals. Impressive!"

"Very, very impressive indeed," they all echoed.

I took a deep bow, "Thank you, thank you, thank you. The things you find in books, I tell you."

Melissa decided to chime in, "Miss Zenyatta, don't worry, girl. You'll catch up fast-fast."

Zenyatta smiled broadly. Her mother nodded.

Chapter Forty-Five

We had supper and everyone departed I good humour. Everything was locked, and we headed upstairs to prepare for bed. After our shower, we lay in bed, each of us thinking, gazing at the ceiling. I was thinking about what Lewis meant by "Gone, never to return. Ever." She left? To where? Why add the word "ever" unless her departure was permanent?

Zenyatta broke the silence, "You know, my love, earlier today I was chatting with my mom."

"And? What about?" I asked.

"I was telling her how much I love you…"

"That's a great thing, my darling Zenyatta…" She turned and placed her finger over my lips.

"I told her that if you asked me for it, I would give you my very soul. My very soul."

"What did she say to that?"

"She said that I can give a man my body and my heart. My whole life, but that the soul belongs only to God. They are deeply Christian people, as I'm sure you realize. Catholics. Growing up, I do not think we missed a single mass on Sunday. None that I can remember, anyway."

"Yes, Zen. I realized that from the first time I met your parents. It was hard to miss the cross around Marjorie's neck."

"Yes, but millions of people wear the cross, and I think that for them it is an ornament…you know, like an earring or necklace or something to be displayed. Like an advertisement for perfume or some such thing. It means nothing. But to those people, to my parents, it is life itself. Christ—his life and sayings—govern everything they do, how they treat others, how they behave, how they act in private and public. I think they would whither away and die without it."

"And you? What about you?"

"I was brought up to believe, Steven. I will always believe. But I do not know how faithful I can be to something otherworldly like the Christ. I believe, but not the way my parents do. I believe in what I see and touch. I believe in you. If you

asked me for my soul, I will give it. I have already given you the entirety of me, of what I am. That is why I will never, why I can never be unfaithful to you."

"Zenyatta, you are the most wondrous human being I have ever known. Your beauty is unfathomable, and I will spend each day of my life trying to fathom it. You are an innocent, and you have all of me too. If there is a human being that can redeem me, it is you. Only you."

She was crying quietly, softly. I felt myself being aroused. I whispered into her ear,

"I'm hungry for you." She kissed me hungrily. I pushed her away, hard.

"No! Tell me to fuck you! Tell me!"

Her eyes were wide, "Fuck me, Steven. Fuck me."

I ripped off her clothes and mine, pushed her on her back and pushed myself deep into her. She screamed and tried pulling away. I tugged her back and rammed myself into her. From far away, someone was screaming for it to stop. It did not. I went on and on and on. The scream got louder and farther away. It went on for hours. At the end of it, she was curled into a ball. There were bruises on her breasts, her hips, her behind, her arms, her thighs. Her face was puffy. I gather her up in my arms and she clung on to me with something like hysteria.

"Was I too rough, my love?" I asked, stupidly.

She nodded. My Zenyatta seemed like someone else, like a memory that I wanted to disappear.

"Please talk to me, my sweet one. Please."

She just looked at me with those eyes, tears running down her face.

"Please just talk to me. Was I too rough on you, my angel? Tell me, please."

"You were very rough, Steven. It hurt. It hurt."

She was sobbing loudly now, and I began to cry. She was awake to my crying, and put me on my back, kissing my tears, comforting me, loving me.

"It's okay, my love. It's okay. We'll be fine."

She got out of bed, dragged on a tee-shirt, turned on the water to fill the jacuzzi tub and went downstairs. She returned with a bag full of ice and dumped it into the tub. She came back to the bed, half-lifted me into the tub, climbed in with me with my head between her legs, and turned on the jacuzzi.

It may have been three or so when I was startled awake by a noise downstairs. The bed lamp on my side was still on. I glanced quickly at Zenyatta. She was asleep. I grabbed my firearm and went downstairs and into the kitchen. There were two pans on the floor. There was a gust of wind, cold. There must be a draft somewhere, I

thought. Another pan came off its hook and fell with a clang on the floor. I wanted to run to the front door and call out to the soldiers. I could not move. I tried to raise my hand to point at the figure in front of me. She was in a nightdress, dripping wet, strangely familiar. My hands were frozen to my side, feet bolted fast to the floor. She opened her mouth wide and out of it came a sound as solid as the wall:

"I'm gonna eat your fucking soul, you bastard. Chomp, chomp, mmmm, tasty." Then a laugh that curdled my blood. I fell, crawled to a corner and curled up, my knees up to my chin.

"Are you okay, my love? Steven, are you okay? Jesus, what's the matter?" Zenyatta was by my side holding me as I shook. "I'm here now. It's alright now. Come, my sweet. I'll take you up to bed. I'm here now."

She took me up the stairs, put me into the bed, came in and held me close to her, drawing the covering over us.

"You must have had a nightmare, my dear one. It's okay now though. I'm right here. My poor love must be stressed out. Just go to sleep. I'll stay up for a while until you fall asleep."

'Is there someone in the room? There is someone in the room, Zenyatta."

"No, Steven, it's only us. Only us. Go to sleep, my love."

When I awakened, Zenyatta was not in bed. I fell back to sleep and she awakened me again. She had brought up a breakfast tray of toast, orange juice, two sunny-sides, and a pot of coffee. She propped me up on a pillow and fed me breakfast as if I were a patient. She was showered and wearing a pale blue dress, full-length, and full-armed with a high neck. After I finished, she put me back to a prone position and asked me to sleep some more.

"What happened? I can't remember what happened, Zenyatta."

"Ssshhh, my love. Rest, and we will talk about this later. For now, all I want you to do is rest. I'll be right here by you side."

I slept, grabbing on to her hand. I awakened at noon, still clutching her hand.

"You stayed here throughout? Did you get something to eat? Why did you not at least lie down?"

"Because, my love, you refused to let go of my hand. And I just did not want to wake you up." I pulled her to my chest, and she rested her head there for a while.

"I'll go get Melissa to prepare something for you to eat and get a maid to bring it up, okay?"

"No. I'll shower and we go down together. I'll have something light and go off to the campus for an hour or so. I also have to call Cousin Peter about the stuff for our dinner. And then elections update."

"You see, Steven. This is why you were such a mess last night. This constant stress you put yourself under. It's constant, my love. And you are not allowing me to share your burdens with you."

"I'm sorry, my Zenyatta. Truly. But we will just relax this weekend, just the final planning and then let everyone know what must be done."

"You know very well that it will not be as simple as that, but you are trying, I know. And I love you for it. Okay, shower and dress, and I'll get things ready downstairs."

Zenyatta and I had a sandwich and coffee. I suggested to her that Gordon should get her parents after four-thirty so that he brother and father can join us,

"I don't want anyone feeling left out of our celebration. Are new outfits for the maids and such being done?"

"Steven, Steven, Steven. If you don't stop it right now, I will become very upset with you. That is all being done, of course. Your anxiety will trigger things that are not good for us…or anyone else. We still have to talk about last night. There should be no recurrence of that."

"You're right, my darling girl. Hey, Zenyatta, do you realize how much you have grown over the last few weeks?"

"I do! I am now The Lady of the House, after all. I will have a husband to care for and keep in line, after all." She laughed. I breathed.

I kissed her goodbye, "I won't be long, my dear."

In the car, I think back at Zenyatta's "Lady of the House" and smile. Then I remember last night and a creature that may be my macabre version of the Lady of the Lake. I shiver.

Monty asked, "You okay, Sir?"

"Yes, yes. Just the shivers. Had a bad night, I'm afraid. My nerves are still frayed."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Sir. I'll get you some fresh orange juice as soon as we get back to 7, but you do need to get more rest."

I stomp into Lewis's train carriage. His two secretaries are there, as usual. They smile broadly when they see me. The brown-skinned one speaks,

"Hey good lookin'. We hear yuh get catch up by a sweet young pussy, man! Getting' married and everyting, eh eh!"

I veered towards her. grabbed her index finger, and bent it backward,

"What the fuck!" She screamed, trying to stand. I bent the finger farther backward that she sat again and twisted to one side, screaming with agony. I felt Lewis standing alongside me. I was about to let go of her finger when she said,

"Why yuh don' go do dat to yuh bitch!"

I yanked the finger as far back as it would go, bent down to her face, and hissed:

"If you *ever* say a word about her again—*ever*!—I will let your Colonel do to you both what he said he would do to you. And I will come every day and see you each get fucked raw by platoons of soldiers. I will *watch* and *cheer* them on! Understood, you whore? *Understood?*

"Yes, Comrade!"

"*Understood*, whore?" To the other,

"Yes, Comrade."

I turned towards Lewis. He was clapping and smiling. The man was cheering me on!

"Finally, Steven! You finally learn how to treat these two sluts. I would tell you to fuck them right here, but I don't want you to catch some whore disease."

Then to the two women, "You better know that from today, your fates are in this man's hands, yuh hear? If he want to push a baton into yuh holes, he can do that. Up to he, any time he fuckin want! Now get to work!"

He draped his arm over my shoulder, and we walked into his office. He slammed the door shut. I felt elated, buoyant, free!

"They were waiting for a long time for that lesson. Pain 101! Taught by Mr. Steven DaSilva!"

I smiled. He slapped me on the back and went around the desk. Still standing, he reached out his hand and bowed. I took his hand automatically. He got upright, arms at the side, at attention,

"Congratulations, *Mr. President*!"

"What? Votes have been tallied?"

"Ninety-eight percent for Steven DaSilva! Landfuckingslide!"

"Sweet!" I could hardly contain myself. "Jesus! Wow!"

Rudolph went into his drawer and brought out two glasses. With some fanfare, he brought out a bottle of Chevas Regal and poured into the two glasses. We raised and clinked our glasses,

"Cheers! To victory!" And we gulped down the whiskey.

"Another?" he asked.

"Hey Rudy man. I have to make a call to my cousin in Canada. I have no phone at the house, so I need to use yours, if you don't mind."

"No phone? At Elegwa? That's bullshit, Steven. Hear, you just dial zero and give them the number. They will put you through and you talk all you want. I'll be outside making sure you have lines at the house before eight tonight!"

I did as Lewis told me ans talked for about thirty minutes to Peter. He berated me a bit for not being in contact, but it was rather good-natured. I gave him my list and he wrote it all down. He said he'll be landing on or about August 10 and have everything delivered to my address. I told him that Zenyatta and I will repay him whatever the cost, and he brushed that away as silly. After I insisted, he said that all of it will be his wedding gift, and he promised to be there. I suspect that cost would have been substantial, but he was my eldest cousin and it would have been inappropriate if not rude to argue the point. We hung up, and I continued to feel elated.

Rudolph returned to his office, "All good with your cousin…what's his name again D'Aguiar?"

"Yeah! Peter—Peter D'Aguiar. He'll bring everything we need from Canada. No problem. Hey, Rudy, what did they say about the phone lines?"

"Say? Say? They can't say a damn thing, boy! They gat to do! I told them that if the phones at 7 Elegwa are not up and running by eight tonight, I'll have two truckloads of soldiers at their office at 9 in the morning to fuck them all up, men and women. They'll get it done, don't worry. Oh, and I am not bluffing about the two truckloads of soldiers!"

"Jesus, Rudy! You bad like tail, man!"

"Steven, my young friend, this is about my own survival too, you know." I laughed loudly,

"Yes, Colonel Lewis. Sure!"

"Listen to me boy! I am not joking here. This is serious shit!"

I stopped laughing immediately. There was something in his eyes that I had never seen before: something like fear. Or maybe fear itself.

"Rudy, tell me what's going on, man. Please."

"Steven, I'm asking you to keep this to yourself for now, okay?"

"Of course, tell me."

"This midday, I got a call from On High," he said, pointing his finger towards the heavens.

"Oh High? From White? Come on, that's your friend, man!"

"White? White? White is high up, but I'm talking about On High!"

"You mean..?"

"That's who I mean. Holy Christ. I never talked to that man in my life! He never talked to me directly. I mean, he addressed officers and soldiers all the time, but never to me individually. I'll tell you something on this Friday, my friend. I am not scared of anything or anyone. And God knows that I know about some nasty shit that go down behind this seawall, most of them I do. But I am terrified of our Comrade Leader, Steven."

"So tell me what happened wen he called."

"My phone ring. I pick up. The voice—and who don't know that voice, eh?—asked if it's Rudolph Lewis. I said speaking. I jumped out of this chair, you hear? And I swear to God, I almost pissed myself. And hear Comrade Leader nuh? The man said:

"I suppose you're out of your chair and at attention, Colonel Lewis?"

"I said: 'Yes, Comrade Leader!'" And you know what the man did, Steven? You know what he did?" I shook my head. "The man laugh a full-belly laugh. That laugh still ringing in my ears, Steven. I swear, I will go to my grave with that sound.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I just waited until the laughter was finished. And he started talking."

"Come on, Rudy! What did Comrade Leader say?"

"He said in that deep voice he has, he said:

'Comrade Lewis, relax. Relax, take a seat.' I sat. He continued, 'Lewis, I know that you're dealing with several things, including the happenings on that campus. I know all of it, Lewis. I have one thing more that you must do. This takes top priority; do you understand soldier?' I said, 'Yes, Comrade Leader. I understand fully.'

He continued: 'I want you to look after that boy, that Steven DaSilva boy. No harm must come to him. Protect him at all cost, understood?'

'Yes, Comrade Leader. You can depend on me.'

'Good.' And he hung up."

I tried to talk, but no words came out of my open mouth. Lewis rescued me,

"I know. I did not know what to say either. But my instructions are very, very clear."

"But why me, Rudy? I just don't understand."

"And you think that I understand? Fuck!"

"Maybe we should ask White. Maybe. What do you think?"

"I don't know Steven. Suppose White goes back and tells the man that we asking questions, eh? My head will be in a fucking freezer in one hour."

"Okay, so let's be quiet for now. If and when the time is right, I will ask Henry White. Not you…me."

"Good. I'm good with that. For now, you have a crowd outside waiting to congratulate you, man! Go and play nice, Mr. President."

He smiled. I left. The crowd was just outside the train carriage. I went out to whooping and hollering. I noticed that Monty was moving towards me as soon as I emerged from Lewis's place. The big sergeant and several other soldiers were their too. The crowd slapped me on the back, some ruffled my hair, a few girls kissed me on the cheeks. I shook every hand put in front of me. Monty was by my side, gentle pushing people aside. I saw Kwame pushing his way towards me. I reached out to him, pulled him to me and gave him a big hug. I had to shout:

"Kwame, let's meet at nine on Monday."

"Yes, Comrade. We can meet in your office in the Arts Building. I'll have it ready by tomorrow afternoon. Set up a meeting with the Student Council for eleven."

"Consider it done, Comrade."

Monty and the sergeant made a way through to the car. I got in and we took off. I waved. I was floating by then. I wanted to get home to Zenyatta.

Chapter Forty-Six

Monty pulled up in front of the main door. Gordon was there to open my door. Two trucks from the telephone company were already there. I said hello to Gordon and went in. They were all there, my family: Zenyatta, her mother, her father, her brother, Quincy, Melissa, the maids, and Monty and Gordon. I shook hands with everyone, and the brother was babbling about the house and cars and soldiers and grounds. I smiled at him. Gordon pointed to the telephone people, signalling that he will be with them. I nodded. I left my Zenyatta for last, saying loudly:

"And the first shall be last!" and hugged her tightly. She returned my hug with equal force and kissed me on the mouth. She turned to the others,

"Please excuse us, we'll be back as soon as we can." She took my hand and pulled me up the stairs and into our room. She pointed for me to sit on the bed, turned and locked the door, and braced against it.

"Now spill the beans before you burst like a balloon, my darling. Start from the top."

"But I want to hold you, Zenyatta."

"You will, but news first in case you get distracted."

"Okay, okay. You're tough, you know."

"Mmmhmm," she agreed.

"I went directly to Rudy's office. His two secretaries were disrespectful to my fiancée. They were very harshly disciplined by the Colonel. They may well be in jail by now."

"Disrespectful to me? But they don't even know me."

"Well, I will never stand any one disrespecting my wife. Neither would Colonel Lewis. The consequences are very unpleasant."

I spoke with Cousin Peter. He cussed me out for not being in contact, wrote down the list, and then cussed me when I said that Zenyatta and I will return the money he spends. He said it was his wedding gift to us. He'll be landing on the 10th and everything we asked for will be here by the afternoon."

"Lovely," she said, moving closer to me, "Then?"

"While I was on the phone with Peter, Rudy got on another phone in the outer office to the telephone people. He roughed them up pretty good and warned of trouble if the phones were not operational by eight tonight."

"No wonder they're working so quickly. Nice to have friends in high places, huh?"

"Girl, you have no idea!"

"Tell me more," she moved closer.

"Rudy told me that I won the elections by a landslide…ninety-nine percent of the votes cast."

"Wheee!" She screamed and jumped into my arms, "I'm marrying the President!!! I'm the First Lady!" We hug and romp and giggle like two children.

"I love you, girl."

"I beg your pardon. You know the consequences for being disrespectful, do you not?"

"Gosh! I do beg your gracious pardon. I love you, First Lady. Only Lady for this president."

"Better. Much better! But you see my point about being distracted?"

"I see indeed, my love."

"Any more news…as if that's not enough for the next year?!"

"Outside of Lewis's office there was quite the crowd hollering congratulations. Monty and the soldiers had to make a path for me, but I greeted every one of them, I think."

"Very nice. Very nice. I'm proud of you, my darling. But we do have people on the lower floor awaiting our pleasure!" Upon my soul, I thought, I love this woman more than I love life itself. I love everything about Zenyatta.

"Yes, it would not be meet that we keep our audience awaiting."

"Meat?"

"No, m-e-e-t."

"Ah," says she, "as in not appropriate, not polite."

"Excellent! There is just one other piece of news, but that can wait until we're alone."

"Sounds good to me. Shall we, Mr. President?" She was still being playful.

We descended the stairs with my angel on my arm. The team looked at us, smiling away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have glad tidings to convey onto you," Zenyatta announced. Her mother and father giggled uncontrollably. The rest looked at her, puzzled.

Her mother blurted out, "Yawl don't take on that girl, you hear? She just acting."

"I am not, mother mine! I am pleased to announce that Mr. Steven DaSilva is the new President of the university's Student Union. It is meet that you give him a round of applause!"

The whole group cheered and hollered their congratulations. Her brother was the loudest.

"I would also like you to know that Steven's cousin will be bringing in all the items for our drink and food menu. He is coming in from Canada on the 10th. We will need for some of you to stay over in case the items arrive late in the day."

They showered her with questions about food and drink, and matters concerning the dinner. She actually allowed me to field some of the questions. There were many questions about partridge, which no one in the entire house had ever seen nor eaten.

To make me uncomfortable, Zenyatta added: You have questions about partridges in pear trees, and quails' eggs and fancy dandy liquor and stuffed pants and shirts, ask the boss. I think he's the only body here who actually went on a plane. Mr. Hot-shot."

They all laughed then fired more questions. By the end of it, most questions were asked and answered. As we were wrapping up, Zenyatta announced that everyone should take the weekend off, if I agree.

I agreed, "I agree, but Gordon should be here for an hour or so at noon tomorrow, in case we need to get anything."

"I'll be here, Sir! Ma'am!"

"We'll see everyone on Monday morning bright and early." They bade us goodnight and left. Robert, Marjorie and the brother hung back to say goodbye with hugs and kisses.

Marjorie to Zenyatta: "Do you want me to cook something tomorrow for the two of you? Nothing fancy," she said shifting her eyes in my direction, "just simple Guyanese things."

"That would be lovely, but President Fancy-pants may not want that. It's not partridges." The two were slapping each other on the back with glee.

With all the fake outrage I could muster, I said: "Mr. Robert Qualis, you simply must put a stop to this!"

Robert: "Boy, I can't handle one much less two. I need to survive! I don't have round-the-clock protection like some people I can mention!"

The three of them started the back-slapping and gleeful giggling.

"I know a gang-up when I see one, you know," I said and we all laughed.

Her brother was asking Gordon about teaching him to drive. I agreed that we can have Gordon get something at around twelve, drop it off and take the rest of the weekend off like the others.

"One last thing," I said. "I think you should get a phone line in your home in case Zen or I need to contact you or you us."

"Can you do that, my love? Please do."

Robert and Marjorie were delighted by my suggestion.

"I'll get that done by Monday or Tuesday."

"Marjorie, we will have a phone, girl. Now we are big-shots." They hugged like teenage lovers.

"I have some other suggestions, but I need to discuss those with Zenyatta before I open my big mouth."

Both parents said, together: "Clever boy!" Zenyatta had disappeared. With talk about a phone, she ran into my study and picked up the phone:

"It's working! It's working!"

Everyone was pleased as they left. Zenyatta and I waved as they drove off. An idea struck me:

"Hey, my darling one, why don't we stay outside for a while, sit on the grass, and enjoy the night air."

"Oh I'd love that, she cooed, "but we'll be soaked through in five minutes, unless..."and she broke off into a run into the house and came back with a large plastic sheet of some sort and a large table cloth.

"Let's sit on the grass and enjoy the night air," she said triumphantly.

We spread the sheets and say quite comfortably, our legs folded, facing each other.

"My love, thank you for suggesting the phone for the grand Qualis home. I know they will be spending the next two days at least babbling about that. They were so happy, Steven. You make them very happy."

"Don't say that, my love. *We* make them happy. *We*!"

"Yes...we! What other plans do *we* have for the old folks?"

"I thought that after the wedding, we could renovate their home."

"Really? We can do that?"

"Yes, we can do that. Let's do that, but I want to be careful not to hurt their pride. We both know that they are very proud people, proud of their independence from anyone except from each other. This means that *you* will have to find a way to get them to say yes."

"It would be so very good! I can try. I will try...let's think about a way to tell them, together. A bright person...and you!" And she put her head back and laughed. I reached for her and kissed her mouth.

"Oh, yes. That one more bit of news you said you had. What is it? You had me wondering the entire evening."

"Yes, that. I will tell you, of course. But I will ask you to promise me that this goes nowhere but between me and you. Please promise me that, my Zenyatta."

"I promise you, Steven. It sounds mysterious though. I promise, just me and you, until we decide to tell the people closest to us, if you think that is wise."

"Okay. After Lewis called the Telephone company and threatened them about the eight p.m. deadline, he confided in me that just two hours or so before I went in, he got a call from 'On High' as he put it."

"From, Comrade Leader you mean? Jesus, Mary and Joseph."

"He said he almost wet his pants. He had never spoken to the man before one-on-one, phone or no. He said he was terrified."

"What was that about? Why did he confess a thing like that to you, my love.?"

"Because Comrade Leader was calling about me. The Big Bodd told Lewis that his number one job was to make sure no harm comes to me. I must be protected at all cost! This means us, Zenyatta."

"This is astonishing! Why you, why us?"

"I asked Lewis the same question, and he had no idea. But the call itself showed that I was important to Comrade Leader. Very important. I think there is some kind of link between protecting us and this Constitutional Law thing. Neither of us could figure it out."

"Let's back away from this whole thing for a minute. For you to be so valuable to be worthy of serious protection, you will have to be one of a kind that is available to him at this time. You are very very bright, but then there are other very very bright people like you at the campus. Correct?"

"Yes," I responded, "but I am the president of the Student Union, so I am a proven leader. In fact, you said that yourself, remember?"

"And clearly I was right. But you are now a proven *political* leader in a place where he has opposition. They do not trust that campus at all, and having you lead it takes away a threat. Plus, it was Lewis who identified you, right. So you can be trusted to lead where they want you to lead…in the direction that they want to go."

"So, I'm a leader who can be led by them to do anything they want me to do. The leader, bright, who will follow Comrade Leader without question. The one identified by their key officer on the campus who is popular, bright, a leader who can follow Comrade Leader without question. So Lewis was doing their bidding without knowing the end game. He is just another piece in the machinery."

Zenyatta's eyes showed that she was honing in on something, "Lewis was good at his job: he identified the right person: bright, ambitious, will do what they say when they say it. Neutral colour too and charismatic and articulate. You can persuade others to see Comrade Leader's divine political wisdom in furthering HIS goal for the country and himself."

"Tell me something, Steven, what do political leaders with power want more than anything else?"

"More power. Permanent power."

"Are you starting to see it? Come on!"

"I still can't see it clearly, my love."

"Who is it—according to them—has the ability to read for Constitutional Law in the shortest time possible?"

"Me?"

"Yes. Now the question is the old one we've been asking: why Constitutional Law? Why not a doctorate in English, say?"

"Because that would take about seven to eight years in a foreign university. And how does anyone political leader with the desire to maintain power and make that power permanent? How?"

"You change the constitution to suit the Comrade Leader's desire for absolute power! Therefore Constitutional Law!"

"You, Steven DaSilva, have been identified by Comrade Leader himself—not Lewis, not White, none of them, but by him—as the perfect instrument to get him absolute power forever. The thing he craves most of all: President for life! And good enough to sell it to the rest of us. Bang! Case solved. Meanwhile we have everything

every young couple wants: influence, money, a nice home, travel, help for their family, safety.

"My God, Zenyatta, you've worked this shit out. We worked it out! You're genius, girl. Damnit! Brilliant."

"Which also means that once you get him what he wants, we will be in mortal danger. The same Lewis or someone like him will be sent to kill us all. That means that we have to calculate the exact time to get out with everyone we care about. Ten years or a bit more, I'd say. It's quite deadly."

"Yes. It is positively frightening. Which is exactly why this can never be talked about to anyone except me and you. No one." Zenyatta is firm on this. She continues: "You want to take a bet?"

"What bet, Zen?"

"I bet you that the number of soldiers on guard will be doubled by tomorrow. They will be front and back."

"If I take that bet, I will lose, I think."

"Second bet, since I'm on a roll."

"Do on...bet!"

"On August 13, Comrade Leader will send a gift through Henry White that will blow your mind."

"Okay, Zenyatta, I'll take that bet. You're over-doing it. I bet you one thousand dollars."

"I'll name the bet later. We have time. But now it's time to go in."

We leave the stuff on the lawns, held each other around the hips and go in. We locked up and went up. We showered, and I noted that the bruises she suffered from my cruelty last night had darked. I kissed each bruise and apologized to each one and to my love. Zenyatta kept looking at me unblinkingly. We both knew that I was sincere in my apology. I did not know what came over me, but I was responsible in the end.

We went to bed, and she asked me to make love too her as a husband would a wife he loves and cherishes. She cupped my face and whispered to me,

"Make love to me, my heart. Be gentle, be loving." And I did. It was the most delicious love-making I'd ever had, and she was still shuddering with orgasms many minutes after we were done.

"How does that happen, my love? Why do I keep having so many after we're all spent? No book or wise aunt ever told me about that."

"I suppose it is the intensity of our love, my Zenyatta. I think so."

"This will never grow old for me, not even when we are old and grey and wrinkled. I will still have this craving for my husband."

"And I will never lose this passion for my wife, my Zenyatta."

Our sleep was deep and peaceful. I felt that my ghosts were finally at rest.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I was awakened by a shower of kisses from my Zenyatta.

"Now this is the way a husband should be awakened."

"This is the way I will always awaken my husband. Any other husband is not really my concern, my darling Steven."

"I stand corrected."

She forced me up and shepherded me into the bathroom. She was wearing a lovely breezy blue dress that flared with her hips. Her calves showed to full advantage. After me shower, we went downstairs and we prepared a simple breakfast together: toast and scrambled eggs. Coffee.

We sat quietly in the breakfast room, and Zenyatta almost whispered,

"Is it not strange that the house is so empty in the morning? Does it not feel strange to you, my love?"

"I like it. The peace. The quiet. Your voice. You, Me. If you looked for a definition of the ideal morning, this will be it."

"Oh yes, even the crumb on your chin seems right where it should be!"

There was no crumb, but she had her morning laugh with her coffee.

"Let's go for a walk around the neighbourhood. It's still cool, and we've never looked close at the other houses and compounds. Why do you think, my darling?'

"You know fully well that I would not disagree, so let's go."

We walked down the driveway to the large gates:

The two soldiers stood at attention as we walked through the gates.

"Good morning, Ma'am, Sir."

"Good morning, Sergeant, Corporal," we both replied.

"Should one of us accompany you?"

"That will not be necessary, Sergeant. But thanks, we're just taking a short stroll."

"Excuse me, Sir. Just to inform you that Colonel Lewis was here at six this morning, and we shall be having two additional ranks added to our rotating detail. They will be stationed at the back parameter, according to the Colonel's instructions. He instructs us that this is to remain in place unless you give any additional instructions. And congratulations, Ma'am, Sir."

"Why thank you, Sergeant," Zenyatta answered happily. I said a pleasant thank you as well." The sergeant seemed quite pleased with himself.

We walked hand in hand. Zenyatta leaned closer to me: "Good thing you did not take that bet last night, huh?"

I laughed, "Why take a losing bet, girl? But I am thinking about taking the other bet."

"I thought you don't take losing bets, Steven DaSilva?"

"We'll see soon-to-be Zenyatta DaSilva."

The road was wonderfully even, of concrete rather than bitumen, straight-edged. I drew Zenyatta's attention to this, and she thought that the concrete road would be more durable and subject to less sinkage. We walked by some half dozen houses, none yet occupied. We both liked that they were separated by large spaces, ensuring privacy. Zenyatta observed that some were slightly larger and some slightly smaller than ours, but none quite measured up to ours in majesty and beauty. Not in her view, anyway.

We turned back after six or seven houses. It was quite a distance. The soldiers were mere dots in the distance, but I could see that they had their eyes trained on us. Protection at all cost, indeed.

Back home, we chose to relax in bed, chatting idly. Zenyatta arrived at the idea of a greens and vegetables patch out at the back of the compound.

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, it would be nice for me to go and get fresh lettuce or boulanger or spinach. I could ask the groundsmen to start one, if you agree."

"Sure, but we only have another year here if things work out."

"True, but it's a year. And the groundsmen can maintain it while we are away and reap the benefits for their families. It would be a good gesture."

"Okay, my love. Do it, then."

In this manner, we chatted and dozed off, until we were startled by the phone. I answered. It was Rudolph checking in to make sure that all is well. I assured him that it was all good and we were just lazing around. He laughed and said "Enjoy". He informed me that the guard station at the back was being set up and that the front gate was equipped with a phone to inform me or Zenyatta of unexpected visitors. I thanked him, and we hung up.

The front gate called not too long after that Sergeant Gordon was at the front door. I went down, got the food bag, placed it on the dining table and headed back up.

Zenyatta smirked: "I can see that you're fed up with that phone already."

"You're right," I smiled and hopped into bed. We spent the entire weekend, dozing, reading, chatting, cooking a bit, eating, and love-making. We both agreed that this was the most wonderfully relaxing weekend that either of us had spent in a long time.

Sunday night, I retired to my study to gather my thoughts and make some notes for Monday. Zenyatta sat at the dining table and read.

Monday morning came and the bustle regained its hold on all of us. I was at the campus at nine. Kwame was there to take me to my office. It was very well appointed, much better than any of my lecturers' offices, I thought.

"Kwame, I want you to chair several of the committees I will form when I meet with the general council."

At the council meeting, everyone was rather quiet. I formed respective committees for the cafeteria, the new building, sports facilities, and fund-raising. Kwame was to chair the fund-raising, cafeteria and new building committees. Members volunteered and promised to get volunteers from their faculties. Each committee was to submit fortnightly reports to me, and we will meet on the first Monday of each month. The entire thing was surprisingly friendly, and everyone seemed wonderfully cooperative. The entire meeting lasted an hour. I asked Kwame to stay back for a few minutes.

"Hey Kwame, I wish you would refer to me as Steven rather than comrade. It sounds too stuffy, man. Don't you agree?"

"Yeah, I do, Steve."

"Good. I wanted to ask you why you think they were all so friendly and cooperative. Why?"

Kwame laughed for more than a minute, "Steve, this is a very small campus, you know. Word gets around very very fast. All kinds of rumours."

"What kinda rumours?"

"Oh, about huge contacts, huge influence, weekly meetings with both Comrade Leader and Opposition Leader, things like that."

We both had a good laugh at all of it, although I knew some of it was not idle. Kwame continued:

"And, to be honest, I would not discourage any of it. You must realize, my friend, that in this country we don't understand respect. We understand fear!"

"Well, we can try both, huh? If one does not work, we use the one that does! Remember that we have only one year to show concrete progress. This is why we need to work on that damn cafeteria and on sports facilities quickly."

"You got it, boss!"

"Okay. I'll see you next week, Kwame."

"Oh Steven, how the wedding arrangements coming?"

"Man, Zenyatta is looking after most of that, thank God."

Kwame was still laughing as he went out the door.

I was soon on my way back to my Zenyatta.

The house seemed abuzz with activity. Monty went around back to examine the new guard post and give instructions to the soldiers. Zenyatta and Melissa were fussing over something when I walked into the kitchen.

She saw me and screamed with delight, "Aaaaah, my love is back! I did not hear you come in!" She ran and jumped into my arms. Melissa was shaking her head knowingly, smiling in the way parents would when they are indulging children at play. The maids were a flurry of activity, as was Quincy. Zenyatta said that Gordon and Marjorie were out back with the soldiers and giving the groundsmen instructions about the garden patch.

I pulled Zenyatta into my study for some peace and quiet.

"I missed you, my love," I said to her, 'but, clearly, you were too busy to miss me."

"I am never too busy to miss my heartbeat, my Steven." We hugged and kissed.

"How was your meeting, my love?"

"Actually, it was very good. Friendly and cooperative. I think they may have been scared."

In mock surprise, she asked, "Scared? Scared of what? Lil old you or your chums?"

And she doubled over in laughter. I smacked her bottom.

"You're a naughty little girl, you know that? I'm gonna tell yuh mommy!"

This was how the days flew by, with bustle and laughter and love. The 10th of August rolled around, and we all tensed up with expectation. I was plagued by doubts. What if Peter forgot about all of it? What if he was unable to come or send the stuff? What then, with just three days to go? What if foodstuff got damaged or spoiled on the flight over? Zenyatta calmed me down several times during the day and found ways to occupy my time: checking the garden patch; asking about this or that literary work; asking about politics; asking about Constitutional Law; asking

about the courses I was doing for the next year, and all kinds of things. It worked for much of the day, but then she was called away on some other matter, and I was left to swim in my uncertainties.

At precisely $:30 in the afternoon, I large truck pulled up at the gate. The soldiers radioed Monty. He and Gordon went out and examined the driver's and laborers' paperwork.

The truck rolled in and towards the back of the building. It was every man and woman on deck. Zenyatta, Marjorie, Melissa, Quincy, Monty, Gordon, the soldiers from the back guard post, the groundsmen and handymen, the three maids, Robert, and the boy. Then the laborers and driver that came with the truck.

I wanted to run into my study, into my sanctuary, but Zenyatta would have none of it. She gave me tasks to do, like everyone else. Her mother was having the time of her life! Eventually everything was placed where they should be: frozen stuff in freezers; liquors on the liquor shelves; cheeses and eggs in fridges, and so on. We had to use the freezer and fridge in the employees' alcove. When they were finished, everything was admirably neat and we all congratulated ourselves.

Zenyatta ensured that the handymen, truck driver and laborers and soldiers were given tips for their help. She asked Monty to get hire buses to take everyone home since it was almost eleven when it was all done. Gordon took the Qualis family home. The boy's parting comment to his sister was,

"Wait until I tell my friends about *this*!"

"Just make sure you tell them that it's your *sister*'s place and *her* wedding, okay? Your wedding may be even bigger!"

Zenyatta looked at me crossly. The boy snickered. Then we were blissfully alone. I sank into a long sofa and Zenyatta lay on it, her head upon my lap, her feet up.

"My darling Steven. Wow! I am tired, beat, kaput."

"Me too," I returned. She looked up at me, "You did well, my love. You helped a great deal."

I read the condescension, of course. I said, "That is the first time I've ever heard you say you're tired. Zenyatta confessed to being tired. What is the world coming to?" She laughed.

I looked down at her and put my fingers through her soft curls. Her head was wet and the drops of sweat clung to her forehead. I was about to say that we should go up, shower and retire for the night, when she hopped up, said she'll be back, ran

into the study and came back with a notebook and a pen. She plopped back down into the sofa. I rolled my eyes,

"Hey, I saw that!" and laughed. "But we just have one or two more things to decide. "You do realize that your cousin Peter sent twice as much of everything that we asked for, right?"

"Yes, I did realize that. I did. I was worried about where we'd put all of that foodstuff."

"Me too," she confessed. "But bless your cousin's generous soul. We must thank him especially during the dinner. Be sure to do that, Steven. Please."

"Don't worry, my love. I will. I promise. He'll be right there, so how can I forget?"

"Good. But there are a few things we will need to get done tomorrow. First, we will have to have two more stoves if we are to cook most of it and keep it all warm. Second, we will have to get two more cooks to help Melissa. Three, we will have to hire three more maids and servers. I'm just telling you the obvious, my darling."

"Jesus, Zenyatta. But okay. We will need money though, right?"

"Well, I still have ten or fifteen, so that should be enough."

"I'll still go get twenty tomorrow, just in case. I'll talk to Rudy about two stoves as well. He may be able to swing two on loan."

"Okay, my turtledove," and she cuddled up clutching her notepad to her chest. I had to shake her awake for us to go upstairs, shower and bed.

The morning seemed to arrive quickly. As usual, Zenyatta was up early, showered and dressed. She awakened me at seven and pushed me into the shower.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I was downstairs at eight, had a quick breakfast, and Monty and I headed to the bank. Zenyatta tasked Quincy with finding three more maids/servers; she told Melissa and Marjorie to get at least two more cooks to work under Melissa.

Monty and I were back by nine. I gave the cash to Zenyatta, keeping some for myself. I went immediately into the study and dialled Rudy. He picked up on the second ring,

"Hey Rudy. Good morning. It's me."

"Hey you, Good morning. How are things? I hear you had a big truckload of delicacies from overseas last night. I'm already working up an appetite, man!" He laughed his Lewis laugh.

"I'm glad to hear that, Rudy. I'm counting on you eating well…and drinking too. But right now we need your help to source two or three stoves for two days or so. Can you help?"

"Lemme think." He was quiet for a few seconds. "I'll tell you what, Steven. I'll get three big stoves to you by this afternoon by three or four. Tell the chaps at the gate to expect an army truck. Don't worry, man! It's done."

I came out of the study and Quincy approached me and Zenyatta sheepishly,

"I beg your pardon, Sir, Ma'am, he stammered, his eyes downcast. Zenyatta and I looked at each other dreading some awful news. Zenyatta encouraged him gently,

"Yes, Quincy. Is there a problem? You know you can tell us anything, right. No matter what it is we will try to make it better. You are part of our family, dear Quincy."

"Thank you, Ma'am. I feel as if I am part of this family, indeed. I am afraid I have let you down."

"Hey, it's okay Quincy. Really. How do you think you've let us down?"

"Yesterday evening, the truck driver gave me a letter from your cousin Peter to give to you. In the hustle to unload and arrange things, I put the letter in my pocket and forgot all about it. It was an unforgiveable error on my part, but I have the letter here as he gave it to me." He handed the letter to me.

I blurted out: "Lord, Quincy! That's it? With all that confusion, we forgot to eat. You simply forgot, Quincy. I have the letter, and that's the end of this. It's nothing at all, man."

Zenyatta hugged him as if he were her father, "It really is nothing, our dear, dear, dear Quincy. Let's all just forget about this and you make our special day as special as only you can. Please. For my sake, do not be so hard on yourself. Please."

"Thank you, Ma'am. Thank you, Sir. Your day will be very special for all of us, I swear to Christ Himself."

He walked away. Zenyatta turned to me, "My love, that is a very special man. I wish all men could be as dedicated and loyal and truthful as that man."

"I agree with you wholeheartedly, my lovely one."

"Should I open this now or wait for tonight?"

"Let's open it and see what news your cousin sends."

I open the letter and take out a handwritten sheet. In the middle of a folded sheet was a cheque for one hundred and fifty thousand Canadian dollars. I kept looking at it. Zenyatta took it from me and looked at it, her hand over her mouth at the amount.

"Steven, this is a *lot* of money, my love. A *lot*!"

"I know, my darling. Gosh, I know. This is about three hundred thousand dollars of our currency."

"Do read the letter," she said. I opened it and read out loud:

My Dear Cousin Steven,

I hope this and the other stuff finds you and your sweetheart in fine health and full of happiness at th prospect of your marriage. I'm sorry that I cannot be there to hand over everything to you myself, but I'm booked for a few meetings over the next two or three days. I'm staying at the Pegasus, so you can contact me there after ten any night. Please be assured that I'll be there for your special dinner. I'll try to be there for seven.

I apologize for forgetting your bride's name, but you know how I am. I was never as bright as you are, so both of you must forgive me.

Your cousin,

Peter.

"Zenyatta," I said, "Peter was always something of a nut, you know. I know that he was incredibly wealthy, but this is amazing generosity. Truly."

"My Steven, I am wondering what we have done to deserve these many blessings. I have lived a pure life, but this—this—all of this is more than anyone deserves."

"Zenyatta, you are the most righteous person I have ever known. I wonder what I have done to deserve you. Just you. Just my Zenyatta."

I hold her close and kiss her head.

"I have an idea! But it will be up to you in the end. We can share a bit of this with others. Quincy, Melissa, Monty, Gordon, the maids, the groundsmen. The maids and the groundsmen can have a much smaller amount. It can be our wedding gift to them."

"It's a wonderful idea, Typical Zenyatta! How much? You say and let's write it all down. We will give them all on our wedding night."

"I'd say let's give Quincy, Melissa, Monty and Gordon one thousand each. The maids and groundsmen two hundred each. It's just a small fraction of Peter's gift, and it would go a long way to express our thanks to our people."

"Please write it down for me, my love." She went to the desk and wrote down the names and figures. "Oh, also add ten thousand for your parents."

She jumped up, rushed to me and kissed me on the mouth. "Thank you, my dearest husband. Thank you."

"It's from us, my love. From us."

"Hey Zen, I'll tell you what. Monty and I can go back in town and deposit this into our account. I can take one hundred thousand for our expenses. It takes something like two weeks for a foreign cheque to clear, but we won't need this for now, anyway."

"Okay, my love."

"I summoned Monty and we set off to the bank. On our way out a van was at the gate: Sam's Musical Store. The soldiers were searching the van. I told Monty to stop. They driver and technical fellow said they were told to deliver a music system to Mr. and Mrs. Steven DaSilva of this address by Colonel Rudolph Lewis.

I went into the guard hut and called. I told Zenyatta that Rudy's wedding gift was coming to her now. Quincy and Gordon should oversee the se up and trial. If we're not back before they're done, she needs to approve or not.

I asked the driver for the address of the store. Monty said he knew where it was. I asked if they sell records. He answered in the affirmative. They went in. We drove on.

At the bank, I deposited the cheque and withdrew one hundred thousand. I have Monty half of it to put in the glove compartment. And we set off for the Music Store. With Monty on guard, I bought several long-playing albums: Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, Vivaldi's Four Seasons, Strauss's The

Blue Danube and other Waltzes, two Nat King Cole Albums, one Brook Benton album, and two albums of The Platters. Then we headed home.

The music people were still setting up. Zenyatta kissed me, whispering: "More blessings. I'm glad you're back."

I gave her ninety thousand which she took into the study and put in a locked drawer. She had one key on her bunch, and I had the other. She locked the study door.

"You know, my love, having is not cause for wasting, so we will be careful from now. Apart from building our library, there should be no major expenses for quite a while."

I agreed quickly, impatient to show her my new purchases. She went through them, her brow furrowed. She called over Quincy, Gordon and Monty:

"You gentlemen ever heard of these people? We all heard the platters, Nat King Cole and Brook Benton, but who are these people with fancy names? Anyone?"

In chorus, they said, "No, Miss."

I pretended to be outraged:

"Good Lord! Are you three in primary school? The teacher asked if you understand two plus two equals ten, and answer "No miss!" I imitated the sing-song voices of little children. They, in turn, pretended to be embarrassed in the way of children, and we four started to giggle.

"No laughing in class!" Zenyatta shouted in her school-teacher voice. The maids froze in their tracks at her loud voice; Melissa rushed out of the kitchen; the two men from the music store looked on curiously at grown men being reprimanded by a young woman. No one who knew her had ever heard Zenyatta raise her voice. Her mother, however, was bent over with laughter. Then all of us started hooting with laughter.

With the appropriate air of superiority, I told them that these were the Masters, the greatest musicians that ever lived.

"Well, Mr. Know-it-all, tell us some of the lyrics, if you please." Zenyatta said with condescension.

"There are no lyrics, my love. Just music."

"Oh, you mean instrumentals? Why didn't you say so Mr. Smarty-pants!"

"Aah!" chimed Monty, "I love instrumentals."

Gordon loved Nat King Cole, Quincy loved the Platters.

"I suppose you could say they are "instrumentals", in a manner of speaking," I said, matching Zenyatta's condescension. "Just wait until you hear the Masters. You'll never be the same.

The men had finished the setting up and asked for a record. Inevitably, there ensued an argument about which album to put first on the turn-table. Somehow, they settled on Nat King Cole. We all crowded around for the demonstration of the correct way to use the system without damaging it or the records. Thankfully, Quincy assumed the helm, establishing himself as the "music man".

The sound was lovely, full, clear. It seemed to fill our home without resort to noise. It was audible without being disruptive or jarring. And the more known singers set everyone to singing and humming. Work became less burdensome. Zenyatta and I went to the top balcony and allowed ourselves the pleasure of listening while being still. Every now and then someone would break into a step or two, or twirl and imaginary partner, or glide rhythmically across the floor to the music. The music brought a new life to our home, a new vigour to all of us, a new rapture to me and Zenyatta.

We were satisfied. The music technician and driver left. Minutes after, the phone rang. It was the army truck with the three extra stoves. Monty guided them around the back, and the soldiers lifted out the stoves, as big and as new as ours. I wondered how Rudy swung this. The ladies were as excited and as pleased as I'd ever seen them. They instructed the soldiers to place two in our kitchen and one in our employees' alcove's kitchen. I suspect the cooking will begin by tomorrow evening or early in the morning of the dinner. I had told Melissa about the manner in which the partridge should be cooked.

Qualis assured Zenyatta that the extra servers/maids will be here, and Melissa did the same for the extra cooks. It all seemed set. I signalled to Zenyatta that we should retire to the study. I dialled Rudy's office to thank him for the gift which everyone in the house is currently enjoying while they work. I told him that the sound was of remarkably clear and full quality. He was pleased,

"Well, only the finest for our boy and his wife has become our new over-riding policy, as you know." I laughed.

"And Rudy, thanks for the three stoves. They will be of great help. We will return them as soon as we can, all cleaned and polished. Man, how did you pull that off so fast?"

Rudy laughed: "Man, you know I have my ways. But truthfully, I went to Henry's office and got the keys to three houses ay Alegwa. Then I sent my soldiers to get the stoves and take them to you. Simple."

"Rudy, you're a godsend, man! Thanks."

""Hey, Steven, if you and Zenyatta want to keep them, it's no skin off my back, you know."

"It's okay, really. I don't think she would like the idea. But thanks. I'll see you at dinner. Well, I'll see you at the Solicitor General's at 8 a.m."

"Don't worry! I'll be there." We hung up. When I looked up, Zenyatta was wearing a quizzical look.

"So how did he 'pull off' the stoves, my love?"

"Oh, he raided the neighbouring mansions and 'acquired' them." I laughed.

"Don't joke about that, Steven DaSilva! How? Seriously."

"Oh, he went to Henry White's office and got the keys to three houses nearby. He borrowed them for a few days. So the Minister knows about it. No underhanded business, my lovely one."

"That's good. We'll have them returned in short order."

It dawned on me—again, I suppose—that Zenyatta was growing into her role as a kind, compassionate, considerate, loving wife and Lady of the House. She was still her parents' dutiful daughter. And yet, she retained the innocence and playfulness of the girl. Zenyatta was perfect, and she was mine. My heart ached with love for her. But there lurked the sense that I was undeserving of her.

I held her around the waist, and we exited the study, locked it behind us, and went back to our preparatory activities. Zenyatta's dad and brother had just arrived. She hugged them; I shook their hands. She chatted a bit, updating her dad about the music system being a gift from Colonel Lewis; about the many food and drink gifts flown in by cousin Peter, who will be at our dinner; and about the loaner stoves. Robert was impressed. Then she excused herself and asked to speak to me for a minute:

"You know, my love, I think that now might be just the right time to give our wedding gifts to everyone. What do you think?"

"Yes. It would provide some incentive, although no one seems to need additional incentive. We do have some time on our hands, although the kitchen is a hive of activity. So yes, why not?"

"As it happens, each person has an envelope with the amount inside and their names written." She said coyly. I smiled.

She summoned Quincy, Monty and Gordon into the study and told them to gather up everyone, but in batches of six. We will be in the study.

"Even the temporary staff. Ma'am?" asked Quincy.

"Yes, everyone."

Zenyatta told everyone almost the same thing while I sat quietly by her side, contented to see Zenyatta in command and their reactions. Apart from her family, she left Quincy, Monty, Gordon and Melissa for last.

They stood before her as if she were granting them an audience, but she was blissfully unaware of any of this. I wondered at it: how she could be so dignified and almost ceremonial, yet so relaxed. Sitting in my chair, with me by her side, Zenyatta addressed the foursome:

"Only a short while ago, Steven and I told Quincy that we view him as part of our family. We meant that with all our hearts. But you four are also part of our family. No one more or less than the other. We are grateful and thankful to all of you, To Monty and Gordon for keeping us safe; to Melissa for keeping us fed and healthy; and to Quincy for keeping us and everyone else organised and happy. To us, thank you is just not enough. Nothing will ever be enough. Your loyalty and dedication are priceless. We need for you to know that."

Tears were trickling down Melissa face; Quincy and Gordon were already misty-eyed; and Gordon was trying to keep it together. Zenyatta held my hand tightly, and I realized that I was the most emotional of them all.

"As a wedding present, Steven and I want you to have a little gift. This is our wedding gift to you," she stood, walked around the desk, gave each one a hug and an envelope. They did not open the envelope, but shook my hand, with me just sitting there, and said "thank you" to both of us.

After they left the study, Zenyatta, held my head to her breast. I breathed deeply, as if I would breathe her in. She smelled of flowers.

"Let's take a little stroll outside, my love. It will do us good."

"What about your parents?" I asked.

"Let's go for a short stroll. We'll be back to finish up, my sweet, sweet Steven."

We went out and walked around the compound, observing the work being done, admiring the neatness of it all. Everyone waved or said hello. It was all wonderful. I leaned close to her and whispered,

"Do you know how sexy you are, woman?" Zenyatta pulled away from me, ran around to me and jumped onto my back, her legs around my waist. She leaned her head against the side of mine:

"Hey, only my husband can talk to me like that!" them jumped off and pushed me to the ground. I dragged her after me. Someone in the distance shouted:

"Dem two should just get married and done!"

The laughter from the entire group of groundsmen could be heard a long way off, I was sure.

"I'm going in, Zen. These boys are too much."

We held hands and went in. We went back into the study, feeling greatly refreshed, and Zenyatta summoned her family. WE sat as we did before, she in the big chair and me beside her. The three people came in.

"We will not keep you long, mommy and daddy and junior, but we wanted to express our thanks for your support in arranging our wedding. Thank you from both of us. There is nothing that we can do to express our thanks for all you hav done. How does a child repay her parents in bringing a child into this world and raising her right, teaching her about what things are valuable and what is not? How do I thank you for a life-time of love and loving care?

We cannot. No child can. We do want to give you a gift on our wedding day, tomorrow. It will be hectic, so we thought of giving you now. She handed a large brown envelope to her mom and dad, hugged and kissed them.

Her father spoke: "Zenyatta, you were a joy to raise. You children are the greatest blessings that the Lord could have given us. We never wanted too much more. I had a good job and our family was taken care of adequately. It hurt when I got injured and could not work. But then you brought us Steven and somehow I got an even better job. Now your mother does not have to work as hard. Steven, you are as part of this family as any one of us. Your greatest gift to us is that you make our daughter happy. I suspect what this is, but it is completely unnecessary, my dear children. He mother took the envelope, peered in and looked up,

"This is a fortune, Steven and Zenyatta. A fortune. Thank you, but..."

Mommy and daddy, there are no buts here. It is our wedding gift to you. Do whatever you wish with it, but Steven has plans to have our home completely redone. Whatever you want done will be done. This has nothing to do with that. That is his way, I suppose, of thanking you for giving him your daughter. We give what we give from pure hearts, please know that. He hugged and kissed them. And they hugged and kissed me.

Marjorie was in tears as was Zenyatta. The boy clung to his father. We all walked out of the study and Zenyatta locked it behind us. Then he surprised us with a request to hear Beethoven. I was delighted. He sat in a large sofa with his wife and just listened, absorbing the sheer genius of it.

Zenyatta sat with them, and I asked for an excuse to go upstairs. I went into our room and lay there, listening to the Master fill the house with his genius.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Today was the day that Zenyatta were to be wed, and I was anxious for us. It turned out that there was no cause for anxiety, for the trip to the solicitor General's was uneventful. Zenyatta was in a pretty sky-blue frock, full-sleeved, calf-length, simple. I dressed in a light-blue Nehru-collared shirt and black slacks. Her father and mother travelled with Gordon. Colonel Lewis came in his chauffeured army car.

We all climbed the several flights of steers to the Solicitor General's Office. We all shook hands, proceeded with the brief ceremony, said our "I do's", kissed and hugged, signed and witnessed by Colonel Rudolph Lewis and Mr. Robert Qualis, and Zenyatta and I were officially married. It was all Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva here on in, all pleasant and good-natured.

Rudy said he see us this evening, and our two cars headed home, Gordon in front. A surprise awaited us at home. The soldiers were in ceremonial uniforms and went to attention, two more opened the gates, we are asked to step out of the vehicle and there was a line of our employees along the driveway, cheering and hollering, and throwing rice and petals upon us. It was all wonderful, and Zenyatta was ecstatic. Quincy, I thought. This was all Quincy! We eventually made it into the house and, after we had retired upstairs, the din downstairs began. Mozart eventually overwhelmed the hum of work.

Zenyatta and I stripped off our clothes down to our underwear and lay in bed, embracing. She said:

"Gosh! I feel so happy. I feel so married, so DaSilva-ish." And we laughed. We were contented to just lay there in each other's arms, quietly, at peace, in love, married. "I love you, my husband!"

"And I adore you, my bride."

We doze off.

It was in the early afternoon that we finally chose to get out of bed, although Zenyatta had to insist that I stir myself, content as I was to just lay there with her.

"We have to at least go down for a few minutes and see that everything is as we want it to be. Come on, we can be lazy tomorrow, my love."

"But I want to be lazy now, my wife!" I returned with some petulance.

"Hey! It's our wedding dinner, and you have some big shots coming, remember? Just a few minutes and we'll be back up, if everything is well downstairs."

"You know full well that you will fuss over something or the other. You know that!"

She laughs, gets out of bed and drags on a pair of loose track pants and a tee-shirt. She throws a pair of the same kind of clothes on my face. I gave up, but insisted on grumbling.

"You've been married for a few hours, and you've already become a grumpy old man! Lord! What would Robert and Marjorie say?"

I answered back: "You've been married for a few hours and it's already "Robert and Marjorie", like you is some big woman!"

We were still chuckling as we headed to the stairs. I was on the third stair and she was already at the bottom. I wanted to scream with alarm, but restrained myself. She called up:

"Old man, old man! Come down here, old man!" she mimicked the Rapunzel rhyme. I walked down even more slowly. I could hear the laughter from everyone. Once at the bottom, I picked her up, flung her over my shoulder, marched into the kitchen, and shouted:

"Melissa! Put this woman into the oven, please! She's already seasoned!"

More laughter from everyone. We looked around: the table was already set perfectly, including name tags to establish seating arrangements, ours at the head of the table and White and Lewis at the tail. Quincy had fans placed strategically in the event that it became too warm for us and the guests. The study door was locked, drinks and various glasses were laid in the breakfast room. Large ice buckets were at the ready. It all seemed neat, organised and formal. Still, Zenyatta fussed and fixed, unnecessarily. Quincy followed her with remarkable indulgence.

"We should begin with Steven's music, don't you think Quincy?"

"Yes, ma'am. Excellent idea!"

I think he felt somewhat badly, so he turned to me,

"Which do you think is best, Sir?"

"Why, Quincy, thank you for including me in something! We can start with Vivaldi, then any order you like, but Back should be during the dinner itself. Bach is great for digestion."

"Wonderful, Sir!"

Two more hours of fussing and needless rearranging, and we were finally upstairs.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Robert and Marjorie arrived ninety minutes early, while I was showering and getting dressed. Zenyatta was arranging my clothes and setting them up on the bed. I was to dress in the traditional Western outfit of dark three-piece suit, bow-tie, cummerbund. I went down one hour before the event was to begin. Marjorie went up as soon as she saw me about the descend the stairs.

I was chatting with Monty, Gordon and Robert who were asking me about the order in which things were about to proceed. All I knew was that Kwame was to MC the thing and that the Ministers will speak. Other than that, I knew little.

"I suppose that as the bride's father I will have to say a few words, right Steven?"

"I suppose you do, Robert. Either you or Marjorie."

"Yes, yes, yes! Marjorie knows that I don't like to speak in public. So, we can ask her to speak as the bride's mother, eh Steven?"

"We? *We*? No, Sir! *You*! *You* can ask her. I want to survive this, you know."

Gordon and Monty snickered. Kwame showed up soon after. He gave me a big hug and shook hands with everyone around, introducing himself: I'm Kwame Jones, I'll be the MC for tonight." He actually went into the kitchen and introduced himself. The real politician, I thought. He'll go far, very far.

He came back to us, "Hey Steven, you must have one hundred soldiers out there, man! Wow!" I was surprised by the numbers and peeked outside. He was right. They were in the yard, at the entrance, and on the road, all armed.

"Yes, the Ministers, of course."

"And their Colonel too, Sir," Monty chimed in.

"It all looks beautiful, Steven. Just perfect!" Kwame added.

"Thanks, Kwame. That's mostly Quincy's work, really. Well, Quincy with some help from Zenyatta."

There was a scream of sirens, the police escort for the Minister of Home Affairs and Colonel Lewis. The Minister of Education was close behind them. The three walked in: White first, then Ramroop, then Lewis.

Kwame raised his voice above the slight din: "Ladies and Gentlemen, Comrades all, I present to you in order The Honourable Henry White, Minister of

Home Affairs; The Honourable Taleek Ramroop, Minister of Education; and the Honourable Rudolph Lewis, Colonel of the Armed Forces. White raised his hands in greeting to everyone and shook my hand vigorously,

"The man of the moment, Steven DaSilva! I'm happy to be here, my friend."

"Thank you for coming, my dear Minister."

Ramroop shook my hand, "I'm delighted to be here, Steven. Delighted!"

Rudy braced then shook my hand, "The bridegroom! You look dashing my friend."

They were introduced to Robert, Monty, and Gordon, then Quincy. Monty, Gordon, and Rudy started chatting immediately. The two ministers held me and Robert captive, White doing most of the talking. The maids (waitresses for the evening) brought glasses of red and white wines and hors d'oeuvres. Henry White went after both with unabashed gusto. Everyone seemed to be relaxing, chatting, smiling or laughing after one glass of wine. The girls kept circulating.

Then she appeared atop the stairs, and the place fell deathly quiet. There she was, my Zenyatta, my wife, a vision of other-worldly beauty. I heard sharp in-takes of breath, even from those who knew her well. She stood there as if commanding all to behold her beauty, to be awed by it. She wore a lilac gown, cut modestly at the top, a necklace of white pearls around her neck. The gown held fast to her slim waist and flared from her hips to floor level.

I walked up the stairs, unable and unwilling to take my eyes off her. She smiled as I reached her. I felt myself dissolving. I whispered softly:

"God! You are beautiful. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen or will ever see."

Zenyatta smiled broadly, revealing her perfect teeth.

Kwame 's voice broke through: Honourable Ministers, Comrades, I present to you the newly-weds, Mr. and Mrs. Steven and Zenyatta DaSilva. The applause bounced off the walls. We descended, her mother close behind. The cheers finally died down when we reached the bottom of the stairs. Then started up again and faded when we were seated by Quincy. The guests took their assigned seats after we were seated. Kwame stood:

"Honourable Ministers, Bride and Groom, comrades, ladies and gentlemen. Friends all, I am your Master of Ceremonies for this evening of the triumph of love over all. I shall not subject you to any speech by myself, but I shall assign and call upon those who wish to speak and those from whom we must hear. I must say, however, that I have known the bridegroom for a considerable time. He is the

president of our student union, and one of the rising stars in our nation. Now he has his own Northern Star, his guiding light, the beautiful Mrs. Zenyatta DaSilva." The cheers rose again, and ceased only when Kwama resumed speaking. Zenyatta squeezed by hand. I glanced across to her; she was blushing a deep red.

I will ask Mr. Peter D'Aguiar, Steven's first cousin who has flown in from Canada on his private plane especially for this event. Mr. Peter D'Aguiar! Cheers. Peter stood, fidgeted a bit, then spoke:

"I have known Steven for all of his life. I have watched him grow into a man that we can all respect. He is a formidably intelligent man, quick-witted, and sensitive to the feelings of others. He is also very independent-minded, never asking for help from the likes of me, although he knows that help would be there if he ever asked. On behalf of entire family both here at home and abroad, I wish him and his wife, Zenyatta, every happiness that is possible under the sun. Please raise your glasses in honour of the bride and groom." Everyone lifted their champagne-filled glasses with "Hear, Hear!"

Kwame: "I now call upon either the bride's father or her mother to speak to us." Cheers and hoots, even from the kitchen. Marjorie Qualis stood, tall, regal:

"Honourable Ministers, Steven and Zenyatta, ladies and gentlemen, I am not too good with words and such. I am a simple woman, a wife with two children and a good man by my side. My eldest baby girl is that woman who is married today. My baby girl is that beautiful woman. Look at her, a woman, Robert, look! Our baby is now a woman. A woman..."and she broke down into sobs, hard sobs that shook her body. She leaned forward and gripped the table with one hand and clung to her now-standing husband who was also wracked by sobs. The two people shared one sense of pride and loss, uncontrollable grief and unfathomable pride. Zenyatta was awash in tears, as was her brother. I do not think there was a single person there who was not in tears or close to it. It took her a few minutes to regain composure. She dabbed at her face and continued:

"Today, when I look at our Zenyatta, I remember every day when she was growing up. She was always a good child. She never answered back, was never rude, was always virtuous and kind and God-fearing. And God has rewarded her for her goodness and clean life by sending her a man who loves her and who she loves beyond our understanding. She will always be our daughter and her brother's sister, but she is now also a wife to Steven. He has already been kind and generous to us, and I beg his friends here—you important people—to take care of them. Keep them safe from this world that can be cruel to the innocent. Robert, Junior and I will

always be here for you and Steven, Steven and Zenyatta. I promise you. Now, please hurry up and give us a grandchild. Thank you."

She sat and the entire place clapped and cheered, still drying their eyes, yet all smiling. This would have gone on for many minutes, had Kwame not stepped in with a toast: "To Mr. and Mrs. Qualis and to the bride and groom. Raise your glasses to them. Cheers. That was very moving."

I am pleased to call upon Colonel Lewis to say a few words. Rudolph Lewis rose, his military bearing conspicuous even if he were not in his ceremonial uniform: "Honourable Ministers, my fellow countrymen and women, I can promise here and now that I will be the guardian that keeps these two young people safe from harm. I promise this to them and to all here gathered. I swear to you upon my life. I see Steven as my young brother and Zenyatta as my young sister. They are and will be protected by men that I have trained—the Lieutenant there (and he pointed to Monty) and the Sergeant there (he pointed to Gordon). I have been given strict instructions by our Comrade Leader himself to protect them, an order from our Commander-in-Chief! I will follow those orders! Thank you. Cheers Steven. Cheers Zenyatta!"

There was a loud chorus of cheers as everyone lifted their glasses. The waitresses hurried around refilling the champagne glasses with expert precision. Kwame took over once again: It is my distinct pleasure to call upon The Honourable Mr. Teelak Ramroop, Minister of Education, to say a few words." Cheers again.

Ramroop stood: "Mr. MC, Minister White, Colonel, relatives, bride and groom. We are here to celebrate the start of a life together by Steven and Zenyatta. This lovely home of theirs is filled with hope, with love, with joy. We can all see that no one here is left out of this hope and love and joy. It is my honour to be part of it. I must thank you for inviting me, especially Steven, Colonel Lewis, and Minister White.

Even before I met Steven, I heard talk on the university campus of this extraordinarily bright young fellow, a Steven DaSilva. Then I met him through the Honourable Minister Henry White and Colonel Rudolph. Steven's intelligence was a matter of reputation and record, but his presence impressed me: a young man, with good looks, bearing and charm. He reminded me very much of myself when I was young…"

Comrade White broke in, "Come on Teelak, you were never that good-looking!"

The place erupted in good-natured laughter. Teelak, not to be outdone, responded:

"True, Henry. True...but then neither were you!" Even more laughter, above them the booming laughter of Rudolph. Everyone was enjoying the ribbing between the politicians. Ramroop continued: We expect great things from Steven, and now that he has a wife to guide his steps and keep him on a virtuous path, we can expect a faster climb to a position in which he can serve our native land. We wish you both a life full of joy and prosperity. Please join me in raising a glass in honour of the bride and groom, to Zenyatta and Steven. Cheers!"

Applause, raised glasses, cheers.

"Thank you, Honourable Minister. I now call upon our feature speaker, the one and only Henry White, Minister of Home Affairs."

White stood, took a generous gulp of champagne and began,

"Mr. Chairman, the bride and groom, Honourable Minister Ramroop, Colonel Lewis, family and friends, I am here because I was honoured with a most gracious invitation from Comrade Steven DaSilva. It has been a pleasure being here to celebrate such an auspicious event, the union of two young and talented lovers. I will not give any marital advice since there are people here who are far wiser than I am in this department."

"But I am also here as a representative of our Comrade Leader Himself. Our Dear Leader commanded me to his office this morning to give me orders that I should convey his personal best wishes to the couple."

At the mention of Comrade Leader and his personal message, there was an audible gasp from everyone present. Zenyatta showed her surprise by looking at me with a puzzled expression on her face. White continued:

"Comrade Leader did not say how he found out about the wedding, but I have grown accustomed to him knowing just about everything that is going on in his nation. He also gave me a rather thick envelope to hand to the bride and groom. I am not privy to its content, but he assured me that the young couple will be happy at its content. He instructed further that the envelope be handed to them during the ceremonial dinner but is not to be opened until after we have all eaten. So, if the bride and groom do not mind, I should like to do the handing over at this time. Steven, Zenyatta, is that okay?"

"Of course, Honourable Minister," I answered, as puzzled and as anxious as anyone. Zenyatta's palm was sweaty.

"Colonel Lewis, will you please summon Major Sinclair."

Lewis stood, straightened his uniform, and shouted:

"Major Sinclair! Approach!"

Sinclair, ceremonially dressed, marched in, and slid to attention and a salute to Colonel Lewis and Henry White. He held the large envelope in his left hand, stationary to his side as he drill-marched. Lewis returned a snappy salute and White a much less snappy one. Every person was riveted, including the entire staff, groundsmen, cooks, everyone. Me too. Zenyatta's brother's mouth was agape.

Major Sinclair, using both hands, handed the envelope to Colonel Lewis who then handed it to the Minister. White walked the entire length of the table in he must have thought to be a most military fashion and handed me the envelope with both hands. I stood and received it with a slight bow.

White walked back to his chair and resumed,

"Mr. Chairman, I have fulfilled my duty to the couple as ordered by our dear Comrade Leader. Honestly, I am just as curious as everyone else as to it's contents, but I am sure that Steven and his bride will inform me as soon as it is appropriate. With that, it leaves me with the joyous task of wishing the very best to the couple in their many years to come. They can be assured that if they need my assistance in any way, they can feel sure that they will have it. Thank you all. Cheers!" Resounding cheers.

"It is now my honour to call upon the bride or the groom to speak to us here gathered."

Zenyatta leaned across and gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek, winked naughtily, and pointed her hand, palm upward, signalling me to go ahead. I winked back at her, stood, and began:

"You are all witnessing that I have already started to learn the signal from my wife about when to open my mouth. This proves what my cousin has said about how bright I am." The place echoed with uproarious laughter, and Zenyatta could not have been more gleeful. Somewhere close, a female voice said: "That my girl!" another male voice, "you show dem who's boss!" All of it leading to more laughter. White was slamming his palm on the table, guffawing. I continued:

"Mr. Chairman, my dear friend Kwame; Honorable Ministers White and Ramroop; my friend and guide, Colonel Lewis; Mom, dad, and Junior; my dear cousin Peter; my dear dear friends and family, it would take me days to thank each of you for your kindness on this our special day. Zenyatta and I have been blessed by your presence, by your generosity, and your kindness. We thank you.

And yet, I must be specific in thanking our dear Comrade Leader for the care and love he has demonstrated to us. Like our friend and mentor Comrade White, we have no idea of the contents of Comrade Leader's package, but I suppose we will soon know. The meal and drinks that we are about to have comes from my cousin Peter. I thank him. But the work that you see around you—the décor, the arrangement, the service, the music, the neatness and wonderfully flawless organization of all of it—is the work of Quincy, Melissa, Monty, Gordon, and each and every person here. You may call them our staff, but Zenyatta and I call them our family. Thank you all." Big cheers.

"My friend, Rudy—Colonel Lewis—I owe him more than anyone can know. I can never repay him for what he has done and continues to do for me. Thank you, Rudy. And I wonder how many people's weddings have been graced with the presence of distinguished Ministers of Government? Not many, I would imagine. We have been blessed. Thank you, dear Ministers.

Mr. Robert and Mrs. Marjorie and Robert, Junior—now Dad and Mom and little brother—what words are there that can contain my gratitude to you? What words? For you have not only welcomed me into your home and into your family, you have blessed the love and respect that I have for your daughter. You have shown that rarest of things—grace! I will never betray my vow to Zenyatta, I swear upon my honour!

And finally and most importantly, thank you Zenyatta, the keeper of my heart and soul. My wife for whom my love is boundless and everlasting. Thank you for having me as your husband. I am astonished perpetually by your beauty, virtue, and grace. Thank you, my love." I took her hand and raised it to my lips. "Thank you."

Thank you all. Please raise your glasses to all of you. Cheers!" The applause was long and loud. Kwame had to calm it down after a long while.

"With that," he said, "we have come to the end of our ceremony. Thank you all. Please help yourselves to drinks in the breakfast room. The guests at this table can remain seated if they wish. They will be served immediately."

Dinner was served with great fanfare and to the sounds of ooohs and aaahs. The French Onion soup was delicious and set the right foundation for the Partridge, baked to a glazed brown. The Quails' eggs smothered in a lemon butter sauce was also presented with panache. It was all lovely to behold, the general presentation leaving nothing to be desired. The aroma triggered the appetite. As we had supposed it was a unique dining experience for everyone there except for Peter. I was thankful that he assumed the responsibility of fielding questions. White

started the questions by asking if this was a different kind of chicken. The strangeness of the menu did not seem to distract anyone from enjoying the dinner. Dinner itself lasted two hours or so. Then we turned our attention to the scotch.

Peter had two drinks of the scotch and apologized for having to leave. Rudy had a few soldiers follow him into town. Robert, Marjorie, Kwame, Zenyatta and I sat with Rudy and the two ministers having a few and talking. Zenyatta, of course, had Coke. She had taken the large envelope and locked it in the desk. After a while, I asked for an excuse, and my wife and I went into the study and locked the door behind us.

"Do you think we should open it now, my darling wife?" I asked, uncertain about the timing.

"Well, my beloved husband—gosh, that sounds so good, doesn't it?"

"It sure does coming from your mouth, my Zenyatta. Music to me."

"Well, on one hand, everyone out there is anxious to know, especially White. But my parents as well."

"And on the other?" I asked.

"On the other, I would have been good to be alone when we open it. So, in the end, it's your call, my love."

"Hey woman! Wife! I am anxious as heck as well, you know. And so are you, I'm sure." She smiled at my presumption.

"Then let's open the thing, see what's in there and tell everyone! What do we have to hide, huh?"

I opened the envelope, not needing any further persuasion.

There were several letters. I read the top sheet:

Dear Steven,

I am enclosing your wedding gift. It should please you and your new wife. I have also signed a small cheque to help with the expenses that will ensue. I expect great things from you.

Good luck.

Your Leader.

I passed that on to Zenyatta and read the other. It was an offer of a scholarship from the government to study abroad in the UK. The details and terms and conditions were attached. It was signed by Comrade Leader himself. I passed that on to Zenyatta as well. Her eyes were darting over the lines, devouring up the words.

The third took my breath away. It was a letter of admission into the Law degree programme (Constitutional Law) at the London School of Economics.

"Jesus," I blurted out.

"What? What is it?" Zenyatta asked.

I showed her the admission letter, saying, "I wonder how he managed that, my love? How?"

"You're looking a gift horse in the mouth, my love. But is that not where he studied law? And I suppose that he would have considerable influence as a former student who is now the leader of a former British colony. Easy."

"Lets go tell them, my husband."

"Wait, Zen. One other thing...this." I held up a separate white envelope. I opened it and there was the "small cheque" cheque for one hundred thousand dollars.

"That is very very generous. All of it! Almost...well, almost too generous to someone he never even met," she said, frowning.

"Gift horse in the mouth, remember?" I returned, and kissed her. "I love you, my wife."

"And I love you more than life, my husband."

We went out, hand-in-hand. She locked the door. We returned to the table. They were well into a bottle of scotch, enjoying it thoroughly. When Zenyatta and I returned to the table, White asked:

"Hah! Teelak, Rudy, what did I say, huh? They could not wait to peer into Comrade Leader's gift bag. Would you care to share, Steven? Tell him to share, Zenyatta. He has to listen to you now! It's official." They all laughed at White's joke and his unharnessed curiosity. "Was there money?"

"Yes," I answered, "but please do not ask us the amount. We will feel very uncomfortable Suffice it to say that it was generous."

"Of course, it is generous! After all, you are Comrade Leader's new favourite, right?"

Rudy and Teelak added their bit as well, but it was Marjorie who said:

"You know, I suspect that money was the least of it. So spill the beans, you two!"

Zenyatta took over, "Well, there was a very nice handwritten note from the Leader wishing us all the best and promising to meet with us very soon. Then there was an official scholarship letter from the government, but I am sure that the Ministers and the Colonel are acquainted with such scholarship letters."

Teelak responded: "Well, not really. The terms and conditions for these contracts can differ dramatically, but we can presume that you are at the top end."

"I would say so too," added Rudy.

"I agree," added White.

"It was very generous, and we will respond to that in a few days." Chimed in Zenyatta.

"But, to me, the best of all was that there was an official letter admitting me into the Law Programme to study Constitutional Law at the London School of Economics. Since the scholarship could not have been taken up without admission, this becomes the most important, don't you think?"

"Absolutely! Also, the man has got you in before your actually finished the B.A., and he is sending you to his old university. This should tell us everything! And since Comrade Leader has taken this into his own hands, I have nothing left to do except look after the details of the scholarship." That was Teelak Ramroop.

"Rudy added, "Well you had better keep up the performance, win all the prizes and awards that they offer, and start packing your bags, you and Zenyatta."

Robert added, "This is all wonderful news, Steven and Zenyatta. You are two very blessed young people."

Marjorie: "Yes, Blessed. The whole nation will look to you to set an example of doing as much good as you can for as many as you can."

"Correct! And we will all be involved in that, of course." White added with enthusiasm. He added: "I must say that this is one of the finest events I've ever attended in my whole life. Thank you Zenyatta and Steven. We should leave the young couple alone now to enjoy their honeymoon, eh Rudy?"

You're right, Henry. They can do without us old folks hanging around for the whole night!"

Zenyatta spoke: "Quincy and Melissa have already arranged for everyone to take a care package for you to take home, so please collect those. Everyone else has theirs already, including the soldiers."

"Gordon will take You home Mom and Dad, unless you want to stay the night, that is."

"Spend the night, then the Colonel will accuse us of being meddling old folks? No thank you," added Marjorie.

They all collected their packages and filed out after hugs and shaking hands and congratulations. The Qualises were the last to leave, by which time most of the clearing and tidying as done. Quincy and the maids were to return the next day, as was Melissa.

Zenyatta and I were alone and happy to be so. We were too exhausted to climb those stairs, so we lay in the sofa in the foyer.

"Don't you think it went perfectly well, my darling?" she asked.

"I really cannot think of anything that could have been improved. You were perfection, Zenyatta. I was proud to have you by my side, my wife. I was happy."

"Me too. Everyone exceeded expectations, really. To me the highlight was your speech, to be perfectly honest."

"Thank you, my sweet, but then you are biased."

"Yes, I am biased, of course. But that does not mean I cannot be objectively truthful. She retorted, smiling.

"But objectively speaking, it did go swimmingly well. Everyone had fun. They ate well, drank well, and were happy for us."

"That's true. Even your big shots had fun. They were actually very nice. I just hope we never get to see their other side, because that is there. We all know that."

"Yes. It's there, but we won't see that."

"Do you think we'll be able to make it up the stairs, my love? We could just go and lay in the jacuzzi. I do want to get out of this dress."

"Yes, yes, yes. Two old lovers climbing the stairs! Let's be adventurous!"

We were hardly in the room when clothes were stripped, tub filled, and in we went. The jacuzzi turned on and we lay there luxuriating. We lay there quietly for more than an hour, Zenyatta using her toes to play with my chest. The tiredness seem to wash away from us, we got out of the tub refreshed. Towels around us, I led her to our bed, but she insisted that we go into another room. I followed as she tugged me into another bedroom.

"Let me be you wife tonight and all nights from now on!" She commanded.

"You will be my wife from today and for all time."

She lay me down and kissed me on every inch of my body. I ached. And I kissed her everywhere. She moaned and shivered. We made love with all the passion and tenderness that is imaginable. It was almost daybreak before we stopped. And yet we were not tired nor sleepy.

We went back to our room and put on shorts and tee-shirts, then skipped down the stairs. She made coffee and we sat at the breakfast table, sipping the steaming stuff.

"If we were thinking clearly last night, we would have thought of giving everyone the day off, Zenyatta."

"Well, I'm glad you accept the full blame, my bright, always-thinking husband! But, worry not, for I am here to correct your errors," she said, laughing, "We can give them the half day and tomorrow off. Let's have Melissa cook two meals and we can put what's uneaten in the fridge for tomorrow. We could also send one of the maids with Gordon to the market for fruits, vegetables, and fish."

"Wonderful, my wife! I'm glad I thought of all of that." She slapped my shoulder.

"Oh, I added, should I go to the bank with that cheque?"

"Why? What's the hurry? Just relax and let's enjoy our first full day as husband and very beautiful and brilliant wife."

"How can I argue with that, huh? How?"

The staff stated filtering in, and Zenyatta told Monty about the day and a half off for everyone, and everything she needed from the others.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Zenyatta asked Melissa to prepare a breakfast of toast, boiled eggs, and diced cheeses for breakfast. She liked the Dutch gouda while I preferred the extra old Canadian cheddar. As we ate, the chatter around us was about last evening's meal and the various families' reaction to the meals they took home. They all seemed to take particular pleasure in reporting the reactions to Zenyatta, and she was careful to give the praise to Melissa.

I remarked upon the fact that she remembered the names of every child of every staff member, asking after each one. I suspected that was one of the reasons why they were drawn to her, and I suspected that she was much like her mother in this regard. To many in university-type and political circles talk about people and their families as if they were abstractions or statistics. Not so for people like Marjorie and Zenyatta.

We went upstairs, showered, and went to bed. We meant to rest for a few minutes; we ended up sleeping until sunset. I kissed Zenyatta until she opened her eyes.

"Is it…?"

"Yep, my sweet, it is almost night time."

"Good gosh! What have you done to me husband? I've never slept through the day before!"

"I'm glad we slept through. I think we deserve the rest," I said, proudly.

"I'm hungry! You are now obligated to feed me!" she pouted. I kissed her mouth.

"Not like that…with food!" We laughed and went downstairs.

Melissa had set out the meals, and we took what we wanted and went to the dining table. Zenyatta attacked the food and gulped down a glass of Coke. I looked at her.

"I'm sorry, my love. I was famished."

"Don't be sorry, woman. I enjoy watching you eat. I do, truly."

"Well, you will be watching for a long, long, long time." She giggled.

"You know, my love, that we will have to start planning for London, right?" I said.

"Of course I know that, but it's a whole year away. We have some time, don't we?"

"Actually, it's more like eight months or so. My final year begins next month and ends in June. It will be time before we blink. I do have to get a few things done on the campus, but I don't plan to neglect my studies."

"Yes, that should be our immediate and most pressing goal. Your commitments to your university constituency and to keep your grades where they are…excellent. Good. But maybe, in terms of our overall plan, what do you think that should be? Apart from our own family, that is."

"We go to the UK, I get my law degree, return and serve the nation, I think. But I also think that you should enrol to do a degree at the same university where I'm studying. That, to me, is important. It would be a waste of talent and time to have you sitting around in some apartment in London just cooking, cleaning, and waiting for me to come home."

"I never even thought of university, Steven. We could never have afforded it."

"Well, we can now. We must think about that now," I insisted.

"Okay, but will I be able to make it at the university level? I have doubts about that, my love. I mean, I was bright in high school, but university is something else entirely—at least from what I hear."

"Listen to me, Zenyatta. My wife. I love you and you may think that I'm subjective about all of this. I'm telling you here and now that I am not saying this because you're my wife and I love you more than anything in this world. But you are brighter than anyone else at that university. You can think through anything, around anything. I see it every single day! The university-level thing is not something I worry about—not when it comes to you. We will have to adjust to a different culture, different place, and so on, but we will deal with that together. We will be at the same university together. Always together."

"We will think about how we manage money, but you will arrive at something sensible and practical. I'm confident of that."

"I hope that your faith in me is not misplaced, my darling Steven. I hope."

"It's not. Tomorrow we can write to the university using their letterhead to get the address. We will write for all the forms, fill them out, and send everything back as quickly as we can. Do you have all your paperwork: birth certificate, high school certificates, and so?"

"I have some, but most are with my parents. We can go and get them when Monty is back at work day after tomorrow. We're going to do this. Oh, what am I going to do my degree in?"

"I can't tell you that. You can do whatever you like, really. You seem to like psychology, so why not that?"

"That will be fun for me. I've been doing a good deal of reading, as you know. I'll quicken the reading and read more carefully, but I will need the books. I can make a list of what I think I will need and you can borrow them from the university library."

"Done!"

"What do you want to do now, my wife?"

"Let's pack up the food and go out for a walk, husband."

"Sounds wonderful!"

And so we did. The soldiers exercised their usual diligence as we headed out the gate and walked for about an hour. It was only when we turned around that we noticed the soldier following us about fifty yards behind.

"They're being careful with us, my love," I offered.

"Maybe their being careful with their own jobs, dear. If you know what I mean."

"Aah, Lewis, you mean?"

"Exactly. Not one of them wants to get on the wrong side of their Colonel. They really are terrified of that man."

"It seems that people are terrified of all of these men, Steven. All of them. I think most of the population knows that these politicians rule through fear. There are many stories of brutal beatings and people suddenly vanishing into thin air."

"People vanishing?" I asked, trying my best not to show my alarm, "What do you mean?"

"They are here one day, and they are nowhere to be seen the next."

"Oh! Well, people just up and leave the country all the time, Zenyatta. Scores of them daily."

"Poor people? Just suddenly finding money for plane tickets?"

"I just don't know, my love. I just don't know. Maybe I will have to start paying more attention." I said.

"When we get home, there is one other thing we must consider when it comes to this stuff, my love. When we get home."

Chapter Fifty

Back home, Zenyatta brought a Coke for herself and I asked for a beer. We sat in the breakfast room.

"What's the one other thing, my beloved?"

"Whether you like it or not, we are now entangled with these people. The Leader, the Whites, the Ramroops of this country. No denying that now, correct?"

"True," I responded, still thinking of people vanishing into thin air.

"So it may be wise to think of disentangling ourselves, but without subjecting ourselves to undue risks by making anyone suspicious. This means talking to no one about this, of course. Not Kwame nor Lewis, not my parents."

"And we wait until we're in the UK to see what exits are available to us," I added.

"Yes. These are politicians, and these are ruthless if we are to believe a fraction of what I hear. They could turn against us in a heartbeat."

"Speaking of your parents, have you had a chance to talk to them about house renovations?" I asked, anxious to change the topic.

"Not yet, my love. But we can broach that when we visit to get all of my documents, if you like."

"Good. You will know how to get around their pride. And if the renovation work is extensive, they could move in here for a few weeks, and Gordon could take Robert to work and Junior to school. I'll be busy on campus, so you mom can keep you company during the day as well."

"That sounds great, my darling husband."

"My only problem with that is…well, when will we have time and where do we go to…well, you know?"

"I know what? Time and place for what? You are speaking in riddles, my love."

"You're teasing, Zenyatta! You know exactly what I'm talking about."

Zenyatta could no longer contain herself, "Oooh. You mean…well, you know?" And she laughed until her face was a deep red. It took minutes before she regained control of herself. I just sat there looking at her. She finally muttered,

"Do you see the size of our home, my husband? Really? It's easy, when they are upstairs, we come downstairs. When they are downstairs, we go upstairs. Not that

any of that matters. We're married people, adults! We do what we do when and where we want to do it in our own home! In fact, why don't you fuck me right here? Right now?"

"Here? On this table?" I questioned, incredulous.

"Come here and fuck me, husband!" And she slipped out of her underwear and shorts. I got up and bent her over the table, pushing myself all the way into her. She screamed. I covered her mouth and kept pushing, her screams muffled now. I pulled a chair and she sat on me moving hard, fast, biting her lip until it bled. But she did not stop:

"Kill me! You're killing me. I love you."

In the end, we were both on the floor.

"Jesus! My Lord! What happened, my love? My Steven, my life," she mumbled, the blood running down the side of her face. I licked it up with my tongue. Salt.

"I love you, Zenyatta. You are my life, my air. Everything. I think we'll kill each other."

She laughed. I laughed with her. She muttered, "Yes, but what a way to go!"

On that floor, we fell asleep. It was daybreak before we wound our way up the stairs and fell into our bed. We did not awaken until the sun had gone down.

"Did we sleep through the day, my love?"

"I think so, my Zenyatta. I think so."

We had long showers, dressed casually, and went down to eat. Immediately after, we drafted Zenyatta's application letter for admission into the Bachelors Programme in Psychology. She typed in out quickly (I had never seen someone touch-type), put it in an envelope and sealed it. It was ready to be posted early the next morning by registered mail. We put that together with the cheque from Comrade Leader, ready to be deposited.

Zenyatta spoke; "I think we should consider putting together some foreign currency from now, don't you?"

"Great idea, my love. I'll find out about that tomorrow morning."

"You should take the whole package in case they need some kind of proof that you need it for study abroad. I hear that people have to get special permission to get foreign currency."

"Yes, the banks could make things difficult for people."

"Come on, my darling. It's not the banks; they simply follow what the government says. It's just one way to stop people from escaping from this country, one of many ways, really."

"I suppose you're right, Zenyatta. If they don't, however, the entire country would be empty."

"Yep. And there's a good reason for that, huh?"

I put my hand up to stop the conversation. It was risky to talk like this. She understood.

"At any rate, we begin our preparations from now," I said, by way of closing off the conversation. I continued along a different path:

"I'll go to the bank with Monty and do what needs to be done there, then go off to the campus. When I return, we'll go to your parents and get things done there.

Chapter Fifty-One

Early the next morning, the staff was there in full force. Monty and I were off to the bank by eight-thirty. I suggested to him that while I'm at the bank, he could go to the post office and send Zenyatta's application by registered mail. He said that would represent a security risk since I would be left with no protection. He preferred to remain with me. I deferred to him. As Monty stood outside the manager's office, I deposited the cheque from Comrade Leader. The manager's reaction was precious,

"Mr. DaSilva, is this—is this—?"

"Yes, it is Comrade Leader's signature. A gift to me and my wife."

"Wow!"

"We were thinking about buying some British Pounds since we'll be travelling there before too long."

"Oh, Mr. DaSilva, you will need to get special permission from the government for that."

I reminded him of the cheque and showed him Comrade Leader's note to me,

"Does this not represent more than "permission from the government" since it comes from the highest authority in the country? Or should I call our Leader and mention your name? I'm sure someone from his office could call you."

He laughed nervously, shaking his head.

"Not at all, Mr. DaSilva. Just let me know when and how much, and we'll get it done immediately."

"Good. I'll need one hundred thousand pounds."

"For that amount, we'll need a few days, Sir. I could call you as soon as it's ready."

"Good!"

I left the office, saying to Monty, "That guy is begging for trouble it seems." I said it loud enough for him to hear. Fear works.

We go to the post office, sent the letter, and then drove to the campus. I walked up the stairs to my relatively well-appointed office—relative to the shabby offices of the lecturers, heads of department, and deans—and was pleased to see Kwame.

"We have good news, El Presidente!" He exclaimed, smiling broadly, holding the door open for me. There was a secretary at her desk, all equipped with an electric typewriter, telephone, and other paraphernalia. She stood as I entered,

"Mr. President, may I introduce you to Rahma Dhanraj. Rahma, meet Mr. Steven DaSilva, our honourable president of the Student Union." Kwame said, with ceremony.

"My pleasure, Mr. President. An honour."

"Just Steven, please. Kwame overdoes the honorific thing sometimes," I laughed and took her outstretched hand. She was blushing, her eyes downcast. She was very pretty, high cheekbones, deep-set eyes, a nose as pretty as a button, two deep dimples, an almost pendulous bosom, broad hips, slim waist, long dark hair. She felt me looking at her, sizing her up, and blushed an even deeper red visible even through her chocolate-brown skin. Kwame spoke up:

"I was very clear with Rahma that her appointment will be confirmed only if you say so. She was here for a few days while you were off."

"Okay, my friend. That's good. So maybe I should talk with her before you fill me in or do you want to fill me in first."

"It's up to you, of course. But it may be better to let her know as soon as possible, and we can talk after?"

"Sounds good, Kwame. So give me about twenty minutes with her."

Kwame left and I invited her to my desk. I pointed to a seat opposite mine. She sat, her hands clasped on her lap.

"I think I've seen you around, Rahma. Are you a student?"

"Yes, I am. Second-year history major. I saw you from the first day I came to the campus. You are very well known."

"Why do you want to work? Don't studies keep you fully occupied?"

"I will be honest with you, Sir—"

"Steven. Just Steven."

"—Steven. My family is very poor, poorer than most, really. I have three sisters at home and my ma takes care of everybody. My Pa cuts cane at the estate. The job would keep me on campus and help me to support our home."

"But you're well dressed, Rahma."

"Oh, I sew my own clothes…and everyone else's too. I sometimes take in things to sew or mend for the neighbours. I also cook and do house-work to help out. Two of my sisters are still in school."

"Okay. And you type? Take notes? Follow instructions?"

"Very well to all three. Kwame told me that trustworthiness and strict confidentiality are most important to you. I can promise you both and absolute loyalty as well."

"Kwame is right. Without those things, we cannot function. And if we do not function, this office shuts down. I need for you to follow my instructions to the letter, even if I tell you to stand on your head, understood? I will not have the time to explain everything to you, clear?"

"I'm perfectly clear about it, Steven."

"Okay. You're hired. I will let you know about the salary and conditions and such things in a day or two."

"Please call Kwame in. And give us ten minutes, please." I look at her back. She was very well shaped.

Kwame came in. He could hardly contain himself,

"Hey Steven, that's sweet to the eye, huh? Beyond my reach, but then you're married."

"Kwame, my friend. I will tell you this once. Once! Don't ever bring up my private life in this office, you hear me? Ever!"

"Hey, I hear you, my friend. Loud and clear. Sorry, Steven."

"Now give me the good news."

"Well, Lewis called and asked me to tell you that the Ministry has given your office a most generous grant for the year. We will need to give some sort of account, but he says that you will know how to manage things."

"How much?"

"Lewis said six hundred thousand. That's more than generous, huh? It's you, man! All you! Those big fellahs love you to death." I smile.

"Which Ministry?"

"Education. Ramroop."

"Yes, it generous, but we need to be careful with how we use the money. I hired that girl. She seems okay. I will need for you to work out a budget detailing all expenses. I will meet with Rudy when we are done here, and find out more. For one, we have to pay Rahma. Three hundred and fifty per month should be good. I will tell her. So do up and annual budget and break in down by month. Any more good news?"

Actually, yes. I got rid of those people that ran what they called a cafeteria. We put out word that people could bit for the contract for a year, with the possibility of

renewal. We got three serious bits, and you will need to meet with them and choose what you feel to be the best one."

"Okay. Set up the appointments at 9, 11, and 1 tomorrow. If anyone does not show, they are disqualified. Oh, I suppose it was Lewis that got the phone lines, huh?"

"Of course, it was Rudy."

"While I'm dealing with them draft donation letter to the biggest businesses in town, regardless of party affiliations. And work on any other project that we talked about in the campaign. Like sports. We can begin with sports equipment. Write a letter to the Ministry of Sports. We need all manner of equipment, and coaches. To Min. of Works for machinery. I'll sign it asap."

"Tell her to come in."

I spoke to both her and Kwame,

"Kwame has made notes of all the letter I need to be ready before I come in tomorrow. Letters to major businesses and altruistic individuals. Call Colonel Lewis and tell him I'm coming across in ten minutes, Rahma."

"Right away, Steven."

I wound my way down the stairs, got in the car and Monty drove to Lewis's office. Rudy rushed out, "My friend, Steven. How was it? Glorious, I'm sure. We were all very impressed by everything, especially that partridge. But come in, come in."

We went in and sat in the chairs next to each other,

"Rudy, thank you for having the phone lines installed...all three, really. And thanks for getting that grant for us. It will help. We've already hired a secretary and have new cafeteria people lined up. We should be fully operational by next week. I'll send out letters to the big businesses and other benefactors by tomorrow, and it may be useful to have your soldiers deliver them. Optics and all that, you know."

"I like that, Steven, "optics"! Love it." We both chuckle, both understanding that the real word is fear.

"Hey, Rudy, can you base up with the Minister of Works, who's it? Hinds?"

"No, it's Reid. What do you want from him? I want machinery to break ground for the new Student Union Building. It may not be completed by the time I'm ready to leave, but it will show progress."

"True, but you will need the university administration's permission to build on their land, you know. Those buggers tend to be very possessive and tend to see this

small place as a country in itself. But one shout from us and they crumble like stale biscuits."

"So bark at them...hard, if required."

"Don't worry, my friend. Leave those things to me," Rudy assured me.

"Great, Rudy. None of this could have happened without you. I hope you know that, and know that we are in your debt."

"Don't mention it, Steven. I will help in any way I can, I promise." He shouted to one of the girls outside. She rushed in, pen poised to write.

"As soon as Steven leaves, let me call Reid, and get a six soldiers to deliver some letters around town. Also let me call the VC. In fact, call him now!"

She dialled and patched him to Lewis, "Good morning, VC. This is Colonel Lewis. VC, I want you to allocate a piece of land to the Student Union. DaSilva, the new SU president, wants to put up a Student Union Building starting immediate."

He listened for a minute or two, then exploded:

"VC, why do you have to wait for Council to meet? So no decision can be made without them? And who the fuck is the Academic Board? You mean the whole heard of lecturers who meet for eight hours to hear themselves talk? They forget who pays their fucking salaries? Go I have to get Comrade White to come down here and read them the riot act? Look, I want this land designated by next week, understood. Let's not get off on the wrong foot here, man." He listened some more to the VC and said:

"Good. I'm glad we see eye to eye on this. The whole front piece will do well for a cricket field, and somewhere at the back of the campus can be designated for the new SU Building. By next week, okay?"

He turns to me, smiling, "Well, that was easy."

"Thanks, Rudy. My friend."

"Any time, Steven. That's why I'm here, you know. I'll call Reid now and let you know. I realise that the clock is ticking on you, but I'm here to help."

I left and went back to my office. Kwame and Rahma were working on a list of businesses and other for donations. I told them that we'll get the front piece for a cricket ground and a back portion for the building by next week. They were both taken aback, the girl especially.

"Kwame, give me a few minutes with Ray (the name was too similar to another name)."

Kwame left, and I signalled her to my desk. She sat in her demure way,

"I've decided that your salary will be three-fifty per month. Is that okay?"

"It is more than okay, Steven. Thanks."

"You will have to work five days per week, with time off for your classes, of course. You can also get some of your own studies here, when I don't need you. There are some Saturdays that I may need you as well."

"Very well, Steven."

"Good. I have to get to another meeting, so you and Kwame can get your stuff done by tomorrow. On your time draw up a contract for you. Kwame can help if you wish."

I told Kwame that I'll be in tomorrow and left. Inexplicably, I deliberately neglected to say anything to Rahma, as if I was angry with her. As Monty opened the back door, as I was getting into the car, I looked up at my office windows. Rahma was peering through the glass louvres.

"Let's go home, Monty!" I said, too loudly.

"Yes Sir!" Monty responded in his usual manner.

I entered our home and there she was running into my arms,

"He's back. My darling husband is back. Now I'm happy."

I cling to her tightly, and she pulls herself away, looking at me intently,

"What's the matter, my love? What happened?"

"Nothing at all, my Zenyatta. Nothing. It's been a good day so far, and now it's a whole lot better that I'm home with my wife, my very own Zenyatta. I missed you, my love."

"I think those few days of being completely alone has spoiled us." She surmised.

"I think so too, my love. We are just greedy, I suppose."

I gave her the brown envelope containing the British pounds, "That's for the study, love." She opens the study and we go in, locking the door behind us. She opened the envelope, her eyes wide with wonder:

"This is British money! Lots of it. I've never seen British money in my life. How much?"

"One hundred thousand. We will start accumulating from now. That must go in a very safe place, Zen. Lock and key. It's for our future really. I sent off your application, and now we wait for that."

"This is great, my darling. But there is something else. Tell me, please."

"Oh, it's good. My office was given a nice grant from the government, so we have money for staff and our projects. The cafeteria should be up and running by next week; we have campus ground for a cricket field; and more land on which to

build our student union building; Kwame already hired a secretary; and Lewis had phones installed."

"And all of that in one morning? Sweet! So what is upsetting you?"

"Nothing at all. I just wanted to come home. I hated being away from you, Zenyatta." She hugged me. "You're home now," she cooed.

We locked away the money, locked the study door, and sat at the breakfast table for coffee. Melissa interrupted asking what we'd like for supper. Zenyatta looked at me,

"Something simple, I think. How about barley beef soup, Zen?"

"Sounds wonderful to me. Is that okay, Mel?"

"Yes, Ma'am. With a nice garden salad, of course."

I roll up my eyes, "Of course!" The two ladies laugh.

"Let's go up for a short nap, Zen."

"Okay. I'll come and hug you up, but I don't want to sleep in the day. I've done more than enough of that over the last two days."

And so we went up, and she held me until I fell asleep. I awoke at around three-thirty to find her beside me, propped up reading Jolanda Jacobi. Zenyatta had called them to say that we'll be coming by at around five. We showered, dressed, and set off with Monty. Gordon and Quincy were left to oversee things at home.

Robert, Marjorie and Junior were by the gate even before the car came to a full stop.

"Oooh, the love birds have left their nest!" Marjorie's exclamation of welcome. The usual Qualis hugs and kisses. I allowed myself to be included, trying to mask my discomfort with this kind of family closeness. We went upstairs where it felt close but comfortable, a change from the sprawl of our home.

Zenyatta went straight to the issues at hand:

"Mommy, Daddy, Junior, you all know that it's confirmed we'll be leaving for about four years. We should be leaving in nine or ten months, but we're trying to make all possible arrangements from now. We've gone through some of this before, but we just need to nail everything down."

"Yes," interjects Robert, "it's always good to plan ahead."

"Good," Zenyatta continues, "we want you to oversee the running of our home and looking after our staff. They get their salaries at the Ministry of Home Affairs, so you don't have to take on that headache. Monty, Gordon and Quincy will be there if you need any help. We can leave the red car with you or with Gordon who

will take and bring you where you want to go. Or, we can just leave the car with you."

Marjorie: "It may be better to just leave it with us. It will be too strange having Gordon drive us and wait and drive us back and so on. We're just not accustomed to that." It was hard not to notice Junior nodding in enthusiastic agreement, wide smile and all.

"The problem with that," continued Marjorie, "is that we have nowhere to park it safely. We'll have to build a new bridge and expand the gate so that Robert can park it in the yard."

"That will be solved. Don't worry about that. In fact, we want to give back to you a fraction of what you've given to Steven and me. We want to renovate this house entirely. It will take two weeks or so, but you can stay with us for that period. We have loads of room, as you know. We could concrete the place, put in new rooms, expand the kitchen and so on. Whatever you want."

Robert: "Zenyatta and Steven, we cannot thank you enough for everything you've done for us, but this is too much. How can we accept such generosity in good conscience, my son, my daughter?"

Zenyatta: "This is not generosity, Daddy. This is us asking you to do us a favour by taking care of our property. We want to return home to find our home as we left it and to find our staff taken care of. And who better to do that than you and Mommy? Who? Soldiers? Do us this favour, please."

Marjorie: "And in return you make our house better? It's like a deal, no?"

Zenyatta: "Well, not exactly. If you say yes, you'll be doing us a favour. And in order that we don't put you out by having to travel from here to there and everywhere, you'll have the car to use at your convenience. The car cannot stay on the road, of course. So we make arrangements to make everything safer and more comfortable for our family. That's all."

I added: "I think the debate has reached a conclusion here. So this is what will happen. Robert and Marjorie will look after things at our place and staff when we are gone. They will keep the red car so that they can travel with relative comfort. We will redo the fence and bridge as well as any part of this home as we all see fit."

Robert: "Okay, Steven. We will. But does it really make sense for us to move in with you two newly married people now? Why don't we wait until you are about to leave and then we move in to your place until work here is done?"

I use the same firm tone: "Now that is sensible. I cannot quibble with that. Neither can Zenyatta or Marjorie. That's a much better arrangement, the you won't have to witness how your daughter mistreats me."

Everyone cracked up at that. Zenyatta's perfect timing was brought to bear:

"Oh, Mommy and Daddy and little brother, I am applying at the London School of Economics—the same university as my husband—to do my degree in psychology."

Marjorie was up like a flash. She dragged Zenyatta out of her seat, grabbed her and danced:

"My daughter! The university girl! Well, God is good. Our dreams are all coming through, Robert. God is answering all of our prayers!"

We all turned to Robert. He was still seated, his face cupped in his hands, sobbing.

"Yes, Madge. Yes, all these years we prayed for our children. God had finally answered." He said, still sobbing into his hands. He got up and hugged me: "Thank you son. You and your wife have made an old couple happy."

"And me too," added Junior who joined us in our hug. The ladies joined us. I was comfortable.

Zenyatta finally spoke up: "Now we have to go so that I can give him his dinner—

"But you all can eat here, child." Marjorie resisted.

"And then what? I will hear whining all night about how we had to go to your parents so you can feed me? No thank you, my mother."

We all stood, still laughing. Back in the car, we held each other close.

"You were amazing, Zenyatta. You were like some crack lawyer making an argument against a formidable opponent."

"Really? Do you really think so?"

"Yes, I think so really. Maybe you should be reading for your law degree, girl!"

"At this rate, my beloved husband, we never know. Miracles can and do happen."

I leaned closer and whispered:

"You know, I never fucked a lawyer." She pinched my side hard.

"Hey, we're not in bed!"

"Well, we were not in bed last night."

Well, we were, in a manner of speaking."

"See what I mean, Zenyatta. Lawyer material. Seriously."

"Just you stop it, you naughty man. Oh, and a lawyer never fucked me either. Oh, no one ever did, except you, of course." And she giggled at her own wit. I burst out laughing.

We had our simple beef barley soup and repaired into the study to go over the admissions papers. We talked about money too. I suggested that some kind of arrangement be made with the bank to put a part of my salary into Robert Qualis's account, just in case he needs money for anything at all. I suggested that she may explain that by saying we'll be paying whomsoever is renovating their house half before and half after the job is done. I will ask Lewis to keep and eye on the person or people we contract to do the work.

She agreed.

Chapter Fifty-Two

I was on campus and in my office at eight-fifteen the next morning. Rahma was already there, much to my pleasure.

"Good morning, Boss," she greeted cheerily.

"Boss? Whose boss? Good morning, Ray," I smiled.

"My boss. You are *my* boss," she responded emphatically, "Ray?"

"Yes. You are *my* Ray. Don't get me wrong, I love your Hebrew name, Rahma. Bu I'd prefer to call you Ray, as in my ray of sunshine." I said half-playfully. "I'd prefer Steven, though."

"Well, good morning my Steven," she said, half-playfully in turn.

"Kwame is not yet here I take it?"

"He'll be here soon enough. I think he respects you too much to be late."

"That's good to hear, Ray. Did you two make a list of potential donors and draft a letter?"

"We did. It's a comprehensive list of the most prominent businessmen and women and other individuals. One name that Kwame paid close attention to is "D'Aguiar". He said that's your cousin—your very rich cousin."

"Well, Kwame is right. He is my cousin, and he is formidably rich. But I really don't feel right about asking him for money."

"But you are not asking anyone for money, are you? Surely it's the President of the Student Union who is asking for donations for a very specific purpose. No?"

"I suppose you're right," I conceded.

"Oh, I'm right. I'm spot on right."

"Okay, Ray. Give me the draft letter, please."

I went to my desk, and she brought me the draft. She stood beside me, her thighs brushing my elbow ever so slightly. I controlled my excitement and focused on the letter with all my might.

"This is good. No mistakes. It is brief and to the point. I like it. Make duplicates of it, one copy to be delivered, another for our files. Each letter must be addressed to an individual. People like being addressed directly; it is more personal and they feel rather special."

"I'll have that done before lunch. We will also have individualized envelopes."

"Excellent, Ray! We have those cafeteria people coming in at nine-thirty. I want you and Kwame sitting in."

"It will be my pleasure. I've never sat on the other end of an interview before. I'm sure I'll learn from you."

"Let's see, huh?"

"I'll get started on these immediately, after I set up the chairs for the interview."

"Good."

"One last thing, if you don't mind."

"No. Go ahead."

"I did not even know that my name is Hebrew. You knew."

"Yes. It's Hebrew. I found it a curious juxtaposition: your first name is of Hebrew origin, your last of Sanskrit or Hindu."

"You know a whole lot, don't you?" she asked admiringly.

"And there is a whole lot more for me to learn. A whole big lot more."

"And you are humble and wise, as well," she turned to go. I hoped that she did not see me get red in the face. She had a truly beautiful behind.

Kwame came in at eight twenty-five, greeting me good morning and Began helping Ray with the letters, labelling, and sorting. I greeted him and told him that he Ray will join me I talked to the candidates for the cafeteria. I had Ray type up a rudimentary scoring sheet which they will use to score the answers. The total was 100, and they were to listen, observe, ask additional questions if I asked.

The first candidate came in at precisely nine-thirty. Three people, two females and a male. Their Company was called "Healthy Bodies, Active Brains" They were neatly dressed, clean, polite. The middle-aged woman was the chief, and she it was who answered most of the questions.

"How long have you been in this business?"

"Just under ten years, although our experience is limited to primary schools running canteens."

"What adjustments do you think you'll have to make given that your clientele wil be adult university students and staff?"

"We realize that the meals will have to be more adult in terms of quantity and nutrition as well as in terms variety and frequency. Breakfast, lunch and dinner."

"Can you give us an example of the meals?"

"Much like a hotel, I suppose. We will not have pre-made food and bring those in. We plan to cook on-site. We will be setting up our own cooking equipment. Hot

sheet areas for doing eggs and toast for breakfast and to heat-up sandwiches like grilled toast. For lunch we will have a series of burners and utensils for rice, pasta, soups, curries and stews. We also realize that fried chicken and fish and chips tend to be in demand, so these will be pre-seasoned and cooked on-site. Of course, the wait may be slightly longer, but the taste will be worth the wait."

"We will also do regular surveys regarding customer satisfaction and suggestions for other food options. We will try and meet those demands if they are practically possible. Our services will be available from seven-thirty to seven-thirty. A twelve-hour, five-day per week. On Saturdays, we will bring in a separate team to clean thoroughly in preparation for the next week."

"How many staff do you have on hand?

"We have fifteen full-time staff, including the three of us; and ten on a needs-basis, mostly cleaners."

"Of course, we will have waste bins strategically-placed to minimize mess. These will be emptied and carried off-campus regularly. As you can probably tell, hygiene and cleanliness is our priority as part of our customer-care ideology."

"You sound very well organized, indeed. To me anyway. Comrade Kwame and Comrade Dhanraj may have their own feelings, of course. Kwame?"

"Yes, Sir. It occurs to me that this would represent a considerable expansion from your school operations. The capital outlay alone will be frightful. Where does your finance originate and what is your organizational structure?"

"Our main financier is my brother who lives in the United States. He provides almost all of our financial outlay. We three provide sourcing of material and the rest of organizational requirements. My brother, Rupert Lewis, owns 27% percent of the business, and the three of us own 16% each. 15% goes toward wages and overhead expenses, and 10% is put in a separate fud for possible expansion or upgrades as well as possible expansion."

I was curious, "Rupert Lewis? Any relative to Colonel Lewis?"

"Yes, Sir. He is my elder brother, just before me. I hope that there is no conflict of interest here."

"If there is a conflict of interest, I certainly don't see it. Do you Kwame, Ray?"

Ray shook her head and Kwame expanded:

"Colonel Lewis is our friend, but he is not attached in any way to the Student Union, so absolutely not. And he holds no stake in the business. Of course, we will need to look at your books to verify everything before our President signs off."

"That's a relief. Although, to be candid, I did hear of this from Rudy. But you can have our records before the end of day."

"I'm glad he alerted you. Ray, any questions for Ms. Lewis?"

"One small one, Mr. DaSilva. The Student Union has special events from time to time as does the university. Would you be prepared to cater for those events out of the cafeteria? Of course, we don't make decisions for the university administration; but for our events at any rate."

"Absolutely. We can and will cater to those. We will, of course, need some advance notification."

"This all sounds thorough indeed. Two final questions, Ms. Lewis."

"Sure, Sir."

"Which university did you attend for your degree?"

Kwame and Ray looked up at the same time, a quizzical look on their faces.

"University of Toronto, Sir."

"Degree in Economics, I presume?"

"You presume correctly, Sir."

"What do you think would be a reasonable annual fee for you to pay the Student Union?" I asked.

"I would say forty-five thousand per year for an eight-year contract." Ms. Lewis replied immediately.

I laughed, "Fifty-thousand annually due every January 1, one year in advance, over a five-year period. You begin in September when the new semester starts."

"We can live with that, Sir…if we were to be awarded the contract."

I stood, signalling the close of the meeting, they all stand, we all shake hands.

"Thank you for a lovely interview, Mr. DaSilva, Sir. And thank you Kwame and Ray. I hope to see much more of all of you in the future."

Ray saw them out, she and Ms. Lewis engaged in friendly banter.

She returned, and I instructed her to put our assessment forms into a folder under their company name. Then get new forms for the two other candidates. I asked Ray for a Coke.

"Straw? Or glass with ice?"

"The latter, I think."

Kswame asked for one as well, and Ray responded: "Kwame, your legs and arms work, no?"

"Yes, Ray."

"Well, there you go." Kwame got up with the most resigned sigh and got his Coke.

"How do you think that went?"

"I think it went very, very well. She was well prepared, they all dressed and behaved professionally, and she answered every question with precision, even some of your multi-pronged ones. And they seem to be equipped to handle this and ready for exigencies."

"I agree. I'm glad Colonel Lewis pointed her in our direction. I'm sure he would have known you'd think of conflict of interest or favouritism. Their financials seem sound, but we'll know for sure by the end of day," Kwame added.

"But how did you know she went to university? And a foreign one too…how did you know? That was truly amazing! You are something else, Steven."

"Girl, you have no idea! This guy is the brightest thing in this country, bar none. I can bet money on that, Ray!"

"Well, I can't tell you all my trade secrets, you know," and I laughed.

"Should I show the next group in?"

"Yes, please," I said.

Ray shepherded in the second group of four, "The Four Chefs", as they called themselves. Four men and one woman, casually dressed (to put it mildly), shirts out of pants, two top buttons opened, on the men. The woman, about twenty-five, in a bright red dress, and heavily made-up. Kwame looked at me and rolled his eyes. They sat without being asked to sit, dragging the chairs under them. Ray was expressionless, flat. I asked them to introduce themselves, and they did. We introduced ourselves using "Mr." and "Ms."

"Are you all chefs?" I asked, with some causticity.

The older man spoke:

"I'm the chief chef."

"Where did you get your chef's certification, Chief?" I asked, with a bit more acid in my voice. Rahma hid her grin behind her hand.

"Right here in town."

"May I ask why you think your group should be awarded this contract, Chief?"

"Oh, we have lots of experience. Lots!"

"Where? Where did you get your experience?" Kwame barked.

"Well, we have a cooking stall in the big market. WE had that for five years now, and it's very popular. We're sold out every day before three in the afternoon."

"That's good," I said.

"How much would you be willing to pay the Student Union per year over a five-year contractual period?"

"Pay? I don't understand. We will be doing the work and paying you??" He laughed.

"I see. I'll tell you what, Comrade. My secretary will see you out and we will contact you if you've secured the contract. If you don't hear from us by end of day tomorrow, you may assume that another group has been awarded the contract. Thank you for your time."

Ray got up, as did they, and she led them out of the office.

She came back and could no longer contain herself:

"What the heck was that?"

"That is downright eye-pass, girl, poor and simple."

"Okay. I think all of us knows what that was, right." I said.

"Ray, call in the last group and let's hope for at least slightly better."

In they came, Ray leading them. Two women, one man. The man, who introduced himself as Omdeo Rampersaud, was a distinguished-looking. He introduced the women as Mrs. Philips and Mrs. Dhanesar, his associates. We introduced ourselves, standing shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries. I invited them to sit, for which they thanked us and assumed their seats.

"Mr. Rampersaud, please tell us why you think the contract to run the university cafeteria should be awarded to you, please," I began.

"Well, Mr. DaSilva—first, I should congratulate you on being voted in as the Students Union President. I would imagine that the responsibilities must be weighty, especially since you also have to focus on studies. But, to answer your question, I am the owner of a reputable restaurant here in the city, "The Penquin." I do not know if you've ever visited us, but do consider this a formal invitation to have lunch or dinner at our establishment."

"While I own it, the people who are responsible for its day-to-day running are Mrs. Philips and Mrs. Dhanesar. They are the reasons for the restaurant's success and reputation, and I am the lest of the apostles. While the restaurant is a great financial and reputational success, we agreed that we could expand our operation to include a different kind of service to a different clientele. It would certainly offer us a new and exciting challenge and provide quality service to the campus community."

"This is interesting, Mr. Rampersaud. In other words, this is not so much about money to you and your team; rather, it is a chance to diversify from the

conventional restaurant-type model to a more informal, relaxed, place to have a quick meal and meet with other students."

"I won't exactly dismiss financial considerations. In business that's always a topic of concern, but in our case (he waves his arms to include the ladies) it is not in this specific case."

"Would it be fair to say that you would like to secure the contract, but that this contract is not vital to your current venture?"

"Yes, Sir. That would be fair, I think. Mrs. Philips and Mrs. Dhanesar may have a different take on this."

"No, we think that is a fair cauterisation of the situation. We will have to make a significant investment in equipment and staff, and that should be put up alongside profit margins over time." Mrs. Philips suggested.

"I agree," said Mrs. Dhanesar, "but this should not distract from the seriousness with which we are approaching this bid to be awarded the contract."

"What would, in your opinion, be a fair amount to rent the space per year over five years, Mr. Rampersaud?" I asked.

"I think thirty thousand is fair, maybe even thirty-five," he responded, "and to be perfectly honest, if another company is offering services equal to ours and offering significantly more as fees, your own business interest would be better served with them." He added, firmly.

"Mr. Rampertab, before we close this meeting, I would like to thank you and Mrs. Philips and Mrs. Dhanraj for taking the time to come in and talk with us. We thank you for your professionalism and courtesy. Above all,, Sir, I wish to express my deep gratitude for your honesty. That is something I have found to be quite infrequent."

"So do we, Mr. DaSilva. So do we," and we all had a chuckle.

"Just one last thing from our end, Mr. DaSilva. WE understand that the Student Union is about to construct its own building."

"Yes, we are."

"I would be happy to be part of that in any way I can. Do take me up on that and we hope to see the three of you as guests of "The Penguin" before too long, irrespective of the decisions made about the contract."

We bade each other a most affable farewell with a promise that we will call and arrange lunch or dinner."

"That went pretty well, I think," Kwame offered as he tabulated his scores.

"When you finished your tabulations, I'd like to see all three folders, please Ray." She returned with the folders, and "Healthy Bodies, Active Brains" was clearly superior on all three assessments.

"Now, Kwame, Ray, how do we proceed from here. I will need the Council to sign off on this. Should I call a meeting immediately?"

"I don't think I know enough about how the SU works, so I will not be of much use in this regard. May I be excused, please?" Ray said.

"Sure, Ray. I know you have other things to get done."

"Kwame? What do you think, my friend?"

"If you call them to an emergency meeting, you may not get a quorum. Very few are on campus now. I suggest you write an memo suggesting that we ratify the decision by signing the memo. Make the point that the new Academic Year is almost upon us and we need to get the cafeteria ready immediately. They will sign. I'll take it to them myself if you wish," Kwame said breathlessly.

"Good stuff, Kwame. Let Ray type up the memo and let it reflect the urgency. I'll sign and you'll sign, the rest will follow. I will help Ray with the letters and such. I'll also call Ms. Lewis. I want things to start as soon as possible, tomorrow maybe. I had the folders in front of me, found "Healthy Bodies, Active Brains", and dialled.

I spoke into the phone: "Good day. May I speak with Ms. Lewis, please?"

"Pamela Lewis speaking."

"Hi Ms. Lewis. This is Steven DaSilva. I have good news to share with you. We have decided to award you the contract for the cafeteria."

"Please call me Pamela. That is indeed good news. I do not know how I can thank you. I really don't. I'm dreadfully excited and can't wait to start the preparations for the start of semester. We will not disappoint you, I promise."

"Great! All I'm waiting for now is formal ratification from the Student Council, which I should get in an hour or two. WE will have the contract ready for you by tomorrow morning. If you could pop by and sign it by eight-thirty tomorrow, that would be capital. Rahma will have it ready in case I'm not here. Also you will have access to the cafeteria immediately upon signing the contract. Rahma will give you everything."

"Thank you, Mr. DaSilva."

"Steven, please."

"I hope to see you in the morning, Steven."

I called Ray, "Listen, sweetheart, get up the contract for "Healthy Bodies, Active Brains" for tomorrow morning, please. Pamela Lewis will be in to sign it at

eight-thirty." I looked up and she was flushed red, her full bosoms heaved, and her hands were tremulous. It was the "sweetheart", I was sure.

I dialled Rudolph Lewis's number.

"Hey Rudy. Steven."

"Hey married man! How's it going? How's Zenyatta? Everything's okay? I did not want to bother the love birds."

"It's all great, old friend. All really great. I'm trying to get things started here in the office. I called to tell you that your sister got the cafeteria contract. No bias, no conflict of interest. She's coming in tomorrow to sign the contract."

"That's great, Steven. I told her about the cafeteria thing, but I worried about the appearance of conflict of interest. I left it to you, of course. She won't disappoint us, man. She's good at what she does."

"Yes, Rudy, I can see that. Anyway, I need to get this student union building thing going. I'm sending out letters to donors, but I think we need help from the Ministry of Works to give us a boost. Can you help me out here, old friend?"

"Anything you ask, Steven. Christ, boy! You aint know that by now?" He laughed and I with him. "I'll call Reid now. What do you need?"

"I need building materials and equipment to start this project. People need to see that a change is coming, right?"

"Hey, consider that done. You should see action by tomorrow, latest. We should meet up soon and talk though."

"Anything wrong, Rudy?"

"Fuck, boy! I can't want to have a beer and chat with my friend? Jesus!"

"Sorry, Rudy. I'm just stressed out, I suppose."

"Then meet me at my confidential place at five?"

"Will do, Colonel." I re-joined. He laughed his laugh.

I called Rahma, Are you finished with those donor letters?"

"All they need is your signature, Steve."

"Well, bring them, dear."

She brought a heap of letters, came to my side of the desk, bent and pointed unnecessarily to where I should sign. I felt her breath on my ear. I felt myself getting hard, large. I took my mind to Zenyatta at home. That did not help.

"Rahma," I whispered.

"Yes, Steve."

"Colonel Lewis's sister is coming in the morning. Give her the contract to sign. Tell Kwame to take the donor letters and also have those people sign the

verification letter. I'll be in by ten. I want you to be and look your best tomorrow. Understand, my dear?"

"Yes, I think so." She answered.

"We will leave the office at noon."

"I need to leave now, Ray. Finish you what you have to do."

On the way to Lewis's hideout, I instructed Monty to find a safe out-of-the-way hotel and book a nice room tomorrow, "I'll be leaving the office at around noon. You keep the key. Make sure of security. Have them put ice and cool drinks in the room too.

Monty looked at me questioningly, but just said his "Yes, Sir!"

Lewis was already there. He ordered two beer, and we made ourselves comfortable.

"I'm glad you're getting things done quickly, Steven. Pamela will be good with the cafeteria, I know that. You will have a good amount of material there for the new building. The excavator from Works will start digging for the foundation in the morning. They will also start with the cricket ground tomorrow since the heavy machine will be on site. They also have their own builders and such things, so don't worry about that."

"That's great news, Rudy. Both should be done before I'm ready to travel."

"I think so, but the weather may offer some delays. Don't worry too much though, I'll be keeping an eye on them.

"That's reassuring, Rudy."

"What's on your mind, Steven?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just all these things to get done, you know."

"Don't give me that shit, man! We've been through enough for you to be straight with me! Is Zenyatta okay?"

"Yes. Yes. She's fine, wonderful."

"So?" He kept probing.

"I'll tell you later, Rudy. I promise."

"Oh shit! Steven, Steven. You're about to mess this all up, man! It's some girl! It's not some freshy in first-year. The damn semester has not started yet. Wait! Steven, it's that new girl you hired, isn't it? Shit, man! You're gambling with everything."

"I'll be careful, Rudy. I will, don't worry."

"Steven, let me talk to you as an elder brother. I know you love Zenyatta and that girl will give her life for you. You're gambling with that. You're also gambling

with a scandal that the big boys might not like. They could very well conclude that you're a bad investment, Steven. And it is not going to end well. Do you grasp what I'm saying?"

"I know exactly what you're saying, my friend. You are not wrong. There is too much to lose. Look, I'll call this off and done with it, okay?" I said, knowing I was lying through my teeth, Lewis knew I was lying too. He shook his head.

"I've done what I can, Steven. All I can do is warn you."

"You've done all you can for me, my friend. I'm grateful. I think I'll go straight home to my wife now."

"Good! That's the safest place for you right now. Be careful, my young friend. You're playing with some ruthless people now."

I left, longing for Zenyatta, fear gnawing at my soul. We swung into the gate, and the soldiers opened it. I could lose that or it could be turned against me. I look at the mansion and its beautiful grounds. I could lose those too. I waked into my home, and there was my Zenyatta, running into my arms. I could lose her, this beautiful, faithful, loving woman, my wife. I can be stripped of all of it, left homeless, penniless, alone. And for what? A pussy?

My darling was hugging me tightly. I pushed her to arms' length and looked at her, absorbing her.

"What's the matter, my love?" she asked, her light hazel eyes wide with sudden worry.

"Nothing is wrong. I hate being away from you. I just hate it, my heart."

"You are with me now, and that is what matters above all else. Come and have something to eat. You must be famished."

"Not yet. Take me upstairs and let's get into the tub. I want to feel your feet on my chest. My feet on your breasts. That is what I want."

We go upstairs, and Zenyatta filled the tub while I stripped. She stripped and threw her clothes on the floor with gay abandon. She guides me into the tub as if I were blind, then climbed in with me. There was a bubble on her cheek. She took a washcloth, rubbed it with soap and scrubbed me; I did the same for her. I climbed out and pulled her up after me. I dried her off, then myself.

"Get into bed, Zenyatta."

"Come with me Steven."

We get into bed. I traced my index finger lightly over her as she lay on her back, delaying on her bronze nipples. She closed her eyes and moaned quietly. Down her belly, skipping the thick brown curls between her legs, down her thighs,

her calves, her feet, back up, to the curls, barely touching her lips. She moaned loudly,

"Jesus! I'm coming! Don't stop!" She screamed loudly, back arched upward, legs trembling. I put my finger into her mouth and she sucked it, hard. I climbed aboard her chest and put myself into her mouth, guiding her hand to her pussy.

"Play with yourself!" She did, suck me all the while. She screamed again, "Fuck! God!" her nipples were upright. Finally, I put my cock into her moist, dripping pussy. She was screaming over and over. I pushed hard into her and she screamed some more, this time from pain. I did not want to stop, did not want this to end. And it took a long, long time before it did. In the end, Zenyatta was clinging to me, sobbing uncontrollably as if wracked by unfathomable grief.

I tried to comfort her, wiping away her tears and the sweat that covered her body as if she had just come out of the shower. The tears kept coming, the shivering would not stop, her clinging became more intense. My own body was lathered in sweat, my sweat mingling with her until I did not know which was her and which mine. Between her thighs there was a white froth, like the froth one sees between the hind legs of a thoroughbred on a hot day at the races.

Eventually, the sobbing abated, replaced by what sounded like hiccups. I held her as close to me as she held me to her. I wondered why we seemed to be comforting each other. I finally found my voice:

"Why were you crying, my sweet one?" I asked.

She shook her head and squeezed me harder. "Tell me why, my love."

She looked up into my eyes, "I don't know. I always feel so new, so much in love, feeling so much joy that I can only cry. I don't know, my love. I am so happy, so fulfilled that I overflow. My cup runneth over, Steven, my love. With you, I need nothing else, no one else. If I die this minute, I shall die happy, in love, complete."

I asked: "Why should I need anything else, anyone else, Zenyatta? I should never, and if I want anything or anyone else, I'd be guilty of too many crimes damnable by hellfire."

"But you don't, do you my love?" She asked, this Innocent, this pure woman, this angel on earth.

I kissed her. "Zen, I'm hungry my love."

"Gosh! I must be the most neglectful wife in the whole wide world! I'm sorry, my sweet."

"My love, from what I have seen and heard and know of the world, you may be the most wonderful wife in the world. A whole massive percentage are not only

neglectful but also downright treacherous in their moral and sexual looseness. They are snakes; you are an angel." She smiled, kissed me, and pushed herself off the bed. The sheets were drenched with sweat and fluids.

"O dear!!! Look at what we did! What a glorious mess! You're to blame, Steven DaSilva. Now I will have to change sheets, but I must feed my husband first." We both laughed.

We showered hurriedly and went down. Zenyatta set out our very late supper and we ate. I will have to cancel plans for tomorrow, I thought. Then I thought of her breath on my ear, her heaving, almost excessive breasts.

"How was today, my love?" She broke into my thoughts.

"Oh, it was good. We decided on the cafeteria contract, and got donor letters done and ready to go. Tomorrow the group is coming in to sign the contract and tour the cafeteria to begin moving in their equipment and that kind of thing. They should be ready before the semester begins. Oh, and the Ministry of Works had agreed to give us building material for the new Student Union Building."

"Good. You got a lot done, so you should be quite satisfied. And now you should take some time to read for your courses. And get those psychology books for me, if you can spare the time, of course."

"Do you mind finishing up alone, sweetheart? I rush up and change the sheets. I'll be back down in a few minutes to clear up." She said.

"We can change the sheets together, Zenyatta. And why are we clearing u, anyway. Don't we have people to do that?"

"I suppose we do, and I'm really, really dead beat."

I finished up and we went up together.

Chapter Fifty-Three

I was in the office at eight. Rahma was already there, checking the letters against the list of potential donors. The contract was ready for Pamela Lewis to sign.

"Good morning, Ray," I said, sounding too business-like.

"Good morning, Steve. How was your night? Restful, I hope."

"Yes, it was very restful, thanks. Will everything be done by noon or so?" I responded.

"Most certainly, Steve. I'll make sure of that." I thought she was being suggestive, but I could not be sure. Not that that mattered, anyway.

Pamela Lewis showed up on time as did Kwame. She signed, as did I.

"We'll walk across to the cafeteria to have a look around to get you oriented. Kwame will remain with you as long as you wish. I have about thirty minutes or so to spare."

"Thank you so very much, "Pamela responded, "my partners are in the van downstairs, so we'll all go, if you don't mind."

"Of course not. The more the merrier. Rahma will hold down the fort here." I smiled.

We all walked north along the covered walkway, passing a few soldiers along the way. They stopped and braced in acknowledgement of my presence. I braced in turn. Respect and protocol. Lewis had talked to them, clearly.

Pamela Lewis noticed immediately, "I've never seen them do that for a civilian before."

"Oh, I'm sure that's your brother's doing." I returned.

"Yes, they're all terrified of him, and I suspect that they have good reason. Rudy can be quite rough with them."

The cafeteria was on the upper floor. It was spacious, about one hundred tables, each with four chairs. Pamela and her team each had notebooks. They started scribbling away as soon as we entered.

"What's the lower floor for, Steven?" Pamela Lewis asked.

"I hope to start an indoor gym, Table tennis, weight lifting and other physical activities for males and females as well as a dojo for some style of karate. *Tae Kwan Do* or *Wado Rio*, or so. We'll have to find a good sensei, of course," I answered.

"We'll have to use thin paper to cover tables, but bins will be placed in strategic spots so that they may throw left-overs and replace trays. Cloth table clothes will mean washing, and that's time-consuming and costly."

"Well, I'll leave Kwame with you to take you around and answer any more questions. Do excuse me."

"Of course, we will."

I had spent an hour or so with them. The cafeteria overlooked the cricket ground. The ground-filling and levelling had already started. I was quite pleased. I also saw huge trucks passing by laden with dirt, white sand, stone, hundreds of sacks of cement, steel rods, concrete blocks, and the like moving through the campus. I was glad that we started now before classes started. The complaints about noise would have been loud and interminable.

I walked to the library, borrowed about ten psychology books that should come in handy for Zenyatta. I took those to the car and had Monty put those in the trunk. I told him that I would need to go to a nice, private restaurant for lunch.

"Yes, Sir!" again with a degree of disapproval, though not enough to warrant a response from me.

I went back up to the office, asked Rahma to bring the contract for a last look and my signature. She remained on her side of the desk this time and pointed to where I needed to sign. I could smell her perfume and could hardly ignore the new top which seemed stretched to breaking point from her breasts. The shirt had a rather modest slit at the side. Heels.

"We'll leave at noon." I told her.

"Okay, Steve. If Kwame is not back in time, should I leave the office open?"

"No. I'll get my driver and bodyguard to give him the keys on our way out. This office ought not to be unattended for long, especially when the new semester begins. Scribble a note to Kwame telling him that you're out to lunch."

"Lock up. Let's go. Ray grabbed her bag and the keys, locked, and we went down to the car. Monty came out and opened the door, saying nothing but allowing his silence to register his displeasure.

"Let's go to a discrete restaurant, please Monty."

"Of course, Sir!"

Rahma sat a discrete distance from me in the back, legs held tightly together, her hands folded modestly on her lap. Monty pulled up in front of the restaurant and asked that I wait in the car. He went in to check it out, returned with a nod of approval, and led us in. It was an enclosed booth, discrete. A small table, two chairs

opposite each other. I moved one chair closer to the other so that she may sit to my immediate right.

I ordered a serving of chicken chow mien and she decided on having the same. I had a beer and she had a local drink. Rahma initiated the conversation:

"This is the first time I've ever done this, you know?"

"Done what, Ray? Eaten?" She laughed. I felt my skin crawl. Her laughter started as a wheeze, then swelled into a thin nasal hehehehheh, and ended in a series of snorts. I imagined having to live with that for any amount of time. That would murder any laughter. But then she stopped snorting and spoke:

No, dear. I meant it's the first time I've ever had a meal with a male outside of my family."

"Oooh," I uttered, feigning foolishness.

"But I'm serious, Steve. I've never allowed anyone to even touch my hands, although many boys have come home to ask for me. I always said no. Always."

I placed my hand on the table, palm upward. She put her palm on mine. It was rough, a hand that worked hard. I turned her palm over. It was dark, deeply lined. Her breasts were heaving and her breathing got raspy.

"Let's go," I said.

"Okay, Steve."

I paid and we got back into the car. I nodded to Monty, and he drove us to a hotel I did not even know existed. He slipped the key to me, and I led Rahma straight to the room. I had hardly shut the door when she rushed to kiss me, full-lipped, her tongue darting in and out of my mouth. It was something she had seen or read, I thought. I opened the buttons of her blouse, and she put her arm to her back and unsnapped her bra. The breasts fell out with abundance, big, hard, heavy. I sat on the bed and put my mouth on one breast. She held one and pulled it up to her mouth, sucking the nipples. I undid her skirt, and she stepped out of it, removing her shoes, and I pulled down her panties. I took her hand and put in on my member, still growing large.

Her eyes opened wide with the touch. I took it out and told her to look. She did, and I showed her how to stroke it. She obeyed.

"It will hurt! It will really hurt!"

"Yes, but only a little bit, then you will feel very good. I will make you feel more than happy. Go lie down on the bed."

She lay on her back, her legs closed, "Can you make it smaller?"

"Okay, I will," I lied.

Her hair was cut short. The hair was straight, close to the skin. I opened her legs and got in-between them. She closed her eyes tightly, begging, "Please don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me."

I was beginning to be impatient. I kept her legs open with my knees and put myself slightly into her. Her eyes opened wide with the shock of entry, and I knew the scream was coming from her belly. I clasped her mouth hard and pushed with all my might. I bore down on her mouth with my hand, not caring if I broke her teeth. Despite this, some of the scream came out, and I just stayed in there until she was quiet. I could feel the wet all over me. I withdrew, still hard.

"It's over already. Now get up and we'll go and get cleaned up for the good part."

We stepped into the shower and cleaned up. I told her to remove the sheets, stained with an enormous patch of blood. She did and I told her to lie down on the bare mattress. She obeyed.

"Now I will fuck you and you will like it, Raina!"

She looked at me, puzzled. I tried to get her excited, then entered again, as gently as I could. She opened her mouth wide, but did not scream.

"Good girl. Shut up and move your hips with me." She did.

She was starting to enjoy it, I could tell by the "Ugh" sound she made. Pressure but no pain. My movement was slow and steady, and she got moist, moving with me, faster and faster, until she reached a climax, her face all muffled up. I withdrew again, and held her to me.

"Was that better? Tell me! Tell me you liked it, Raina."

"You're too excited my darling. You're getting mixed up between "m" and "n". It's "m", my darling." She said.

"I said to tell me!"

"It was nice. The second part. I think you tore my inside in the first part. It was nice. I liked it."

"You want more? Tell me, Rahma. You're my bitch now, so tell me to fuck you."

"Fuck me, Steve. Fuck me!"

"Say please!"

"Please, my darling."

And I did, hard, and she responded. I climaxed with her and got off. She clung to me and played with the sticky stuff on my manhood. She put her fingers, then seemed to test it between her thumb and forefinger.

"It's sticky. No one told me it was sticky."

"Who? Who told you?" I was near hysteria.

"My friends from school. They all had sex many many times, but I kept myself."

"Good. But this is between me and you, do you understand, Rahma?" My threat was clear.

"Of course. My parents would kill me if they found out."

"So this is our secret. Ours alone, you hear me?"

"I know. No one can know about this until we're together officially."

I heard Lewis's voice as clear as if he were sitting before me:

"I know you love Zenyatta and that girl will give her life for you. You're gambling with that. You're also gambling with a scandal that the big boys might not like. They could very well conclude that you're a bad investment, Steven. And it is not going to end well. Do you grasp what I'm saying?"

Word for word. I was now aware of the shabby bed, the desperately shabby room, its smell of stale piss and sordid sex. I can lose everything. Everything. Zenyatta. I must tell her everything. That, I know in my heart, will be but the beginning of loss, the worse loss I can suffer. My treachery will break her and she will shed her innocence and become someone else. Or she will simply die, for death is the rancid fruit of all betrayal. I will tell her, but not now.

"Did you hear me, Steve? You seem far away." She breaks into my thoughts. I resented it and welcomed it, at once.

"No, what did you say?" I answered.

"I said that no one must know about us until it's official," she repeated.

"Official? I will tell you this once! There must be no more talk about "Official"! None! If anyone is to speak of that it must be me. Clear?"

"I understand," she said, "you know I will obey you always."

"You'd better or else this will end very badly for both of us! I'm talking about life and death here. Your life itself depends on you keeping your fucking mouth shut. My life too!" I was almost whispering, my fury and panic was such.

"I will be quiet, I swear. I will be patient. I will wait." She places her hand over her heart.

"In the office we will be professional. If we go out again, that will be different."

"I swear to God, Steve."

"Okay. You should shower and get dressed now. I shower when you're done."

She did as I said. I showered, scrubbing hard to rid myself of any scent, as if water and cheap soap could wash away my inner stench. I dressed.

"We'll drop you off on campus. I have somewhere I have to be."

"Okay, Steve."

I walked behind her to the car. She was walking uncomfortably, reaching her hand backward for me to take. I dropped back further to avoid any sign of intimacy, silly given where we were coming out of. Monty opened the door and she got in. I looked at Monty, the tears pricking at my eyes. He put his hand on my shoulder, and said in a hush:

"I'll wipe this away, Sir."

"Thank you, my friend. Thank you."

I slid in. Rahma leaned towards me and whispered: "It hurts a lot down there."

"That's normal," I said sternly. "Monty, we'll drop Ray off on campus and move on. We're running a bit late."

"Yes, Sir!"

After we dropped her off, I asked Monty to drive by Lewis's office. His car was not there, so we passed by his hideout. His car was there. I told Monty to come in with me,

"Are you sure, Sir? I could wait out here."

"No. You're with me."

Lewis saw us come in, and his eyes lit up. He jumped up:

"The man him—" he stopped when he saw my face—"fuck!" Jesus Christ, Steven! You stupid fucker! You jackass! I could beat the shit out of you right here!"

The tears threatened again. Lewis stopped, "Sit down, boy. You too!" to Monty.

He signalled to the bartender to approach, "Bring a bottle of Johnny Walker, three glasses, water, lots of ice." The man hurried away and returned quickly. No one spoke, Lewis looking down to his shoes. He poured generous shots into the glasses and added water into mine and Monty's. He grabbed his glass and downed his drink in one gulp. I sipped mine. Monty emptied his glass. They both poured again.

"And soldier! You stood by and see this fuck-up happen in front your fucking eyes?" Lewis was shouting.

"Colonel, Sir—" Monty began.

"—shut yuh fucking mouth, soldier! Just shut up before I shoot yuh skunt here and fucking now!"

Monty was quiet. He stiffened. He knew that Colonel Lewis meant it. Lewis was sweating profusely, the sweat dripping down his face. I had my head bent in shame and in fear. Monty reached across and patted me on the shoulder. I felt the tear run down my right cheek. Lewis softened:

"Steven, wasn't it just yesterday that we talked about this, man? Just yesterday?"

I nodded. For some reason, this annoyed the colonel.

"Look at me, boy! Get your fucking head up and behave like a fucking man!"

I wiped the tear stain away and lifted up my head. I looked him in the eye,

"Yes, it was yesterday. And today I fucked up. I could not control my dick!"

"That's better. Much better than being a pussy. Look, Steven, I saved you before from this same shit. You know it, I know it, and the lieutenant there knows it, if he wants to be honest." Monty nodded.

"And now I must save you again, right? All our skin is at stake here. All three of us and more! You two know this, right?"

"Yes, we do, Colonel." Monty answered.

"Yes, I put everyone in peril. I'm sorry. I truly am."

Lewis leaned forward closer, "We can't just get rid of this problem like the last one. This one has family. They know where she works and who she works for. But we cannot let this stand. This will get out. This girl will feel used like a whore. She will talk. If we pay her off, she will really feel like a whore. She was new, huh Steven?"

"Yes. A virgin."

"So there was blood, and you left it all there, right?"

"Yes."

And, of course, people saw you. Saw the car, the whole shit, right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Okay. So now we have some facts. How do we proceed, Lieutenant? Ideas? You too, fuck-up!"

"We could talk to her, Colonel. Let her know how dangerous it is to open her mouth about this." Monty suggested.

"Okay, but dangerous to who? She might be so hurt that she might not give a shit about what can happen to her."

"To her and to him. Both of them," Monty returned.

"And deadly to her family! Everyone!" Lewis spat out.

"That will work. Fear works," Monty said.

"What do you think, Steven?"

"Yes, it will work. She very attached to her family. So she will want to protect them. Also, she would be ashamed that she was fucked outside of marriage. That means the family is loose and prospects of a good marriage for all the daughters are about dead."

"Okay then. Everyone she knows, everyone who's involved even indirectly will suffer great harm or death. That's the fear part. You said "We" should talk to her. Who? It cannot be Steven."

"It has to be you, Colonel. The uniform, the bearing, the experience. You have all of that. It has to be you."

"Then it's up to me, again, to bail his ass out, right? Okay."

"Listen, Steven. Send her to me tomorrow morning. Use some pretext. A note about the building or cafeteria. Something. Put blank paper in an envelope, seal it. Tell her that it must be taken across to Colonel Lewis and put directly in his hands. I'll do the rest and give you a feedback tomorrow. Right here. Steven buys the drinks."

"Drinks on me tomorrow." I said.

Now, Lieutenant, take him home to his wife and we can hope he does the right thing. Zenyatta cannot know about any of this. If she does, you're fucked Steven. Behave normally."

"I will." I assured them.

We finish off our drinks and leave Lewis where we found him.

"Hey Rudy, thanks again." He just nodded.

Monty took me home, opened my door, and warned, "Be normal."

"Yes. Normal."

I walked through the door, and Zenyatta was up and running to me. She flung herself into my arms, and I swung her around playfully.

"I'm home to my Queen, my love, my wife!"

"And my lord, my husband, my life is back home to me."

"I'm hungry, my love," I said, "I'm still trying to recover from your attack last night." She laughed and elbowed me lightly in the belly. Monty brought in the pile of books for her, and she shrieks with delight.

"Hah! My light reading! Thanks Monty." She took the books and carries them into the study. I helped. She sat at my desk and started to go though the books. I coughed:

"Oh, and I'm still hungry, my Zenyatta." I laughed.

"I've done it again, huh? Neglecting my husband for Jung and Jean-Jacques Piaget. How dreadful of me! Let's get my husband his well-deserved meal or snack."

Zenyatta sat and watched me having my snack, "You seem tired, my sweet. I suggest you go up an shav a nap."

"Will you come and supervise my nap, my Zenyatta?" I smiled.

"If I come up with you, your very nap will be endangered. I'll tuck you in and come down to look at my books that are begging to be read." She laughed.

"Okay, my love," I acquiesced.

I got up from my nap after night had fallen. Zenyatta had decided which books she wanted to attack first. She brought them up to our bedroom with her notebook and made notes while I napped. That way, she could get her reading done and still be at my side.

Awake, I said: "I really can go back to sleep."

"That is good. You need to rest, but you also need to have supper. I will bring up supper, feed you, and you go right back to sleep."

"I love you, my wife."

"And I, you, my husband. Please give me five minutes, and I'll be back up. Supper in bed!"

By the time she came back up with my supper, I had fallen asleep. I slept restively, knowing that I was thrashing, hearing Zenyatta's sweet, calming voice through the haze. She was the calm, the centre without which all thing will fall apart. I dreamt of Yeats's "rough beast".

I finally awakened at dawn, Zenyatta was applying a cool cloth to my forehead.

"You ran a fever last night, my love. It's broken now, the fever. I'll have some porridge brought up in a few minutes. Just rest, please. Just for a short while."

I reached out for her to hold me in her arms. I felt safe, cool. Zenyatta fed me some brought and I dozed off again. I was up at mid-morning, more energized. I decided to go on campus to have that plan executed. Zenyatta was unsure that I should leave bed much less venture out. I promised to be back in an hour or so. Certainly no more than two hours.

Monty and I drove to the campus, arriving at about eleven. I walked briskly into the office, gave my greetings and went directly to my desk. I wrote a note to Lewis,

My Dear Rudy.

Am doing as suggested. Thanks for everything, my friend.

Steven

I put in some blank pages to make the large brown envelope seem more bulky, seal it, and called Rahma. She came in looking all star-struck. Knowing what she was about to be put through, I was polite,

"Ray,

I need you to walk this across to Colonel Lewis. I do not want anyone else doing this. This must go directly from your hands to his, understood?"

I could see that she was pleased at being brought into the inner circle,

"I understand perfectly, Steve." She took the envelope, clutched it to her bosom ad set off for Lewis. I told Kwame to keep monitoring the activity on the building site, the cricket ground and the cafeteria, and that he should call me at home if I'm needed.

I told Monty that everything is in play, and I was back home in forty-five minutes. I reminded Monty that we should leave at five for our meeting with the Colonel. Then I went in to my Zenyatta, who forced some soup into me, and we went up to bed. I slept while she propped herself up reading. I awaked to find my head on her lap, my arms around her hips, Zenyatta's one hand on my head, and a book in her next hand.

"Hi, my love." I mumbled.

"Good morning, sleeping beauty. Don't worry, it's not morning, but it is four in the afternoon."

"Okay. I have a meeting with Lewis at five-thirty, but I won't be long."

I was up, showered, dressed, and Monty and I left at five. We arrived at Lewis's hideout minutes before time. I told Monty to wait for a few minutes, that I wanted to be exactly on time. The truth was that I wanted to collect myself, to contain my fear that the Colonel's news may not be as I hoped.

"Okay, let's move," I told Monty. He got out, opened my door, and we walked in. As soon as I looked at Lewis, I knew it would be good. A slight twitch played at the corner of his mouth. He was sitting ramrod straight, his uniform looking as if it was just starched and pressed minutes ago. He stood, hugged me, and shook Monty's hand.

"Sit, boys!" He said pleasantly. There was a bottle of scotch with three glasses, a bucket of ice and a mug of water set upon the table.

"It's over. We will have no more trouble from that quarter. Pour yourselves a drink. Let's hope that I do not have to deal with this kind of shit again, huh Steven?"

I raised my glass, as did Monty his. "Bet on it, Rudy!" I said with a certainty that I did not feel. "Would you care to share the details? Give us the chance to learn from the master, man!" I spouted. Monty was stoic.

Lewis laughed: "Trying to flatter my ass, boy? You're still a baby in this business, remember that! I will tell you this upfront. I did what I did today to save all of our asses. But most of all, I did what I did to protect Zenyatta from the kind of hurt she will never recover from. I like that girl like my little sister, and you hurt her, I will hurt you, Steven. Bad! Got me, boy?"

"I hear you, Colonel. Loud and clear, Sir!" I answered quickly, a different kind of fear gnawing at me now. I knew for sure that this man that sat in front of me—my friend—would kill without hesitation or remorse. A platoon of Monty's and Gordon's would not be able to stop him.

He continued: "Details? When se came into my office, I understood why you wanted to fuck that, man. She's a fetching piece of ass! She came in all aflutter like some bird. Anyway, she introduced herself, shook my hand, and said that "Mr. DaSilva instructed me to hand-deliver this to you, Colonel."

I told her to sit, made as if I was examining the package, and put it down. I gave her a serious look and went to work. 'Rahma, I want to talk to you seriously. I was you to listen as if your life depended on it, because your life does depend on it.' She stiffened sharply. 'I know about yesterday. I know everything!' She stuttered, 'But—' I held up my finger as a warning. I told her to keep her fucking mouth shut and listen! 'I know DaSilva fucked you. I know you bled all over the sheets. I know you two left the sheets there in the room, like two idiots. I had my soldiers collect it all. I know exactly who saw you go in and exactly who saw you come out. Don't think I'm bluffing, girl.' The bitch was already crying, man! And I did not even start, but I had to be sure, so I went on.

'What do you know about DaSilva, girl?'

'Well,' she began, 'he is the President of the Student Union and very popular—
'

'So you know nothing at all!'

'Let me tell you the important thing about that boy. He is a big favourite of Comrade Leader Himself! He was hand-picked to get a scholarship to study law by Comrade Leader! Our Leader has huge plans and DaSilva is central to those plans. So if you mess him up in any way, all hell will come to you! Do you understand what I'm saying, girl?'

She started her crap, 'Yes, Colonel—'

I raised my voice, 'No you don't!'

'I will explain this to you once! *Once*! If what happened yesterday gets out, hell will come to you *and* your whole family! We know where you live in LBI, in that small wood house. Father, mother, three sisters, one going to school. Fireside at the back, small wood bridge, old picket fence, two rusty dogs. Everything!'

The girl was crying out loud by now, nose running, and all. I asked her, 'Now you getting the picture? Answer me now!'

'Ye-ye-yes, Colonel,' she stammered.

'If you open yuh mouth to one single soul, two trucks of soldiers will land there late at night, rape every female one by one with yuh mammy and daddy looking on. Every soldier will take a turn with you girls and fuck you all raw. When dem done, dem guh tie ayuh up and burn down yuh house wid all ayuh inside! Now that is what I mean by hell. And all you have to do to bring this is to open yuh mouth once! Not even to DaSilva! Understand now?'

She nodded her head, shaking a leaf. 'One more thing,' I continued, 'I know you like that boy. Nothing is wrong with that, girl. But if he wants to fuck you, you can lock the office door and fuck away. If he wants to bring in somebody else to fuck you, that's his business. If he tells you to strip and run outside naked, you do it. You obey, and you smile! But no going out, no loving shit in public or when the office has people in it or outside waiting. Not even lovey-dovey looks from you. All professional stuff.'

'All of this is frightening to you, I know. But people will do anything to protect DaSilva or they will suffer the same fate as you and your family will suffer if you open your mouth. I am doing you a favour by warning you.'

And I pulled out a small towel, told her to clean herself up, and get the fuck back to work.

End of story. Detailed enough for you, Steven? You wanted details, you've got details."

I could see that Lewis was enjoying this. I was supposed to thank him for this cruelty, I supposed.

"Now drink up, you two!"

Monty and I emptied our glasses and poured another full glass each. Lewis was really having fun now.

"Now, Steven, you see the consequences of your fuck-up?"

"Jesus, Rudy! What the fuck you want me to say? 'Thank you?' Fuck off, man!"

"Listen to me carefully, Steven. I'm the best friend you have, even though it does not feel like that right now. This is the second mess I've had to clean up for you. My instructions come from way, way upstairs. I may not want to protect you, but I have to. This will sink in when you have time to think about it. I am protecting you and Zenyatta, you damn fool. If you continue to be stupid, it will all come crashing on your head. Zenyatta will be crushed to dust. If you do not control your urges, I will tell her myself."

"And you, Lieutenant, you need to do a much better job of protecting this damn ass or else..."

"Or else what, Colonel? What? You will shoot me? You *know* that I can kill you where you stand. You *know* that! So sit down and cool off, *both of you*! *Now!*"

I had never heard Monty raise his voice, never heard him be rude, never seen him angry. I had never seen fear in Lewis's eyes either. It was there now; it was there as clear as day. We both sat. Monty stood for a minute, then sat.

He continued with a calm that was somehow much more menacing: "We can continue our discussion like officers, like gentlemen and friends. Mr. DaSilva, the Colonel is right. You allowed your lust to overcome your judgement. He is also right in saying that he is protecting you, orders or not. Colonel, you were too zealous in the performance of your duty, and you relished the cruelty you visited upon that girl a bit too much. And you were dead wrong to threaten your friend by threatening to bring Zenyatta into this. I will protect her with my life, for in all of this, she is the only lamb among wolves and vipers. She is the only innocent here. And I will die for her. No more threats, no more swearing and cruelty. We will sit—even in silence—and have our drink. First, you too must apologise to each other, shake hands and raise your glasses."

"I'm sorry, Rudy. I am so very sorry that I've put you in such a position. I'm sorry, my friend." I said sincerely.

"Steven, my young friend, I am sorry for getting out of hand. Monty is right. I was over-zealous. I was dead wrong to bring my innocent little sister into it. You know that we all love Zenyatta. We all know that she is pure and innocent. Monty is right. I'm sorry, my friend." Lewis said, his eyes almost teary. We hugged each other. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Monty nod.

"Oh Steven, they've started the cricket ground. Pamela is half=way though setting up the cafeteria. It looks really good, man. And material for your new building is piling up. It's all looking good."

"That's fantastic news, Rudy! Cheers to us!" I raised my glass.

"Cheers to us and special cheers to Mrs. Zenyatta DaSilva!" Lewis said. WE clinked glasses and pored again.

"Hey, Rudy, have you heard anything about donors for the new building?" I asked.

"Naah, man! Well, nothing for certain, but the rumblings I've heard are positive. Should I lean in a bit, with less, enthusiasm, that is!" We all laughed loudly, the tension evaporated.

"Not yet. We will hope that they are generous without us prodding them. Then we try Monty-like gentle persuasion, then we lean in a bit." I responded. We

laughed at my reference to Monty. Lewis raised his glass, "To Monty the Calm One…until he wants to beat the crap out of me, that is."

We laughed even louder, "To Monty!" Rudy and I emptied our glasses. Monty sipped.

Monty spoke up, "Hey Colonel! Wouldn't it be funny if Steven beat the shit out of both of us!" I started flexing my muscles.

"Don't get carried away, Sir. I was joking." And Monty bent over double with his own joke. We drank, talked, teased, drank some more, talked more. It was good, then I passed out.

I awoke in bed, with Zenyatta sitting looking over me. I sprung up and ran to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet bowl before the vomit spewed out> Zenyatta was rubbing my back furiously to get me to empty my stomach. I was still bent over when she ran downstairs and rushed back up with two bottles of Coke. She helped me back to bed and had me sip the sweet drink.

"Is that better? Or would my darling husband prefer some scotch?" She teased, smiling.

I groaned more loudly. She teased some more by taking a sip of Coke and twisting up her face as if she had had a swill of scotch. I had to laugh.

"I love you Zenyatta DaSilva"

"And I love you Steven DaSilva. But you need to learn that there are limits. I've already told off Monty and I'm waiting for Rudy Lewis." She giggled, "Gosh, you three children! Honestly! Children!" And she burst out laughing. I fell asleep to her laughter.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Zenyatta had to coax me awake at around midday. She half-fetched me to the bathroom to brush and wash my face, and I was ready again to go to bed. She fed me a bowl of hot porridge, and I went back into my slumber. Zenyatta had her breakfast brought up and ate while she watched over me. I was asleep, yet vaguely aware of her comforting presence.

She brought up several books along with her notebooks, propped herself up in her usual fashion and read. A pot of tea was at the ready when I awakened from time to time. Eventually, I was able to make it downstairs to make a call to Kwame. I told him that I will not be in today, but that he should keep an eye on the three major projects we had going. If there were any developments on the donor front, he was to call and let me know. He reported that there were three rather generous pledges from the bigger companies. I thought this a good start and told him so.

I relayed this to Zenyatta. She had a suggestion:

"When you're better, maybe you'd want to visit each government ministry with Lewis (in uniform, of course) to leverage the ministers. You could start with White and Ramroop. The other ministries may not want to be outdone."

"That's a fine idea, my love. Fine indeed. I will bounce this off Rudy."

"Meanwhile, you stay in bed and allow me to pamper you." I smiled at the prospect of my Zenyatta spoiling me. It was already evening when I was well enough to be up and about. My wife has me shower, put on loose clothes, eat my first solid meal for the day, and insisted that we go for a walk around the neighbourhood.

As we walked, she remembered that Lewis had called enquiring about me, "I told him that you were resting but getting better. I was clear that I'm holding him solely responsible for my husband drinking himself silly.

"What did he say to that?"

"Oh, you know Lewis. He laughed it off, said he was guilty, but that 'that boy needs to hold his liquor much better.'"

"Yes, that sounds like Rudy all the way. You know, Zenyatta, Rudy owns you as his young sister. He's extremely protective of you, as is Monty. They're good men."

"I know they are, but that does not make them responsible men, you know."

"Agreed, my love."

The walk was longer than I thought it would be, but Zenyatta kept saying that we should go just a little farther. We eventually turned back. Back home, she plied me with tea.

We were in bed by ten.

The next morning, I was as new. Monty and I left for the campus at eight. I went up to the office. Kwame and Ray were already there. I greeted them in my usual manner.

"Kwame, we will walk around to take a look at the work being done. Ray will hold down the fort here, okay Ray?"

"Of course, Steven."

The cafeteria did look like a place where one would want to eat and converse. Clean, spacious, organised. I told Pamela that I was really happy with the changes. I wanted to use the bottom half of the building for a gym, with a table-tennis board, space for a dojo, a free-hand exercise room and a limited weight room. I was beginning to have doubts about funding for the equipment that would be needed, and staff—a sensei, cleaning staff, a part-time trainer, etc.

The Reid's people from Works had already filled up the ground to avoid flooding during the rainy season. The levelling, seeding, measuring of boundaries, and pitch-making should be done soon after. We will need to have cricket gear. Funding again.

The Works folks were digging a rather deep hole for the foundation of the building. The architect suggested a three-story building. The foundation, I was told was important. My plan for that did not yet solidify in my mind. I will need to seek advice about lots of things, I knew. But from whom?

Kwame and I went back to the office and talked a bit about donors. I included Ray in the conversation, and voiced my worry about funds for the things that will be needed. Kwame suggested we wait. Ray said that we should wait as well and hope that donations roll in. They had no ideas other than that we should wait. I changed the topic:

Kwame and Ray, I want you to go to my lecturers' offices and get the reading lists for the four courses I will be taking over the year. I gave them the names of the lecturers and the courses. Once you get the reading lists, I want Kwame to go and borrow the books from the library. They said they would do that today and went off.

"Oh Ray, how was Colonel Lewis? Did you have a chance to talk with him?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"He was very business-like, but he was full of information. He was nice though, for the few minutes I spent with him."

"Good. I'm glad you find him nice. Most people are terrified of the man. He has quite the reputation for being not-so-friendly, to put it mildly. He's not a man anyone would want to cross. We'll talk more later."

They left to get the reading lists. Then the idea struck me that I should call Cousin Peter in Canada. I dug out his number and dialled. He answered:

"Peter D'Aguiar speaking."

"Hey Cousin Peter! It's Steven. How you doing, man?"

"Wow! A call from the man of the moment! I'm good, really good. How's Zenyatta? How's married life?"

"Everything is perfect, Peter. Perfect. I don't even want to leave home, to be honest. But I must say thanks for doing all that you did. Thank you so very much, my dear cousin."

"Not a problem, Steven! Any time you need anything, just call."

"Well, truthfully, that's why I called. As you know, we're putting up a new Student Union Building on campus. We are looking for donations from the business community and I was hoping that you'd be in a position to donate something, no matter how small."

He was quiet for a few seconds, so I said, "I'm being pushy, I know, Peter."

"No, no, Steven. I was just thinking. Our uncle—my namesake—you know he owns the brewery there right? What I can do is call him and ask him to call you with a donation. Once it's you, he'll give. I can't say how much though. We know he's a mean bugger, but with family he might be different. I'll call him and talk with him today. Whatever he donates, I will match. I'll call you at home tonight at eight or so. Hey, I have to run. Talk tonight. Bye, Cousin."

In said bye. I packed up some papers excitedly, and ran down to the car.

"Get us home quickly, Monty." He gunned the car, put on the lights, and we were pulling into the driveway in five minutes.

As usual, Zenyatta was running to me. She jumped up and crossed her legs around my waist. She kissed me on every part of my face.

"Girl, I hope you don't ever become a 300-pound heavyweight." I declared.

"But that, my love, is my burning ambition!" She laughed at her witticism.

"Do you wish something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Coke? Water? Scotch?" She asked.

"Have you fun Zenyatta DaSilva! Have fun! I'll have a coffee, thanks my sweet."

"Melissa! The master demands coffee! We'd better hurry lest we incur his wrath!"

I could hear Melissa laughing in the kitchen. Zenyatta and I sat in the breakfast room. I waited until the coffee was served, then spoke:

"I called Peter today."

"Oh! How sweet of you, my love! Did you tell him hello for me? Did he ask how we were, how I was coping with you? Did you tell him how grateful we are for what he did?"

"Nope! Your name never came up. It was about business."

"Steven DaSilva! You are a trouble-maker and a fibber. He's much too gracious not to have enquired."

"Of course he asked, woman! But I called about him giving a donation towards the new building."

"And?" She asked, impatiently.

I took my time, raised my cup and had a sip of my coffee. Oh, this is delicious, Melissa," I said, raising my voice that Melissa may hear. I could hear her and Quincy chuckling in the kitchen.

"And? What did he say?"

I sipped again and made the "mmmm" sound. Then I told her about the entire conversation. "To be honest, I just called him on the spur of the moment. Before the call I was really worried about finding funds for the building, for gym and other sports equipment, a salary for a sensei for the dojo, and such things. I was really worried. After the call, I was a bit more optimistic, but I'm still rather worried."

"Be optimistic. Peter will not let you down. But about cricket equipment and other equipment, can't you or Lewis call the minister of sports? They must have a budget for equipment, right? Call whomsoever it is. And then there is White who always seems willing to help you. Think, Steven!"

"You are my saving grace, Zenyatta. I never thought of that. I was just hoping that the business-people would come through."

"Well, someone in this family has to do the thinking, huh?" She smiled coyly, batting her eyelids.

"True! Let's make a list of our needs, and then I'll call the Colonel."

She was up in a flash to get a notepad and pen. We made a comprehensive list of things we thought were necessary. I called Rudy and told him about my conversation with Peter, my worry about funding for various things, and that Zenyatta had suggested we talk to the Minister of Sports and Henry White about equipment. Lewis said he'd be happy to call the ministers. He made some wise-cracks about how I should get down on my knees that I have Zenyatta. I agreed.

"Do you want me to give you the list tomorrow or read it out now?"

Zenyatta spoke, "Why not send it with Monty right now?"

Lewis: "Boy, get down on your knees and thank whatever God you pray to. That girl is special, you hearing me?"

"I hear you, Rudy. Truly I thank the heavens for her. I'll send the list right away with Monty."

Zenyatta and I dispatched the list, and I led her upstairs. I put her hand to feel me getting big,

"We can't, Steven, people are downstairs. They will hear us, my love."

"Don't you want to satisfy your husband?"

"You know I do. I'm wet from just touching him. But…"

"Then suck him. Get down on your knees and suck him." She did, gagging.

"I raised up her dress and pushed myself hard into her." Zenyatta pulled a pillow over her face and bite into it. She moaned. "Give it to me. I want him big! Fuck me."

We had just finished, still naked when the phone rang.

"You'd better answer it, husband. It might be important. You can always have me."

I answered the phone. It was Lewis:

"Done! You'll get the whole list next week Monday. I'll find storage. Get back to what you were doing."

I hung up. "Lewis said that I will get everything on the list and he will find storage."

"That's great, my love. You really are great, especially in me." I got excited again, and we started all over again. This time Zenyatta forgot that people were downstairs.

We lay there holding each other, breathing hard, unwilling to move.

"I'm sore, bruised. No more for two weeks, you hear?"

"I hear nothing. We'll see. Do you realize how much I love you, Zenyatta?"

"I think you just showed me," and she giggled. "You know I'm not going down there until everyone leaves, right?"

"I know, my beautiful one. I know."

"You know that you'll always be my virgin, right?"

"I know, my heart, I know."

"Zenyatta, you have by your love and example, by your innocence and goodness, put me upon a road at the end of which there may yet be redemption. There is no repayment for this on this earth that is enough. You have come into my life and have been as rain to a soul that was as parched desert. Fruit may yet emerge

out of that soil, arid by sun and sin. How may I even begin to give thanks for a thing such as this, my love?"

And we held each other as if this togetherness was our last.

It was only after the house was emptied of sound, within and without, that we unclasped each from the other. We put on tee-shirts and shorts and went downstairs, almost on tiptoes, inexplicably.

"Tell me why we are sneaking around in our own home, please."

"I have no idea, my love. None at all."

Zenyatta made coffee for me and tea for herself, and we sat at the breakfast table.

"Zenyatta, you have by your love and example, by your innocence and goodness, put me upon a road at the end of which there may yet be redemption. There is no repayment for this on this earth that is enough. You have come into my life and have been as rain to a soul that was as parched desert. Fruit may yet emerge out of that soil, arid by sun and sin. How may I even begin to give thanks for a thing such as this, my love?" The words came from my heart, and I could feel my eyes burn.

"My Husband, if I have been this or brought this into your life, it is through the love I have for you. My love is pure. You have brought joy to me that I did not think possible, but here it is. Something new under God's sky."

"Zenyatta, you have been a God-fearing person, have you not?"

"Yes, I think so. If church-going is a measurement, then yes. And yet there are wicked people, the hypocrites and thieves, the liars and adulterers, who also attend churches of every sort, so that may not be a good yardstick. As I've told you before, I cannot remember the family missing one single Sunday mass. My parents are righteous people, humble and true. I may have got those qualities from them as my heritage and by practice. I do not know."

"When last have you been to church, my love?"

"Not since we got married. It is a feeble excuse, but it has been hectic."

"Your family is Roman Catholic, I think?"

"Yes, my love."

"Then we will join your parents and go to your place of worship on Sunday."

"I'm surprised by this, my husband. You did not strike me as being religious in any way. What has brought this on, Steven?"

"I really am not sure. It is you, maybe. It may be that I need to try to be redeemed in some way, to have my sins forgiven. I don't know. Unlike you, I

cannot remember a single day when I was in a church, except for weddings and funerals."

"My parents will be delighted, of course. But they will be even more puzzled than I am. We'll call them and let them know."

"Yes, call them. And be assured that I am the most puzzled, although I do feel this need for atonement."

"And that, my darling, is enough. I will not pry, I promise."

I kiss her, and we take our beverages into the study. She called and they talked, but being wrapped up in my thoughts, I did not listen to the conversation. As soon as Zenyatta hung up, the phone rang.

"Peter!" I exclaimed, and picked up the phone.

"Hey Steven! Good evening to you and Zenyatta."

"Good evening, cousin. I have news. I spoke with Uncle Peter. The crusty Peter is very much the crusty Peter. He started off by complaining that you did not invite him to your wedding, that the only time anyone in the family calls him was when they want something, and that my call will be no different, he was sure." Peter was having a good laugh.

I joined in the laughter, "I'm sorry you had to endure that, Peter, but we all know how Uncle Peter can get."

Peter: "Well, it may have been a good thing that he was not invited. He would have insulted everyone, especially the politicians. 'Set of scoundrels' he called them. I was surprised that he seemed to know everything about you though. He was wary about you 'throwing your lot in with those asses', but was proud that you were doing something to improve the university. He thought that you should come work for him. Anyway, it was a long conversation in which he had nothing good to say about anyone.

I told him that we thought that he could make a generous donation to the Student Union Building. Also, I would try to match the amount of his donation with my own. He said he'd want to see that! Anyway, he wants you to write an official letter asking for a donation towards the building and have it delivered to him. The man refused to tell me the amount he'd donate though. Typical Uncle Peter!"

"Yep. That's him aright. But we both know that he always comes through…eventually." We laughed.

"So get that letter to him as quickly as possible. As soon as you get a reply, phone me with the amount, and I'll match it as promised."

"Thank you again and again and again, Peter. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Repay me by taking care of that girl of yours, Steven. I think she's a rare breed of human being. Bye, cousin."

"Bye, Peter. And thanks again."

I relayed all of this to Zenyatta who heard snippets of the conversation.

"Your uncle sounds like a tough man to deal with, huh?" She ventured.

"Tough? Tough? Are nails tough? He's almost impossible to deal with, Zenyatta."

"You know Steven, maybe all this toughness is just an act. Maybe he's just a bit hurt that you've all kept your distance from him. Maybe." She offered, then went on,

"Do you know what I think? I think we should invite him to dinner. Just him."

"Have you completely lost your mind, Zenyatta? Good Lord! That's the worst idea you've ever come up with, girl. No no no no."

"I think it's a grand idea, Steven. When last have you ever had a one-on-one talk with your uncle?"

"Never! He'd always have everyone there and berate them one by one."

"See? That's my point! Because of that no one invites him to their home! And so he becomes more and more isolated. He lashes out because he is isolated. He is isolated because he thinks no one cares about him except for his money. We can change that, my love. Let him know that you care about him."

"You may have a point, you know. It's a gamble, though."

"Isn't everything a gamble, my love? But we can minimize the risk in a few ways. First, you invite him *after* he offers a donation, or even if he does *not* offer a donation. Otherwise, he will see it as some sort of bribe. Second, dinner can just be supper. No ostentation, nothing at all fancy. Just me setting out supper and Quincy to serve. We can offer a nice scotch though, if he drinks. With the scotch, you have a chance to speak of your cousin. Simple, close, intimate, quiet."

"Girl, you have a brain in that beautiful head of yours, you know. It makes sense, although I'm not sure any of this will work with Uncle Peter."

"Right! No guarantees, but what do you have to lose?"

"Okay, we se it up after I hear back from him."

"That's my Steven!" She smiles, almost condescendingly.

Chapter Fifty-Six

I was first at the office the next day. A large pile of books—essential reading for courses—was on my desk. I moved them aside and drafted a professional but polite letter to Mr. Peter D'Aguiar, CEO and Founder. As soon as Rahma came in I asked her to type it out, address and envelope, and I took it down to have Monty deliver it to Uncle Peter.

I went back up, put the books in order as they appeared on the lists, and started my reading. I was aware of Rahma and her heavy presence. I called her and invited her to sit. She was hardly seated when the tears started. Kwame came in and I got up immediately and walked to him, "Kwame, I want you to use the day—the whole day—to check on the ground and the work on the building. Tomorrow I want ideas about what we'll need to stock the various segments apart from those we'll lease. Also, check with Colonel Lewis about the storage space. He'll know what you're talking about. I need quiet time right now."

Kwame about faced and left. I want back to Rahma. The tears were flowing freely now, quietly. Tears born of fear and hurt rather than of anger, I supposed. I was moved. I stood close to her, and still sitting, she put her head on my belly, her breasts on my middle. I did not want to be aroused, but I could feel him getting ready. She stroked him through my trousers to largeness, then unzipped my trousers and pulled him out. She was stroking, playing, admiring.

"It's so beautiful," and she put him in her mouth. I was helpless with lust. I pulled her up and told her to remove her panties. I put her to sit on my desk and put myself into her. She contained her scream. I wanted this to end, and she was drooling down her chin. I was near, and pulled out.

"Lemme drink it, Steve. Please let me drink all of it." She took him into her mouth, brought me to a climax and swallowed all of it.

"God, that was good. I know we have no future, but it was good. I have no future. I've given away my most valuable thing."

"You need to stop this talk, Rahma. Stop it."

"Okay, Steve. But will you make some time when we can talk? Right here in the office, in private."

"Okay, I'll make the time." For the first time in days, she smiled. She put on her underwear, unlocked the outer door, and went back to her desk.

I tried to get to reading, but my self-disgust got in the way. Two hours after I had given him the letter for Uncle Peter, Monty returned. I was surprised when he came into the office. He glanced at Rahma, wished her good day and came to me,

"You uncle asked me to wait for a bit in his waiting area. An hour after, he came back and told me to give this to you."

"He did this right away? Just like that?"

"Yes, Sir! Right away, just like that."

"Sit down, Monty."

There were three pieces of paper, held together by a paper clip. The first was a handwritten note:

Dear Steven,

I hope this finds you and your bride in good health. It was a surprise hearing from you and from Peter. But they were pleasant surprises. I hope my contribution helps with your efforts to improve conditions on this nation's single campus. I look forward to hearing from you again.

Your uncle,

Peter.

It was an unusually friendly letter, given the man's reputation for causticity. I will cherish this personal note and the reserved affection it conveyed. Of course, he could not resist the slight barbs.

The second sheet was typed on the Company's official letterhead.

Dear Mr. Steven DaSilva,

I am enclosing a cheque of five hundred thousand ($5000,000)local dollars as my contribution to the new Student Union Building you plan to erect. This is on behalf of my Company named above. I am leaving the expenditure solely in your hands, without input from any other person.

Yours truly,

Peter D'Aguiar

CEO

The last was the cheque. I hopped up with delight. I showed Monty. He smiled and reached out to shake my hand. I ignored it and hugged him. Rahma came running. I showed her the cheque and she joined in the group hug. I noticed the milky stain on her face.

"Rahma, I think you need to go clean up your face." She blushed and left to clean up.

"I'll call him now."

"Yes, Sir! I'll be downstairs."

I dialled the number on the letterhead. His secretary answered.

"May I speak with Mr. D'Aguiar, please," I spoke into the mouthpiece.

"May I ask who's calling?"

Tell him it's his nephew, Steven DaSilva.

"Yes, Steven! What you want now?" He barked, but I though I heard a chuckle behind the bark.

"Nothing Uncle Peter. I just called to say a big big big thank you. It will really help, truly."

"Okay. What else?"

"Oh, and my wife and I would love to have you over for supper any evening soon. Please say you'll come, Uncle Peter! Please! Zenyatta has heard so much about you. She's anxious to meet you, as am I."

"Your wife? Yuh married? I did not know that! Well, I suppose wedding are only for real family and close friends, huh? Why invite Peter D'Aguiar? And what kind of name is that, anyway? Zen what?"

"Zenyatta, Uncle Peter."

"Oh, she got my name too? Zenyatta Uncle Peter DaSilva. Nice name."

"Yes, she got your name too, Uncle Peter. How about next Wednesday evening? Say yes, please." I was begging, and he was probably rolling on his office floor in glee.

"What time? How about six?"

"Okay, Uncle Peter. I'll send the address with Monty, my driver and my home phone number."

"Okay, boy. I have to go. You've wasted enough of my time." He hung up. I was dripping wet, but all things considered, that went swimmingly well, I thought. I called Peter and told him in detail what had happened. Peter was laughing so hard that he could hardly breathe.

"Hold on! Hold on!" He screamed into the phone. Then he started a whole new round of laughter: Zenyatta Uncle Peter DaSilva!!! What a name!!! Man, I wish I could be there when you tell her that she has a new name!

After more than half of an hour we both settled down, remarking upon the difference between his note and his talk. Peter Assured me that he will match the amount as promised and send it to me in a few days:

"My accountant will do the exchange and such things and I'll send it in Canadian dollars."

"Oh Peter, can you write a formal letter like Uncle Peter's to accompany your contribution, please?"

"No Problem! Do you and Zenyatta need money? I can send some for you as well."

"No, Peter. We're doing well, really. No need for that."

"I'm just letting you know that I'm here if anything arises, okay?"

"Got it."

We hung up, and I headed down with Uncle Peter's envelope and a few books in my hand. Monty was smiling broadly as he opened the door,

"Well done, Sir!"

"Thanks, my friend."

We raced to Zenyatta. She had just come downstairs, and ran to me as soon as I opened the door.

"My amazing husband is home!" She took some of the books and placed them on the dining table. She eyed the envelope:

"That looks official."

"It is, my sweet." It's from Uncle Peter. I told her in detail what transpired. She screamed, laughed, cried, danced, then became sombre.

"I know exactly what we'll prepare for Wednesday. Nothing hoity-toity. Simple, ordinary food. We'll have beef pepperpot with cassava bread. We eat with fingers! I'm betting that your uncle will appreciate the simplicity. People of means can have extraordinary meals whenever they want, but the food of our people is pleasing to their origins."

"You, Zenyatta, are a wise woman," I said.

"I know it, boy! I am indeed wise. After all, who was it that had the idea to invite your grouchy old uncle, huh? Meeeeee!"

"The idea came from Zenyatta Uncle Peter DaSilva!" She punched me playfully in the stomach.

We had coffee and I retired to the study to read up in preparation for the new semester. Zenyatta busied herself with her reading and note-taking. I continued to be wracked by guilt at what happened earlier today with Rahma. I wondered at my

weakness and by Zenyatta's strength, but my treachery and by her innocence. It was that innocence that blinded her to my treachery for she could not conceive of that nastiness. Zenyatta was at the dining table doing her reading. I left off my reading and told her I was going to have a quick shower and be back down in a jiffy. She smiled. I scrubbed my skin until it hurt, as if that could wash away the filth I contained, the filth that I was.

I walked back down feeling no better than when I went up. I slinked pass Zenyatta, went into the study, and tried to drown my guilt in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on Language. My light appeared at the door of the study and asked if I wanted tea. I looked at her, unable to speak. She came to me hugged me from behind and kissed my head:

"You've done well today, my love. I'll get you some tea." I nodded.

Yes, I've done well by being the most heinous heap of filth.

Zenyatta returned with my cup of tea. I found my voice:

"Let's go and see the progress on campus tomorrow, my sweet."

"Really? You won't be too busy? I really don't want to be an impediment. I would dislike myself if I were."

"You will never be an impediment, Zenyatta. Do not ever even think that. Ever."

"In that case, I'd love to go. And a guided tour, no less!"

Chapter Fifty-Seven

I took photographs of Uncle Peter's official letter and the cheque early in the morning. Monty drove me to the bank, and I deposited the cheque into the Student Union account, which now boasted a total of five hundred ad ten thousand dollars. We swung back to get Zenyatta at around ten. Monty instructed Gordon to come along for added security. Zenyatta appeared at the front door. She wore a red tee-shirt tucked into a light-blue jeans. She wore a pair of comfortable red loafers. In her simplicity, she looked elegant. Gordon opened the door, and she slipped in. She kissed me.

Our first stop on the campus was to the office. By the time we got out of the car, an army jeep with five armed soldiers pulled up. The soldiers at the gate must have called in to the Colonel and alerted him of Zenyatta's presence. He must have assigned them as protective detail. Typical of Rudolph Lewis. The Officer in Command, a Captain Kellawan, explained as much. They were instructed to stay by our side allowing no one to approach our group of four. The captain explained that the Colonel had put the soldiers on high alert. Zenyatta asked the captain to convey her gratitude for the added security to Colonel Lewis.

Gordon assumed the forward position, the captain and another officer on either side of us, and two at the rear. The perfect security cordon. Our first stop was to the office, the stop I most dreaded but the one I thought was the most important. Two soldiers had already gone into the office to ensure it was safe (and for Lewis to drive home a point, of course!). The captain entered the office first and signalled his okay. We entered. Kwame and Rahma were standing at attention, expecting some dignitary, I supposed. I introduced Kwame to Zenyatta, the former doing his best not to smile. He reached out his hand, but Zenyatta gave him a hug, saying: "Kwame, my friend, are we not beyond hand-shaking after all you've done for me and Steven?" That made him happy, made him feel special.

I introduced Rahma: "Zenyatta, this is Rahma, our secretary. She keeps us organised and controls appointments."

"Nice to meet you Mrs. DaSilva."

"Oh, just Zenyatta. I'm not one of those officious people." Rahma's eyes were wide open, he mouth slightly agape. They were both pretty women, but Zenyatta

appeared to wear her dignity as if she were born to it while Rahma seemed to shift with discomfort. Zenyatta shone in her simplicity; Rahma seemed starched in her rigidity. Monty was close, making his protectiveness obvious.

We moved toward my desk. Zenyatta proceeded to set the papers and books in order, making the desk appear much neater.

"There," she turned to me, Monty, and the Captain, "Is that not better?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the two men responded, simultaneously.

Then we left, Zenyatta shaking Rahma's hand again, and giving Kwame another hug. We walked to the cafeteria and Zenyatta spent a long time chatting with Pamela Lewis, asking questions about the set-up, and admiring the work done so far. Their relationship seemed warm from the start.

Next came the cricket ground. The Captain called over the person in charge to speak to us. I asked a few questions, and was happy when Zenyatta took over. We went on to the building site. Once again the, Officer in Command called over the chief contractor and had the noisy equipment silenced. The only sign Zenyatta gave to me of her discomfort with the attention was that she held my hand very tightly. With each new deference, her clasp got tighter.

The foundation having settled into place, the frame of the new building was being constructed. Even with just the skeleton it looked impressive. Zenyatta was full of questions for me, Kwame, the contractor, everyone within earshot. She was very sweet in her asking, and I was impressed by just how curious she was. Rather like a prodigious child in her innocence and pleasant disposition She was asking away when the figure of Colonel Lewis loomed up. He was marching towards us, and ground to a formal halt when he got to Zenyatta. He gave the perfect salute to her, then removed his hat, and bowed. She shouted, "Rudolph Lewis! How wonderful! How wonderful it is to see you again, And she hugged him with genuine affection. She was so amazingly unself-conscious, this woman of mine.

I could sense eyes peering through louvres of every office of every building with a view of the scene that was unfolding before them. No one on the campus had ever seen Lewis being effusive in this manner, and one would think that—with his performance—it was Comrade Leader's daughter that was visiting our campus. I knew that none of this was choreographed, but it darned well would seem so to on-lookers and peering eyes.

Lewis put one arm over my shoulder and the other over Zenyatta as we ambled back to the car. He was engaged with Zenyatta about the improvements and about how she was surprised to have been greeted with such pomp and ceremony. She told

him about Uncle Peter's donation and Cousin Peter's as well. Lewis gave me a playful cut-eye and complained to Zenyatta about my keeping him in the dark.

Zenyatta returned playfully: "Well, Colonel Lewis, you cannot be privy to all family matters, you know."

I saw my opening and told him: "And there you were, thinking that she would take your side! You tell him off, Mrs. DaSilva!"

"Steven, it may be a good thing if you were quiet at this point." And we all had a good laugh.

We were back home by about three. I felt tired and grimy. Zenyatta was simply bubbling over with excitement, relating everything to Quincy, Melissa, the maids, Gordon and Monty, as if the last two were not there. She even tried to mimic Lewis march and salute and bow, messing it all up, giving a salute with her left hand and all. No one corrected her, and I kept my mouth shut.

She was still rattling on like an excited child when I went up, showered and fell into bed.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Wednesday rolled around quickly enough, and my nervousness at having Uncle Peter to supper grew with each day. When six-fifteen came and went, I was beginning to breathe easy with the thought that he had forgotten or had changed his mind. At six thirty, his car rolled up. Monty showed him in. Uncle Peter was a stern-faced, straight-backed, wiry man. He could freeze a room full of people with a gaze that conveyed how much he loathed all who were there.

I walked up to him, my hand stretched out, "Uncle Peter, welcome to our home. This is an honour, indeed. May I introduce you to my wife, Zenyatta?" He deliberately ignored my hand and opened his arms to give Zenyatta a hug. I had never seen that man hug anyone. My mouth fell open. Both of them seem to ignore me.

"Let me look at you, Zenyatta Uncle Peter DaSilva," he instructed.

She returned, "I'm glad that you got my name right, old fella." They were guffawing. The house was suddenly emptied of tension. I breathed.

"Well, at least you have spunk, child," he quipped as she stepped back.

"I think you are the most lovely thing I've ever seen, girl."

She curtsied, "Well, thank you, kind Sir."

"Tell me, girl, what idiocy caused you to marry *this*?" He waved his hand at me derisively, "Did you go temporarily insane? Did he work the D'Aguiar/DaSilva obeah on you?"

"I believe that being merciful is a virtue, Uncle Peter. It would have been sheer cruelty to have rejected him, and I am not cruel."

He nodded his understanding of her argument. I decided to enter the fray,

"No one may have noticed, but I'm standing right here. I'm the mumu you all call Steven DaSilva."

Uncle Peter ignored me again. "Come on, Zenyatta, show me around and introduce me to people. Oh, you can come too, boy!" They linked arms and she introduced him to "our family": Monty, Gordon, Quincy, and Melissa. They had all heard of the great Peter D'Aguiar and were quite in awe.

I followed as she showed him all parts of the house, the employees' quarters, and the grounds.

"This is all very impressive, Steven. You two should consider having two dogs. I can tell you that they are a whole lot more loyal than people. What kind of dogs do you like, Steven?"

I said I liked the Doberman breed, but I'd never seen one in the flesh.

"That's a good choice. They are faithful and very protective."

"Zenyatta?"

"I don't know, Uncle Peter. I have seen photographs of all kinds of dogs, and I rather like the Great Dane."

"Another good choice. But you cannot have both, so choose one breed." He commanded. I pointed to Zenyatta and she pointed to me.

"Well, I don't have time to listen to a husband-and-wife squabble, so discuss it and call me. I'll import two pups of whatever you agree on." He said with pretend harshness.

"Steven, my love, will you not offer your uncle something to drink?"

"What would you like, Uncle Peter?"

"What yuh got?"

"We have some really good single malt scotch that Cousin Peter brought."

"That sounds great. Just ice, please, Steven."

Quincy moved quickly.

"Let's sit in the breakfast room. It's more cosy," and she grabbed Uncle Peter's hand in one hand, and mine in another and half-dragged us into the breakfast room.

"Now I'm starting to feel sorry for you, boy," Uncle Peter exclaimed.

"Frankly, I think it's your influence, Uncle Peter." He laughed loudly, a rare sound indeed. We sat with him at the head of the table, a place to which he was accustomed, and we sat on either side of him.

Quincy had the glasses, ice, and scotch ready. Uncle Peter poured a generous shot for me and then for himself. Zenyatta had Coke. We raised our glasses,

"To the beautiful Zenyatta and my fortunate nephew Steven!"

"I am happy to be in your home. I feel comfortable, which—as Steven will testify—is not something that I feel very often. You have made me feel at home, and I'm grateful for that."

"Thank you, Uncle Peter. Our home will always be a place that will welcome you with open arms. I promise you that. But I do need to ask. I've found you to be the most charming man I've ever met, so why do they seem to see you as some kind of ogre?"

I looked at her, hoping she would withdraw the question. Uncle Peter answered:

"Well, child, I am an ogre. This family is populated by weaklings and bovines, and they bring out the worst in me, I'm sorry to say. My other nephews are married to some ill-bred and ill-informed cows. Don't you think so, Steven?"

I smiled but remained quiet.

Uncle Peter continued: "You see, Zenyatta? This is my problem with this boy. He never wants to take a stand. He wants so badly to be liked that he seldom expresses an opinion that can be seen to be negative. Other than that, I really like Steven."

"I can assure you, Uncle Peter, that this nephew of yours is beginning to hold his ground. I've seen this at home and at the university. He remains pleasant, but stands his ground at the same time." Zenyatta said.

"I am glad to hear that, my beautiful child. Truly glad. You do not strike me as someone who would say anything that was not true. I felt that the moment I saw you. It may be the single most significant cause for me to feel at home."

Zenyatta blushed a deep red.

"I do not mean to embarrass you, dear. But, like you, I speak the truth. And I cannot tolerate ignorant people for long."

"Now tell me about the goings on at the campus."

I told him about everything, with Zenyatta chiming in every now and then. He was mostly expressionless, but did ask one or two pointed questions, especially about the franchises and about functionality and profitability generally.

"And after you are granted your degree?"

Zenyatta answered: "Steven will read for his degree in law in the UK, and I hope to read for my degree in psychology at the same time."

"Sounds like good plans. And how do you plan to finance all of this?"

"I've got a government scholarship, and we hope to pay for Zenyatta's on our own. In that way, we thought, she will not be bound to anyone." I responded directly.

"Again, it sounds like a solid plan. And what do you have for supper? I'm a bit hungry."

"I thought we could have something simple, the only dish that's indigenous to the West Indies: pepperpot and cassava bread." Zenyatta answered, nervous about how he'd react.

"Oh! How delightful! I have not had that for decades. I alwys seem to be given something fancy. This is quite a change."

"Shall we have supper now, Uncle Peter?"

"Yes, yes, yes. I can't wait!"

Quincy brought out the plates, a bowl of the dark, gravy-and meat dish, and plates of cassava bread. We dug in with our fingers. Upon the very first taste of the meat, gravy and cassava bread, Uncle Peter look up and made a sound that confirmed that it was delicious. "Hhhhmmmm! Now this is food, children! Real food!"

Zenyatta was as pleased as punch, and I was happy. Uncle Peter cleaned his plate and asked for more. Quincy refilled his plate, and he wolfed that down as well. He had a smaller third helping and we had seconds.

Finished, he leaned back, "This is the best meal I've had in years! Years…maybe ten years or so. Compliments to the cook!"

Zenyatta, called for Melissa, "Melissa, Mr. D'Aguiar has high praise for your meal."

"Thank you very much, Sir. But Miss Zenyatta was also involved in the cooking, so she should share the praise."

"Compliments to you, ladies. I am full to the gills."

"Would you like me to pack some for you, Uncle Peter? It will be even better tomorrow." Zenyatta asked.

"I would not want to impose on you, but if you have to spare, I'd love some."

Melisssa rushed away, and Quincy poured a small drink in our glasses.

"Zenyatta, how about if I give you a scholarship towards your degree. No strings attached."

"You'd do that for us, Uncle Peter?"

"Of course I would, child. Steven, is there any other female in the family who is reading or who has read for a degree of any sort?" He asked pointedly.

"I can't think of anyone off the top of my head."

"Of course you can't. There are not. They are quite content to remain ignorant. But I'm not going to get started. I must tell you too that if there is any way I can help, just pick up the phone and call me. Promise me you'll do that Zenyatta and Steven!"

"We promise, Uncle Peter," said Zenyatta, "but you have done so much already!"

"Well, I donated towards that building of Steven's, but that's to the university. Any further help will go to you two."

"Thank you, Uncle Peter," I said, "we are grateful that you came. Now we should plan when you will return."

"I'd love to come back, Steven. I'll call. It will be a joy meeting Zenyatta again…and you too, Steven." He smiled.

"And now I have to run, kids. Thank you for your fantastic hospitality." And he got up, hugged and kissed Zenyatta and hugged me tightly. We walked him to the door, and watched as he boarded the back seat of his car. We stood in the doorway and waved until the vehicle went through the gate. We went in and flopped down on a sofa. I took minutes before I could find words,

"That has to be one of the most peculiar men in this country."

"Maybe, but he also has to be one of the most gracious and generous," she returned.

"After tonight, I'd have to agree. The man is quite an enigma. His causticity came across as genuine humour tonight. No one in the whole family would believe it if I told them."

"Don't you see, Steven, it's all an act? He's a kind man who wants no one to exploit that kindness. So he assumes the mask as of an ogre, which is quite unlike his true face."

"I suppose it takes Zenyatta to see through the act. For all of my life, all I've seen is the mask. But three helpings? The man does not even take a bite at gatherings. You made the perfect choice, woman."

"So did you, obviously," she said coyly. I smile.

"Oh, speaking of obvious, that girl is besotted by you." She said.

"Girl? Which girl?"

"The girl in your office. Rahma, is it? Positively taken." She insisted.

"Where in the world did you get that from, my love?" I asked, trying to get a grip on the rising panic inside of me.

"Oh, it was so very obvious. She looked at me as some kind of rival, in that measuring way that one woman looks at another. That full-on look, and yet keeping the object of her affection in sight, from the corner of her eye."

"I think you're reading too many of these perception theory books, my darling," and I made what sounded like a hallow giggle, even to me.

"Make light of it if you wish, Steven. But I wish you would be careful."

"I will be careful and vigilant, I promise, my love. At the first sign of anything untoward, she will be out of a job."

"I am not asking you to take a job away from anyone. But I am asking you to safe-guard yourself. That's all. We cannot be held responsible for the way people feel about us, but we can dissuade them if those feelings are inappropriate. That is what I'm saying, okay?"

"I understand, my sweet Zenyatta. I'm glad you pointed this out. I'll be vigilant."

"Good. Now let's talk about pleasant things like Uncle Peter, shall we?"

I was relieved, but hid that relief very carefully. "Yes, this Uncle Peter tonight was different from the Uncle Peter that anyone in the family has experienced." I said.

"Maybe, but I am convinced that we saw the real man tonight. Kind, funny, gracious, and guardedly generous. I'm sure of it, my love."

"I will always trust your instincts, my Zenyatta." She smiled at that.

"Let's go for a stroll around the compound, shall we?" I asked. She was up in a flash, pulled on a pair of slippers and off we went. We were out for about fifteen minutes when a soldier came up with an envelope that someone had left at the gate.

"Who's it from?' I asked.

"He just said it's from your cousin, Mr. Peter D'Aguiar. That's all."

"Okay, thanks, Corporal."

"Good night, Sir."

"Good night, Corporal"

We went back in and went directly into the study. Zenyatta sat and waited as I opened the envelope. There was a hurriedly scrawled note from Cousin Peter. I read it aloud for Zenyatta:

Dear Steven,

I am sending my contribution with my friend Danny Sukhoo, a friend of mine here in Canada. He will give to you a cheque for 500k, as promised. I'll repay him here in Canada. This should make for speed in getting the cheque cashed quickly at your end. I've also given him a formal letter that follows Uncle Peter's quite closely. IF there is anything else I can do, just ask.

Love to you and Zenyatta.

Peter

The cheque was signed by Danny Sukhoo.

"Wow! That's one million from your two relatives alone. Even if the other people collectively donate two million, the SU will be in good shape," Zenyatta speculated.

"I think you're right, but let's see how it goes with the local business folks. I'll call a general meeting as soon as the semester starts and let students know of the progress we've made in such a short time. This will definitely get back to the big boys."

Chapter Fifty-Nine

We were up early, had breakfast, and Monty drove me to the bank to have the cheque deposited. Our total was now one million and ten dollars. We should be getting fifty thousand for the cafeteria franchise within days.

I was in the office at around ten. Rahma was there, looking as if she had not slept in days, and Kwame was his usual enthusiastic self. I asked to speak to both.

"I just deposited five hundred thousand in the SU account, and I showed them the book with its total. Kwame was ecstatic,

"We've never had close to that in the past, Steven. This is truly amazing!" He enthused.

"And we should be getting a cheque from Pamla Lewis in a few days. Ask her about it, Kwame. Any news from the businesses, Rahma?" I asked.

"Yes, but I have not opened them as yet. I was waiting for you."

"Okay. We will after this. I want you both to think about how we will allocate the space in the new building. My plan was to have the Social Club on the top floor. Beverages, music, a dancing area, etc. The second floor could include a clothing and gift store. Student Union memorabilia. But we can also buy the university stuff and do a mark-up of fifteen percent. It's income. Kwame, I want you to find a student volunteer to keep our financial records. He or she must be dependable, trustworthy. I'd like our books to include the various in-kind donations from the Ministries of Works, Youth and Culture, and Home Affairs. Also, call a meeting of the general council for next week so that we can update them. We will call a general campus-wide meeting within two weeks of the start of semester and update them. Maybe we can get some ideas regarding creative use of space.

They both took notes and promised to act on all of this. Okay, Kwame, go do your thing while I go through these donor letters with Rahma. He left; she brought the letters.

"May I say something before you start with that? Please." She asked.

"About?"

"It's personal. I've locked the door, so don't worry about that."

"Okay. You have fifteen minutes."

"You wife is really beautiful. She is graceful and charming as well. I was jealous, to be honest."

"I really do not want to be discussing Zenyatta with you, Rahma. But thanks anyway."

"I know that I have no chance with you, that what you felt for me was just lust. But I have to tell you that I am in love with you and will always be in love with you. If anyone comes and asks to marry me, I'll say yes. I have no illusions about happily-ever-after and all that shit. You cured me of that. As soon as I get married, I will quit this job and the university. I know I will have to come up with some lie to explain the loss of my virginity, but that's not your business, I suppose. I will spend my life trying to repair my life, the one you wrecked."

"Okay," I answered callously, "anything else?"

"Yes, one more thing. Until I leave, you can fuck me whenever you want, right here, like a whore."

"Okay. But if I get any crap from you, there will be consequences. You understand that, right?"

"Oh yes! I understand that very very well," she responded.

"Okay. The letters?" She opened the letters and handed them to me one by one.

The commercial banks and insurance companies were quite generous. The big businesses were somewhat disappointing; the sugar estate was generous, being now a government entity, the smaller businesses like restaurants and bars were as kind as their profit margins would allow. Individuals were very generous, headed by Rudolph Lewis with ten thousand dollars. Some of the ranks even donated their five and ten and twenty dollars. I expected the university itself to be generous, there was nothing from them. I instructed Rahma to get up a columned list of donors and the amount donated. I planned to get this to Lewis and ask him to work his magic.

"Get me a copy of that list of names and amounts and the total from donors. Put in the D'Aguiars'."

"Yes, Sir."

As soon as I got the list, I walked over to Lewis. He was his usual welcoming self.

"Take a look at this, Rudy."

"If you take out your cousin and uncle, you've got two hundred thousand. That's not bad, but it should have been much more. Well, I'm telling you what you

know. So how much pressure do you want me to put on the bitches? What grand total you have in mind?"

"I'd say that you should put as much pressure as needed. Grand total of 2.5 would be good, I think. Did you notice that the university did not give a cent?" I asked.

"Yep, I noticed. Here's the thing that bothers me about these jackasses. The government pays for every damn thing here, their salaries and everything else. Yet, they want to have rules like this country is a town in their nation. Our rules and laws do not apply when you pass those gates. I'm telling you, Steven, I feel like walking across there with a few of my soldiers and kicking some teeth out. Then make sure that the fuckers don't get paid. You will see how the pigs will squeal, man!"

Lewis was deadly serious. I tried levity: "Then they will strike, from the VC down."

"Strike? Do you see what we do with strikers, boy? We break skulls like eggs! It will be fun for us."

"Or you could go across there and talk to the Bursar, the money man. He'll probably say that the VC will have to say yes; the VC will say the academic board will have to say yes; the academic board will take three months to meet; and they will vote that the university council will have to say yes. The university council *may* meet next year! When they meet, if they meet, they will say the Bursar is in charge of money." I rattled off and laughed.

Lewis laughed with me, but half-heartedly, "Man, and imagine tax dollars paying for this shit, eh? Imagine! You know what I think? I think that if Comrade Leader did not have a different use for you, you could have made a study of how other universities work, come back here and ask Comrade Leader to put your ass in charge of this place. You make changes with his blessings!" He was serious, continuing:

"Hey Steven, why don't you come with me to see Seeraj, the money-man?"

"You sure? You sure you want me there, Rudy?"

"Yeah! It will be fun, man. Come on!"

We marched across to the bursary, a flat, train-carriage place. There was a shop counter with a flap, some poor woman sweating in a cage, and various people at small desks seeming to shuffle pieces of paper, brows furrowed in dreadful concentration.

A clerk came up as Colonel Lewis raised the flap and let me through, then he dropped the wooden flat that landed with a very loud clap. The clerk jumped, but got out,

"Can I help you?"

Colonel Lewis glowered at the fellow, and he shrivelled. Lewis marched on to the office emblazoned with BURSAR on the glass frame, his heels banging on the floor. He opened the door without knocking.

"What—" the startled bursar started.

"Seeraj! How you doing, man?"

Seeraj jumped to attention, "Colonel! I'm good, I'm—"

Lewis cut him off, "You know Steven DaSilva? Of course you don't! He's just a student. But this boy is the President of the Student Union."

"Pleased to meet you," said the bursar as he reached out to shake hands. I shook his hand.

"Seeraj, we're not here for pleasantries." Lewis said, the threat unmistakable. He pointed to a chair for me to sit, and he sat on the other. Seeraj flopped into his plush executive chair.

"Nice chair there, bursar. You like it? Comfortable?"

"Yes—yes, it's comfortable," he stammered.

"Look, Seeraj. Mr. DaSilva wrote you a nice letter asking for a donation towards the new building on the campus. You see it going up, right?"

"Yes, yes, of course!" He forced a smile.

"Good. You're very observant. You did not respond to that polite request. Why not, Seeraj?"

"I'm waiting for the VC to find time to meet with senior staff."

"When will that be?"

"I really don't know, Colonel."

"Once you meet and decide on if and how much you will donate, you come back here and sit in your comfy chair and write a cheque, right?"

"Well, it's not as simple as that, you know. It has to go to several committees for approval. It's a process."

"Oh, that's what you call this shit? Process!"

"Look, lemme tell you how that building is going up so fast. The Ministry of Works donated *all* the material and contractors. The Ministry of Home Affairs donated material too. The Ministry of Youth and Culture, like the other two have donated everything for the cricket ground on the campus. Additionally, responding

to the *same* letter you got, Mr. Peter D'Aguiar donated *half of a million dollars*. Another D'Aguiar, a businessman in *Canada* who has *nothing* to do with this campus, also donated *half a million dollars*. Within *two* days of getting the *same* letter you got! The Student Union already has one million in the bank from two people that have *nothing* to do with *your* government-funded university."

Lewis turned to me: "You get where I'm going with this, Comrade DaSilva?"

"I do, Colonel. I do." I responded.

"But forgive me, please Comrade, while I explain to this asshole sitting in that comfy, government-bought-and-paid-for-chair. So Seeraj, Comrade DaSilva is graduating next year. He will leave this campus for the UK on a scholarship paid for by Comrade Leader himself. He will not put that fucking building in his pocket and take it. He will not take the brand new cricket ground and brand new gym and up-to-date cafeteria in his suitcase! That will be left as improvements to your campus for future students to enjoy. But I will be here to tell new students that you fuckers did nothing to improve conditions, that students had to do this for themselves with the backing of the government. How much respect you think they will have for you skunts? Tell me!"

Lewis stood, hovering over Seeraj menacingly.

"Tell me before I bust yuh face up, fucker!"

"No respect, Colonel."

"So how much will the university donate? Make it good! How much?"

"I think we can donate sixty thousand, Colonel." Stammered Seeraj.

"What you think about that Comrade DaSilva? You good with that?"

"Yes, Colonel. It's okay."

"Well, it ain't okay with me! Seeraj, write a cheque for one hundred thousand!"

The bursar's hands were unsteady; it took him several seconds to fish out the official cheque-book, several seconds to steady his hand, then scribbled out the cheque.

"Good! Now that's real decision-making, right Seeraj?! Real leadership! Comrade DaSilva, now you have a real-life example of effective and immediate action!"

"Oh, Seeraj. What about your personal donation, man? Show this boy what it means to love this campus!"

"How—how much, Colonel?"

"How much would make you admire the bursar, Comrade DaSilva?"

"I'd admire ten thousand, Colonel."

The bursar fished out his personal cheque-book and scribbled a cheque for ten thousand local dollars. I smiled.

Lewis: "See, Bursar? Soo how this boy smiling with admiration?"

"Yes, Colonel. It's nice to see young people smile."

"Have a good day, Seeraj." We left, ambling back to Lewis's office.

"Now, Steven, you see how to get donations?" He laughed loudly.

"I see, o master donation-getter!" We laugh, and I take my leave, cheques in pocket. I knew that for Lewis, that was but the first of many. For some reason, I thought of the time when Monty had him back down in fear. I also thought of the utter fear that he instilled in Rahma.

I went back to the office and locked the door behind me. Rahma was at her desk.

"Come to me!" I commanded.

She got up quickly and followed me to my desk. I unbuttoned her blouse and pulled her large breasts from her bra. She reached behind her and unclasped the bra. I grabbed the large, heavy breasts and squeezed them. She moaned. I kissed the nipples, dark, large. She put her hands on my crotch, rubbing me hard.

"I want you in me! Fuck me, Steve."

She unzipped me and put my manhood in her mouth, sucking hard, ""Put him in me! Come in me!"

"No. Not today, Rahma. Maybe tomorrow. I just want your lovely breasts today."

"Oh, You can't come today. You have to save yourself to fuck your bitch, Zenyatta, huh?"

I flew into a rage, and punched her hard in the stomach. She doubled over, falling to her knees, vomiting on the floor. I wanted to punch her again, but found the strength to resist that urge. Instead, I grabbed her hair and pulled her head backward and up to look at me,

"I want you never to talk about her! I fucking warned you! Now I have to call the Colonel, and he will do as he said he would do. Your whole family is done! You've killed them all, you stupid shit."

I let go of her hair, and she held on to me ankles, kissing my shoes, pleading, crying, vomit running down her chin:

"Please! Please! I beg you! Please don't! I will worship you, do anything you tell me to do from now on. I swear to God. Please, Steve. Have mercy on me. I am your slave from now. Whatever you say, I will do. Please!"

I enjoyed the abject submission, as I'd done before with Raina. I was aroused by it.

"This is your last chance, my slave, my whore. Last! Now get up, button up, clean up the floor and yourself."

She did exactly as I said, with speed and accuracy. In five minutes, everything seemed normal, except for the smell of vomit.

"When Kwame comes back, tell him you ate something bad and threw up. That would explain the stink. Spray perfume or something!"

She went into her handbag and fished out a perfume bottle and sprayed it around.

"Good girl. Now record that we received one hundred thousand from the university towards our projects and ten thousand from Mr. Seeraj, the Bursar as a personal donation."

"Right away, Steven. Anything else?" she asked, clutching her belly, wincing.

"Not right now. Go to your desk."

I packed some books and papers and left, telling her to go to the ladies and do herself up.

I wanted to be home. I wanted to be with Zenyatta. Quincy pointed to the study, and I went directly to the door. I knocked and heard the key turn. She held me, and I held her. It was not that I wanted to be with her body, but I craved being in her presence, her purity and innocence. WE held each other for a long time, then I narrated the whole story with Lewis and Seeraj.

She was quiet for what seemed ages, holding the cheques and then placing them in the drawer of the desk.

"That sounded cruel, what you two did to that man."

"Oh, I did not do anything, really. I just played along with Rudy."

"You were a participant, Steven. You know it. You were there, an active participant. I wish you would avoid suc encounters, my love. They always leave a moral blemish. Always. It is simply not right, my love."

"Okay. I will avoid those in the future, my Zenyatta."

"Good. And now tell me about that girl."

"Who? Rahma? Oh yes, she says she's getting married, I told her that I was happy for her and that I was sure you'd be happy for her." I lied.

"My goodness! That's good news, but rather sudden, isn't it?" She queried.

"I don't know, Zenyatta. I really don't involve myself in people's personal business, my love."

"Oh, quite to the contrary, my darling husband. You are naturally quite a probative person: always who, where, when and why. That's how you are built. Which is why you will be an excellent attorney."

"I suppose. But not with people I work with or people that work for me. That's a bit too close for comfort." I was beginning to squirm with discomfort.

"Oh, never mind. But you have to admit it's quite sudden."

"Yes, it is sudden. Maybe the parents arranged a match. Don't know, don't care. It's not our business, Zen."

"Okay, my darling. This is making you uncomfortable, so let's put this to bed."

"Please, let's do that. I rushed home to be with my wife, not to have a discussion about some random person and their random life." I said, needlessly defensive.

"You may want to ask Rudy to light up on his enthusiasm although he's trying to help you."

"Lord, Zenyatta. Asking Lewis to lighten up is like asking a raging bull to go in reverse." I laugh. So did she.

"That's quite the image! More literary than lawerly, I must say."

"Girl, I'm going to pay dearly for this psychology tree that you are climbing."

"Hah! Yet another metaphor from Steven DaSilva!" She breaks out into more laughter. I laugh too, but could almost hear the falseness in my own laugh.

"Tell me something, Steven. Do you think that "m jealous of this girl?"

"Honestly, it did cross my mind. I dismissed it, of course. But it did flit across my mind."

"You should know by now, my dearest, that I will never degrade myself to feel such a base emotion. I'm capable of self-deprecation—like many West Indians, of course—but self-degradation, self-debasement, not at all. I will never bring myself to wallow in that filth. Not ever."

"I know that, my noble wife. You have too much dignity to go low. It's just one of a million reasons why I love you more than life itself, my Zenyatta."

"So that's settled. But there is something in that girl's eyes that I cannot put my fingers on. Something deeply sad, something like hysteria or disappointment or fear. I just don't know. But whatever it is, it's there."

"You may be right, but I really don't care that much. I have enough on my plate. I can tell you, though, that if she is an impediment to the work I'm supposed to be doing, I'll have to replace her."

"I truly hope it does not come to that, my love. I truly hope it does not come to that. With compassion comes understanding, my love."

"Zenyatta DaSilva, you are an angel sent from heaven. Truly you are. You are beautiful in unfathomable and immeasurable ways."

"Thank you, my love."

Chapter Sixty

I did not suggest to Rudolph Lewis that he should curb his enthusiasm in leaning on donors. The result was that the donations totalled three million dollars. After extensive consultations, I decided on the space allocation and rental fee structures for the new three-story building, scheduled to be commissioned before Christmas.

The top floor will be dedicated to the Student Union Social Club that sold liquor and was furnished with tables and comfortable chairs, barstools, a dance floor, music equipment. It was to be managed and staffed by students who were given a monthly salary, the revenue and stock books were to be submitted to an independent accountant each week. The Student Union Executive was to oversee the books and conduct monthly assessments.

The second floor was to house various stores: a clothing and souvenir store; a general clothing and shoe store; a pharmacy' a burger/fries and sandwich joint; a jewellery store; and a 25-Cent Store. The rental fees varied according to projected profits. The ground floor was where the Student Union Offices were to be located, including an office for the president and secretary of the Union, an office for the independent auditor and accountant, a conference room, and an auditorium. The projected income was between four to five hundred thousand annually. This, I felt, was a conservative estimate.

For the cricket ground, I thought of building a modest shaded stand for spectators and two modest dressing rooms with showers. I also thought of contracting a wicket specialist to prepare the pitch, but left the actual selection to the council. I thought it was a good idea to rent out the ground for off-campus teams for a modest fee. This could be put in a fund for the upkeep of the ground itself.

The cafeteria, in retrospect, was under-valued, but the contract was up for renewal in a year. The new president could re-negotiate the annual fee upward to seventy-five thousand.

I also suggested that we activate an alumni association immediately. The people who had donated so generously towards the new building were to be made honorary alumna. Finally, I told the council that I will try my utmost to get Comrade Leader

himself to commission the new building. This was met with resounding applause, even by those who were opposition-oriented.

Kwame was to organise a general meeting of students two or three weeks into the semester. He should lobby the university administration for the large lecture theatre, and have a list of potential guest speakers. I thought of Uncle Peter D'Aguiar, but I knew what his reaction would be. The VC, of course, would be invited to speak, and I knew that he could not say no. I planned to be clear that the Student Union was generating more revenue than the university itself, that entity being wholly dependent on government largess. I planned to invite Henry White as well to represent the government. I planned to use him to get Comrade Leader to commission the new building. I knew this was shameless self-promotion, but I had to justify their investment in me. White, the Vice Chancellor, and I will be at the head table on stage, with the trusted Kwame as the Chairman.

I planned to have Zenyatta in the front row alongside Rudolph Lewis in dress uniform, the army Chief-of-Staff, Ministers Reid and Ramroop, and maybe one or two Student Union council members.

All of my plans came off without a single hitch. White spoke briefly and with pride, spoke vauntingly of Comrade Leader and me. He actually spoke of me in affectionate terms. The VC spoke about numbers of students and lecturers, about the university's world-class standards, and the history of the place. He almost lulled the packed large lecture theatre to slumber. I woke them up with a fiery breakdown of what was accomplished in a matter of three or four months. I gave praise where it was due and praised those who would serve my purpose in the future. My talk contained no mention of the university administration, but I praised my lecturers who were seated in the second row. I singled out Comrade Leader, and the ministered detailing how they helped. It took all of fifteen minutes.

The large gathering was wonderfully responsive to me, and Henry White was obvious in his admiration and delight. When I spoke of the Union bank account going from ten dollars to five million and ten dollars in a matter of months, the applause could have brought the building down. It was my most important moment since I entered the campus. Apart from my marriage to Zenyatta, it was the most important moment of my life. For almost the entirety of my talk, my eyes were looking directly into hers, looking at her expressions change from a proud smile to a puzzled frown, to an encouraging nod. Nonetheless, I was keenly aware of the mood of the crowd, the approval of Henry White, the admiration of Lewis, and the wonderment of my lecturers.

Zenyatta and I, at the end of it, invited the VIP's to our home for cocktails. Lewis and White showed up as did the other two ministers, the VC, and a few council members. Quincy and the servers were in full swing, ensuring that each glass was filled, snacks were at the ready, and no one had to ask for what they needed to be given them. Zenyatta moved around like a whirlwind, chatting, listening, laughing. She seemed to spend most time with my lecturers and with the VC than anyone else, but neglected no one. Kwame was fluid, moving between the council members, the ministers and the lecturers. I remained mostly with the politicians and with the lecturers. The latter could not stop admiring the sheer size of the house and the sweep of the ground. I took pleasure in showing my study to the lecturers and the VC. It was clear that my study dwarfed his office at the university.

Apart from the political and military folks, they were all quite surprised at the number and quality of protection offered by the army and the clear respect they showed to someone as you as I was. The mere address was awe-inspiring. I was happy that, given the splendour in which we lived, they now had a renewed idea of who I was in the national scheme of things. My grades and status on campus were assured, although I did not plan on taking anything for granted.

By seven in the evening, the house was empty of company, and Zenyatta and I sat in the sofas and breathed.

She teased: "Well, your VC made much of his chance to drink single-malt scotch. I don't think he ever put down his glass until it was time to leave." She had a chuckle at her observation.

"What did you think pf the event itself?" I asked, "I saw a range of emotions crossing your face like Conrad's 'sunshine and shadow.'"

"Overall, I thought it went splendidly. You certainly had the effect you wanted from the students. White and Lewis were the most proud people in the building, and the two other politicians seemed to see you as their equals. I think word has gone around that you are the Leader's new favourite. I think you were a bit too dismissive of the university administration, but maybe they deserved it for their narrowness and intractability. But everyone was impressed by your delivery, the sheer volume of things you've done in that short time. That was objectively impressive, my love. I was very proud of you, my husband."

"And what did you not like, Zenyatta?" I asked smiling.

She smiled back, "I thought you went overboard with your praise of your leader and his minions. But I understand why that may have been necessary, you know."

"Zenyatta, Zenyatta, Zenyatta! My beautiful wife! You could be a top diplomat if you chose a field like International Relations instead of psychology. You refuse to offend, but you are quite clear about how you feel about issues, people, and the manner in which things are done and said."

"Steven DaSilva! I am quite happy in my preparatory readying for the psych degree. So back off, pal!" her laughter rang out in the house. I sounded good to my ears. I would not exchange that laughter for all the applause in the world.

"Oh! One other thing: did you have to make it so obvious that your eyes were made only to look at your wife?"

"Let's go shower and to bed so I can really show you that you are my world."

We went up, showered, and I showed her.

Chapter Sixty-One

In terms of the Student Union (and by extension in terms of pleasing the politicians), I only had the commissioning of the new building left to be planned and executed. Zenyatta was adamant that no new projects should be undertaken and attention should be paid to the remaining courses. She busied herself with her reading and with travel plans. I agreed with her thinking, although I thought that the travel plans bit was premature.

My plans for the commissioning in December were thrown off when Henry White called and informed me that Comrade Leader was going to be abroad at the same time. According to White, Comrade Leader wanted to be at the commissioning of the new building and asked that it be put off for January. I assured him that I will postpone it without much of a problem. I told him that my main concern was to have our Leader and our Ministers there to see the opening of a building that would not have been built without their support. This, of course, pleased White enormously.

When I got the news, I was upset. I had everything organised, and delays did not fit into my plans. But I smiled and flattered and hid my displeasure with utmost care. End-of-semester exams were around the corner, and that added to my anxiety and edginess. I decided that I will spend the time revising quietly in the office. By doing that I could keep whatever bile that was building up in me away from Zenyatta. In spite of myself, I remembered what that venom had done to Raina.

I decided that Kwame and Rahma were distractions and should be given time off until exams. Students had the days off from classes in order that they concentrate of exams. Ten days of peace to revise in the office. No conversation, no visitors, no distraction, nothing but revision. I had two examinations scheduled for the first day of the exam period, so I decided to concentrate on those. I put aside the books and notes that were relevant to those courses. The remaining two had two-day spaces in between. I was ready to buckle down, my books and notes meticulously arranged.

I was almost two hours into my work, when there was a soft knock at the door. I was startled though the knock was soft. I refused to answer. The knock came again.

I again refused to budge. The knock became harder, more persistent. In a temper, I got up walked across the office and opened the door slightly.

"Good day, Steve. I was hoping to have a few words with you," Rahma said, flashing me her most winning smile. I peered down the corridor, and there was one fellow there yards away from her, dark, bearded, straight oily hair, quite short.

"You know I'm working, right?" I asked rather loudly.

"I know. I'm sorry, boss, but just a few minutes, please." She pleaded. I opened the door to let her in, she waved to the fellow behind her to wait. I locked the door after she came in and went directly to my desk, still standing, signalling my displeasure.

"What is so urgent, Rahma?"

"I thought you should know that I'm getting married!" She said triumphantly.

'Good for you! Is that all?" I asked. Then, stupidly—my nerves and venom getting the better of me—I added: "Does he know about you?"

"No. But I thought you should know that we're going to get married and move to Canada. And that you should meet the man who will fuck me!"

I lost composure, "Get on your knees, you whore! Now!"

She withered before my eyes and got down on her knees.

"You know what to do, whore! So do it!"

She unbuckled my pants and pulled it down. I put my member into her mouth,

"Now suck him because you like it!" She sucked, until I became hard.

"Get up! Over the desk!" She did as commanded and I raised her skirt and tore of her panties. I pushed myself into her. She opened her mouth to scream. I warned,

"You want that sucker to hear you getting fucked? Or should I open the door to come watch who he's tying himself to?"

"No, please, Steven. I beg you, please!"

"Okay. Stay quiet, you slut." I pushed myself into her anus, and she grunted with the pain.

"Not one sound! No tears!"

I pushed harder and harder, and she grunted harder.

"Get back on your knees and suck." I ordered.

She shook her head. I grabbed her hair and put myself into her mouth until I climaxed.

"Swallow it! No stains for that shit out there to see! Swallow!"

She did, gagging.

"Now pick up your panties and fuck off, Now go get married like a good whore. I hope he beats the shit out of you for many, many years!"

She picked up her ripped underwear, put it into her skirt pocket, and made for the door. I locked it behind her, cleaned myself up. I was in no frame of mind for study. I called Lewis and insisted that we go for a drink at his usual place. He agreed. I went down, saw Rahma and her man sitting on the sidewalk, passed them and went into the car. Monty drove off. We arrived before Rudolph, waited, and we all went in.

After two stiff drinks of scotch, I asked Monty to give the Colonel and me some time. Monty left.

Lewis started: "Aright. I know that girl came to your office when they were supposed to be off. Tell me, what the fuck did you get yourself into now?"

I told him the whole sordid tale, leaving out no detail at all. He leaned forward devouring up every word, absorbing every detail. He did not interrupt me at all, rapt as he was. When I was done, he clapped his hands,

"Ah!! Now you are learning how to do things without me having to bail your ass out! I'm proud of you, boy! Good work. How do you plan to proceed?"

"I don't. Let her get hitched, fucked by some piece of shit, taken abroad, and beaten. She cannot return here, that's for sure. That's the end of my problem, except that I have to find me a new secretary."

"Good. Find a nice, nubile, obedient one this time, will you, please!" He laughed loudly.

"Don't worry, Colonel. I will."

We changed the topic back to the commissioning of the new building and called Monty back in. We drank late into the night, Monty measuring his intake studiously.

I awoke the next morning in my clothes. Zenyatta was not happy with me, but remained civil and polite. I knew that a telling-off was due…and deserved. After the staff left, it came. The fact that she refused to be acrimonious or loud or accusatory made me feel much more rotten about everything. She simply pointed out that such conduct as I had displayed ought to be below my dignity. She also pointed out that my studies would inevitably suffer, thereby putting my scholarship in the category of something undeserved. Surely that ought not to be good enough for me. Then she was done, and was back to her affectionate, playful self. I wondered at the nobility

of this woman. By what quirk of Fate could this gift of grace be bestowed upon someone as poisonous as me?

Zenyatta was a divine puzzle that was beyond my ability to solve, I thought. It was clear that some of her humour and grace came from her parents, from both genes and from the moral decency and goodness of her upbringing. Zenyatta was not religious in any kind of outward manner; her spiritual depth did not depend on religiosity. She would never be found jump and waving and screaming as they do in so many of these American-style displays of faith. That mimicry which was cheap showmanship masquerading as worship. But there was something about this woman that rendered her immune from evil intent, something that preserved her innocence.

Ordinary women would react to my behaviour by thinking about what would happen to them if something were to happen to their spouse. Zenyatta was unrelievedly focussed on my welfare and well-being, with no consideration for herself. Zenyatta was simply incapable of falsehood, betrayal, and treachery. She was my opposite in every way, and I knew that I did not deserve this gift from Heaven. I, who has dedicated my whole adult life to tearing asunder anything that was fragile, to rendering blemished anything that was pure, to making innocence into something ugly and twisted. She was the only human being who has got close to me without being dragged into a pit of ugliness.

I wondered—and still wonder—whether it was her love for me that blinded her to my malevolence or whether it was her innocence that refused to allow her to acknowledge my true nature.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Thanks to my wife's steady guidance, my grades were excellent for the semester, and I was becoming more confident of winning the prizes that Lewis had talked about. One semester to go, with just the commissioning to be done. As the day got closer, the more anxious I became. Zenyatta calmed me down, only to have Lewis and White wind me up. Their advice came in waves, rather like warnings.

Lewis assured me that this was the most significant event since the campus itself was commissioned by Comrade Leader. In fact, he had never again set foot on the campus after that. Now he was going to be here again, for only the second time. This, of course, only served to increase my anxiety.

White advised that my speech should not be too long so as to eat into Comrade Leader's time, although no one would dare give him time limit. I should not speak for more than five to eight minutes, and give the bulk of the praise to the man Himself. Now I was nervous about being to five or being to eight. I also had to thank the other ministers for their generosity as well as thank the major donors. Not to mention them could lead to resentment from that group.

The fact that a large turnout of more than students also made me anxious. All the ministers would be there, all the major businessmen, the advisors to the various ministers as well as their permanent secretaries. The army and police top brass were to be there too,, of course. The general public will be there, if only to boast of having been at one of Comrade Leader's events.

Two days before the commissioning, I was throwing up. Zenyatta tried her best to get me to concentrate on anything else except the event. She pointed to the excellent speeches I had over just the last year. This will go even better. She convinced me that I was born for the big stage with the big players. And she reminded me that this was my campus, my brain-child, my project. No one could know it better than me.

I had the chairs labelled with the names of dignitaries, I put all the ministers in the front row, The second row was reserved for the diplomats and university senior folk. The third reserved for the lecturers and army and police heads. I placed Zenyatta in the front row sandwiched between Comrade Leader's wife and Colonel Lewis.

I was to be at the high table with Comrade Leader, Henry White, and the VC. Kwame, once again, was to be the MC. It was to start at four p.m. I was there at three. Kwame, Lewis, Monty, Gordon and Quincy were there. Cool drinks were to be set with glasses on the high table. Another large table was also set with cool soft drinks and water. Council members were to usher dignitaries to their assigned seats. By the time I arrived, the place was already packed. The auditorium was packed and the crowd spilled over to areas beyond the auditorium. Loud speakers were set up everywhere so that people could hear, even if they could not see the speakers as they made their remarks.

I had arranged with Pamela Lewis to have borrowed a red carpet that stretched from the place where Comrade Leader and his wife were supposed to exit their vehicle. On one side of the red carpet, we positioned the diplomatic corps: The High Commissioner of the UK, the Ambassador of the US, the High Commissioner of Canada, and the High Commissioners of sister West Indian States. Lewis and I were to welcome the Leader and his wife and follow him as he was introduced to the members of the diplomatic core and the senior university officials. I was to walk a few steps behind the Leader while Lewis did the introductions.

The sirens signalling the Leader's approach could be heard from the main road, so we all took up our assigned positions minutes before the outriders and cavalcade of vehicles entered the gates of the campus. The big, black Rolls Royce stopped at precisely the point where it was suppose to. Colonel opened the back door, and out stepped Comrade Leader. I was the first time I'd seen him in the flesh, a rather large man, dark, close cut hair, a small moustache, large black eyes that seemed to take in all around him without moving.

Lewis saluted snappily, and the Leader saluted in return.

"Comrade Leader, Your Excellency, may I introduce Comrade Steven DaSilva, President of the University's Student Union," Lewis said, loudly.

I stretched out my arm, bowed, "It is my honour and my deepest pleasure, You Excellency," I could hear the tremor in my voice. His reaction surprised me,

"Steven! How are you, boy? Are you well? How is your dear wife, Zenyatta?"

"She is inside the auditorium awaiting your arrival, Comrade."

"Lewis, go get that girl. I'm not going in without being introduced to her!" He laughed and put his arm over my shoulder as if we were old friends. He made no move to go inside, choosing to stand there, arm over my shoulder, and asked,

"I hear your grades were excellent, and that all plans are in place. Are you making travel plans as yet?"

"Zenyatta is handling that end of things, Comrade. She insisted that I look to this event and my studies. Tyranny, Comrade! Tyranny!" He burst out in uproarious laughter, and held me more tightly. Then he suddenly turned serious,

"Listen Steven. Go and get this degree done as quickly as you can. I hear it coud be done in three years. Check it out as soon as you get there. I want you back here as soon as possible. I have plans, and you will execute them."

"I understand, Comrade."

Lewis appeared with Zenyatta. She was in a simple sky-blue dress, a simple pearl necklace. She reached out her hand, curtsying, "It's an honour, Comrade Leader."

"The honour is mine, Zenyatta. You are as lovely as they tell me you are. Maybe even more lovely."

"Why thank you. You're very kind to say that."

"I say it because it's true, girl. Is this boy treating you well? If he slips up, you call me directly. Call collect from the UK if you have to. Do you have my number?"

"I don't, but he is being good, Comrade."

"Lewis! Give this girl my numbers after this is over!"

"Yes, Comrade!"

"Okay, we can go in now," signalling for his wife to exit the car. He introduced Zenyatta and me to her. He shook the VIP's's hands as he walked by, stopping to chat with the UK High Commissioner briefly. I was close enough to hear.

Comrade Leader said: "Albert, this boy DaSilva is going to the UK inn a few months to read for a law degree. Make sure he is looked after, you hear."

"Of course. I will take his particulars when this is over." With that, we walked, the Leader shaking hands along the way. The auditorium erupted in cheers as Comrade Leader walked in. He waved, and I pointed to the high table on the stage.

He shook the VC's trembling hand, then White's.

"Give me a call tonight, Henry."

"Yes, Comrade Leader."

He sat, then we all sat. He leaned over to me, "This is very nice, Steven. It should have been bigger, but it's very nice indeed."

"You are very kind, Comrade."

Kwame went up to the podium, introduced himself briefly, and asked the Vice Chancellor to make brief welcoming remarks. The VC walked to the podium to lukewarm applause. While he was showering praise on the Leader, the latter leaned across to me again,

"Pay special attention to constitutional reform. Ask questions. Meet your professors and question them, understand?"

"I understand, Comrade. And thank you for doing so much for me," I said.

"That's okay. You will pay me back when you return." There was something about the flatness, the matter-of-factness about the statement, that caused a chill to run down my spine.

The VC was still droning on. He had moved on from lathering praise upon the Leader to talking about numbers. There was no mention of the new building that we were here to have commissioned. Henry White signalled to Kwame. The latter approached and White whispered into his ear. Kwame moved to the podium and interrupted the VC, whispering in his ear. The VC abruptly said "Thank you." And came back to his seat. There was not a single clap of hands to be heard. I felt certain that his days as VC were numbered.

Kwame introduced the Minister of Home Affairs, the Honourable Henry White. After adjusting the mic downward, White spoke about the importance of this initiative and how proud Comrade Leader's government was to have been a part of this important step in the development of this campus that was build by the Leader himself. He wrapped it up by mentioning my name and commending me to the Leader.

Kwame introduced me, and I approached the podium to loud applause. I spoke about the uses to which the building was to be put and how it would be of immediate benefit not only to students, but to the entire university community. I emphasised the money-generating potential. I also spoke briefly about the new cricket ground and the new cafeteria, stressing again the amount of money that was to be earned annually. I highlighted the assistance from the various ministries, and the pivotal role that Comrade Leader and his ministers played in making all of this a reality. I closed by talking about the generosity of donors both at home and abroad and the fact that we moved from having ten dollars in the Student Union account to having five million and ten dollars in the same account. There was deafening applause. I singled out Colonel Lewis and Kwame for special praise.

During my entire speech, I concentrated on Zenyatta and turned every now and then in the direction of Comrade Leader. I left the podium to a standing ovation, walked and stood before the Leader, gave him a deep bow and resumed my seat. The man smiled widely and acknowledged my bow with a nod.

Kwame, in introducing Comrade Leader, said: "And now I give to you the man who is single-handedly reforming our nation from one of subservience to one where we are in charge of our own destiny. Comrades all, I give you our great Comrade Leader. He walked up to the podium, shook Kwame hand, and arrange the mic to his height.

"Members of the Diplomatic Corps, members of the administration and staff of our university, Ministers of Government, Comrade Steven DaSilva, Comrades all. It is my pleasure to be here and to see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears the improvements that have been made on our university Campus.

I had this campus erected at enormous cost to your government and to the taxpayers of this nation. The single purpose was to increase the expertise of our students. I did not have this built to have a country within our country, a thing onto itself, with its own laws and rules. I have been hearing stories that this is the case, that students had to fight to have space to implement their own initiatives. Now I see this lovely building, and I have heard of the new cricket ground, a modern cafeteria, a gym, and plans for a vibrant alumni association. The wonderful part is that Steven DaSilva and his fellow students are not completely dependent of government funding to make improvements. They took the initiative, worked cooperatively with our ministries, and the result is what we see here today. I am especially pleased that these projects were designed in such a way that they will generate their own funding which will yield more development. I cannot help but think that the Administration would do well to follow the lead their own students. I am proud of you young people, especially of young Steven DaSilva. It is my understanding that these projects will be managed and staffed by students themselves. I am pledging here today that should this Student Union need any assistance, they can contact the Honourable Minister Comrade Henry White and help will be forthcoming.

I am particularly pleased that so much has been accomplished in such a short period. Was it six to eight months, Steven?" He turned to me. I nodded, smiling.

I am also aware that the presence of soldiers on the campus may have caused some concern to the university, and we have reduced the numbers dramatically because Steven has made a convincing argument that we do so. They did not revolt and protest and carry banners. They came to us, made their arguments in calm fashion, and the result is that the number of soldiers has been cut by almost eighty percent.

I look forward to more initiatives of this sort from both students and staff, including the administration. Comrades, it is my pleasure to hand over to Comrade DaSilva all control of each of these projects. Thank you all.

It was brief, avoided partisan rancour, and focussed on the students. I could not have been happier. We had the ribbon-cutting ceremony, and repaired to the cafeteria where light snacks and soft drinks were served.

Comrade Leader had to leave for another engagement, but instructed White and the other ministers remain. We all sat at the same table. Lewis insisted that Zenyatta join us, and we ate and chatted for almost two hours.

Before he left, the Leader instructed me to come to his office before we travelled to the UK. He was firm in saying that Zenyatta, Lewis and White were to be there. He turned to Lewis:

"Organise it, Brigadier-General Lewis!"

Lewis saluted as the Leader climbed into his Rolls Royce.

"Did you hear that Henry? Did you hear that, Steven?"

"Yes," I answered, "That was an on-the-spot promotion, Rudy! Sorry, Brigadier-General!"

"Why don't we invite a few people to our home, Steven. Quietly." Zenyatta suggested. Monty can all ahead and ask Quincy and the others to be prepared for a few guests. Lewis told Monty to use the phones in his office.

We settled on Teelak Ramroop, Henry White, Kwame, Lewis, the Vice Chancellor (Zenyatta's idea of politeness), Pamela Lewis, and the Bursar. Of course, there was Mr. and Mrs. Qualis. I liked the idea of small and manageable. Lewis did the rounds to invite them, and I could not imagine anyone declining Brigadier-General Lewis.

A line of cars entered the gates of our home. It was the first time that Pamela Lewis, the VC and the Bursar had been invited to our home, so I suspected that Zenyatta would pay special attention to them that they may feel welcomed. But even Zenyatta could not save the two university big-wigs from what was to come.

It all started off well enough, with Teelak Ramroop raising a glass:

My friends, we have multiple reasons to be joyful this evening. First, congratulations to Steven DaSilva and his sidekick Kwame on the successful commissioning of the new student union building on the university campus.

"Here, here!" came from the gathering.

"Second, congratulations to our dear friend, Brigadier-General Rudolph Lewis who was promoted on the spot by our Comrade Leader."

"Here, here!" we all yelled out. Lewis actually blushed and we three said thank you at the same time.

Lewis added, "I just hope that Comrade Leader does not move me to HQ before Steven graduates!"

Zenyatta: "Yes, we all hope so. We all know that I'm his baby-sitter at home and you're his baby-sitter on campus!" The entire group rolled with laughter.

I joined in the Toast: "I cannot think of anyone on that campus or in our nation who deserves a promotion more than a man I am proud to call my friend, Brigadier Rudolph Lewis."

White, Ramroop, Kwame, White and Monty bade Lewis congratulations.

White asked generally, "How did you all think it went?"

Teelak Ramroop answered first: I think your remarks were concise in view of the fact that the man speaker and Comrade Leader himself were to follow. You hit all the right buttons in that short time. I also liked the fact that out Leader was spot on time and the protocols were all observed. Apart from our Leader's speech, I think Steven's stole the show. He covered a lot of ground in what? Ten minutes. The audience just loved your husband, Zenyatta. Just adored him. To keep the money figures last was a stroke of genius. Comrade Leader was very impressed with everything, but especially with that thing about from 10 dollars to five million and ten dollars in a few short months."

White joined in: "Well, from the time he stepped out of that Rolls Royce, it was clear that his favourite person there was Steven DaSilva. I can tell you that many people were shocked to see him throw his arms around you and Zenyatta."

"Yes, Steven and I were both taken aback by that show of affection."

I added, "Before we forget, we must raise a toast to Kwame, the best chairman/MC around, I think. To Kwame. I can honestly say that without him, we would not have accomplished half of what we did."

"Yes," Lewis boomed in, "I hope that he runs for president of the Student Union when Steven is gone to the UK."

"Hear, here!!"

Even the Bursar joined in:

"I can say, frankly that I've never seen any function so well attended apart from convocation. That takes serious organisational skills."

"The only part that Comrade Leader did not like was the VC's long ramble. I'm sorry I had to cut you off VC, but I got the instruction from Comrade Leader. He was showing me the "No more" sign under the table, you know, like when you play Black Jack." White added, not hiding his delight at having to cut the VC off.

Lewis: "The most cutting part of our Leader's speech was directed at you two chaps and your administration. Your performance was not even remotely comparable to the students' accomplishments. And he was right about the campus being a tiny part of this nation instead of this nation being part of the university."

I could see the VC becoming agitated. Zenyatta noticed it too. She said:

"Well, the VC had to say what he said. His speech was what it was supposed to be, I think."

White: "Zenyatta, you are an angel sent from heaven, my child. The man almost delivered a lullaby to the audience." White was being unkind, but truthful. But then he went on to address the VC directly: "VC, my feeling is that you had better start packing after the next convocation."

Everyone laughed, thinking it to be a good-natured jab. I knew it was not. Rudy and Ramroop knew it too, as did the VC. He responded to White,

"You realize that I'm here to help your tiny university, right? I'd prefer to be enjoying my retirement in my own country, Mr. White."

White hit back, "But what money do you get from retirement, man? What we're paying you here is ten times more than you would earn there. Oh, VC, how that new house you building boy? I hear it makes Steven's mansion look like a fowl coop. Thank God for our money, huh? But not for long more, boy."

The VC stood up, a think, very tall man. He hovered ominously some eighteen inches over White. Lewis stood up, grabbed his arm, and twisted it around his back. Lewis said calmly, "VC, I really don't think you want to be seen as threatening a senior government minister of this country, man! I suspect that you want to return to your little island in one piece, right?"

"Yes. Let me go please."

The VC pulled himself together, thanked Zenyatta for her hospitality and signalled to the Bursar that they should leave. Lewis, Monty and Gordon saw them to the door and watched them exit the gate. Lewis returned,

"Don't worry, Zenyatta. I'll smooth this over on the campus quite easily. I knew exactly what that meant. Zenyatta did not. She said, "Please do, Rudy. It was unpleasant."

White added, "But it was fun, huh Zenyatta?"

Zenyatta: "No it was not, Henry. Not in my home."

Henry White apologised. I wondered how the VC could or would exact revenge against me. I took comfort in the fact that Lewis would "smooth it over". Zenyatta excused herself for a few minutes and went upstairs.

White articulated what everyone was feeling: "I think that lovely wife of yours is upset with all of us, you know."

"Maybe a little. Zenyatta is just unaccustomed to such scenes. It made it worse that it occurred in her home. She'll be okay in a few minutes, don't worry," I assured the company.

The talk about the commissioning ceremony continued, the VC and Bursar already forgotten. The most surprising thing to me was Lewis's instant promotion. I wondered if that has been planned or whether it was an impulsive action from the Leader. He did not seem to me to be the impulsive sort. Everything was calculated.

Ramroop redirected the conversation to me: "You know, Steven, you deserved more than the praises that were heaped on you today. What you've managed to do in four months is quite impressive."

"As I said, I had a lot of help. From Rudy, to you and Henry, to my Uncle Peter and Cousin Peter. Lots of help." I returned.

For the first time, Pamela Lewis spoke, "What I know for sure is that Steven gave me a chance to do well. My small business is starting to make a good profit and we like the work we do there in the cafeteria. I hope that contract gets renewed after Steven graduates. It does make me nervous."

Henry White: "At this point, Steven can call the shots. Who is your successor, boy?" He asked me directly.

"I was thinking of endorsing Kwame." I answered directly.

"Well, in that case Kwame is as good as elected. And Miss Lewis has nothing to worry about. In fact, if you think she's doing a good job with the cafeteria, give her a two-or-three-year contract, subject to annual reviews," Henry White suggested.

Kwame: "Actually, we can do that even before Steven leaves. We don't have to wait for elections and to hope that I'm elected."

Zenyatta re-joined the company, and this made everyone much more relaxed. She smiled and teased in her usual fashion, "If Steven is to be frank with everybody, he will admit that every now and then he does wonder why he—of all people—was practically handpicked to serve in this role. I'm sure it was not for his good looks alone."

Lewis answered: "Actually, my little sister, it was partially for his good looks. Look at your husband and you will see it as clear as day."

"Well, big brother, since you were the first to see it clearly, maybe you could tell us."

The all laughed and agreed with Zenyatta. At any rate, Lewis had been somewhat quiet throughout the evening.

Lewis: "Look at the boy! He does not belong to any of the two major ethnic groups in the country. This gives the impression of political and racial neutrality. Second, he was very popular on the campus. Third, he was well-known as a very bright chap. And, although he did not know it then, he had the charisma, his looks being part of that charm."

He continued: "I chose him. I made the case to Henry who made the case to Comrade Leader, and that was that."

Zenyatta added: "But surely the question here is what is the end game here? Choose Steven, yes. We may agree on the reasons for that, but for what? Money. House. Scholarships. All of this is right in front of us, all around us, but why?"

Everyone went very quiet. Henry White shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Ramroop seemed as if a window had been opened to a fresh new view of a landscape he thought he knew well. No one said a word.

I relieved the tension, "Well, we'll find out soon enough. Unless someone has knowledge of what goes on in our Leader's complex brain, that is."

They clucked uneasily. I suspected that their uneasiness was about seeming to question the will of Comrade Leader. Fear might have been a more appropriate word. Do we not do that at some level or another, after all? It is simply a matter of scale.

Lewis spoke, "Whatever the Great Man's plan for Steven and Zenyatta, we know it is for the good—their good. Did you all ever see Comrade Leader being so openly affectionate to anyone? He actually embraced these two young people, this wonderful couple. It may be that he sees that they embody the future of our nation.

They all raised their glasses, "To Steven and Zenyatta DaSilva!"

A wave of pleasure washed over me. Zenyatta looked at me, leaned towards me and kissed my cheek.

"On that note, we old folks should let the young love birds enjoy the rest of their night," Lewis announced.

We waved them off as the drove down the driveway in their cars.

We went in and immediately went upstairs. Zenyatta asked cryptically but with a smile, "Did you notice that they never answered my question? To what end?"

I had noticed.

Chapter Sixty-Three

The aftermath of the commissioning of the new Student Union Building were significant. The Minister of Education, Teelak Ramroop, was instructed to take a much greater interest in the campus and its welfare. Brigadier-General Rudolph Lewis was told to divide his time between his office at the Defence Force HQ and his office on campus. He was to move full-time to HQ after Christmas. The Minister of Home Affairs, Henry White, was to increase the presence of the army after Christmas in the event of unrest during and after the Student Union elections, a battleground that was a microcosm of national political currents.

The VC was given marching orders and replaced by acting VC, Dr. David Ramnarine, who happened to be the brother-in-law of Minister Teelak Ramroop. The bursar was retained since he was made to be more pliable. We hired a new secretary for the Student Union Office, but I allowed Kwame to take the lead in the interviews and make the final decision. I simple sat in. Kwame eventually hired a plump, homely girl who worked with an insurance company. She said it was always her dream to work in an academic setting. In my mind, I wished her good luck. My own schedule underwent a change. I spent very little time in the office, but I kept in close contact with Lewis and the others. I chose to go to my classes and went back home to Zenyatta.

We hosted a dinner every Friday evening, with usual group—Lewis, White, Ramroop, and Kwame. We included the new VC, the bursar, and brought Zenyatta's parents in since the time for us to leave was growing closer. Her brother had grown. He was about to write the Caribbean Grade Eleven Exams, and he had a girlfriend. Zenyatta and I insisted that he bring her along. She was a rather ditsy girl, given to outburst of giggles for no apparent reason. Her vocabulary seemed restricted to "Oh My God", "whatever", and "would have" to replace the simple past tense. The restricted vocabulary persisted in spite of corrections from Zenyatta.

The girlfriend—Tonya Buford, I think—was also given to grabbing her boyfriend's upper thigh under the table. The poor fellow always seemed to squirm in embarrassment. This ended when Lewis barked at her to sit next to Zenyatta. Her burning ambition was to be "an English teechuh", a teacher of English. I suspected that this would be the last time that we would lay eyes on this girl.

The weekly dinner allowed me to keep abreast of the goings on in the university world as well as in the general political world. White was consistent in asking Zenyatta about arrangements for travel. He suggested that he could be of help in finding us a nice flat close to the university. Zenyatta accepted his offer. Lewis asked if Zenyatta had a driver's licence.

Zenyatta answered in her unusual candid manner: "I've never even sat in the driver's seat of a car, Rudy. So licence? No." She chuckled.

"Girl, you have one of the best instructors and drivers right here!" Lewis said, somewhat parentally.

Zenyatta looked at me, and Rudy broke in,

"No, no! I am not talking about Steven. The worst person to teach you to drive may be your husband." He laughed, "I was talking about Monty. He was one of the best drivers the army ever had. And he is a master instructor. And he is right here!"

"Darn! I never even thought of that!" I added.

"And you are supposed to be the bright one around here!" Rudy countered. Everyone had a good-natured laugh at my expense.

Zenyatta mounted a deliberately feeble defence on my behalf:

"You should not be too hard on Steven. Safter all, my own father did not even broach the idea, so he is much to blame if not more to blame." All eyes turned to the usually quiet and unassuming Robert Qualis. She put his head down: GUILTY, was written all over his face.

Zenyatta turned to Lewis: "But seriously, Rudy, what's the process?"

Lewis: "Well ordinary folks apply for a booklet containing all the ruled of the raod, then you get a learners' permit, study it, do the written test. In between, you learn to drive in preparation for the road, if you pass the written test, that is."

"So that is what I will do, being an ordinary folk. Monty will guide and teach me. I will be happy to have deserved to get the licence."

"But Zenyatta, you can just give me a passport-sized photo, and I'll bring it to you the next day," Lewis interjected.

"No Rudy, that would be for extraordinary folks. I am ordinary. I follow the rules. But don't worry, Monty will use the red car and teach me."

Rudy surreptitiously quickened the process and Zenyatta got her driver's licence in two weeks. Under Monty's patient tutelage, she became an accomplished driver rather quickly.

The semester was going well as far as my grades were concerned, and I vowed to continue this discipline when we go across to the UK. The arrangements were

finalized with Zenyatta's parents to move in, immediately upon which the renovation of their home was to begin. I asked Lewis to have a few soldiers to check in on the work being done there. He was to call me weekly with updates.

One of the things I admired most about this group of men—men who could be cruel and ruthless when they need or want to be—was the way they demonstrated respect and affection for Zenyatta. At no point was there any inappropriate approach or conversation. None. Zenyatta, in the first place, would not have tolerated that. Her unbending fidelity to me and to her vows and her own dignity would not allow it. And even if she was confronted by an inappropriate approach, she was not the sort to run to me with some tale of it or run to me whining or take any idiotic pride in the fact that someone had found her to be desirable. She would have taken matters into her own hands and broken that it the breach. Of course, Lewis would have noticed and ended it with the kind of ruthless finality that I knew only too well. I wish I could say any of this about myself.

At one point during our gathering, when I was standing apart from the group, observing all and everything, Marjorie Qualis came up to me. Zenyatta was involved in some intense conversation with White, Ramroop, Lewis, and the new VC. There was seriousness and humour, like shadow and sunshine. They saw her as their equal, and she was. Her mother whispered to me,

"She has grown, has she not, Steven? I think she has blossomed into something better than her own mother." She said, almost wistfully.

"I cannot agree with you on that, Marjorie. Maybe your daughter has grown in confidence. She has certainly matured intellectually and socially, but she will never outgrow you and Robert in terms of moral calibre. Her moral strength is as yours, wrought from you two, her parents. You have established the highest of standards, and she has met those standards that you have set by the way you live your lives."

"Thank you for saying that, Steven. Robert and I talk about it every single evening. We are proud of the woman she has turned out to be. We are thankful to God Almighty that she has found happiness. And you are the most important part of that happiness."

"She makes me happy too. She really is the most important thing in my life. I can do without the rest, the social and material trappings, the politics. But it would all be nothing if she were not by my side." I was as sincere as I have ever been in saying this to my wife's gracious mother.

She continued with this, our first conversation of this sort, "I think we both know that she is vulnerable, though. Truly good people always are. Zenyatta is

incapable of betrayal, incapable of deceit and treachery. And that strength is exactly what makes her vulnerable to the malevolence on the world. I beg you to protect her from malice, from evil. The good are always targets for evil."

I thought that this mother, this woman was asking me to protect her daughter from me, from the man she married, the man she loves. I felt my heart contract with guilt, with remorse.

"I promise you that I will do everything I can to protect her, Marjorie. I swear it."

"Good,' she responded, "But nobody can protect any of us from that girl's stubbornness! She so darned stubborn, that child."

"I agree fully!" And we laughed heartily.

"And, if I may dare ask, what are you two plotting in such whispered tones, Steven DaSilva and Marjorie Qualis?" Zenyatta asked, "I do believe that Brigadier Lewis should be conducting an investigation immediately."

"Girl, is just son-in-law ad mother-in law business," answered her mother.

"Robert Qualis, I suggest you keep your wife under control, Sir."

She had the others in stitches.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Zenyatta and I sought the advice of Lewis and White about how to manage our finances. We had about eight hundred thousand in the bank at this point, and my salary was to be deposited each month at home. We had authorized Robert and Marjorie to withdraw money from the bank if necessary, although we had already met all of our financial obligations. White pointed out several salient points.

First, he recalled that part of the scholarship included plane tickets back home annually. Therefore, he posited, if the financial situation at home changes, that could be dealt with when we were back home. We pointed out to him as well that even if we were not here, then Zenyatta's parents were authorized a certain amount in the event of an emergency. White advised that a separate account should be taken out in their name and a finite amount be deposited. The amount in the main account should be increased dramatically by the time we return since our salary will be deposited each month.

He advised against taking any exorbitant amount of money (apart from some to "settle down". Of course, this would be supplemented handsomely as stipulated in the contract. Our expenses—tuition, living allowance, entertainment allowance, travel allowance, and housing allowance—should be more than sufficient. We could even buy a small car, if we wished. He also pointed out that he had contacted a friend who will find a comfortable flat not far from the campus and shopping areas.

"How much British Pounds do you think it will take to "settle down?" Zenyatta asked.

Lewis suggested one hundred thousand pounds that should last three to four years,

"That would be more than sufficient to furnish the flat, although it comes with a fridge, stove, and some furniture like beds. Sheets, pillows and such things you can buy. Of course, you will need to buy clothes for each season. Nonetheless, try to wrap up your degrees in a shorter time frame. Comrade Leader has said little to me about this, but I have a feeling that something urgent needs to be done upon your return. It may be tied to his insistence on Constitutional Law, but I can't be sure," Lewis speculated.

I felt my chest tighten. "Something urgent"?

After White and Lewis left, Zenyatta and I retreated into the study to examine the implications of every piece of advice given. That it was well-intentioned was never in doubt as far as we were concerned. We agreed that our money situation was not something we ought to worry about too much. Neither here nor in London.

Zenyatta brought the worry part out in the open, "What do you think that mean by 'something urgent' means? Immediately upon your return too. What does any of that mean, my love?"

I answered: "I really do not know, my Zenyatta. We can speculate, but that is all it will be: speculation. It has to be tied up with the insistence on Constitutional Law, but how?"

"Look at it dispassionately, Steven. This branch of Law, not criminal law or some other specialization—this Constitutional Law. So it must have something to do with some change that Comrade Leader needs to make to *our* constitution. What change, I do not know, but it has to be that." Zenyatta offered.

"Well, Zen, we are back to the question that we raised in the very first place: to what end?" I responded.

"Whatever the end, you can bet that it would be for them to have a stranglehold on power. I'm sure of that," Zenyatta said emphatically.

"Okay, for now, call your parents and let then know that we will send Gordon to get them tomorrow, and you three can go to the bank. I want to concentrate on these courses I have left."

"That sounds good, my love," Zenyatta agreed.

We got to our reading, breaking only for meals.

Our plan was to establish a basic routine of classes, home, reading, meals. This would hold us in good stead in London, allowing no time or room for distractions.

My discipline and studies continued to yield excellent results. By the end of the final semester, after grades were out, I was told unofficially by the acting VC that I had won every prize available to me. Lewis had assured me that some prize was coming from the government that was to be awarded me for "the most valuable contribution to the University." It was lucrative, Lewis said. He promised to collect them all and send it by registered mail to me in London.

For some inexplicable reason, Zenyatta and I packed hurriedly. Our suitcases and documents and cash were all set with one week to go before we travelled. We spent the time being somewhat nervous of all manner of things: will we adjust to the new culture? We answered that by comforting ourselves that we were not that far

removed from the English since we spoke the language and we had been a British colony, after all. Our accents may be different, but we would be able to communicate with ease. Will we be able with the food? Zenyatta posited that we would not have the time nor could we afford the money to eat out. Nor could we afford a cook. She would cook, she said. Money? We know we had money, by local standards, but we had no idea of how expensive things were over there. Nor did we have any way to estimate how and on what we should spend money. Books, of course. But anything else, we were quite lost.

Henry White tried his best to put us at ease. With our allowances from the scholarship, we would be more than able to eat out regularly and buy a cheap car to get around. He had already arranged for the flat at a lower rent. He realized, he said, that the difference between the standard of living here and there would take some adjustment, but Zenyatta and I had little doubt that we would adjust quickly in that regard. She came from a family of modest means; and I was not exactly living high on the hog not so long ago.

I worried about the difference in academic standards between what we had that passed for a university and their vaunted academic standards, refined over centuries. Zenyatta was quite bothered when I raised this.

"Have you gone mad, my love? Stark, raving loony-bin? If there is anyone in that university that is brighter than you, I will drop in shock!" She was so adamant, so certain, that I gained some confidence.

"I'm a bit worried about this dreadful racism thing, Zenyatta. I really am. We could find ourselves ostracised socially, looked at and seen as somehow inferior. How do we deal with that, huh? Do you remember how shabbily they treated our cricketers the first time we went there to play a test match?"

"I remember, Steven. But did our boys not carry themselves with dignity? At any rate, look who's worried about racism? Steven DaSilva. Do you realise that the racism in this place stinks to high heaven? And, in many ways, were you not the beneficiary of that racism, being all fair-skinned? Did we not suspect that you were chosen to the SU president because you were bright and also because you were seen to be above the black/brown rubbish? Your colour would make you acceptable, I think. I'm a bit darker than you, so I should be the one worrying, but I know we can both deal with that in ways that are disciplined and dignified. So please put that anxiety to bed. We will deal with that if we encounter it."

"Okay, my darling. It's put to bed. But it's when not if we encounter it."

"True. When it occurs, we deal with it., my own dear whitish husband," she smiled and pinched my cheek. I tried to slap her bum, but she was faster than Muhamad Ali in moving out of range.

"You know, Zen, I will have to spend as much time learning how universities are managed—their administrative structures—and getting pointers from my professors as well as doing well in the law classes."

"Yes. In other words, you will have to do there exactly what you were doing here, minus the national politics of it all."

We prepared each other in this manner of point and counter point in ways that left us both more assured.

Chapter Sixty-Five

We got through immigration and customs is quick order at Heathrow, collected our suitcases, and headed for the exit. I expected the university to send someone to drive us to our new home. I did not expect the Dean of the Law School to be part of the welcome committee. Dean Galloway was accompanied by the Assistant Dean and two of the law professors. Galloway was a tall man, slightly greying hair, maybe mid-fifties, ruddy cheeks, military bearing, pipe-smoking, tweed jacket, no fall coat against the chill. His glass-blue eyes seemed to look right through us. His harsh demeanour dissolved when he saw Zenyatta:

"Welcome to England, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva. I'm David Galloway. It's good to have you here. I trust you had an uneventful flight?" His baritone seemed to fill the air, although he was speaking with the volume and tone of normal speech.

"Thank you for having us, Dean Galloway. And it's an honour to meet you, Sir," I responded.

"Any flight is eventful to me, Dean Galloway. I've never left the surface of the earth except for high jump in school."

The effect of this candidness and pleasantness from Zenyatta had an immediate effect: everyone smiled and relaxed. It was a good start. Even Dean Galloway smiled, plume of flavoured smoke coming from his mouth and blown upward into the fall air. They gave us fall coats to wear over our tropical clothes. My first lesson: university folk can be gracious and considerate beyond the measure.

The Assistant Dean—Doctor Roger Powers—was younger, somewhat fidgety, but very pleasant and informal. They drove us to the landlord's, uplifted the keys to the flat, and accompanied us in. It was almost fully furnished, in spite of what I'd been told. I suspected White having a hand in that. There was even a television, something that delighted Zenyatta who had never seen a tele before. I was about to say that the place was almost claustrophobic. As if she knew that I was about to say something ungracious and untoward, Zenyatta took hold of my hand and said:

"My love, don't you just love the way they make use of every square inch of space? Gosh, we need to learn so much as a young nation, including something about the efficient use of space. We simply build big boxes, without a thought as to aesthetics or and spatial utility. Dr. Powers, we have much to learn indeed."

Powers responded: "Yes, dear girl—if you will forgive the familiarity, Mr. DaSilva—we must necessarily use what little space we have left in old London. But I must confess that this flat is quite larger than the average flat in this city. You have chosen well. I will not be so rude as to ask the amount of rent you have to dole out for this." And he laughed pleasantly.

Dean Galloway interjected, "Well, enough babble from you, Roger. Christ, man!" He turned to us, "Give this chap half a chance, and he will rattle on until tomorrow night!" I thought I saw him wink at us.

"Oh, Dean Galloway, you're way too harsh on the young man! His chat makes us feel almost at home, doesn't he Steven? You should meet my mom, and you'll know what I mean, Dean Galloway."

Galloway smiled, somewhat, "Nonetheless, we need to get going and allow you to unpack and get settled as much as you can. I've taken the liberty of ordering dinner. One of those fellows downstairs will bring it in about thirty minutes. I will ask Roger to get you at around one p.m.? Would that be okay? We just need to get some paper-work done and talk a bit about courses. Mrs. DaSilva, I understand that you're reading for your degree in psychology?"

"Please call me Zenyatta, Dean Galloway…although I do like the sound of 'Mrs. DaSilva.'" She giggled.

"Tomorrow then, Zenyatta. Good night to you both, and welcome again to England and London and to the London School of Economics. Until tomorrow."

They left, and I could hear Galloways, baritone from way downstairs. No sooner had they exited the building, Zenyatta rushed to turn on the television. She flopped down on the small sofa and gazed at the screen. My attempts at tearing her away from the thing proved futile. The buzzer sounded, and I pressed the "open" button to let in whomsoever it was. As it turned out, it was our dinner, compliments of Dean Davis Galloway.

I turned off the television, smiling as I did so, "Zenyatta, my darling, we need to eat while it's still warn and before I drop, face-forward, from hunger."

She pretended to sneer, but made as if to drag herself off the sofa to set out supper. The place, thankfully, had come with dishes and cutlery. Cheap, but useable. Galloway had ordered a large salad, roast chicken, an apple pie, and two cups of tea with creamers and sugar in small packets. We ate, putting the left-overs in the fridge.

As we unpacked, Zenyatta observed, "I like Dean Galloway and Dr. Powers and the rest. I really do. The Dean seems a bit stodgy, but I think he's just playing a part."

"'Stodgy', Zenyatta? 'Stodgy'? You've been here for two whole hours and you already sound English. Anyway, I think that Galloway is a man to be feared."

"Now, you're being stodgy, Mr. DaSilva!" She returned, placing her hands on her hips in a mock threatening manner of older women back home.

We undressed, showered, got into night clothes, collapsed into bed, dragging the thick blankets over us, and fell into a slumber.

We awoke early, with no sign of jet lag, showered quickly, and went out for breakfast. The air was brisk, and we were thankful for the coats that Dean Galloway had given us. We had coffee and croissants, and went back to our flat. Zenyatta suggested we get up all papers we thought were relevant.

At precisely one in the afternoon, Dr. Roger Powers pressed the buzzer. We went down and got into his car. Zenyatta sat in the back, and I sat alongside Roger Powell. We entered the campus, and both Zenyatta and I made our awe obvious. The buildings were magnificent, rearing up into the sky, the architecture original and wondrous.

"My God!" gasped Zenyatta, "This is so beautiful that I want to cry, Steven."

"I know, my love. This is a real university, a real campus. I feel ashamed of our shabby campus at home."

I could see a smile flicker upon Roger Powers' lips, but he stayed silent, allowing us to absorb the sheer majesty of the place. Everything upon which we laid our eyes spoke of originality, taste, creativity, history, nobility. Every brick, every stone, every curve of every building seemed to lean towards learning, towards truth, higher purpose beyond individual ambition. This, I thought, is what excellence looks like once it was pursued with honest intent. Yet, it is always unfinished. It is the striving that counts. In my country, we fail to strive for excellence, and it shall remain like that for a very long time. I felt a wave of shame wash over me. I looked back at Zenyatta. The tears were rolling down her cheeks.

We stopped and parked in the law faculty parking lot, and Roger led us up a flight of stairs to the second floor to the secretaries' offices. Zenyatta waited outside the offices. Roger spoke to one of the five:

"Hi Trina. This is Steven DaSilva. He's here to see Dean Galloway."

"Does he have an appointment?" She asked, somewhat rudely, I thought.

"Well, not quite..." responded Dr. Powers, tentatively.

"Then he has to make one, Roger."

I thought of what I'd do to her if my secretary spoke to me in that fashion. I spoke up,

"Dean Galloway told me last night that he'd see me at one p.m. Does that fit your definition of an appointment?"

I was seeing her bent over my desk whimpering like a bitch, like Rahma.

"I suppose it does, Mr. DaSilva. Dean Galloway's office is upstairs. Just up the stairs and..."

"And follow the smell of the pipe, I suppose."

"That's right," she said, venturing a smile.

Roger said he'd take Zenyatta to the Psychology Department and wait until she's finished to bring her back.

"Thank you, Dr. Powers. You are kind in the extreme."

Roger and Zenyatta took off. I climbed the stairs, nervous. Dean Galloway's door was wide open. I knocked gently.

"Ah! Steven! Come in. Have a seat," he seemed to command, his teeth clenched on the pipe.

We've already done the damn paperwork. You'll have to open an bank account for us to deposit your various allowances. There is a bank on campus, so that may be the most convenient. Of course, it's up to you."

While he spoke, I looked around the office. Every inch of wall space was lined with books, from floor to ceiling. The office smelled of tobacco smoke and leather. The chair on which I sat was old, of leather worn to a shine from use. I imagined ten thousand students sitting where I now sit quivering.

"I'll go to the bank immediately after this, Dean Galloway."

"Good. Is Zenyatta with you? You may want to open a joint account, if you like."

I was pleased that he remembered Zenyatta's name...and mine. I informed him that Dr. Powers had taken her to the psychology department. He nodded his approval.

He told me the courses I'd be required to do and those that I may do, a total of four for the semester and three for the next. One mandatory course was to be conducted by Dean Galloway and one by Roger Powers. Our conversation about courses and other requirements lasted all of five minutes, and he made it seem clear and simple. I was full of admiration of this man of whom I knew so little, about whom I need to know more, and from whom I can learn a great deal. The academic requirements dealt with, Galloway turned with much greater enthusiasm to a topic he enjoyed.

"You're West Indian, so you must know a bit about cricket, at the very least, right?" he asked.

"I love the game—chess on turf—as a friend of mine put it."

"Who do you think is the most accomplished batsman of our time?" He asked pointedly.

"I think Rohan Kanhai is the most accomplished, at least one of the most." I responded.

"And what of Sir Don Bradman? 99 percent batting average!"

"Yes, Bradman was great, but there was no flair. I don't think he could have executed the shots that Kanhai did."

"And what of Viv Richards?"

And it went on and on like this. He turned to bowlers of spin, bowlers of pace, all-rounders, fieldsmen, and captaincy. The only thing we agreed upon was that Garfield Sobers was the greatest all-rounder in cricket. It was exhilarating, to be honest. And I have to admit that the man knew his cricket. He was fabulous in his knowledge of the game; all I had was some knowledge of recent West Indian cricketers.

"Have you read C.L.R. James's Beyond the Boundary?" he asked, again pointedly.

"I haven't."

"Okay. You can go to the library and borrow a copy after the bank. Read it, then we can continue this debate."

I did exactly as he instructed. Zenyatta returned with Powers, and he offered to drive us around as needed. Powers went up to the lounge for coffee while Zenyatta and I made the short walk to the bank. We deposited most of the money we brought—a substantial amount—but we kept enough for initial shopping: clothes for fall and winter; groceries; books; day-to-day use, etc. Zenyatta was pleasantly surprised by how easy banking here was. We then walked to the library and borrowed a few books, including C.L.R. James's book that Galloway insisted I read. Then back to Powers.

We thought that he would simply take us back to the flat, but he insisted that he had the entire day to do as he pleased. He seemed excited by the idea of going shopping. He also seemed surprised by the ease with which we spent money. It was nightfall before we finished shopping and fetched it all up into the flat. We insisted on taking him out to dinner.

"Let's go somewhere fancy, boys. Dinner is on Steven." Roger laughed and agreed. We went to a place called Circolo Populare. It was expensive, but we thought that Roger deserved a great treat after his help today. We had a most pleasant meal, rich in conversation. We learned about Roger's academic journey (I

told him I was to be in his Constitutional Law class which delighted him to no end). We asked his advice about how best to proceed, about the university administrative structure, and how best to shorten our study time. He was free with his answers. For the university inner workings, he deferred to David Galloway whom he called a maestro with that, and suggested ways to graduate in less than four years. He also promised to get me a reading list by tomorrow morning and a reading list for Zenyatta as well.

He asked about our life back home, and Zenyatta issued an open invitation for hm to visit:

"We have a rather nice place, and I think you will enjoy the peace and quiet of it all. In fact, we plan on going home at least once a year, and you can come with us when we go back in a few months, all expenses paid by Steven DaSilva, of course." And we laughed.

Zenyatta added: "We're laughing, but the invitation is serious. Please do come."

Roger promised to think about it seriously. He did. The very next day, when I went to his office to collect the reading lists, he asked,

"Steven, when do you and Zenyatta plan to return home? I think I'd like it being your guest."

"We can go, I suppose, at the end of this Fall semester. We could leave your bleak winter for two weeks and bask in our perpetual summer."

"That sounds simply delightful, Steven! Capital."

"Of course, I'll have to clear the timing with Zenyatta. If she gives the go-ahead, we can book our airfares."

"Of course, you need to clear it with Zenyatta. You know, Steven, if it's too much having me as a guest in your home for two weeks, I can always book into a hotel."

"Do you really want Zenyatta to kill me? She would not hear of such a thing! Neither would I, incidentally."

We both saw out the semester with excellent results, although with much work. Three days after the end of the semester, we were on a plane back home. We told Dean Galloway of our planned trip and that we invited Roger along, hoping that he –Dean Galloway—will be part of the group the time we go. Of course, I had called Monty, Lewis, Robert and Marjorie to inform them and have them make preparations for our arrival and for our guest.

Chapter Sixty-Six

It was a spectacle from the time we stepped off the plane. At the foot of the stairs leading from the plane, there was Brigadier-General Rudolph in full uniform and four soldiers in battle fatigues, the four ranks marching towards the plane, Lewis in front, strolling. The Zenyatta, Roger, and I were on the ground by the time they marched up to us. I noticed Roger stiffen with trepidation.

The soldiers approached, came to a formal halt, and saluted. Lewis braced and I braced in turn. Then he grabbed me in that bear hug of his, and hugged me tight. He lifted Zenyatta off her feet and swung her around a few times.

"My sweet Zenyatta, welcome home. Steven, welcome home."

We introduced Doctor Roger Powers, Assistant Dean of Law at the London School of Economics. Lewis reached out his hand and shook Roger's hand and welcomed him heartily. Together, we walked into the small airport. Lewis waved us through Immigration and Customs, instructing one of the soldiers to get the passports stamped and brought back to us immediately.

And there was Monty and Gordon, already with our seven suitcases.

"Welcome home, Sir! We missed you and Miss Zenyatta very much indeed."

We introduced them to Roger as Lieutenant Monty and Sergeant Gordon, our drivers and trained bodyguards, but also as members of our family.

We left the airport in very quick order, with two police outriders, siren going to clear the roads, followed by a jeep of soldiers, then our big vehicle carrying Roger, Zenyatta, and me. We were followed by Lewis in his army vehicle, then another jeep-load of soldiers, and two more police outriders bringing up the rear.

I glanced at Roger. His eyes were wide with wonder and maybe worry. I assured him that this was all for our protection and to get us home as quickly as possible. We'll explain it all later, but please know that you are being given the VVIP treatment. He relaxed somewhat, but remained wide-eyed.

The convoy got us to Elegwa soon enough. The eight soldiers—four from the front post and four from the back, snapped to attention, their arms glistening menacingly in the late afternoon sun. Two broke formation to open the large gates, and the cars rolled into the driveway. The jeeps remained at the gate.

Before the entrance, the staff were lined up in two rows. In one line, stood Robert and Marjorie Qualis, Quincy, and two groundsmen. In the other row, there was Melissa, the three maids, and another groundsman. We shook hands as they bade us welcome home; shook Rogers hands with a slight bow of respect, but with Zenyatta there were hugs and squeals of joy, peals of delight. That they adored Zenyatta could not have been more obvious.

We entered the large foyer, pointing out the study, then the dining area, the breakfast area, the kitchen, and so on, to Roger. Our suitcases—save one—were taken into our respective rooms upstairs. Zenyatta gathered everyone around and handed out the items she had purchased for each one. Everyone was happy to get something from abroad, and Zenyatta got hugs and kisses in appreciation. Robert, Marjorie, Roger and I looked on, witnessing the joy that she brought with small things. The largest thing she offered them was her kindness, and they all knew it and cherished it.

Roger observed to the three of us: "They regard her as their favourite little sister as well as their fairy godmother, don't they?"

"You are destined to see more of that Dr. Powers. Be sure of that. Zenyatta has as pure a soul as I've ever known. She's our daughter and she's Steven's wife, but she's their angel." Commented Marjorie.

"Steven, you will have to insist that they call me Roger. Please."

"Call him Roger, please!" We all chuckled at my attempt at mimicking Roger.

At the end of it, only Rudy's gift remained. He was called away to HQ on some matter that needed his attention. I was sure we'd see him tomorrow evening. Robert, quiet for the most part, added, "She's my angel too, Madge. Our angel from the Lord."

"It will be hard to go back to England after the warmth that I've felt in this lovely home. Truly." Roger said. We smiled.

With the exception of the stoic Monty, they began asking questions about the flight, about England, about the university, and all manner of things."

"Now listen you lot," she said, pretending firmness, "we have our special guest, Doctor Powers. You must treat him as if he were one of us, for he *is* one of us. This goes for everyone, including you Mommy." They smiled and giggled and went back to their duties. The upstairs maid dallied a bit, and whispered something to Zenyatta which sent my wife into stitches.

I asked Zenyatta what she'd said. "Oh, she said: 'Miss Zenyatta, me never see one white man before!'"

Roger turned a lighter shade of burgundy. The rest of us had a good laugh. Quincy moved to the edges of our little group:

"Miss Zenyatta, when would you like dinner to be served?"

"Oh! Roger, you must be famished, so..." Zenyatta said.

"Not really. I've been busy taking everything in that I forgot it's about dinner time," Roger responded.

"In that case, we could go up, freshen up, and be down in about 30 minutes?" Zenyatta suggested.

Quincy, Zenyatta and I showed Roger to his room. His first comment upon entering was, "Gosh! This is more spacious than my flat in London!"

Zenyatta said modestly: "Didn't I say we have yet to learn how to use space more efficiently? But I hope you like it."

"I already do, Zenyatta and Steven. Careful now or you may have a pemanent resident!" And we all enjoyed the joke.

We went to our room and showered together. It felt good to be home. We put on jeans and tee-shirts and went down.

The table was set in the dining room. Robert and Marjorie were already there, and Roger came down soon after. We had a couple of scotches, Robert had a beer, and we chatted while dinner was being served.

"Maybe we can show Roger the grounds after dinner, if you two are not too tired. What think you, my love?" Zenyatta asked.

"I'd love that, if you don't mind, Steven. I'm not at all tired."

"Well then," I said, "we shall take a stroll around the grounds after dinner. What about you Robert and Marjorie?"

"Oh dear, no thank you, Steven. We hope to go back home while you are here. We do want to enjoy our practically new home, and there is that boy of ours to watch over lest he gets himself into grave trouble. If you'd allow Gordon to take us home with the red car, that would be good."

"I understand that you've hardly spent any time at all in your home since we left. Understandable. But why don't you just take the car Robert?"

"And how would Gordon get home?"

"Monty can take him home. We can assemble for dinner tomorrow, if you like." I suggested. I continued, "We said you can use the red car for the time we're away, so please take us at our word. Failing which, your daughter can buy you a car of your own." I smiled at Zenyatta.

"That's enough from you, Steven DaSilva!" Marjorie hissed. "Roger, lemme tell you what these two people did for us. You wanna hear?"

"I'd love to hear. Do tell!" Roger replied.

"First thing was that Robert was a machinist at the sugar estate. He got injured on the job and they simply fired him. We were in bad shape financially, really bad. I had to be selling food on the street outside we home to support the family. Steven got Robert a job in the accounts division, a kind of nice office job."

"Mommy, you boring the poor man, you know." Zenyatta offered, knowing she would fail.

"Child! Yuh mother speakin'. You hush yuh lil mouth!" Zenyatta made a face at the reprimand. Roger was having too good a time for my liking.

"Then Steven took this stubborn child off we hand!" Even Marjorie could not contain herself. She put her head back, laughed, slapping her palm down on the table. Roger was in stitches, as was Zenyatta.

Then they re-did our old wooden house into a really nice home. Got the material, workmen, the contractor, everything. They even had the Brigadier-General of the army himself go and check the work being done. You tell me, Roger. You tell me how many people do things like that without wanting something in return?"

"Not many in this world, Marjorie. Not many at all."

"Well, you..." I started and was cut off by Marjorie's "You just hush!"

Tears were coming from Roger's eyes. He could not contain his mirth. We were laughing just looking at him. He was a happy man. Then he got serious,

"Marjorie and Robert, I promise you that I will do all I can to help Steven and Zenyatta as long as are in England. I promise."

Marjorie got up, walked up to him, and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, son. May the good Lord smile upon you in all things."

Roger blushed a deep red. Robert also gave him a hug. Zenyatta was crying silently. I was moved as well.

"So dinner tomorrow? Should I invite Lewis?"

"Yes we should," Zenyatta said, "Roger will enjoy him, I think. He only looks tough, but I'm tougher than that teddy bear!"

"Tougher than the Brigadier-General? Girl, wake up from that dream yuh dreamin'" Marjorie teased.

"Anyway, we should make a move before it gets too late. And you three have got to get your rest after all that travel."

We saw them off, after exchanging hugs, and waved as they drove down the driveway.

"Are you still up for a walk around, Roger? Or we can leave it for another evening, if you wish."

"I'm up for it for sure!" he replied.

We walked to the gate, said good night to the soldiers, and took in the full view of the house.

"My Lord, Zenyatta! This is magnificent. This is not a house at all. This is palatial."

"Why thank you kind Sir," she responded to the compliment. "Actually, the scheme is called Elegwa Part. It's supposedly very exclusive, built for government ministers. But, for some strange reason, they really like Steven, so he was offered a house and he chose this for us. We got married here."

"I wish I could have been at the wedding." Robert said with genuine sincerity.

The ground was awash in light. And, as usual, there was a slight covering of dew that sparkled like diamonds on the grass. We walked for a while, then—as if she could not resist—broke out into her customary fifty-metre sprint. She slowed, stopped, turned around, and headed back with great speed.

"Zenyatta, don't! Don't—" I screamed. And up she came jumped on me, knockin me flat on my back. Then she rolled us around on the wet grass. Roger was laughing again, and he sat on the grass, then lay flat, then rolled around as we did. The three of us lay there, lokkin up into the night sky. The voice of one of the soldiers carried:

"The white man crazy just like dem two!"

We lay there and smiled, wet to the bone. It was only after Zenyatta began to shiver that we got ourselves off the wet grass and went in.

"I cannot remember when I ever had such fun!" Roger declared.

"That's good. I'm happy at that. But now we must go up, have a shower, and to bed." Zenyatta said.

We bade each other good night and went in to our respective rooms. Zenyatta and I showered together and made love in the must deliciously slow way. We were happy to be back in our bed.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

We were up, showered and dressed by ten that morning. Came down, and Roger was already in the breakfast room. He was sipping a coffee and chatting with Quincy and Monty.

Zenyatta offered his a cheery "Good morning, early bird," she greeted.

"Good morning Zenyatta and Steven. I hope you had a good night's rest after our escapade last night."

"We did, Roger. It was nice being in our own bed, to be honest."

"Yes, there is something divine about coming home to one's environment, one's friends and family. I was up quite early. Awakened by bright sunshine. I took a walk around the not-so-small compound. It is a wonderful place indeed. Neat, clean, expansive, manicured to perfection. The air was sweet and invigorating. Zenyatta was right when she said that I would enjoy the peace and quiet of the place."

We asked for coffee and joined him, and Quincy obliged. We discussed breakfast and settled on toast, various styles of eggs, breakfast meats, and boiled and fried provisions. We discussed our plans for the day. I thought that we could go to the bank and see the state of affairs of our finances.

I asked Roger if he'd be interested in coming with us, and he said yes. Monty was his usual formal, soldierly self (Roger noticed that he was armed). He opened the door for Zenyatta and me, then the front door for Roger.

We drove to the bank, with Roger in tow. We introduced Doctor Roger Powers to the manager who became immediately obsequious. We were in excellent shape where money was concerned. Zenyatta decided we should withdraw a substantial amount to last us through our holiday. We also ordered a good amount in British pounds.

We decided to give Roger a tour of our local campus. I forewarned Roger Powers not to just us by the standards of the London School of Economics. We were stopped at the entrance by soldiers who were distinctly unfriendly upon seeing a white man. They peered in the back, saw me, backed away, and saluted. The sergeant, said loudly, "Welcome back, Comrade!"

"Thanks, sergeant," I responded, and we drove on. I pointed out the various buildings and spoke briefly of their functions. The first was a small building to our left. That was reserved for meetings of the University Council and for meetings of the Academic Board. Roger was curious about "Academic Board" and I promised to explain later. Then the Faculty of Education building, the Arts building, the Science Faculty building, the Administration building, on the third floor of which sat the Vice Chancellor's office. Nearby were two train-carriage-like buildings, one being "personnel" and other the "Bursary". We drove on to the Engineering building and then to the train carriage that functioned as Lewis's office. Monty pulled up, and opened the doors for us. Roger opened his own door, and we walked to Lewis's office.

We said good morning to the two secretaries (the same two). They were friendly, their eyes latched on to Roger, then onto Zenyatta. Lewis rushed out of his office. He was in civvies:

"Zenyatta! Steven, my boy! Doctor Powers! I'm happy to see you all. Did you rest? Powers, do not let these young people exhaust you! Especially this DaSilva chap!" We all laughed at his joke. Roger relaxed with his friendliness and by the fact that he was in civilian clothes.

"Too late a warning, General! After less than a day, I'm exhausted and beyond happy. I feel so at home, it's incredible."

"Then you can stay here, Roger! Rudy will keep you safe, and Steven and I will keep you happy."

"Yes," Lewis joined in, "it would be easy for us to get you a nice position here on campus."

"Don't tempt me, General! You and these two wonderful young people."

"Just think about it, man. We really need excellent teaching and research faculty here. It's desperate. And we can only get that from outside of our country until we build our intellectual—especially research—capital. No pressure, but give it a thought."

"Okay, General, I will think about it."

"Steven, we should take him to see VC Ramnarine. What you think?" asked Lewis.

"That's a wonderful idea," I replied, "Roger, would you find that a bit too much or you're game?"

"You lead, I follow, Steven." Roger said, uncertainly.

"Well, come on boys, let's to the VC." Zenyatta commanded.

We strolled over to the VC's building, walked up three flights of stairs and down the corridor to Ramnarine's office. Lewis spoke to one of the secretaries:

"Tell the VC that Brigadier-General Lewis and Mr. Steven DaSilva are here to see him."

"I'm sorry, Comrades, but the VC is in a meeting."

Lewis leaned on the girl's desk, got into her face, and spat out:

In did not ask about some meeting, girl! I said to go tell him that we're here. Now, you think you can manage that?"

"Yes, Comrade. She knocked on the VC's door, entered, and returned with four others that we supposed were deans or so. Then Ramnarine came out.

"Why Steven! Zenyatta! What a wonderful surprise."

We introduced the VC to Doctor Roger Powers of the London School of Economics.

"We welcome you, Dr. Powers. It is an honour to have you here."

Lewis interjected: "VC, Steven offered the man to join our ranks here. What do you think?"

"Dr. Powers, if Steven DaSilva makes an offer, it is as good as gold. We hope you consider it seriously. Obviously, we're not the London School of Economics, but if you come on board, we can take a few steps forward in that direction."

"VC, I am quite over-whelmed by this hospitality. As I told General Lewis and Mr DaSilva, I will consider your generous offer. However, I will need more information and discuss the matter with Dean Galloway in London."

"Just let us know. If you need anything from me, you can get my number from Comrade Lewis or from Steven."

Roger apologised for interrupting his meeting and thanked him for his politeness. We walked over to the library to show our holdings and collections to Roger. He noted the paucity of books on law, but opined that the holdings were adequate for a fledgling university.

"I do hope they build on it, however. Building the capacity of a university library—or any library, for that matter—necessitates knowing what's being published now as well as trends in various academic discipline. To fail to know or to fail to pay attention will result in large gaps in what's available to students and faculty. But I am dreadfully impressed by your Caribbean Collection. It's one of the best I've seen anywhere. I hope it's taken care of. It would be a grave loss if anything were to happen to damage that."

Lewis agreed: "Well, Roger, I'm no academic or scholar, but I will certainly convey your sentiments to the Chief Librarian as soon as I can."

"Rudy, you may want to convey that to the VC, the Registrar, the Bursar and the rest as well. They're all responsible one way or the other," I suggested.

"Will do! How hard?"

"Low to medium. We have time."

"Got it."

"Slow to medium?" asked Roger.

"Oh, it's just a manner of speaking." I responded, seeing Zenyatta looking at me with curiosity as well.

We walked across to my old office, inhabited now by Kwame.

Kwame was effusive in his welcome:

"The Boss is back! Man, you did not even tell me, you old dog!"

"I thought I'd surprise you, my friend. Meet Doctor Roger Powers, one of my professors at the London School of Economics."

Kwame and Roger shook hands, "Welcome to our campus, Doctor. I welcome you on behalf of all students here."

"Kwame is the President of the Student Union, Roger. He's a really good chap in all ways."

"Ah!" Roger uttered.

"Steven is the real president, Doctor. I'm just continuing to keep his innovations running. I'm just the caretaker of his legacy. Even the Prime Minister of our nation has said that Steven has been the instrument of the most significant improvements on this campus since its founding. Zenyatta! The apple of everyone's eye. Doctor Powers, this is the person who keeps Steven on the straight and narrow. She is a blessing to all of us." Kwame returned.

"Okay, Kwame. That's quite enough. If you don't stop, you will be off my guest list when we have a gathering in a few days."

"Arite, gyaal. Me hear yuh. You think I forget that partridge dinner? Yuh see how she does bully people, Doctor?"

Roger laughed, "Partridge dinner? The bird? Here?"

"Steven had a whole plane-load of food brought in for their wedding. Noone in this country has ever seen or tasted anything like it, I tell you." Kwame went on.

"Steven. Zenyatta, there is a great deal I have to know about you two love-birds," Roger exclaimed.

Kwame insisted on taking Roger on a tour of the "DaSilva Building" as he put it. It was no architectural wonder, but it was pretty, especially when compared to the raw concrete structures that surrounded it. Much of the exterior was glass. The franchises occupied the exact space that I had prescribed for them. Kwame had followed the plan to the letter. We toured the social club, conference room, the offices, and the shops. Zenyatta insisted on buying memorabilia for Roger, Dean Galloway, and some of her professors as well as for some of her friends in the psych department.

Kwame narrated the history of the "DaSilva Building", laying bare the raising of funds. According to Kwame, I single-handedly raised five million dollars for the project, got material and contractors and workers from the Ministry of Works, got donations from the most prosperous businesses in the nation, even a generous donation from our Comrade Leader. Indeed, the great man himself came to commission the building because of Steven. The building itself was generating almost eight hundred thousand per year in rentals and commissions. This here is a wonder boy, Doctor Powers, and that is not hyperbole.

Roger was impressed, again repeating that he had much to learn about me and Zenyatta. We walked over to the cricket field, beautifully manicured, three pitches, boundaries and a small covered stand for spectators. Again, Kwame gave me credit in the entirety. I reminded him and was constantly pointing out the major role played by Rudolph Lewis in all of this.

We then walked the short distance to the cafeteria, where Pamela Lewis welcomed us like long-lost relatives. She hugged Zenyatta, me, Kwame, shook Rogers hands, and kept the last hug for her brother, Rudy. She showed us to a table with a clear view of the cricket ground, told us what available at this time and had her people serve us. Roger ate heartily as did Rudy and Kwame. Zenyatta made to pay, but Pam Lewis would have none of it. She was clear that any time we came to the cafeteria, our money was useless.

"Special treatment, huh?" said Kwame, "And we know why too, right Brigadier-General? Not for we small folks, that for sure." It was all said in good fun and received as such.

"Kwame, do you remember who is responsible for me getting the contract for this cafeteria? The same people who are sitting around the table, except my brother Rudy, that is. He has to pay like everybody else when he comes here for a meal, but when he comes with Steven, it's on the house.

"Pam, we are having a small dinner at the house tonight. Why don't you come with Rudy? Please say you'll come." Zenyatta pleaded.

"I cannot say no to this girl, and you all know it. Thank you, my sweet girl. I'll come if only to look at that palace of yours." Pam said. Zenyatta blushed.

I could see that Roger was absorbing every conversation, every interaction. I suspected that he was compiling a list of questions for later. By the end of our campus tour, we had added several people to our small dinner. I thought of calling Henry White as well, but I though it best to hold off on that until I could talk with Zenyatta.

As we were strolling back to the car and Monty, Zenyatta whispered,

"I think you should call Henry White. He and Lewis are close, and it would be good to introduce him to Roger and thank him for arranging the flat in London."

As soon as we got home, I called. He was happy to accept.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Zenyatta, Melissa and Quincy had decided the dinner theme for the evening after we had toured the campus. This was both in honour of our national treasures and of Roger Powers. The theme: Wild meat and Maubi.

Zenyatta had conscripted Monty to get up a hunting team, headed by Gordon. The returned with bush hog, wattrash, venison, labba, iguana, and rabbit. These were considered delicacies and were to be cooked in various ways. Zenyatta and Melissa had arrived at a dip made from our local plums, much more sour and flavourful than foreign plums. There was another sauce made from local cherries. Both of these sauces were meant to take the edge of the "wild" taste of the meats. They were to be served with maubi, a local drink from the bark of a tree soaked over in few days in water, and sweetened. This was a delicious drink, especially when served ice-cold. Zenyatta charged me and Monty with getting the alcoholic drinks.

The list of invitees included Henry White, Teelak Ramroop, the VC, Kwame, Pamela Lewis, Brigadier Rudolph Lewis, and the Qualis family, Robert, Marjorie, and Junior. The guest of honour, of course, was Doctor Roger Powers. Monty and Gordon were tasked with managing the background music. It only occurred to Zenyatta and me that we ought to have brought back more long-playing records from the UK, an oversight that we will remedy on our next journey back home.

After we returned from the campus, I suggested to Roger that a short siesta might be wise before the dinner. We all had a short nap and got up by five in the afternoon, refreshed. Marjorie, Robert and Junior were there first, as usual. Robert helped Monty and Gordon arrange the music selection; Marjorie went into the kitchen to spar with Melissa over the complexities of food preparation, and Junior dawdled in the bored fashion of teenagers. He hovered over Monty, Gordon and Quincy for a while as they were deciding on their music selections. Monty, having had enough, sent him on his way with but a look. He wandered into the kitchen and was promptly expelled by his mother and Melissa. He tried the door to the study. It was locked. He hung around the foyer, the breakfast room, the dining room, and wandered outside. He was gone for a long while, thankfully.

Roger and I went down and had a drink of scotch. He expressed an interest in having a copy of our constitution, and I promised to get one for him by tomorrow. He recalled our trip to the campus in admirable detail.

"You must have raised a ton of money for those projects, Steven. In a matter of two to three months? How did you pull that off?"

"Well, I got very generous donations from my uncle, Peter D'Aguiar. And then a matching amount from my cousin, a business hot-shot in Canada. The university chipped in, thanks to Lewis. Then he leaned in to the local business-people. They find it rather difficult to tell the Brigadier-General of the army anything resembling a "no".

"I can imagine! A man like that turns up at my home and asked for a donation, I'll rush to my piggy-bank in a hurry." We both had a chuckle over that.

"He is a great friend to us, Roger. He and Henry White, the Minister of Home Affairs, have been very kind."

"But is there not always a price for this sort of kindness, Steven?"

"I suppose there is, you know. I suppose there is, but I'm not willing to think about that at this point."

"May I suggest that you keep that in mind? I'm not trying to discourage you, dear boy, but simply keep it in mind."

"I will, Roger. I promise. My main worry is for Zenyatta, but Lewis is fiercely protective of that girl."

"Okay."

The campus, to be honest with you, reeks of newness and inexperience. I suspect that—administrative—they will stumble from reflex decision to reflex decision. With the obvious political elements at play, I also think there will be a constant turn-over of Vice Chancellors, most of them from abroad—no white person though."

"You are right about that!" We both laughed over that.

"You're not interested in that, are you?"

"Hell, no! Why would I want to do that to myself? No, Galloway would be perfect though. Perfect! Of course, I suspect he would be snuffed out in a hurry with his attitude, but then he's proven to be a very hard man to kill."

Lewis, Kwame and Pamela had just strolled in, so we ended our conversation.

"But you do need to tell me about the Dean, Roger." He nodded.

We all shook hands, Pamela giving me a hug.

"And where is the Lady of the House? Lady Zenyatta!" Lewis shouted out.

Zenyatta emerged from the kitchen area, and gave Lewis a big hug.

"Do you know the penalty for calling my name in vain, Brigadier-General?" She teased.

"Beg paadin, Mistress. Madness gone in me head!"

Everyone was laughing at this, and Roger looked puzzled. Pamela explained it to him, and his laugh came after ten minutes. We all exchanged knowing glances.

Robert chimed in, "You cruel people! Laughing the poor white boy in front he face! Roger, don't worry, boy! I'm on your side."

"Why, thank you, Robert. But I really think I'd rather have Marjorie and Lewis by my side! Warriors!" Roger returned, good-naturedly. He was beginning to fell at home with everyone. The university set walked in: The VC, the Bursar, the and the Registrar. The greeted everyone politely, although the VC was more relaxed in his greeting. The Bursar showed his fear of Lewis, and the Registrar seemed like a fish out of water. Immediately, Zenyatta engaged the two men, trying to get them to relax.

"So, Doctor Powers, what did you think of our little campus? And have you considered joining our faculty," the VC asked, his voice light, friendly.

"I'm really flattered by your offer, VC. I am certainly giving it the thought it deserves. The university, as I was telling Steven, is raw from newness. I think you know that you will only grow in reputation by attracting the best lecturers or even professors available internationally. Once your local expertise grows—in terms of administration, teaching, and scholarly research—you can ween yourself of the dependency. But there must be innovative research if you are to have something like a global reputation. I admired your Caribbean Collection. It is stunning. Please do take special care to preserve and expand that. Also, begin to establish a path towards accreditation by an international body. Ooops! I have rattled on, please forgive me."

"Why do you apologize, Roger?" Lewis said. "Every single word that came out of your mouth was dead accurate. Beneath it all, I think, we need people who have seen what happens in other places. People who know about the evolution of universities as long back as the Medieval Germanic universities. I see it happening already, you know, the jostling for position, this sense of smugness once you get a job on the campus. That smugness will be the end of us, I think. So don't apologise, my man."

"I agree with Rudy. He and Roger have nailed our dangers. But to avoid those dangers is another thing wholly." I ventured.

Roger continued, grabbing everyone's attention: "One of the perils that I have seen new universities face is the temptation to stagnate even before they are out of infancy. In the former British colonies, for example, they tend to pattern themselves after what they thought were the administrative ways of the British universities. But their knowledge of British universities is almost microscopic. It's what they glean from being students in some Brit university for four years or so hustling for grades for some degree, with no knowledge of how the system works. Rare indeed is the student who has the opportunity and the interest to learn how the machine functions. One other thing: whatever Brit pattern they are following is two hundred years out of date. Meanwhile, Brit universities have themselves evolved into being quite unlike what they were in the early 1800's."

Roger was starting to sweat profusely. I commented:

"So that's a lot of ground we have to make up. In terms of time and all that the passage of time entails, we're talking about a three-hundred-year span just to catch up. It's almost impossible."

"No, Steven. Not at all. It means that you look at how the system has evolved—into what it has evolved—and start from *there*, from *that* point, not from the beginning. The real problem, VC, is that you cling hysterically to the illusion of what you think a university should be, how it should be run. You become dedicated to consolidating something that is dead and decayed. Let me ask you folks this one thing, with respect: How many of you have read Cardinal John Henry Newman's The Idea of a University?

"I haven't," said the VC. The rest of us—the Bursar, the Registrar, and me—shook our heads.

"All of this would suggest that your university will have to be multiple times more creative in the shortest possible time frame, get research done that is of topical and immediate national importance—lots of published, internationally verifiable research. And your faculty themselves cannot, *cannot* afford to be straight-jacketed into a single, minute academic area!"

One of the maids handed him a cool towel, which is when he realised that he was soaking wet. Roger laughed at himself: "That's the price we pay for babbling on!"

"Small price to pay from where we're standing!" exclaimed Lewis.

"Exactly!" exclaimed the VC, "which is why we need people like you here!"

Roger laughed.

"Or if he does not want to stay, we make the white man stay!" came a voice from the doorway. Henry White and Teelak Ramroop had been by the doorway all this time. I glanced at Monty, who nodded that he knew that they were there all along.

"Henry White, you rascal! You move like a panther!" Zenyatta exclaimed. I wondered at how far she had come, from trembling at the very thought of being in the presence of a minister of government to this.

White walked by all of us and went directly to her:

"Our angel! Zenyatta DaSilva, welcome home, sweet girl." He gave her a hug and a peck on the cheek, then turned to the rest of us,

"You all hear what the girl call me? Panther! From now on, that is how you lesser beings have to address me. When I show up, you say, 'The Panther is here!' And that includes you, white chap!"

I introduced White and Ramroop to Roger. They shook hands, with Roger giving a slight bow to both.

"So the professor of the London School of Economics has ideas about how we can make this university into something worthy of the name university, huh?" White asked half-jovially.

"He has some good points, I must say, Henry," said Ramroop. "We will do well to take on board what he has to say."

"Maybe, my friend. But I'll tell you what will happen if he does join this university here. The red tape—which Steven had to cut through with much help from us—will suffocate him until he dies or runs for his sanity. That is what will happen, unless the Ministry of Education—*you*—take a much firmer hand in the running of the place which we pay for. Do you remember how they treated Steven—and all of us, by extension—as if they were the country and this nation was their plot of land that they gave us? Or have you forgotten. At first they will shout from the roof-top that they've attracted some genius to come here. Then, very quickly, they will despise him for his ideas." White proclaimed.

The VC: "You have a very bleak view of our university, Minister."

Henry White: "Of course, I do. For good reason. I should arrange to have someone tape one of your eight-hour meetings and play it to Comrade Leader. He will listen for one minute and order me to burn all of you people."

Zenyatta: "Boys, boys, boys! Get a hold of yourselves, please."

White: "My Angel, if not for you—only you, not Steven, not Powers, not Lewis, just you—I would cuss these people to hell and back. But I will control myself because of you."

He went up to her and gave her a hug, apologizing. Then he pivoted to the university trio and said: "Hey, VC, you know I was just joking, right? I like you guys, man! Steven, you ain't tell these chaps I like to make rough jokes?"

"He does! I've seen him in action." I attempted.

"We know you're pulling our legs, Minister. We know that," The VC lied.

"We all got to be on the same page and blame professor white man here." White joked. We all laughed. Roger forced a smile. The temperature went down immediately. Zenyatta shepherded everyone into the dining hall, and signalled for us to sit. The maids hurried in with drinks. The VC quaffed two drinks quickly. Roger whispered to me:

"He's a dangerous man, isn't he?"

"Yep!"

"Tell us how our favourite sin is doing in your university, please." Ramroop asked of Roger.

"Oh, he's doing very well. Very bright, very curious, top notch. They're both doing well in London," Roger said vaguely.

"His grades are good?" White asked.

"His grades are excellent. It's only been one semester, but we think that he's one of the best we've seen in a long, long time."

"Professor, do you mind if I take this back to our Comrade Leader?" White asked with fake humility.

"Not at all. It's all true. Do inform your PM, if you like."

"He was one of the best things we've produced here, you know." The VC chimed in.

"Yes, we've seen his record," Roger returned, tritely.

"It's rather nice to be talked about as if I'm not when, but I am quite here." I teased.

Roger added, "He simply needs to apply himself. Be consistent in his work, keep the rhythm, not get distracted."

White joined in: "He most certainly will do all of those things, but distractions? Do you see who he's married to. Zenyatta will keep him focused like a laser. Not by quarrelling and nagging or being foolish. That is for ordinary women, for foolish women, not for an angel from heaven."

"You boys have me blushing here."

"But it's all true, my love. You really are my North Star, and you are an angel sent to save me from myself. I say this unabashedly: were it not for you, I would be lost, completely and utterly lost."

"Hear, hear!" The whole gathering erupted.

"You should know, Roger, that we don't agree on much, but when it come to this woman, we never fail to agree. Mr. and Mrs. Qualis, congratulations on raising the perfect child."

Roger smiled and nodded his agreement.

Henry White stood, quite unexpectedly:

"Doctor Powers, on behalf of our Comrade Leader, I welcome you wholeheartedly to our shores. Comrade Leader has instructed me to ask of you a favour to our nation. That favour is that you do all within your powers to assist and protect this young couple. They are as important to him as they are important to everyone in this home. Please grant us this favour, Sir."

White's formality was somewhat surprising, but I knew it was necessary since he was delivering a message from the Leader.

Roger, matching the formality, rose:

"Honourable Minister, thank you for delivering that message. Please convey in turn that, upon my word of honour as a gentleman, I will do my utmost to assist and protect Steven and Zenyatta from any harm that may come their way. I promise."

There were cheers while Zenyatta and I sat almost dumbfounded.

As if to offer us time to breathe, Quincy started his unprecedented pre-dinner announcement:

Ladies and gentlemen, in honour of our special guest, Dr. Roger Powers, the DaSilva household is pleased to present to you the theme of our dinner: 'Wild Meat and Maubi.' The game that will soon be brought to you was all freshly culled this morning from our jungles. Enjoy!"

With that, the dishes were brought in on platters. We all helped ourselves to the feast before us. Zenyatta and I guided Roger as to what we are eating, how it was prepared, and how it ought to be eaten. The only sounds from those sitting around the table were sounds of enjoyment. Monty increased the volume of the music—Bach.

Once finished, bowls of warm water and soap were brought to each guest. The washed their fingers and wiped them on hand towels provided.

Ramroop: "Our compliments to your staff, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva!"

Roger: "I've never had anything like that before, and goodness knows if I'll ever enjoy anything like that ever again."

Henry White: "Doctor Powers, I can predict when you will have this again!"

We all burst out laughing.

"No, no! Don't laugh. I predict that you will return with this government's compliments as soon as Steven and Zenyatta graduate and return. And feel free to bring your friends and family. We will even charter a plane."

"Honourable Minister, you have left me speechless. I could hardly have contemplated such an offer up to about a few weeks ago until Steven and Zenyatta asked me to come home with them. I am deeply grateful to them, to you, to all of you. I have never known such generosity and such kindness as that which has been my pleasure to enjoy over these few days. With your offer, I may yet see you my friends again and enjoy meals such as that which we had this evening. Thank you all."

I reached out to him and held his hand, as did Zenyatta. He kept his head bowed to hide the emotions, but he squeezed our hands tightly to control and convey his emotions.

To take attention away from Roger, I announced that tomorrow will be our rest day. No tours, except to come down and eat, and back up and sleep. With that we went back into the foyer for more drinks.

It was well past midnight when the last of the company left. Roger had already excused himself and had gone to bed. Zenyatta and I had to wait until thr last of our guests left.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Monty reported that Roger Powers was up with the sun and had ventured outside the gates. He walked around the entire park, tailed discretely by the front gate guards. He was in the breakfast hall having a coffee when Zenyatta and I came down. We exchanged greetings and sat with him over coffee. Melissa made omelettes and toast for breakfast.

Roger recapped the events of the previous evening to Zenyatta, mostly:

"After the argument between White and the university folks, I whispered to Steven that I got the sense that White was a very dangerous man. I think he is even more so when he turns on the charm and joviality. Steven had agreed. What is your sense of it, Zenyatta?"

"I think you're right. White has quite the reputation for ruthlessness in the population at large. The funny side is not seen by the public; the ruthlessness is often. Remember, apart from his master, he has ultimate control of the armed services. That's a lot of power."

"Ramroop?" asked Roger.

"He joined them only recently. I suspect that he was chosen because of his ethnicity, the illusion of a multi-ethnic cabinet. I don't think he has much of a say, frankly, but education is a massive portfolio." I volunteered.

"The VC and the rest are known quantities to me, so no need for info on them. Kwame is your protégé: he almost reveres you, Steven. But he's also afraid of you. That explains his silence for most of the evening. Faithful and loyal to you, but will never stand up to any authority. The Bursar will have him for a snack," Roger laughed along with Zenyatta.

She voiced her opinion: "Before you say that I am terrified of Steven, let me say that you are mostly spot on in your assessment of the company."

"Mostly?"

"Yes. People may be quiet for reasons other than fear. They may be uninterested or uncomfortable, like my parents. They are simply uncomfortable around these big wigs, but fear them? Not at all. Those people fear nothing except their God. Also, people may just want to be quiet, to live with their own thoughts for a while. Don't you think?"

"Absolutely, but don't dismiss the element of fear too easily. Steven, what do you think?" Roger asked.

"You're both right, of course. Many reasons to be quiet, including fear. Kwame is fearful, I will grant you that. But he is not afraid of me; he is afraid that he will not do as much as they think I've done."

"That is subtle, nuanced. I agree."

Zenyatta: "Oh, I'm waiting for it! Come on, Roger, out with it!"

Roger laughed out loud, almost spilling his coffee, "Yes, General Rudolph Lewis!"

"Good boy, Roger!" she said with fake condescension and a laugh. I chuckled, somewhat worried about how close Roger would come.

"That man is the most complex of them all. I think he would readily kill, and the army has little to do with it. If he were a handyman, he'd be the same. But that's only one side to him. He lied when he said he had not read Cardinal Newman's book. He did, he has. He reads, but he never let that be known, does he Steven?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, "If he does—if he does—he never told me or intimated that to me."

"That's precisely what I'm saying, Zenyatta! He is quite content to let people think he's the muscle, much like Marc Anthony in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Same thing, really. But he is much more than that. Lewis has no final political affiliation the way White does, the way Ramroop want to prove. He has his own ambitions and is clever enough to bide his time, doing what he has to in the meantime. But, gosh, he's tough, that one. I don't mean physically. There's something about that which almost defies identification or definition. He's not the kind of man I'd want on the witness stand or standing against me."

"But he has another side as well. If someone were to attack or speak ill of Steven, he would do them ham. He likes Steven, at least thinks of him fondly. That's genuine too."

"And Zenyatta?" I asked, trying hard to deflect. Roger took the bait,

"Oh, if someone were to attack her whether physically or with words, Lewis would butcher them. I have no doubt about that. He loves this girl more than he loves his own sister, or his *other* sister. He would harm Steven if Steven were to hurt her. He would not grind you into the dust because he knows that Zenyatta loves you. He'd probably give you a chance or two."

I was getting uncomfortable again. I asked for more coffee, hoping that the pause would take Roger off the scent. Roger's conversation took an unexpected turn,

"It has just occurred to me that if you take away whatever negatives may exist in Lewis—*all* of the negatives—you'd get David Galloway." He said.

"Dean Galloway?" asked Zenyatta, incredulous.

"Yes, Zenyatta. Yes, Stephen. David Galloway."

Zenyatta, he voice almost shrill with puzzlement, said:

"You've lost us completely, Roger. You will need to explain that to us, if you hope for us to understand the comparison or the contrast," she smiled. I breathed.

"Lewis is an army man, head of a small national army. Galloway was an army man, Major Galloway during World War II. He headed the late King's elite unit against the Germans. I'm pretty sure that Lewis has never seen how cruel war can be, how murderous, so his own instincts to harm or kill have not been tested in battle. Personal vendettas can come easily in that case. If you mention weapons in Galloways presence, he gets as pale as a sheet of paper. He hates it. I'd be willing to bet that if you ask Lewis about firearms, he would talk your ears off. Most people who have not seen war would do that, I suppose. Test it out, Steve, Zenyatta.

Galloway went to Cambridge; Lewis spends time at your university from what I understand. For one man, the intellectual life is his life, for the other, it is an interest. Do stop my babble if you think I've mis-read anything."

"No. No. This is all fascinating. It's almost a study in the psychological underpinnings of individuals. What causes then to do as they do., to put it simply." Zenyatta commented. She was leaning forward, ready to hear more. So was I.

Galloway has won his accolades—his medals of honour—for bravery under fire. He has been tested on the most brutal battle-fields the world has ever seen. Lewis has won his accolades by political affiliation. The first is proven courage, even heroism; the second is opportunism. This does not diminish his personal loyalty at all. The problem will come when his personal loyalty clashes with his political affiliation. One can only hope it never comes to that, but I think we can hazard a guess as to where Lewis will fall.

Galloway is a rounded man, you know. He was quite the athlete and was supposed to represent Britain in the mile at the fifty-something Olympics. I can't be sure, but I think he beat Roger Bannister in the trials. Bannister went on to win gold and broke the long-standing four-minute barrier for the mile. Galloway injured his hamstring just before the Olympics...the fool played cricket for some club

bowling quick, pulled a hamstring, and there went his chance at Olympic gold…or a medal, at least. The problem is that Galloway never talks about these things to anyone.

Can you imagine Lewis being reticent about being an Olympic-class athlete? I think not. Then Galloway has published eleven books on various aspects of the law. Again, that takes dogged dedication. I have published one book, and I can tell you it's lonely, difficult work. You don't write books doing work in some committee or some group. In my career so far, I have seldom seen anything significant come out of a university committee, even at a university as good as ours.

Let me assure you, Zenyatta and Steven, that I am not making a moral judgement on anyone. I'm just making cursory assessments based on what I see and hear, what I observe."

"I think that your observations are astute, given the parameters within which you observe. But should those observations not be subject to adjustment if the parameters are extended or contracted?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Roger asserted, "as a lawyer there are two things at play here. First, we need to observe human behaviour if we are to apply the law equally to all. Well, we have to observe human behaviour if we live among people anyway. This, Zenyatta, is not just for psychologists, although they may be more equipped with the tools to observe. The second is that we need to adjust legal judgement given new evidence, whether behavioural or physical or forensic. Nothing is final, really."

"And what of human unpredictability? Is that not to be taken into consideration?" Zenyatta asked.

"Now we're adding yet another layer of complexity to the complex business of observing and observing and therefore predicting human behaviour. But yes, our species is infamously inconsistent." Roger responded, somewhat tentatively.

"And that,' said Zenyatta, "does not expand nor contract these parameters we're talking about. They dismantle them, no?"

"They sure do, now that you mention it," Roger conceded.

"Well, there is much to think about here. I'm just grateful that your observation does not include us." I ventured. We all chuckled.

"Oh, I could not do that. First, because that would make me a most ungracious guest. And second, because I'm much too close to observe with any accuracy."

"Yes," said Zenyatta, "the accuracy of our observation often depends on the distance we establish between ourselves and the object being observed."

"Now, who's being astute?" Roger asked teasingly. Zenyatta giggled.

"And yet, dear girl, there is that category of folk—rare—that we've missed as by neglect."

"Ah Roger! Roger, Roger, Roger. You have someone specific in mind. Out with it." She commanded, almost.

"Actually, I do. Your driver/bodyguard, Monty."

"Aah! Monty who is always there, but almost invisible." I said.

"Yes. There but not there. He is inscrutable. No matter if the distance be near or far. Steven knows him well, but that is not a function of distance. Rather, it may be a function of action."

I started. He was getting close again. I recalled when Monty stood up to Lewis and had him almost cowering. Too close. I had to divert his attention.

"I don't know about that. Do you find Monty inscrutable, my love?"

"Not at all. Monty is as steady as a rock. He's truly devoted to us, and I feel safe when he's around. When Steven is with Monty, I feel that my husband can come to no harm. That's not inscrutable at all."

"I agree, Zen." I said, quickly.

"Well, I may be wrong then." Roger conceded.

I was close to being exposed. This had to end, I thought.

"Speaking of Monty. Why don't we go for a drive up the coast?"

"That's a capital idea! Are you up for it, Zenyatta?"

"I am. I don't want you boys out of my sight," she said in the most motherly tone she could use.

I asked Quincy to get Monty. We piled into the car and set off down the coast, stopping to buy fruits. My uneasiness clung to me like sweat.

Chapter Seventy

We had precious few days before our departure for London. We hosted a dinner with the usual set, but this gathering was much more relaxed than the previous. There were lots of smiles and general comradery. I was thankful for the lack of tension.

The more significant event that preceded our departure was time alone with Zenyatta's parents. Marjorie had asked her daughter for this family time, just Robert, Marjorie, Zenyatta, and me. Monty had taken Roger out for a spot of shopping for souvenirs.

We sat at the breakfast table. Robert spoke first,

"We thought it would be appropriate to speak with you two children of ours outside of company. In private. We will never stop saying that Steven is as much a son to us as Zenyatta in our daughter. We want to reinforce that in your minds."

Zenyatta nodded acknowledge the truth of what he said.

Morjorie joined in: "We are grateful for kindnesses you have extended to us—the job which I now enjoy; the house which is now a great deal more comfortable; the car for our use; and, most importantly, the trust you have placed in us. Thank you, Steven. Thank you, Zenyatta."

"But…I hear a but coming." Zenyatta and I smiled. The Qualises did not.

Robert continued: "We think you know that we are not really comfortable with these big folks, ministers and so on. We don't mind them, but we're just not comfortable. This is why Marjorie spends more time in the kitchen with Melissa than in the company of your guests. Which is why I prefer chatting with Quincy or Monty or Gordon than with any one of them.

I spoke: "What we did, we did because you are family, and it is our duty to assist when we can because you are family and because we love and trust you. Zenyatta does, of course; but so do I. These people—White, Ramroop, the VC and them, Lewis—we know they can be argumentative and intimidating. But—"

"Steven," Marjorie broke in, "we are not intimidated by them at all. It is just that we do not trust them. Your new friend, Roger Powers, can be trusted much more than they can be. We asked to speak with you two because we know that these people cannot be trusted. They will turn on you at the first opportunity, Steven.

They will. We want to beg you Steven and Zenyatta, to be very careful about them. They will turn on you in bad ways. Even Lewis, who seems to close to you, will follow orders to bring you down if he is given orders from above. Monty. Gordon, Quincy, Melissa and the staff are loyal without expecting something in return. These other people want something, although we do not know what. And when they ask you to do something for them—for their political agenda—you cannot say no. They will hurt you, both of you. These are ruthless people. We're begging you to be more careful with them. Please, children."

"We know that your warning is coming from a place of love, Mommy and Daddy. And we will never disregard your advice, even though I think you're over-reacting a little bit." I returned. But we promise to be much more guarded about them."

"That is all we're asking. Be careful. These are politicians, and they will do whatever they have to in order to stay in power."

"We wish you well in London, both of you. We will go home now, if you don't mind. I suspect that you and Zenyatta will want to talk about what we've said."

They got up, hugged and kissed us, and left. Marjorie and Robert were crying. I was puzzled by the tears, and put it down to the fact that we would be leaving in two or three days. Zenyatta and I talked about the conversation. In the end, she agreed with her parents. I was more reticent, since I was deeply indebted to these men, especially to Lewis. Everything would fall apart if he were to divulge my awful secrets.

Robert returned from his shopping, and was intent on showing his acquisitions to Zenyatta. I stole away into the study and called Uncle Peter. We had a nice chat, mostly about the progress of my studies. After I hung up, I called Cousin Peter in Canada. He was happy that I was back home for the break. I told him about our conversation with the Qualises. He listened intently, then said,

"Steven. Those people know what they're talking about. They are more in tune with what ordinary citizens know, the ruthlessness, the oppression. These people know hunger, Steven. They know. What the fuck do you know of hunger, huh? You'd better be very clear-eyed about the people around you, people like White and Lewis and the rest."

I'd never heard Peter being this harsh, and I was jolted by it.

"Look, Steven, if you don't give a shit about yourself, you surely give a shit about your wife! Surely! Open your eyes, man! Jesus!"

"I'll be more careful, Peter. I promise," I said, feebly.

"I know I'm being harsh with you, but this is life and death here, Steven, whther you want to believe it or not."

Then, suddenly, his tone changed:

"Get your degree and do as they tell you, then get the hell out. Apply for a landed immigrant visa to Canada. I'll support that. You and Zenyatta. Promise me youll do that!"

"I promise, Peter."

"Good. I will hold you to that. Next break you have, why don't you spend your vacation in Canada? I'll cover your expenses if you want. Spend a month or so. This is a great country: it's big, stable, free, with good, kind people and a rich history. Call me from London, and I'll make all the arrangements. I'd recommend a small city in New Brunswick. The capital, Fredericton. It's really a pretty place, a university city, really. It's small, almost painfully polite. Good eating too. You won't even need anyone to show you around. Call me and let me know, even only a week in advance."

"I will. I'll talk to Zenyatta about it, and we'll call you from London."

"Okay then. Talk to you soon, Steven. Keep in mind what I've said. Bye, cousin." He hung up.

I sat there thinking about Robert and Marjorie, about Peter, about White and Lewis and Ramroop, and about Comrade Leader. I was now worried about Zenyatta. But they all like her. Surely they would do her no harm, surely. As if she sensed that I was thinking of her, she came into the study.

"Hey you. Why are you sitting there all alone? What are you thinking about, me love?"

I gave her a half-truth: "Oh, I just finished talking to cousin Peter. He wants us to go to Canada on our next break. I told him I'll talk it over with you. I think it's a great idea. Don't you?"

"I'd love to visit Canada, but then I'd love to visit anywhere since I've been to only one place outside of this country." She laughed at her self-deprecation.

"Peter said he'll handle all expenses, so no worries on that front."

"He's done so much already, Steven. Would it not be a bit much to ask him to do this?"

"I did not ask, he offered. And it would be quite ungracious of us to turn him down. He even recommended where we should go."

I told her what Peter had said about Canada and about Fredericton in New Brunswick. She was now getting excited at the prospect.

"That sounds wonderful. It could be a nice, romantic getaway for an old married couple like us."

"It's North-east Canada, so it will be cold. We could go in spring or summer."

"My love, our going does not depend on weather; we have semesters, studies, remember those? You're back here for a few days and already you're spoiled!" I laughed. I had forgotten. Spoiled? She had no idea of how badly spoiled, and I intend to keep it exactly like that.

Chapter Seventy-One

We were back in London, back to our flat. It felt more so this time around for some reason. The English weather felt more raw, and I felt a familiar restlessness, that kind of shiftiness that had caused so much damage, even death. I decided to meet with Galloway and ask about finishing up before the scheduled time. I was also interested in asking him about the inner workings of the university, how it developed, what were the initiatives that marked the stages of development. I needed to find out the steps they take towards decision-making. I did know that they were amazingly quick and efficient.

When I went in to the Law Building, Galloway was in the lounge with seven or eight professors, including Roger Powers. It was just past noon. Galloway was holding forth on something or the other while the rest were quiet, attendance, even cowed. Smoked bellowed from his pipe, his blue eyes flashing, cheeks ruddy, the voice a booming baritone. He saw me peering in:

"Well, hello Steven. Come in! Welcome back from what I heard was a glorious vacation." His tone was markedly different, even affectionate. I went into the lounge.

"Help yourself to a coffee. It's fresh."

I was poured myself a coffee, added sugar and cream, and sat. One of the professors—a thin middle-aged fellow that I had yet to meet—seized on the distraction and initiated a different conversation. The thin fellow—John Davis, I discovered later—started talking about choice of guns he used to hunt deer.

At the talk of guns and killing, David Galloway's entire demeanour underwent a dramatic and immediate change. He became quiet, his skin ashen, and there was something like horror in those glass blue eyes. He flopped down on the sofa next to me as the talk of guns continued. Galloway stood and turned to me:

"Christ, Steven! Let's get out of here! Let's go for a drink!" He was not quiet either. I followed him down to the parking lot and got into his small Volkswagen. He was still as white as a sheet of paper, and there was a film of sweat over his face. His knuckles whitened from gripping the steering wheel too tightly.

He drove directly to a hotel bar where they seemed to know him.

"Two doubles, each, please." He said to the barman after we were seated. He downed his two doubles before I could take a sip.

"Two more for me, please," he ordered the bartender. They arrived in quick order.

We had not uttered a word as yet. I was too afraid to speak for fear of saying the wrong or insensitive thing. After his fourth drink, the colour was returning to his face. Finally, he spoke:

"Those blithering idiots! That glib talk about killing, about guns! They've seen nothing, those chaps. They've never seen the bodies of men and boys cut down, dismembered, killed outright. Never! That's why the talk of guns comes so fucking easily, you know."

"They haven't, but you have, Dean Galloway. You have, and that explains why you reacted the way you did."

"I find it very difficult to talk about any of it. It brings it all back, The whole damn nightmare!"

"That's understandable, Sir. But have you tried writing about it? It could be almost therapeutic, and we can all gain insights from what you've experienced and seen."

He reached into the pocket of his sports jacket, removed the pouch in which he kept his pipe and tobacco, fill the cup of the pipe, lit it. Smoke, sweet-scented, pleasant. The movements were deliberate, precise. He was thinking about what I'd suggested.

"I'm no writer. I'm certainly no V.S. Naipaul. And it would be somewhat embarrassing if my writing turns out to be rubbish."

"Why would it get out. I'd certainly like to take a look and give you my unvarnished opinion. If you like. And I promise that no one else would see it."

"I'll give it some thought. At any rate, I'll try to start one tonight." Galloway said, unconvincingly.

"You know, Dean Galloway, just forget about the craft—the writing—and just tell the story. Just the story."

He simply nodded, and I vowed to myself that I would not let this rest. I felt that this man has important stories to tell, especially according to Roger Powers. His reaction to the glib and idle talk of guns and killings was, to me, a sure sign that Galloway needed to be heard or read.

He broke into my thought: "You know, I have always had doubts about choosing a career in law. I like it, of course, but I would also have liked literature.

I've always been a reader, especially of Shakespeare and the Bible. The language enchants me, really. The sheer, wonderful simplicity of it."

"I agree. That is why he's the greatest poet of all time, plus this formidable knowledge of human nature."

"Yes! True. I remember at one point when we fighting the Germans in North Africa. The Germans were under the command of Rommel, a tactical mastermind. Anyway, there was a lull in the fighting. I was in a tent with a lieutenant, also an avid reader. We thought it would have been nice to get some reading done, but any light would attract German fire. Then it occurred to me that there were always thousands of fireflies around. Their light stays on when they die, you know. So we went out and collected as many dead fireflies as we could and put them in a glass jar. There was enough light to read! Shakespeare by fireflies! A respite from the cruelty of the war."

"What a wonderful story, Dean Galloway! How many people would think of the brutality on war being relieved—even for a few minutes—by reading Shakespeare by fireflies. Nice title for a short story too," I hinted.

He changed the subject: "Roger tells me that he had a splendid time in your country. He says you live in a mansion, in an exclusive area, with armed soldiers at the gates, and with ministerial company. It does sound enchanting."

"I suppose it is, although it gets too much at times. The weaponry, the politics, that kind of thing wears thin after a while, but we are kept safe."

"You are aware, of course, that the tide swings the other way too, right Steven? That just as you are tired of their presence, they too will be tired of yours. Is that not the way with expedient alliances. Good for both until it's not good for either."

He continued: "Your Prime Minister was here, you know, an alumnus of the university. I remember him: a somewhat large fellow who had this easy laughter. I tended to know that he had huge ambitions for himself. He would be laughing in the most jolly fashion, but I always felt that it would not surprise me if he plunges a knife into the heart of the person with whom he was laughing. Even while he was laughing the knife will be thrust into the heart of the person with whom he was sharing a light moment. His eyes, I always thought, was too cold."

"Did you teach him, Dean Galloway? What kind of student was he?" I asked, my heart contracting with fear for some reason. Maybe it was because I thought I may have been crossing into forbidden territory, a place sacred to Comrade Leader.

"Oh no, I had just joined the London School of Economics after Cambridge. He was already in his third year, and I was relegated to more basic courses. He was,

from his records, a rather mediocre student, although he got help from other West Indians—especially the aspiring writers and politicians—who were around at the time. The help was significant."

"So he was not bright?"

"Oh no. But he was charming, I'm told. No one here who knew him was surprised when he became prime minister. They all knew how ambitious he was, and they also knew how unscrupulous he was. His letters recommending you ended up on my desk. I was rather puzzled by the choice of Constitutional Law, mind you. It was unusual for someone recommending to be so specific about the area of study. Usually, it's the student that chooses after examining the options. Why do you think he chose that?"

"Dean Galloway, I've asked that question from the beginning. But who was I to question the wisdom of the Leader himself?" I asked with irony. "He also sent messages to me through Henry White—the Minister of Home Affairs—that I should try to shorten my time away. He wants me back there armed with this degree, but the reason escapes me."

Galloway leaned back in his seat, puffed hard on his pipe and blew rings of smoke into the air. His thick eyebrows twitched as if they had a life of their own. He remained silent for a few minutes, deep in thought. Finally, he spoke,

"He wants to change the constitution, the cunning bastard. He can't do it himself; he wouldn't know how to go about it. And given the Black/Indian tensions in your country, if he should try, there would be violence. So, he needed someone bright, malleable, but outside those two ethnic groups. That's you, Steven. You fit the bill."

I wondered out loud. "But is changing the constitution a bad idea?"

"It depends on the changes he wants made, doesn't it?" Galloway replied.

"He would need a two-third parliamentary majority to change the constitution. He'll never get that, I don't think."

"Or he could call a national referendum by-passing parliamentary approval. He will say, 'Let the people decide'. And rig the whole fucking thing," Galloway retorted.

"Jesus! Is it that easy?"

"No, it's not easy, Steven. That's why they need you. The face. You're to be the face, until they scrape the skin off you. They need someone to set this whole shit show in motion."

"Can the Brits not stop this, Dean Galloway?"

"You've got independence, remember? It's no longer the concern of the Brits. Do you really think they'll come riding in to rescue you? Rescue you from whom, for Chrissake? From yourself? At any rate, who will ask the Brits to intervene? You? Me? Roger?"

"So, how do I extricate myself out of this?"

"I don't know. I do know that you have no recourse in the laws there. Let me give that some thought."

Please do, Dean Galloway, I beg of you. For my sake, but more for Zenyatta's sake. Please."

"I'll give this some thought, and we'll talk later in the week."

With that, he drove me to my flat. Zenyatta was sitting up reading. She got up and hugged and kissed me,

"You look terrible, my love. What's wrong?" She asked.

"It's nothing, really. I was just out for drinks with Dean Galloway."

I told her about the scene in the lounge, how Galloway had got ashen at the glib mention of guns and killing. None of the others had seen the horrors of war, so they could afford to speak of such things with the glibness of the ignorant.

"I suppose only a few have the ability to imagine that kind of horror, Steven. It could be that it's too much for our minds. It could drive us to madness. But then that is why we should honour and respect those who were in it, those who had to swim in rivers of blood. The holocaust is also hard for our minds to contain. We almost turn away, not because we are vulgar enough to deny it, but because we can't contain the horror of it." Zenyatta was crying, shuddering. I held her to me, closely, kissing away the tears.

"I love you, Zenyatta. I love you more than life itself." Unable yet to speak, she nodded. I understood her reply.

We spent the entire night in each other's arms. She sought comfort from the idea that we human beings were capable of inflicting such cruelty upon each other on such a scale. I sought comfort from the thought of what may be before when we return home.

Chapter Seventy-Two

We were in no condition to go to the university the next day. We had a light breakfast and went back to bed. We hardly spoke for the entire morning, each distressed by our different thoughts. After a light soup for lunch, we showered. Zenyatta broke the silence:

"You know, my love, even after that World War, I doubt whether we have learned much. I think the time is just around the corner that we shall have that kind of killing, that kind of murder and genocide all over again. On and on and on. We are an ignoble species, Steven."

"But you, my Zenyatta, are the exact opposite of ignoble. You are the kindest, gentlest, most generous and loving human being there is. I cannot imagine you doing something cruel. Not one little thing."

She leaned over and kissed me on the mouth:

"Thank you for saying that, my darling husband. I hope you're right about me. I pray it be right about me. But how awful it is to think that I'm unique in that way, if you're right, that is. I'm sure I've done someone wrong in some way or another. Maybe I was not conscious of having done a wrong to somewhat, but I must have at some point. How awful it would be to be consciously, premeditatively cruel to another human being? How unbearable even the thought."

"You see? That's exactly what I'm saying about you. You have proven me right even now, within seconds." I preened.

"I will give you this much, my love. I can honestly say that I have tried my whole life to be a good person. When my eyes are closed in death, I hope that I am remembered by you, my parents, and others who have known me as someone who has been good."

"I do not want to talk about death, Zenyatta. Enough of that, please, my sweet."

"Okay, my love. I'll stop. But I do think it's important for each of us to assess ourselves, our thoughts and deeds, as we go along."

"Yes. It's important." I agreed, even while I was thinking about my own thoughts and deeds, my own evil thoughts and deeds. I changed the topic,

"Did I tell you that Roger talked with Dean Galloway about our vacation?"

"You didn't. But you can tell me now, huh?" She smiled.

"Roger told him that we lived in a mansion, that we had soldiers guarding us, and that we have ministers of the government as our social friends." I said, laughing.

"Well, he was telling the truth, right? What else? Come on Steven DaSilva, this was burning you since last night. So out with it, my love."

"Well, it seems that Galloway knew or knew about Comrade Leader when he was studying here at the London School of Economics. Comrade Leader was studying here, that is. Galloway had just joined the faculty. Galloway's impression of him was far from flattering. He read him well, I thought: charming, cold, ambitious at any cost, ruthless, even deadly. And he was not very bright."

"Remarkable! He has captured the essence of the man with precision. Is anything Dean Galloway says inaccurate, Steven? Well, except that the negatives have been made much larger, deeper, more malevolent." Zenyatta challenged.

"No, Galloway's spot on about him, and that was before he tasted power. But then Galloway says that he was puzzled when the "recommendation" from the Leader insisted on Constitutional Law. Do you remember when we too asked why? Why that particular specialization? We could never put our finger on it. Roger did, remember, but he did not foresee the extent of it. Not the way Dean Galloway did."

"What's the 'extent' of it? This sounds ominous."

"According to Galloway's reading of it, they chose to cultivate me. I'm popular, somewhat charismatic, bright, and—most importantly—outside of the Indian/Black ethnic battlefield that the Leader himself worked to exacerbate. I was—am—the perfect patsy. The end: change the constitution to make himself President of the Republic by the new constitution."

"A republic? But is that so bad? Is America not a republic, a democratic republic?" asked Zenyatta.

"It's the exact question I put to Galloway. Additionally, I thought that the only way to change the constitution is through two-third support in parliament. He'd never get that. But Galloway says that Comrade Leader could call for a referendum instead under the pretext that for such change we need to go directly to the "people". So call a national referendum, and rig the crap out of it. He becomes President-for-Life! An all-powerful being over our country."

"Then he would never have to call another election, right?" she asked.

"Nope. Never. It's a king by a different name, that's all. But Galloway's take on our role was what disturbed me the most. He suggests that I was picked, groomed,

financed, given great privileges, money, etc. for a single purpose. And that purpose is to serve the Leader's agenda to be president-for-life. King!"

"And when or if he achieves that ambition, what then Monty and Gordon and Quincy and Melissa and the girls, the staff, what then for you and me?"

"Then we become expendable. We could be stripped of everything, even our lives, and there would be no consequences at all. Zenyatta, we're in a heck of a web. Those very soldiers at our gate can be ordered to be our executioners."

"I asked Galloway about how we can get out of this. He said he did not know, but he will give it some thought. He was really worried."

"Steven, we could tell them that we want no part of it any more. We're out. They can take back their house, their money, and so on." Zenyatta was bordering on panic by now. I had to remain calm.

"Yes. We could do that. Live simply. Open a private law practice and you open yours. Yes. But we can also hear what Galloway comes up with. I'm sure he will find some way, my love. Meanwhile, we're safe here. This is England, beyond their reach." I half-lied. But she was starting to calm down.

"Yes! Yes, ordinary lives like real people live. And we will find a way to take care of everyone. I like the idea. I'm afraid for you, my love. They can hurt you badly." She sobbed, and it tore me heart in pieces.

I wanted to tell her the truth about me being a party to murder and to cruelty beyond her imagination. I wanted to tell her that I was a willing participant in all of it from the start. It was not recruitment so much as it was volunteering. And this is the result of my wickedness. But I could not right then. My Zenyatta was already distraught, and my confession would make it all worse. I kept my mouth shut and hugged her tightly.

"I love you Zenyatta. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. You are my life, and I will let no harm come to you. Never!" I said, through my daze. I did not think she heard. She just stayed there in my arms, limp.

"Don't worry, my darling wife. Dean Galloway will find a way out or we do it ourselves. We have time, lots of time to think, to plan our way out of this mess."

Almost an hour went by without a word between us. Then she released herself from my arms and got up.

"Do you wish some tea? Let's have gallons of tea, my love!" she said.

"I'd love some tea, my dear one," I replied, pretending to be relieved, unworried, confident. I sat at the table and looked at her making a pot of tea. Her movements were fluid, athletic, and I remembered her jumping full-tilt on me after

her short sprint over the grass. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, then and now.

She poured our tea, sipped hers, and said:

"I want to have children, Steven." The question was sure to have been asked at some point about children. Without a pause, I answered:

"How many?"

She brightened immediately, "Oh two or three. One boy and two girls, although it does nor really matter, just that they are ours."

"I think five or six are better numbers, Zenyatta.' I smiled.

"Now you're being greedy, my love, but…" she laughed. I missed her laugh. We had hardly laughed since we returned to London.

"As soon as we wrap up our degrees, we start our family. How about that? And we have as many children as we can."

She was up and dancing, "Three girls and two boys!" she shouted.

"Nope! Three girls and three boys. It's about balance, my lovely Zenyatta."

"Deal!' she agreed, "Let's kiss on it!" She kissed me and I felt for her the desire that I felt from the first day in the store where she worked.

After we made love, I recalled every step we took before we got married. She rolled over onto her tummy,

"I know what you're thinking, you know," she said coyly.

"No you don't! You cannot bluff, girl, so don't even try."

"I do too. You were thinking about when we first met, when you were forward and unbearably rude."

"You, Zenyatta DaSilva, never cease to amaze me. You're right. How can anyone so gentle, so kind, so beautiful, be so perceptive? It's unfair to the rest of us, really."

"You forgot to say that I'm beautiful!"

"And beautiful and gracious…and humble too." I teased.

She punched me playfully in the chest. We laughed and told stories about our first meetings. I knew that just beneath our laughter, the worry lurked. Zenyatta b;urted out a question,

"Tell me, Steven, will you miss the house? Honestly."

"Yes, I will miss it very much. Will you?"

"I will, but I will miss the people much, much more. I am younger and less experienced than any of them, but they treated me with love, with kindness and respect. I think they genuinely cared about me, about us."

"Yes, I'm sure of it, my love. I suppose that people react to us the way we act towards them. They treat you with love and kindness because you treated them exactly like that, with love and kindness and respect. I have never seen you being cruel to anyone. And that is because you have no malevolence in you whatsoever. None!"

"Oh, I am cruel to my brother at times! Remember how I gave him a tongue-lashing when he was late for dinner?"

"No, Zenyatta. It's not the same thing as being cruel. You were harsh, and justifiably so. The fact that you get harshness mixed up with cruelty says volumes, you know."

"I don't know, my love. To me that was cruel. But I do worry about him sometimes. He seems so unfocussed, so scattered, so purposeless. I worry."

"He's young, my dear. Barely fifteen! And he's male. We take a long time to mature, if we ever do." I defended. She laughed.

"I will miss Rudolph Lewis too. He's been kind and affectionate to us. You will miss him too, no?" She asked. I immediately became uneasy again. Lewis was not a topic I cared to address. He knew too much. I thought of a way to get away from the topic:

"Lewis will do whatever is politically expedient, I think. He will serve his political masters, I think. I don't know him that well, you know." I lied.

"Gosh! I was genuinely under the impression that you and Lewis were practically inseparable. But if you don't know him well, then you don't, I suppose." She was almost caustic, and I realized that I may have stumbled into quicksand by being a liar. A lie in one sentence.

She left it there. I left it there.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Two weeks later—my lie remaining like a wall between me and my wife—Galloway asked Roger and me for drinks. Roger picked me up, and we met Dean Galloway in the same bar to which we had gone. He ordered double scotches for each of us, took a gulp of his, and spoke:

"I asked Roger here because he has an idea of the physical and social set up in your country. That, I hope will help us to find a way out of this unholy mess in which you've found yourself. I honestly think that you have also put yourself into this, but we're beyond that now."

I nodded grimly, as did Roger.

"It also ensnares Zenyatta, Dean," added Roger.

"Yes. Yes, it does. But Steven knows that very well."

He turned to Roger: "Can you think of a way around all of this, Roger?"

Roger looked at me, "I'm sorry to ask you this, Steven, but I simply have to ask. Do you have money in the bank over there?"

"Yes, we do. Quite a bit, almost one million of our currency—about three hundred thousand pounds."

"And the mansion is yours, right?"

"Yes, it is in my name."

"Dean Galloway, I'd say that the place is worth at least a million pounds. I'd suggest that a good start would be to sell the mansion and bring over as much cash as you can. You and Zenyatta can start a new life here or anywhere anywhere else."

"Christ, Roger, do you realize how many reg flags that would raise? I doubt whether he and Zenyatta would make it past the airport when they land there. The moment he puts up is place for sale—a place that they gave him because of what he can do for them—they will cease everything. They will begin by freezing all of his accounts. Then they will put them both in freezers as an example of what happens to people who cross them. Those places are not run on law and order, they are run by whims and fancies, by what enriches them and keeps them in power. That is possible the worst idea."

"I suppose you're right. I did not pay too much attention to the politics at play when I was there." Roger responded.

"I think Dean Galloway is right. We would not survive an hour, and neither would Zenyatta's entire family. They will all be slaughtered."

"So that would not work. What would?" asked Roger.

Galloway pulled hard on the pipe and blew smoke rings into the air. He waited for his idea to take shape, like his smoke rings.

"I think he continues as if blissfully ignorant. They both return after they wrap up their degrees. They will reveal their plan to him almost immediately because time is not on their side. Steven will go along with the plan, identifying strategies to make whatever crap they have in store to appear legal. Steven can drag this out because the planning and execution will take time. To change a constitution is no simple matter, making a Prime Minister into a President-for-life takes great thought, firm planning and action. He will appear to be working towards the end that *they* have in mind.

Everything must appear to be as normal as ever. You appear happy and anxious to get done what needs to get done for your master. You have these dinners, yes. And widen the circle of government ministers, if anything. Show them that you are even more loyal than you were before you left. Show that you are enthusiastic, show that you are happy. And show that you are just as unscrupulous as they are. It's the show!"

"And in the meantime, Steven and Zenyatta make their own plans quietly?" Roger asked.

"Exactly! And no one must have the slightest idea. No one at all! Not your chauffeurs nor friends nor family."

Roger: "Will Zenyatta go along with this, Steven?"

"I do not know, really. She is honest at all times."

Galloway: "Then you explain it to her, that it's a matter of life and death for both of you!"

"I think it will help if you and Roger help to explain it to her. She will certainly listen."

"What do you think, Roger? Galloway asked.

"We can help, I think, Especially Dean Galloway. His experience and seniority will be valuable. She'll listen, then come to her own decision. She may even have idea to refine this plan of ours. The girl is no fool."

"And stage two?"

"Yes, stage two indeed." Galloway repeated as he tapped out tobacco into the ashtray, refilled the pipe using his forefinger to compress the new tobacco, put the

pipe between his teeth, and lit. The red glow of lit tobacco as he pulled on the pipe, smoke circles. It was a sure ritual, comforting to him. I liked the smell of the cherry-flavoured tobacco. He finally spoke:

"Roger tells me that you plan on going to Canada for your next vacation. Correct?"

"Yes, Sir. That's the plan. I have my cousin Peter D'Aguiar there."

"And I hear he's very well off?"

"Yes. I'd say he's wealthy."

"Then you should be sure to have a frank discussion about your situation. He could be used as an excuse to send the money you have to Canada. When you go there, you open an account with Peter's help. Transfer as much as you can from your country into that account. You may say that this is a loan from you to your cousin. But you do this only when the time is right."

"I would suggest that you would have to give up the house, since putting the house on the market will surely raise suspicion. That is, unless you find some excuse that would go down well with those people."

"One more thing: when you go to Canada on your vacation, talk to your cousin about your situation and ask him to sponsor you for status in Canada. Do you think he'd be willing to do that, Steven?"

"Peter would do just about anything for me and Zenyatta. He knows some of the people in government that I've dealt with. He knows how ruthless they are, how ruthless they can be. And we can be sure of confidentiality on his part."

"That's good. That is Stage 2 of the plan, then. So, to recap, Stage 1 is to go back and do exactly what they want of you with apparent enthusiasm, including demonstrating that you are also ambitious. Stage 2 is removing as much of your assets as you can without raising red flags and—while vacationing in Canada—applying for Residency in Canada through your cousin. Stage 3 would be to move to Canada under some pretext…a conference or meeting with the Canadian attorney general or some such thing."

"Brilliant!" exclaimed Roger.

"I agree completely," I chimed in.

Galloway cautioned: "Of course, we can adjust the plan as or if circumstances change."

"Yes, Sir." I agreed.

We had a few more drinks, and I was taken back home to Zenyatta. She was still stung by my lie, and I decided to address it. She made things easier when she

rushed to me and hugged and kissed me, as if it were she who ought to be apologising.

"I love you, Zenyatta. I really do so very much. I'm sorry I lied. I do know Lewis well, and what I know of him is very unpleasant. But I know he likes you as he would his little sister and you like him as if he were a protective brother. I did not want to throw a wrench into that. I lied. I am not making excuses, my love, but I do think that I should explain myself. I'm sorry, my darling Zenyatta." My half-truth gushed out in a torrent like so much muddy water.

"Of course I forgive you my love, but please never again. No lies, no half-truths, just tell me the truth and have confidence that however bad it is, I will understand. Promise me."

"I promise you, my Zenyatta," I said, solemnly, knowing full well that this promise was made mere seconds after I lied again. I just could not bring myself to tell her about the things in which I was involved, the people that I had abused with such wanton cruelty. How could I tell her that I was complicit in cold-blooded murder? Cold-blooded murder in order to advance my own greed for power and money. Raina and Rahma, Raina just before her, and Rahma even while we were married. And now, all of it could put us both in danger.

I told Zenyatta of my meeting with Roger and Dean Galloway. I told her that Galloway, true to his word, had arrived at a plan to extricate us from what could be a very dangerous situation. She listened attentively, then asked the question that only an innocent would ask:

"Do you really believe that all of those people—White, Ramroop, Lewis, their Leader—would harm us? They were so good to us, and we are thankful, but we never did them any harm, did we? As we agreed, we could give back the house, give up the privileges, give back what money they gave, get ordinary jobs, and live ordinary but happy lives. So why seek to do us harm?" She was starting to cry again, and my heart ached at it.

"My dearest Zenyatta, people can be mean and cruel for no reason at all. The hunger for power and money is just a partial explanation, but it really is much more than that. We are, at the core of it, a deadly species, and evil thing, my love."

"I cannot believe that, my husband! I cannot and I will not. God did not create us to be evil. Christ did not give up his life for us to be evil all over again. That simply cannot be."

"I hope you're right, my sweet. I really hope you're right. But for now I think that Galloway is being very pragmatic. Roger agrees with him. If there is danger, we

need to be prepared, that's all. We know that politics can be a very dangerous game, and I have placed us in the political arena. If we are at risk, it makes sense to have a plan, right? We know we can both trust Dean Galloway and Roger. So let us trust them."

"Okay," she said, almost wearily.

"Hey, wife, would it not be fabulous to live in Canada? Big, wide-open spaces, kind people, polite people? Focus on that for now," I said, trying for levity.

Unconvinced, she simply said, "Yes. That sounds lovely."

I tried again: "At any rate, we'll see the place for ourselves for our next vacation. And we'll see Peter."

She brightened at the thought of seeing cousin Peter, "Oh, that would be so wonderful, seeing cousin Peter again. He's such a kind man! I've never been to Canada, but everything I read and hear about the place is complimentary."

"It could be very cold in winter, but we will be there at the height of summer, so we will escape Canada's legendary cold." I said.

"Yes, the cold. I read that a French king, in his infinite wisdom exchanged vast Canada. In exchange for Canada the British gave the French one of our small islands, the spice island. The French king thought he had made a good deal, calling Canada 'thousands and thousands of acres of white wasteland.'

"Yes, bright fellow, the French monarch." I returned, and we laughed. It was good to laugh.

We looked forward to our stay in Canada, but our primary focus was on studies. Zenyatta was doing extremely well, and I was holding my grades without showing any strain. At the back of our minds, however, our tenuous situation back home lurked like a snake ready to pounce. We both took comfort that we had Dean Galloway as a guide through this political mine-field.

Chapter Seventy-Four

We met with Dean Galloway and Roger for dinner twice, but my drinking sessions with Galloway was now a weekly routine. The man was a virtual encyclopaedia of information about the ways in which universities function. I gathered more knowledge about management at every level than I would have had I done a degree on management or some such thing. The best part of it was that it was all very conversational. I never felt as if I were being lectured.

It occurred to me that if the situation back home allowed me to exit politics amicably, I could float the idea to Teelak Ramroop about initiating a Faculty of Law. I suggested the idea to Galloway, and he seemed quite enthusiastic about it. Of course, my idea was vague, void of details because of my lack of expertise and experience. Galloway filled those in with admirable ease.

"Do you have the numbers for the first intake of students and who are your targets?" He asked pointedly.

"Yes, we have more than enough numbers for the first intake, but I think it may be wise to limit the first intake to twenty or twenty-five in order to make entry competitive while we see ways to consolidate teaching staff and refine the degree program. Our targets will be folks who graduate with first degrees in English and related subjects like History. If we make entry requirements consider relevant experience, we will also have a good number of cops interested."

"Of course, this is just your sense of things. You will have to be more empirical in assessing interest. But it sounds reasonable. Your major problem would be to recruit teaching faculty, I think. No?"

"Yes. That could be a challenge. However, we can have a number of practicing lawyers teach part-time to cover courses." I ventured.

"In other words," he replied quickly, "the core of your teaching faculty will be part-time folks. This is a bloody recipe for failure. The opposite is what you must have: a core of full-time lecturers and professors and a few part-time folks to fill some holes temporarily—until you hire a full cadre of full-time faculty. You would also need some of the full-time people to be the administrative core. Of course, you could advertise internationally."

"In terms of the programme itself, you could use us here as a template and adjust as needed. I can help by encouraging our faculty who are or go on their sabbatical to come to your university and teach/research for a year."

"Sabbatical?" I asked.

"Yes, Steven. Every five-year period of full-time service, earns one a one-year sabbatical. We don't use the year to sleep, of course. We are required to *demonstrate* that we have published something of significance—a book, say—or demonstrate that we have made a meaningful contribution to university education. Assisting to build your Law School would constitute meaningful contribution."

"I understand, Dean."

"In terms of credibility or even accreditation, we can propose twinning your Law School with ours here. Your Prime Minister would love that!" He laughed.

"Look, Steven. Have no illusions. This is a very expensive undertaking: full-time, qualified teaching faculty; ancillary staff; a stand-alone building; a law library, Bar Exam, and so on. But, with your PM's backing, this could be done. He'd probably beg for a loan from Britain, or some place else. I'm not trying to dissuade you, but your eyes need to be wide open."

"The other thing that occurs to me is that if our PM's help and support is necessary, that would put me in exactly the same sticky mess that we're trying to escape, does it not?"

"Exactly. It's difficult all-round. Of course, you could start some half-arsed school which graduates people who know nothing about anything at all. They would simply have a parchment saying they have an LLB."

He saw that I was downcast, so he tried to comfort:

"Look, give this some more thought. I can promise you support from my end. Don't throw the idea away because it's difficult."

"May I speak frankly, Dean Galloway?"

"Always," he answered.

"It's not just the law school idea. It's the whole thing. The whole damn thing. The whole mess that I created which now ensnares the only person I ever loved."

"The whole thing? There is more than your involvement with some horrible people?"

"No, Sir. It's all tangled. It's all one evil knot, and I'm at the centre of all of it. I am just as cruel and horrible as the rest of them. We are the exact opposite of Zenyatta and all she stands for. We are all as wicked as sin."

"Listen to me, Steven! I tend to know people. I've been through enough to know people and how fucked up they are and can be. No one is exempt from this, Steven. Not you, and not me. No one!"

He continued, his baritone becoming almost shrill: "We have all done bad things. We've all been cruel at one point or another, to some degree or another. So let's leave that alone. Whatever *that* is, leave it alone and let it die a natural death. It has been clear that your primary concern is for the welfare of Zenyatta. It is that which you must now attend rather than past transgressions. It's too late for that, and maybe—maybe—one day when you two are old and grizzled with grandchildren, you could confess to her. For now, let's try to get you both to safety. That's the end game here, right?"

"Yes, Sir." I replied as I dabbed at my eyes.

"I think it will be fine, you know. I think we need to avoid distractions and follow our plan. In two months or less you'll be in Canada relaxing, you two." He insisted.

I smiled at the thought of Canada. Galloway put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a reassuring squeeze. This was not a man who gets too close to people, but I felt close to him.

"Do you have children, Dean Galloway?"

"Yes, I do. Two daughters, both live in the United States. They like it there, they say. They went there with their mother after we got divorced."

"Any more law professors in the family?" I asked good-humouredly.

"Oh no. One is an accountant; the other is an economist. They kept away from their father's footsteps, I'm sorry to say."

"You know, Steven, before you leave for your vacation, I'll have you and Zenyatta and Roger over for dinner or lunch or so. It's a nice place, I think, rather remote, by a lake, tranquil, wooded. We can go strolling in the woods. It should be relaxing."

We had two more drinks as he talked about his home, and then he drove me home.

Chapter Seventy-Five

Zenyatta was up and reading, awaiting my return. She greeted me in the habitual fashion, rushing up at me, and jumping up.

"Are you lonely when I'm away, my love?" I asked.

"Lonely? Not really, I have lots of company with some great psychologists. But I do miss you, my Steven." She smiled.

"I made us a nice cook-up rice, like we do back home. It's still hot, so we should dig in."

We did. It was a taste of home.

The weeks went by rapidly, busy as we both were with papers to submit before deadlines and preparing for end-of semester examinations. I felt confident that we would both do very well.

We called Peter to finalize arrangements to vacation in Canada. He had already booked our first-class tickets on Air Canada. We were to land in Toronto and spend a few days with him. Then we were booked to New Brunswick, a province in northeast of Canada adjoining Nova Scotia. We were to spend a month there, based at the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel in downtown Fredericton, the capital of New Brunswick. The small city, he said, had two universities, the University of New Brunswick and Saint Thomas University, the later being much smaller than the former. He had arranged with the Dean of the UNB Law School to meet with us. The Hotel, he said, was the best in Fredericton, and they will provide a full-time driver and vehicle to take us where ever we wanted to go. It was clear to Zenyatta and me that he had thought of everything.

After the call, Zenyatta observed, "This trip must cost Peter a mini-fortune, my Steven."

"I'm sure it does, but there is no point arguing with Peter, any of the two Peter D'Aguiar's." A reference to both my cousin and my uncle.

"Nonetheless, we need to take a good amount of money, just in case," Zenyatta insisted.

"Just in case of…?" I asked.

"Well, just in case we want to buy a private jet, you dolt." She laughed.

We finished the semester as expected, both of us excelling in our respective courses of study. Then we were on a plane from Heathrow to Pearson International in Toronto. Zenyatta was much more relaxed than she had been on our flights to and from London for our vacation home. In the air, we discussed our progress at the London School of Economics. The time, we agreed, was moving at lightning speed. We were doing very well academically because we were both riveted by the subject matter of courses. The social life was good as well, and I can hardly think of a university lecturer at our local university who could measure up to those at the London School. The latter were active scholars, always publishing something new and exciting. These activities enlivened classes. Of course, research and publication was part of the university culture and the continued international reputation of the institution itself depended almost singularly on that activity. The diversity of the student body from around the planet made things perpetually interesting.

Zenyatta was also happy with her department. Psychology was a challenging field, with new clinical techniques being improved on an almost daily basis. The teaching was always engaging, and that made learning an exciting experience. She was happy with the professors and with her fellow students.

We also talked about home and the people we had left there while we did our studies. She talked about her dad, mom, and brother. And then our staff: Monty, Gordon, Melissa, Quincy, the maids, the ground crew, and so on. Then, inevitably, our plan—or Dean Galloway's plan—for escape. We were so engrossed in our conversation that we were surprised when the pilot announced the start of our descent into Toronto. Zenyatta kept her eyes peeled for her first look at the Toronto skyline.

It took all of three minutes to pass through immigration and customs, and the luggage from our flight was already coming down the shoots and onto the carousels by the time we got to the baggage collection area. We hoisted our suitcases onto the baggage carts and headed for the exit. The waiting area was jam-packed, and it took a few minutes to spot cousin Peter. Zenyatta saw him first and screaming with delight she ran up to him, hugged him and did a little dance. I followed.

That large, packed area was a place of unreserved joy, screams of delight, tears, shouts in numerous languages and accents, people of all hues and dresses, family and friends greeting in other in a place where the sense of freedom and joy was palpable: Canada. This, I decided, was what makes this country one of the best places to be on our entire planet.

Zenyatta and Peter walked ahead, while I stayed behind them pushing the luggage cart. We crossed two one-way roads and into the parking garages, Peter paid the parking fee through a machine, walked into an elevator, the two still yapping away, into Peter's Lincoln Continental, and off we went. Peter was paying special attention to Zenyatta, knowing that this was her first visit to Canada. He was explaining everything that seemed noteworthy, and then she would re-tell that to me in the back seat. It was all wonderfully funny, her explaining to me what I already knew. I could see and hear Peter having a giggle at my expense.

"How we doin' at the back there, ol' chap?" he asked mimicking a Brit accent.

"Isn't this exciting, my love?" she asked, without a trace of irony.

"Yes, it is, my darling. I've always found highways to be exciting," I answered, pretending to be sulking. We all laughed.

"I'm so very happy you decided to come, Steven. You and Zenyatta. I am truly happy."

"We should be thanking you, Peter," I responded.

Zenyatta: "Steven's right, we are truly grateful to you, Peter. You have done so much for us in such a short time."

"Steven knows that I'd do anything for him, short of murder, that is." They chuckled. I could not bring myself to smile, knowing as I do that I would kill for any of those people in this car.

"It's almost supper time, Steven. Would you and Zenyatta like to go home and freshen up, then we go out for supper. Or do we just drive to a restaurant?"

"Let's freshen up, please. Is that okay, Zenyatta?"

"Oh yes, it would be nice to have a quick shower and change of clothes." She replied.

Peter drove to his home in Burlington, a city off Toronto. It was one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Canada, I heard. The house was on Lake Shore Road. In typical Canadian fashion, it was somewhat understated: it spoke of comfort rather than proclaimed wealth; built of enormous stones, intricately put together, it ensured warmth against the bruising winter and coolness in the summer. In many ways, it also suited Peter's personality: functional rather than ostentatious; built to last rather than built for uniqueness; modest like Peter.

Unlike Peter, the house spoke of age. It was built in the early 1800's of large boulder-like rocks, finely interlaced and seemingly welded together. It was built to guard against the bitter chill of the Canadian winter. It was also built to keep cool in the sometimes unbearable heat and humidity of the summer. The view was

gorgeous, overlooking the wide expanse of water that was Lake Ontario. Even at that time—darkness had already blanketed the land—folks were out strolling, walking their dogs, greeting each other with waves and smiles. A few called our evening greetings to Peter.

The house was immediately comfortable, and Peter gave us the master room while he stayed in one of the other four bedrooms. We all freshened up and drove us to the CN tower, atop of which was the famous revolving tower. The structure was once the tallest building in the world, but was overtaken by the twin towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The revolving restaurant fascinated Zenyatta. Each moment, the scene changed and a different view presented itself. Each change of scene elicited from her a sharp intake of breath; I was too occupied witnessing her reaction to see any of it; so was Peter, but he had seen this many times and could take it for granted.

Zenyatta, having never had lobster before, ordered that. She had read about it: how it is cooked, the butter sauce, the implements necessary to crack the hard shell to get at the meat. The taste was what she now wanted. Peter helped her with that. She was quick to compare the taste to our two local crabs, the buck crab and the cheriga crab. Peter had salmon, and ordered white wine to go with that. I had an angus T-bone steak with red wine.

When Zenyatta remarked on the price of the lobster, confessing that she felt guilty about it. He laughed, then told us of his lobster story when he was last in New Brunswick, a province north-east of Ontario.

"I decided to take a drive into the New Brunswick countryside, and all along the road there were these large pails filled with lobster. Curiosity had me stop and enquire. Steven, Zenyatta one whole pail was just five dollars! Here, we pay one hundred dollars for *one*. It's a much cheaper to live in New Brunswick that it is to live here. Rents, groceries, transportation, and so on are about a quarter of what it is in Toronto.

Of course, that is not why I wanted you to spend the bulk of your vacation there. The most attractive thing is the people: they are hospitable, polite, accommodating, friendly and generous. And certainly no racial tensions there. The landscape is much prettier, although they have nothing like Niagara Falls and the buildings we have here. The New Brunswick skyline is a wall of trees." He laughed.

Zenyatta spoke up, "So that's the plan. We spend a week here, fly to New Brunswick and spend a month, then back here for another week?"

"Yes," I said, "but to come back we'll drive and go through Quebec."

"Yes," said Peter, "It's a lovely drive, scenic and serene. And you could stop and overnight when you feel like doing so. No hurry. This week, as well, we have to put together all the necessary documents for your Landed Immigrant status. That should take a year to eighteen months to process. I'll have my lawyer talk with us about the details before you go to New Brunswick."

"Sounds good, does it not Steven?" Zenyatta asked.

"Peter was always more organized than anyone else…but back then he never let anyone forget it." I laughed and they laughed along with me.

"Okay, Mr. Super-Organized, what's the plan for tomorrow?" Zenyatta teased.

"Well, you disorganized duo, I thought we'd take an early night to rest after your flight, and tomorrow we take a trip to show Zenyatta one of the wonders of the world: Niagara Falls. What say you, Zenyatta?"

"Oh, I would love that! I would! It has always been one of my dreams to see the great Niagara Falls. The closest I ever got to that was what I read in books. And even though I knew we were coming to Canada, things have been so hectic and worrying, that Niagara did not even occur to me. Thank you, Peter." She rattled off excitedly.

"Well, Cousin Peter, that's a good plan then." I added.

"One of the nice things is that we are quite close to Niagara. Mybe just thirty to forty minutes. It's just a matter of driving across the bride over Lake Ontario. And we can even go to a casino if you like Zenyatta. Maybe even overnight there."

"A casino? I've never been to a casino before. It would be an experience indeed."

And so, having eaten, and having watched Zenyatta do battle with the lobster, we went back to Burlington to cousin Peter's lovely place on Lakeshore. Zenyatta and I spent half the night on the balcony off Peter's room. The balcony over-looked the massive. It was cool, and Zenyatta draped a blanket over her shoulders. She looked as beautiful as I've ever seen her. The stress of studies, my lie to her, and her worry about our future had started to weigh on her. Here she was, free from it all for now. I kissed her tenderly, and she smiled. We sat quietly absorbing the massive beauty, the majesty of the place.

The next morning we were up at nine, and Peter prepared breakfast: toast, bacon, eggs, coffee. We bade each other good morning. While having breakfast, Peter asked: "Did you sleep well? I was worried that the place may have been too cold for you."

"We slept soundly, thanks Peter," said Zenyatta, "In fact, the slight chill made for sound sleep. We spent almost two hours on your balcony admiring the lake."

I added: "Then we fell into our coma-like sleep."

"I'm glad. Now eat up, you two. I'd like for us to be in Niagara at lunchtime, take in as much of the Falls as we can, them o off into the casino and gamble away the night. I've booked two rooms, so you may want to take a change of clothes."

"Sounds good, Peter," I replied.

After brekky, we showered and got dressed for our adventure. The bridge across Lake Ontario was a sight in itself, although Zenyatta became uneasy when Peter insisted on driving between two massive trucks. They must have been taking exports to the US since the border was just two minutes or so from Niagara, the source of electricity for much of the easter seaboard of the USA. Peter explained to Zenyatta that being between the trucks shielded us from the cross-winds which can be quite powerful, sometimes shifting a car into another lane. We were doing 160 to180 kpm between the trucks, as they reared up beside us.

We turned in to Niagara, and could immediately hear the roar of the Falls. We went onto a viewing platform from which we could have a panoramic view of the falls and feel the spray beat against our faces. They provided protective gear against getting soaked. Then we went to cave-like underground tunnels where we could hear the thunderous sound of eight million cubic feet of water pouring each minute over the precipice of the falls. Zenyatta and I took a ride on the *Maid of the Mist*, a relatively small ferry that took as rather close to the falls itself.

By the end of it all, Zenyatta could not speak, struck dumb with awe as she was. Hers was the wide-eyed wonder of a child, an innocent who has witnessed a miracle wrought by Nature or by God. My wife was a beautiful woman, graceful, generous, kind, faithful, loyal, a truly good human being incapable of doing harm to anyone. She was a gentle soul who could never quite accept that human beings were vile, hateful, treacherous creatures. She could not and would not accept that. It was this innocence that I loved most about my Zenyatta. She looked upon the whole world with the eyes of a child. It frightens me greatly that the world will chew her up and spit her out without a second thought. I am adamant in not letting this vile world and its vile creatures do her harm. Of this, I was certain; I knew even as I thought of my Zenyatta that I am one of those vile creatures. I knew. I know.

After the Falls, we went to the hotel. Zenyatta and I showered and rested for a couple of hours. We were to meet Peter in four hours in the hotel lobby, then off to the casino. I gave Zenyatta five hundred dollars to play the slots which required no skill at all. I took one thousand dollars, after Zenyatta agreed. She had never been to

a casino before, and I thought it might be fun for her. I simply knew that if she lost one hundred dollars, she would quit.

At the appointed time, we went down and met up with Peter.

"Are we ready to break the casino, you two?" he joked.

I answered, half-seriously: "You know the casino never loses, Peter."

"But no casino has ever gone up against Zenyatta DaSilva, boy! In fact, I will invest one thousand dollars in this girl, with your approval, Steven."

"Hey, it's your money."

"You are two children, you grown men. But it will be a new experience for me. I've never gambled in my life. My mom and dad would be mortified if they knew." And she giggled.

Peter reached into his pocket and took out one thousand dollars. He held it out, but Zenyatta backed away,

"Come on, Peter, you know we can't take that. Not after all you've already done." She said, quite sternly.

"Listen you too. I'm a businessman, and I don't give away anything. This is an investment. If you win, you return my thousand and keep your winnings. If you don't win, that's okay with me. Okay? Please, for me. It will make me happy."

"Take the money, my love. Invest it for this poor man." I said.

She took it unwillingly and put it in her purse. I knew she would not touch it.

The casino was enormous, and we escorted Zenyatta to a slot machine quite close to the tables. Peter said he was going to play Texas Hold 'em poker at a table nearby where we could keep and eye on Zenyatta. I told him that I'll join him in a while if there's a seat at his table after I show Zenyatta how to work the machine. That way, we can both watch out for her and she can see us.

I was showing my wife how to play the machine, pressings button. As I leaned over, Peter shoved some money into my back pocket, and he left for the poker table. There were four other players.

Zenyatta refused to play maximum bet, opting instead for half of maximum at the "Flaming Sevens" machine. I stayed behind her for a while until she was playing with some confidence. Then I strolled over to Peter's table. I changed five hundred dollars into chips. Peter was losing after an hour, while I was winning about five hundred. One of the machines nearby sounded an alarm: someone had hit the jackpot. Peter and I looked across and saw that it was Zenyatta's machine. She was simply looking at the machine, quite puzzled. I asked to be dealt out and went to her.

"It just started doing that. I did not do anything at all, my love," she exclaimed.

"You did something, alright. You won the jackpot. Look at the counter, my darling wife."

"That's more than five thousand dollars, Steven! Five thousand Canadian dollars!" she screamed.

At the end of the night, Peter had lost a hundred dollars; I had won five hundred; and Zenyatta had won six thousand. We cashed in and went to the bar for a nightcap. Peter and I had double scotches and Zenyatta had orange juice. She insisted on paying, much to our amusement. We teased her about beginner's luck. She defended herself by claiming to be a "natural". She gave Peter all of the money she had won, and he took what he had given her and gave her back the rest.

"How did you two seasoned gamblers do?" she mocked.

"I did not win," Peter confessed.

"I won a bit," I said.

Zenyatta gave Peter two hundred, one for the one hundred he had lost, and one hundred "as a tip". We cracked up at that.

It was already three in the morning when we got back to our rooms. We collapsed into the bed, and fell asleep.

Chapter Seventy-Six

We awoke at ten, showered and get dressed, and went down to see that Peter was already there, using his credit card to pay the hotel bill. On the way back to Burlington, we stopped by a *Tim Horton's* and had coffee and donuts. During brekky, we agreed that we will spend the day relaxing. Peter asked what we should like for lunch, and Zenyatta said she would like pizza. Peter readily agreed, as did I, with extra toppings. We planned to decide about supper during lunch.

Peter informed us that he would have to go in to his office in the afternoon to sign some papers and have a quick meeting with some of his senior people. The consummate businessman, he insisted that a meeting never go past one hour and fifteen minutes. Biting into a donut, he said,

"If you cannot get done what you need to get done or make a decision in that time, then the laws of diminishing returns begin to set in. We begin to lose time and money while we have what amounts to a social gathering. I suspect this is why in backward universities they have numerous and interminable meetings after which decisions are made about what decisions are to be made. They have no sense of the money being wasted. The bizarre thing is that nothing substantial comes out of those meetings. Don't you agree, Peter?"

"I think you're spot on, cousin. Of course, I have very limited experience of a faculty meeting, but if I'm to take the Council Meetings at our university back home as symptomatic, then you're distressingly right. Often, it is about people talking to hear their own voices and admiring it. Discussions are mostly circuitous. Someone babbles for thirty minutes, then another person spends thirty minutes agreeing with the previous speaker, and on and on." I contributed.

Peter tried to bring Zenyatta into our conversation,

"What do you think, Zenyatta?"

She responded: "Both of you know, of course, that I've never attended a business meeting nor a meeting of academics. On the face of it, I prefer Peter's way of doing things. I doubt whether the top universities in the world—the Oxfords and Camridges and Harvards and Yales—have these forever meetings. But as you were talking, I remembered reading somewhere about a Japanese Company—it may have been Sony, but I'm not sure. They used to have these meetings in ultra-comfortable

settings: large conference tables, cushy seats, coffee and tea and snacks served every few minutes, and so on. The meetings lasted hours upon hours. Then the CEO made a change. The Board members came into a meeting. The room was bare, save for the table. No seats, no drinks, no snacks. They all had to stand. Discussions suddenly became brief and decisions arrived at rapidly and efficiently. True or not, I rather like the story. Half-baked universities and businesses can learn a lot from that, I think."

Peter and I had a good old laugh. The story, Peter held, was priceless.

Zenyatta insisted on paying from her winnings, and we did not argue. We knew that it made her feel good about contributing in some way, no matter how small the contribution was.

We set out for Peter's house and went directly into our room. Peter excused himself and went into his office to make a few calls. We retreated for about two hours, showered again, dressed, and went down. Peter was still on the phone. Zenyatta mad us a pot of freshly brewed coffee, and we sat at the dining table enjoying the coffee and the quiet.

"Do you think we'll be permitted to open an account at one of the banks here, my love?" Zenyatta asked.

"I don't know, Zenyatta. We'll ask the Canadian when he's done. We're just visitors, so I don't know," I responded.

Eventually Peter emerged from his office and apologize for neglecting us. He helped himself to coffee and joined us. Zenyatta asked him about opening an account. He promised to find out today and let us know.

Zenyatta's idea was that we put our winnings and some of the money we brought into that new account. More importantly, if we get a chance we could send at least some of our money from home. If we ever get a chance.

Peter agreed with us about that being a good idea,

"I think we should talk about how we will proceed to get you to Canada. We should do that before you leave for New Brunswick."

"How about we discuss that this evening after supper?" Zenyatta asked, "Steven can fill you in on all the sordid details."

"Then that's set for this evening. You will need to walk me through the complexities, Steven. The dangers. Back home, the one trustworthy asset you have is Uncle Peter. The people you had at your wedding dinner were gracious social company, but trustworthiness is not a quality I would attach to them. They will do that which is to their own political interests."

"I agree with Peter," Zenyatta said. I nodded. Any of them would sell us down the river if it would ingratiate them with Comrade Leader. In a place like this—safe, quiet, stable, with two of the people that I would trust with my life—it felt unreal to be thinking of the monstrosity of that man and his minions. It felt strange to even have him in my thoughts, but there he was.

Peter ordered pizza before he left, and put some money on the table that would cover the cost and give a generous tip. He said he should be back by five and we should decide what we'd like for supper. He'll pick it up on his way back.

Zenyatta and I enjoyed our pizza and went into the room to relax. We went out onto the balcony and enjoyed the view and fresh air. Refreshed, we made love and dozed off. We startled awake when the phone rang. It was Peter asking what we decided about supper. We had not even talked about it, and Peter suggested that he could get something from Chinatown. Zenyatta and I said that sounded wonderful.

Peter was home by six. He brought out a bottle of scotch, ice, water, and coke for Zenyatta. Clearly, he was anxious to deal with our situation.

"Okay, Steven. Let's talk about what's going on and how we can deal with it."

"We're in trouble, Peter. I have put Zenyatta in danger. I have put us both in danger."

"Okay, Steven. Be specific. What have you done to put you both in danger?"

"It's a series of things, really. Lewis tempted me to join the ruling party. Money, prizes, influence, gifts, including a scholarship. Everything."

"And in return?"

"In return, they chose my field of study and where I should read for my law degree—Constitutional Law."

"Why? Why that?"

"Well, Zenyatta and I asked ourselves that many times, but arrived at no firm conclusions. Meanwhile I was given the house and all its trappings by Henry White on the instructions of the leader. They even paid all of our staff: Monty, Gordon, and so on, the people you met."

"Yes, I met them briefly. Good people, But why Constitutional Law, Steven?"

"I discussed that we Dean Galloway at the London School of Economics. We've become quite close. He is certain that the plan is for me to graduate, go back, be put into the Minister of Justice position, and change the constitution to make Comrade Leader the President-for-Life. The Prime Minister will be appointed by him and simply obey his orders. Dean Galloway is certain of this."

"Why you, of all people? I mean, you're bright. We know that, but that's not it, is it?"

"No. Race is involved here. Because of our colour, I'd be seen as neutral by the black population and the Indian population. So no kind of racial riots would be likely. That is their calculation, anyway. And even if there is any kind of opposition, the army under Rudolph Lewis will slaughter any protestors without so much as a hesitation."

"And then?"

"Well, that would be the end of the road for me because I will be of no further use. Or, if I object, I get snuffed out and Zenyatta with me. Everything that they gave will be taken back, and I will be ostracized at best. I think they'll kill us, Peter."

"Can you not sell the house and move what money you have out of the country?"

"No. Dean Galloway said that the moment I start withdrawing big amounts of money or try selling the house, that will raise red flags. They will shut everything down immediately."

"I think your Dean is right." Peter said. He turned to Zenyatta,

"What do you think, Zenyatta?" he asked.

"Peter, I think we are in serious trouble. We danced with the devil and this is the price we pay. We need your help."

"Well, I can help with money, that's for sure. Can you not stay in England?"

"No. The big man went to that university and has firm contacts there. They will hunt us down in a day at most."

"Yes, and money would be no good to you dead."

I forced a smile. Zenyatta's hands were trembling. I held them tightly, hoping she'd be comforted somewhat. Peter seemed lost. He poured us a drink, and he gulped his down and poured himself another. Mine remained untouched. I looked at my wife. Her face was shiny with sweat, beads forming on her forehead and above her lip.

"Peter looked at her. Zenyatta, we'll solve this, girl. It's not yet time to panic."

"Thank you, Peter," I said.

"Look! We need legal advice here. Give me a minute. He went into his study, leaving the door open. He was on the phone:

"John! It's Peter. I need to see you."

"Yes. Now! My house…okay, see you on thirty."

He returned.

"That was my lawyer, John Barry. He's a really good, and he's connected. He's coming over. He'll be here in half an hour. Let's see if he has anything to offer."

"Thank you, Peter," Zenyatta whispered.

"Did you talk to Uncle Peter about any of this?"

"No. I was too busy being greedy, I suppose. And can you imagine his reaction?"

"Yes. He'd hit the roof and then take your head off. But, I'll say this for him...after he finishes berating you, he's settle down and try to help."

"I suppose you're right, Peter. But I never thought of going to him."

"Okay. Maybe it's best we leave him out of it completely. I'm just trashing around here, I know."

The doorbell rang before too long. Peter went to the door.

"Hey Peter. What's the emergency, man? You sounded terrible."

"You'll see and hear soon enough, John."

They moved towards us, Peter in front, the lawyer trailing him.

"John, this is Steven DaSilva, my first cousin. Steven, meet John Barry, my lawyer and friend. And this is Zenyatta DaSilva, Steven's wife. Zenyatta, this is John Barry."

"We all said 'pleased to meet you' and sat down. John Barry was a rather large, imposing white man. Grey hair, clean shaven, large paunch. His ruddy cheeks, veined, showed him to be a heavy drinker.

"Can I offer you something to drink, John?" Peter asked.

"Maybe in a few minutes, Peter. Thank you, my friend." John answered.

Peter spoke up telling John Barry the story in as succinct a manner as possible. The lawyer listened intently, scribbling notes furiously. I added a few details, while Zenyatta remained silent for the most part. I knew that it was tearing at her insides at having the tale told over and over. Barry asked some questions to fill in gaps that appeared in our telling.

When we were finished our synopsis, the lawyer leaned back, looking at each of us, then back at his notes. He bit the top of his pen in concentration. Finally, he spoke:

"Well, Zenyatta and Steven, as Peter knows, I am not an immigration lawyer. I am a corporate attorney, although the fundamentals are mostly the same. I will say from the start that your situation seems quite difficult, but I think there may be ways to extricate yourselves from this tangle. It is clear that you have gotten mixed up with some pretty unsavoury people."

"The first thing that occurred to me was exactly as Peter had suggested: liquidate your assets and leave, but that—as your Dean Galloway explained—cannot be done without sending up warning flares. That can and will precipitate any action they may want to take to neutralise both of you. I have read some of David Galloways books on the law, and there can be no finer mind to be found in our profession today. He is right on just about every point. The second thing that occurred to me was that you could apply for convention refugee status here in Canada. That takes twelve to eighteen months to come through one way or the other. But I do not see granting that because you are from one country where the threat resides, but you currently reside in another country, the UK. You could have applied for the convention refugee status there, but then the people who will be coming after you to exact revenge know much about your life and studies there. They most likely know where you live, where you shop, and even the times when you leave for the university and return from the university. Aad they will know your routine for sure if there are military men involved. So applying there will also precipitate action. Where does that leave you?"

"Canada," Zenyatta replied quickly, "we can apply for refugee status here."

"Yes,' Barry replied, "but our officials will certainly ask why you did not apply for refugee status in Britain. Of course, you explain about your people's familiarity with the London School of Economics and their contacts there. And they know where you live. Even if you move, they will know where you've moved to. The other element of this is they may have doubts about how vicious or vengeful these people can be—a few ill-trained assassins from a Third World country. That is precisely how they will think. Therefore, they will conclude that there is no real threat to your physical well-being and turn down your request as not rising to the level of deserving refugee status. In other words, you are not in any immediate danger in Britain and that you should apply there for asylum."

"So you're saying that we have no way out, that we are at the mercy of those people, right?" I asked, shakily.

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all. I'm identifying the avenues that are not likely to be open to you under the circumstances." There is another option that we have not identified. It involves Peter. Well, it involves everyone at this table, really. It is simply a variation of David Galloway's plan."

"Well, say it man! Tell us." Peter said impatiently.

"Instead of going the convention refugee route, you take the more traditional route and simply apply for Landed Immigration status in Canada…"

Peter broke in: "Why the fuck did I not think of that? Excuse the language, please, Zenyatta. But why?"

"Neither did the two of us, Peter." I offered.

John Barry: "Because you're too close to the problem. That's why."

He continued: "It makes sense. Peter sponsors Steven and Zenyatta. He has the financial resources to assure the Federal Government that you will not be a burden on the Canadian taxpayer. The process takes a longer time than refugee status, but that works to your advantage, You have three years more of study. You have three or four years to get what assets you can out your home country without raising suspicion. Studying abroad can be expensive even if you're on a scholarship—unforeseen expenses. We could file the paperwork immediately if you have the documents available, and in three years or less you're Landed Immigrants to Canada."

"Sounds hopeful," said Peter.

"It sounds wonderful to me," added Zenyatta.

"Peter, will you sponsor us?" I asked.

"Boy, don't be foolish. You're my cousin and Zenyatta is my favourite person in the whole damn family, so just be quiet."

I got up and hugged him. Zenyatta did the same. Then she turned to John Barry:

"You deserve a hug too, Counsellor." She gave him his hug, and he turned a deep red.

"Filing the paper-work will cost a bit, but..." John Barry said, when Peter cut him off,

"Come on John. No talk of money. You know that is easy part in all of this."

"Okay, Peter. You're right. Now I will accept that drink, please."

We each had about three drinks of scotch, while Zenyatta had hot cocoa.

"Tomorrow, I'll give Peter a comprehensive list of the documents we'll need to start the process as early as next week. The only caution I would have for you all is that this needs to be kept close to the chest for obvious reasons. No one except we four should have any idea. No one. Clear?" John Barry warned.

"Clear!" the three of us said, almost simultaneously.

The conversation changed when Peter recalled Zenyatta's success at the casino last night. It was lighter, and we needed that levity.

"Hey Peter, we should take these young people to Woodbine to see the horse racing. It's a really nice place," John Barry offered.

"Now that's another good idea, John," Peter agreed, "we still have a few days before you leave for New Brunswick."

The conversation turned to New Brunswick. John Barry was also familiar with the province. He named the sights that are a "must-see": the reversing falls of St. John and the magnetic hill in Moncton were two that I remember.

"From the sound of Peter and John, we will need to spend two years rather than a month in New Brunswick. Don't you think, Zenyatta?" I asked her, smiling.

"From the sound of things, I'd want to spend the rest of my life in New Brunswick, my love." She replied, happily.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

John Barry gave the list of necessary documents the next day, as he had promised. Even though my experience with Canadians was limited, he seemed to validate my feeling that Canadians were solid, dependable, genuinely nice people, for the most part. Of course, Peter had his tasks as well: letter of sponsorship; certified bank statements; properties, etc. Zenyatta and I set about immediately getting up copies of all the necessary documents: application forms, London School of Economics acceptance letters, our own bank statements, birth and marriage certificates, etc. Everyone was determined to begin the process by the start of the following week.

A few days later, we boarded a plane from Pearson International in Toronto for New Brunswick. Peter has ensured that we were booked in to the best hotel available in Fredericton, The Lord Beaverbrook Hotel, and had them make a car and driver available to us at the airport and whenever we needed it for our month-long stay. Our meals and drinks were to be charged to our room. If Peter had skipped a beat, we could not identify it.

The flight was about ninety minutes. We landed at about four in the afternoon. As we were coming in I remarked upon the vast forests below. The airport was small, and there were no problems at all to collect our luggage and walk out to the car waiting outside. It had the hotel name on the side and the driver knew our names. He loaded the luggage into the trunk and opened the door for us to get into the back seat. The drive was smooth with very little traffic. It was mostly trees: pine, cedar, and maple. At times a break in the forest opened out into large fields.

We were in Fredericton in thirty minutes. The first word I could think of to describe the city of Fredericton was "neat". The street was neat, easy to negotiate; the buildings were neat; the layout of shops and eateries was neat. The people we saw ambling along the streets were neat. The driveway into the Lord Beaverbrook was neat.

The staff were uniformed and polite. They helped take the bags up to our room, and accepted the tip graciously, asking that should we need anything, we have but to dial zero and we shall be tended to. Our view looked out upon the St. John River.

"We have been lucky to have views of water, my love. First, Lake Ontario, now the St. John River."

"Yes, my darling Zenyatta, this augers well. I have a good feeling about this place, but we will know more after we look around."

"And a whole month in which to do so!"

We unpacked, showered, changed and decided to go out for a walk. Although it was almost sixty-thirty, the sunlight was bright but it was cool. We walked up Prospect Street. It was steep and after a while we began to feel the effort in our legs. Zenyatta observed that it was quite different from going for a walk in the evening at home where it was flat, still steamy, and always somewhat risky. Here we felt safe, free, breathing the crisp air. We walked for about thirty minutes until we could see the red-brick buildings of the University of New Brunswick. We were tempted to go onto the campus, but thought better of it since we planned to spend an entire day touring the campus. We noticed the conspicuous absence of guards, guard gates, soldiers, the military presence that befouled our own campus back home. The contrast was stark in our minds, so was our shame and envy.

We headed back down the hill towards the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel. We decided to have supper; the walk and the fresh air made us hungry. The bar and dining area were almost empty. We sat at a table that over-looked the St. John River, asked the very polite waitress for a menu. I asked for a Canadian beer—Labatt's Blue, I think—and clamato juice for Zenyatta, a drink that was new to my wife.

She was sitting to my left, facing the river, holding my hand and running the fingers of her other hand through my hair. The waitress returned, young, white, neat:

"If I had to guess, I'd say you two were on your honeymoon. Would I be right?" she ventured.

Zenyatta smiled widely: "Oh no, dear. We're an old married couple—three years like yesterday, am I not right, my love?"

I smiled at her buoyancy: "Three short years," I replied.

"We're just on vacation from studies, and Fredericton came highly recommended, so here we are."

The girl seemed interested: "You had a good recommendation. Fredericton is a lovely place with lovely people. We are kind and neighbourly, like most Maritimers. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, PEI, and Newfoundland are the best places to be in Canada. Of course, I'm a bit biased, being from here."

"We like what little we've seen," I said, "we plan to visit the campus tomorrow or the next day."

"Oh, wonderful! I am a student at UNB. It's a pretty campus, and the professors are all very good. Especially the Department of English. They go out of their way to help us."

"What of the law school?" I asked.

"Gosh. I can't tell you much about the law school. It does have a good reputation, but they tend to keep to themselves, I think."

She changed the subject: "I hope you guys don't mind my asking, but are you West Indians?"

"We are," Zenyatta answered with a smile.

"I knew it. I knew I heard that beautiful accent before, with slight differences," she exclaimed, quite happy with herself.

"You knew someone from the West Indies?" I asked, curious.

"Steven, my love. Why are you probing the poor girl. She had a boyfriend who was West Indian, probably from Trinidad."

"My goodness! How did you know? This is incredible. Yes, he was my boyfriend…from Trinidad. He graduated and went back home last year. We still write to each other, but time and distance, you know. Oh, my name is Nancy, by the way. I should have introduced myself in the first place. I'm sorry."

Zenyatta replied: "Hi Nancy. My name is Zenyatta and this is my husband, Steven. We are very happy we ran into you."

"Oh my! I love that name, Zenyatta. If I ever have a daughter I'll name her Zenyatta. It's beautiful."

"Thank you, Nancy," Zenyatta said graciously.

We chatted some more about the university and about Fredericton, St. John, Moncton and few other places we should visit while we're in New Brunswick. Nancy also told us about the best places to eat and the best places to shop. She also told us about bars with the best views of the river and about places where there is dancing. Zenyatta took down the names dutifully.

"Are there many international students at UNB?" I asked.

"Yes, maybe a thousand or so, I think. From around the world—West Indies, India, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Africa. They make the campus lively and interesting. And there is another university here too, Saint Thomas University. It's right up the hill from UNB. It's smaller, much more close-knit that UNB. It's a more relaxed place, I think…a Catholic university. You really should visit. The STU president is a lovely man, Monseigneur Martin."

"I'd love to visit there. I'm Roman Catholic, so that should be interesting. And my parents will be pleased to know that I visited a Catholic university." Zenyatta ran on excitedly.

"Zenyatta and Steven, I'd be happy to show you around on my days off, if you like."

"Oh, capital," Zenyatta replied, "but we would not want to impose, you know."

"No problem. I work here to pay my tuition and other expenses. My parents help when they can, of course, but I really dislike burdening them. I try to be as independent as much as I can."

"That's most admirable, Nancy. We're staying here. We're in Room 509. Do call up when you're free."

She served our meal of pasta and meatballs and left us to enjoy our meal. When we were finished, she cleared the dishes and presented us with the bill in a tasteful, leather-covered folder. We charged it to the room, as Peter had insisted, we do. I gave her a tip of two hundred dollars, which was slightly more than the cost of our meal and drinks.

"Oh no! That's way too much. I can't accept that, Steven. I'd feel guilty about that."

Zenyatta would have none of it and put the money into her apron pocket:

"There! Now it's yours. It really is no trouble, and you've been extremely kind. It's our way of expressing our appreciation, Nancy."

The matter ended there. The place had started to get busy. People were coming in for dinner, drinks and dancing to a live band.

We went up to our room, showered, and went directly to bed. It was only when we were in bed that we realized how tired we were. Sleep came quickly and easily.

The morning seemed to come quickly. As usual, Zenyatta was up and dressed before I opened my eyes. She was on the balcony, gazing out at the St. John River, a thick blanket of fog lay on the river like a thing of comfort.

I hurried up my morning routine and joined her on the balcony. She kissed me good morning and we held each other close.

"Is it strange, my love, that for the first time in what seems a long time that I feel comforted? I feel soothed, calm, unworried." She mused, almost in a whisper.

"My darling Zenyatta, I feel exactly the same. It is as if I am home, finally. And yet, we've not even spent a full day here. It is strange indeed. I feel as if I could live out my life here with you in peace, in safety. If we continue to feel this way, and if we get through to come to Canada, we should consider settling down here. What do you think, my sweet?"

"Yes! Yes, our whole lives here. And yet, as you've said, we've not even spent a full day here. We've hardly seen the place. We've hardly spoken to anyone except

for Nancy. We really know nothing of the place. And yet, this wonderful feeling of coming home that we both feel."

"Do you want to go down for brekky or should we order room service?" I asked.

"Let's go down. We could have brekky and people-watch if there are people there," she smiled.

We locked the room, got on the elevator and down to the same space as last evening. There were other people there, all white, all in suits. They seemed like lawyers and politicians to me. Everyone seemed to be speaking in hushed tones, punctuated every now and then by a peal of laughter.

I told Zenyatta about my sense that most of the people having breakfast or just coffee may be lawyers or politicians. She said it made sense since Fredericton was the capital city of New Brunswick. We also noticed that, while it was clear that we were strangers here, no one stared. It seemed to us that the crowd here having breakfast or coffee was the same crowd every morning. Everyone seemed to know everyone else.

Even as were we making our observations, a tall figure loomed over us,

"Excuse the intrusion and top of the morning to you. Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva, I presume?" he said, reaching out to shake our hands.

"That's us," Zenyatta answered breezily. I'm Zenyatta and this is Steven, my husband.

"My name is Richard Bosnitch. I happen to be the mayor of Fredericton. I wish to welcome you to our fair city. Your cousin, Peter D'Aguiar called me last night and told me that you were on vacation here and that I should keep an eye on you both. He is quite protective. I hope you will call on me at City Hall, and do contact me if I may be of service. I'll leave my calling card with you and leave you in peace to enjoy your breakfast."

"Thank you, Your Worship," I said.

"Oh, please, Richard would do. Peter's family are like my own family. I hope to see you when you have the time."

"Thank you, Richard." We both said. He went back to his table.

Zenyatta observed, smiling: "Cousin Peter gets around doesn't he?"

"It sure seems so. He was always popular, even at home. And that may be why Uncle Peter was always disapproving of him." We both laughed at that.

We arranged with our driver to visit St. John after lunch. Being from that city, he knew the key sites. It was a pleasant drive, and one gets a sense of the massive sprawl that is Canada. But only a sense. I do not think it is possible to grasp the expanse of this wonderful country, so varied, so calm, so welcoming. At the

entrance of Saint John, we saw the Reversing Falls, a waterfall that seemed to flow upward in defiance of the laws of gravity. Zenyatta was quite impressed by this. I was struck by how different St. John felt from Fredericton. The former had more of a blue-collar feel to it, equally friendly, but with a kind of rough edge, less refined in behaviour and in language than Fredericton. I supposed that the primary reason was that St. John was more of a manufacturing city, while Fredericton was the seat of government and a university city. St. John—its streets, its structural formation, its people—had an organic feel to it. Fredericton seemed more deliberately designed, more structured for neatness and efficiency. Both had their virtues, and I felt at home in both.

On the way back from St. John, Zenyatta spoke. Throughout the journey, she had been rather quiet. She was absorbing every detail along the way, the rise of every rocky cliff, the sweep of every pasture and animal therein, the shape of every building. Respecting her silence, her quiet observation, I remained quiet. She seemed to be assessing everything, and I felt sure to hear of it soon enough.

"My love," she uttered, then a long dash of silence. I answered her in a whisper,

"Yes, my darling Zenyatta?"

She started, as if I had awakened her suddenly. She was still looking around her keenly, her eyes now grown almost wistful.

"Did you say something, my husband?"

"Oh no. No." I replied.

She returned to her reverie for almost fifteen minutes. Then she blurted,

"Yes, we should live here, My dearest husband. We should find jobs, settle down, raise our family in this peaceful, blessed place. This place seems to call to me more than any other place I've been to, even in our own country. Our country is home, yes, and I love it with all my heart. But it is nota place where we may act and speak freely. It is not a place of peace where I would feel our children to be safe. Maybe one day, it will be free. Maybe."

"Yes, my darling Zenyatta. We can make a good life here for us and our children. And yes, maybe one day a hopeful dawn will break upon our country. Maybe.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

We went back to the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel as dusk fell. We relaxed a bit, showered, and went down to dinner at around seven. We were happy to see that Nancy was working; she was happy to see us in equal measure. As she was taking our orders, she informed us that she was free the next day and she could take us on a brief tour of the two campuses if we so desired. Nancy informed us that the mayor was here and that a good word from him might make things easier on our tour. I strolled over to Mayor Bosnitch'a table, excused my intrusion:

"Richard, please forgive the intrusion, but I'd like a brief word if you don't mind."

Richard stood, shook my hand vigorously,

"Ah! Mr. Steven DaSilva. How may I be of service, Steven?"

"Zenyatta and I plan to visit the University of New Brunswick tomorrow, and we were hoping you would help open some doors for us."

"Of course, Steven. I'll call the University tonight and let the President know that a friend of mine from London is visiting, He will open all doors, He's Dr. Jim Cogburn, charming man, really. What time should I tell him, Steven?"

"How about 10:30 tomorrow morning?"

"I'll call and set it up, Steven. No worries at all. Jim's office is in the Old Arts Building."

"Thank you so very much, Richard."

It was set and we arranged to meet Nancy in the lobby at nine.

Nancy was a few minutes later. She had overslept and was profusely apologetic. Zenyatta put her at ease, and we had the driver take us up to the campus. We went first to the University President's office to pay respects, as protocol would dictate. It was warm when we approached the famous Old Arts Building. It had the aura of history, large blocks of stone, ivy up the sides of the structure, its was almost modest in its majesty. It was an example of dignity without ostentation.

The inside was cool and comfortable. Nancy explained that the building kept the warmth in during the winter and kept in the cool in summer. The first floor was almost bare, except for the chapel. Zenyatta insisted that we spend some time there once our business with the president was done.

The second floor housed the Registrar's Office and Admissions Offices. There was a calm efficiency to the people working in there, a kind of structured bustle. Things were being done, was the impression I got.

We climbed another flight of wooden stairs, shine, sturdy. We went down a long corridor where the President's office was to be found. We neat middle-aged woman greeted us with genuine friendliness. She invited us to sit while she went in and informed Dr. Jim Cogburn of our arrival. She waved us in and shut the large door behind us.

We stepped almost ankle-deep into the plush-carpeted office. There were leather sofas along the walls, two chairs in from of a large mahogany desk behind which sat a good-looking man, white, light-brown hair, greying at the sides. Without looking up, he signalled for us to sit on the two chairs. We did as he bade us, while he completed reading whatever it was that was before him.

The scene seemed staged, studied. On the desk, a collected Shakespeare was open; it was upright so we could see the spine of the thick book. Shakespeare to impress rather than to be read. The small sets of papers were neatly laid out. The man himself had one lock of hair out of place. It fell over his forehead. His tie was studiously askew. He finally looked up at us with a broad smile:

"Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva, I presume?" he asked, imperiously but pleasantly.

"Yes I'm Zenyatta DaSilva, and this is my husband, Steven. Thank you for seeing us on such short notice. We came simply to pay our respects, Mr. President. We were hoping you wouldn't mind if we paid a short visits to your lovely campus."

"Of course. Welcome to the University of New Brunswick. Are you thinking of enrolling?"

"Oh dear, no! We are on a short vacation from London where we study at the London School of Economics."

"Oh! Then a most cheery welcome to you. Would I be right in thinking that yiu are from the West Indies? Your lilt…"

"Yes," I responded, "From the Republic of Guyana."

"I thought so. We have had several students from Guyana here at UNB. I must say they have all been consistently bright, although some have been quite fiery."

Zenyatta and I decided not to take that bait. Instead, I said,

"We'd like to visit your library, the Law School, the Department of English, and the Psychology Department if we may."

"Of course, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva. You will find our people quite friendly, I hope."

"We came to you at the suggestion of our friend, the Mayor of Fredericton. And, of course, because protocol would demand that we first visit the university president. I'm sure you're a very busy man, so we will thank you again and take our leave," I said.

We stood, Cogburn stood, shook hands, and saw us to the door.

Nancy was waiting on the ground floor. Zenyatta asked for an excuse and went into the chapel. It exuded age, of use. Long wooden benches, comfortable, shiny from use. It was simple, unadorned. A place where one may meditate, I thought. Nancy and I left Zenyatta to the privacy of prayer.

The two of us went out of the building to enjoy the fresh air. The campus had this typically Canadian sense of expansiveness, of ease and freedom. There were many trees that decorated the campus. I imagined sitting under those heavy-leaved trees reading, exchanging ideas, laughing.

The campus was very hilly. Zenyatta emerged from the Old Arts Building. Nancy and I had stationed ourselves at the bottom of the seven flights of stairs. As Zenyatta emerged into the light, she seemed a thing of gold, radiant, a vision. I remembered her on our wedding day. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes upon. She still is. She had that rare combination of beauty, grace, and dignity that is not often to be found in such perfect proportion is a human being.

She seemed lighter, more at peace.

"You prayed for us sinners, I hope."

"Yes, of course. And I prayed for you, for our family, that we should find our way out of darkness into the Lord's light. I prayed for my mother and father and brother, for Nancy, and all others we know, and for those we do not."

"And did God answer?" I asked light-heartedly.

"No, my love. He listened. Sometimes we just need to talk to Him and his silence is as much a receptive response as a roar of a lion."

I held her and kissed her lovely mouth, "I love you Zenyatta Da Silva."

"I love you, my husband." We kissed and embraced.

Nancy brought us back to earth, "Old married couple indeed!" She giggled, and we laughed with her.

"We'll climb up here and take a peek into the Department of English where I spend much of my time. The English Department and the Psychology Department share one building."

We climbed a long flight of stairs, the height interrupted by large platforms for rest and against the dangers of falling, I supposed. Once atop the stairs, the library

commanded our attention. It stood tall at the top of the hill, seeming to oversee all things beneath. I called Zenyatta's attention to the library. She was already gazing at it.

"Does it not seem to dominate the whole sprawl of the campus, my love?"

"It does. Imperial without the need to jewellery or adornment. It is the way it should be on university campuses, I think. The library is, after all, the repository of what knowledge and wisdom we human beings have gained in the past."

"And the repository of our savagery too," I reminded.

"Yes. Unfortunately, yes." She replied, wistfully.

The building that housed the English and Psychology Departments was a simple one, just three stories of rectangular space. We walked up two short flight of stairs into the Department of English. The secretaries told us that the Dean was not in, but Dr. Robert Ploude, the Head of Department was. Nancy was happy at that and asked if we may see him. The secretary showed us into his office, a simple space where books took centre stage. The walls were lined with volumes from ceiling to floor. We sat on the three ordinary chairs awaiting The Head of Department. One minute later a young man bustled in, shook our hands vigorously, smiling all the while.

"Hi there, Nancy! How you, girl? How's the job treating ya? Stay focussed on the studies, please."

Then he turned to Zenyatta and me. We were standing:

"Hi, I'm Robert Ploude. Please do sit. What can I do for you? Would you like some coffee? I just made a fresh pot in the lounge."

"Good day to you, Dr. Ploude. I'm Steven DaSilva and this is my wife Zenyatta DaSilva. We're just here on a brief visit from London. I'm reading for my degree in Constitutional Law and Zenyatta is reading for her degree in Psychology. We thought it a good idea to take a look at UNB since we're here in New Brunswick. My cousin in Toronto inisited that we see what he calls "real Canada."

"Oh, please call me Robert or Bob. Your cousin is right. The Maritimes are real Canada. We Maritimers tend to be wary of those Upper Canadians," he laughed.

"London, eh? Great. Which university?"

"The London Scholl of Economics," Zenyatta answered.

"Yes, one of the best indeed, Robert replied, "Do you like it? I prefer our wide open spaces. The age of those places depress me, but they also make me a bit jealous." He laughed again.

Robert Ploude was young, slight, clean shaven, tussled hair, neat, frenetic, unguarded. We liked him instantly.

"We have some good professors here, some from England, some from Wales, one from Ireland. A couple from America. One from Barbados. They're good folks and solid scholars. Nancy can tell you more, I'm sure."

"That's quite cosmopolitan, Robert. What of the student population?" Zenyatta asked.

"Oh, that's our pride and joy, really. Our graduate students are sterling. American, Nigerian, Malawi, Kenya, India, Guyana, Zimbabwe, Jamaica, Oxford, Cambridge, Australian, and so on. They are all very bright, very driven. The two stand-outs are from Zimbabwe and Guyana."

"From Guyana?" screamed Zenyatta, "We are from Guyana too! What a lovely coincidence, Steven!"

"Yes, my love," I answered guardedly. It immediately occurred to me that it was a coincidence, but hardly a lovely one. If this fellow was pro-government, we would need to pack our stuff and leave immediately. New Brunswick, which we both saw as our place of refuge ceases to be so. We must find out more, and we must do so with dispatch.

"Robert, I thank we've taken up too much of your time today, but how about joining us for dinner this evening at the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel in town?"

He looked hesitant, so I enlisted Zenyatta.

"Would that not be lovely, my darlin Zenyatta. The Robert can give us the low-down on the department and our country-man. Please say yes, Robert," I entreated.

"Yes. That would be such a joy to have you to dinner, Robert. Say at six this evening?"

"Well, I suppose I could. It's not every day that I get a chance to go out to dinner. I'll call my wife and tell her I'll be late."

"Great!" exclaimed Zenyatta.

We both stood, shook hands with Robert Ploude, and made our way out of the building.

"Zenyatta, would you mind if we go back to the hotel, my love? I'm feeling rather queasy. If Nancy does not mind we could save the rest of our guided tour for later in the week when she has a day off."

We walked a short distance ton the Bank of Montreal—the only bank on campus—and Nancy used the Trius taxi phone to call a taxi for us. I asked her to call one for her too, but she insisted that she had to get some work done at the library.

I gave Nancy one hundred dollars for being so knd to us. Again, she said it was way too much, that it was her pleasure to show us around and that payment was not necessary.

"Oh, it's not payment, Nancy. We can never repay you for your kindness, but it's just a little gift." Zenyatta chimed in.

The taxi was there in five minutes, and we got in and waved a cheery bye to Nancy. I saw Zenyatta looking at me from the corners of her eyes, but I said nothing. We arrived back at the Lord Beaverbrook in four minutes or so and went straight up to our room.

Then she spoke:

"Okay, my dear one, you can speak now. What's going on?"

"This Guyanese graduate student. He worries me. Suppose he is a supporter of the government? The fact that we were here would get to them immediately. Our plan to settle here would be shot. Suppose he is on the same type of scholarship that I'm on, the same deal?"

"And supposing he's not, my love? Tell e this: why would they make a deal with someone and have him study English of all things? Not law, not engineering, not politics, but *English*? And at UNB? Come on, Steven!"

She was right, I supposed.

"Maybe I over-reacted, my darling Zenyatta. But at dinner we can find out more from Robert Ploude. Then I will be more at ease."

"Now that sounds like the thoughtful man I married. No panic, no hysteria, just thought," she smiled. I felt my muscles relax.

"Yes," I agreed, "Thought, logic, and a wife moulded by the most sublime will of the universe, my Zenyatta."

"Aah, my husband, newly-wrought poet" she returned, smiling.

I took her hand and led her to bed. It was already six in the evening when we awoke. Robert Ploude was due to be here at seven, so we dawdled, showered, dressed, and went down to the dining room with no hurry whatsoever.

We took our seats at our favourite table with a view of the Saint John River. The male waiter was upon us immediately. I ordered a double scotch and Zenyatta surprised me by ordering a glass of white wine rather than her usual coke or pepsi cola.

"I just felt like it," she responded to my unasked question.

"Okay, my love," I smiled.

Robert turned up before the waiter returned. I stood and greeted him warmly, my hand outstretched in greeting. He took it and we shook hands. Zenyatta remained sitting in her imperious way. She reached out her arm and Robert shook it. He seemed uneasy, and I planned to ask about it,

"What would you like to drink?"

"A Beer would be good. Labatt's Blue, please."

I ordered that when the waiter brought our drinks. Finally, his uneasiness:

Do you come here often, Roger?"

"Goodness no. There are way too many politicians and lawyer sorts around here. There're almost always loud, so I avoid the place. At any rate it's rather too upper-crust for me." He laughed nervously.

"We're happy you came, Robert. We really don't have friends here, and although everyone is so wonderfully friendly. We're hoping that you will think us worthy of your friendship, even if Steven will be one of those lawyers you talk about." Zenyatta said, laughing out loud.

"Oh goodness, I'm not much of a conversationalist, really. I think I'll make a rather poor friend. And I do not think your Steven here is a loud person," he responded with that ready and genuine smile of his.

"And I'm hoping the esquire monicker does not make him loud," Zenyatta shot back good-naturedly. "Are you A New Brunswicker?"

"Yes. I was born in Moncton, did my doctorate here and got hired immediately at UNB. I did well, I suppose, and a spot opened up in my area of studies."

"And that is?" Zenyatta, interested, asked.

"Nineteenth Century Thought, not exactly riveting stuff, but I find it all dreadfully engaging."

"But that is one of the eras of great political and philosophical debated. I thinking it was the nineteenth century that laid the foundation for both American and French democracies in the twentieth century. And the writing is simply sublime, I think. The Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine debate alone is desperately important. Then there is Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, and Percy Shelly, among others." I responded excitedly.

"And, of course, there is Mary Woolstonecraft, Steven.

"Yes, yes, of course, my love."

"I could not agree more, Steven. I cannot tell you what a joy it is to be speaking with two clearly well-read people. Reading is a withering habit, I'm afraid. I

dread to think it, but reading may well be a thing of the past by the time we get to the new millennium."

"I hate to agree with you on this point, Robert, but I agree. Even so-called educated people—you know, the Ph.D. sorts—are stuck within the granularity of the disciplines. No reading around, no reading outside, no interest whatsoever, as if any discipline exists on its own. It's foolish, really." Zenyatta held forth.

"You know, I think the education system itself almost encourages this narrowing of interest and perspective. In a way it's self-indictment."

I entered the conversation: "'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings.'"

"Cassius, for all his scheming ways, had some good insights," added Zenyatta.

"That's one of the great things about Shakespeare, isn't it? Even reprehensible characters have some wisdom embedded in the words the utter, except Iago, of course."

"I think we will be fast friends, Robert. I really do," Zenyatta insisted.

Oh, I agree, my love," I responded.

"It's a pity that you are scheduled to leave us in a few short weeks. It's a pity," Robert added.

"Oh, we may yet surprise you, Dr. Ploude." Zenyatta smiled. "At any rate we will be writing regularly until we meet again."

She was careful not to let slip any plans about our migration plans. After all, we had not yet learned much about our countryman and his political leanings.

"Hey Robert, do tell us some more about this young countryman of ours, if you don't mind." I asked, almost as an incidental.

Guileless as he was, Robert put the question into the realm of mere curiosity, "Oh, he bright indeed. The department is almost unanimous in their opinion that he's one of the best we've had in a very long time. He's been enrolled in one of my courses, and I can tell you that he's unique. He establishes connections that are most unusual, even strange."

"Connections?" I asked.

"Well connections between works that are not apparently connected, between disciplines that are oceans apart. Sometimes, admittedly, it's rather adventurous, but he makes it all work."

"Any specific examples you can think of?" I queried.

"Yes. Like between Marxism and various mythologies, between Shakespeare and mathematical logic, between language and quantum physics, that sort of thing. It's quite dazzling, to be honest."

"Wow!" exclaimed Zenyatta.

"Any weaknesses?" I asked, almost too pointedly.

"Well, yes. He is sometimes too intense, and there is always the danger of him burning out like some sort of meteor. Also, he falls prey to the old temptation of girls, women. They find him irresistible. And his strength may also be his greatest weakness: he may be too diffuse. For instance, he's the president of the Caribbean peoples, and has founded the Board of International Students in Canada. He's the Chairman. He has rallied the Caribbeans, Africans, Indians, Chinese, Hong Kong and Malaysian students to his side. He is intensely opposed to the regime in his own country. It borders on hatred, I think."

"Do you think he'll burn himself out?" Zenyatta asked.

"I really do not know. He seems durable, but...I just do not know. If he doesn't, he will be an exceptional scholar though."

"We'd like to meet him, Do you think that's possible, Robert?" Zenyatta asked.

"Well, I can ask him, if you like. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know."

"His name might help," Zenyatta said jokingly.

Robert laughed: "Yes, he's Omar Hussein."

"Good," she said, "that helps." We all chuckled at that.

I decided to change the topic: "We're hoping to meet with the Dean of the law school. Maybe tomorrow, if he available."

"Ah, Liam Hurley. Good chap, I think. You'll like him."

"We'll wait for your call about Omar and then decide. As you said, our time is short for now."

Robert looked at his watch. It was ten, and he expressed surprise that it was so late.

"I must say to you Steven and Zenyatta, that this has been very enjoyable. I hope we can do this again."

"Do you gentlemen realise that we've failed to order dinner? If Robert is in a hurry, we can order whatever he wants to go. Is that okay with you, Robert?"

"That would be nice, thanks."

We gazed at the menu for a few minutes. I beckoned the waiter, and we ordered.

"Robert, do order for your entire family." Zenyatta insisted.

He ordered lamb chops and baked potatoes, and two steaks with French fries.

"Dr. Ploude will have that to go, and we'll order later." She instructed the waiter.

"Yes, Mrs. DaSilva. It will be fifteen or twenty minutes. Would you like a drink in the meantime?"

We ordered a round of drinks and chatted away about Roger's family, his wife and son. We were guarded about speaking about ourselves too much. Robert left, promising to call about Omar Hussein tomorrow. He was gracious and polite. He left a friend.

We ordered our meal and asked that it be brought up to our room. Zenyatta and I were anxious to watch the CTV News, a habit we got into since the idea of migrating to Canada came about. We also listened to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on radio when we could. The news there was excellent; CTV was almost too parochially Canadian. Zenyatta and I were in agreement that the BBC was still the best newscast available in the English Language, but it became important to glean what news we could about Canada, its history, social and political currents, cultures.

We had our meal while watching television, showered, and cuddled in bed.

"We should get as many books as we can about Canada and read up while we await word about our immigration plan." Zenyatta muttered.

"Yes, my dear. About Canada generally, but also about the Maritimes especially," I responded.

She was asleep before I could finish my sentence, and I lay there looking at her and listening to her soft, rhythmic breathing.

The phone rang. I picked it up. Zenyatta did not stir.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

My cousin, Peter D'Aguiar's voice sounded loud:

"Hello! Steven? You there?"

"Yes, yes, I'm here, Peter. Sorry, I was looking at Zenyatta sleeping. Sorry."

"It's okay, Steven. I hope I did not disturb her."

"Naah, man. She did not so much as stir," I laughed.

"You two love birds, man! It is good that you found her, Steven. Really good. I think you'd be lost without her, you know."

"I think I'd die without her, Peter. That's the truth. Anyway, what's up?"

"I just called to find out if you two are okay."

"Yeah. We went to Saint John yesterday. Today we went to UNB, saw the president briefly…quite the showman. Then we visited the Department of English and had dinner with Robert Ploude, the Chairman of the department. Nice man."

"Good that you're keeping busy. Good that you're learning the place."

"Zenyatta and I think this would be a good place to settle down, raise a family…"

"I agree with you one hundred percent, boy! Serious! Good choice. If I could leave Toronto and come there, I'd do it tomorrow, but my businesses are here, so that's not possible for now."

"We love it, Peter. Oh, your Mayor friend, Bosnitch, made contact. He's helpful."

"Good. That fucker owes me, man! I financed his campaign," Peter laughed.

He continued: "Hey, Barry thinks that you application is going through smoothly up to this point. He's doing his best."

I did not like the "to this point," but I said, "Please thank him for me Peter. And thank again for all that you're doing."

"Hey, no problem, Steven. None at all. Anyway, I'll let you grab your sleep. I'll call again in a few days. Bye."

"Bye, cousin." I hung up the phone, with Peter's "to this point" ringing in my ear. I got out of bed as noiselessly as I could and, put on my robes, and went out into the veranda overlooking the Saint John River. Even in summer the wind was bracing, and I welcomed it. I sensed her before she spoke or touched me.

"I thought you were sound asleep, my darling."

"I was until you cradled the phone. It could only have been Peter. Is he okay?"

"He's fine. Peter's always fine, you know. He just called to find out how we were doing, if we had toured New Brunswick, and if we liked it. I told him that we've fallen in love with the place."

"So what is it that he said which disturbs you so that you got out of bed?"

I hesitated. "Come on, My darling husband, out with it."

He said that our application for Landed Immigration was going smoothly *up to this point*. What did he mean by that? By "up to this point"?

"Exactly what he said. That there have been no stumbles , and that its going smoothly," Zenyatta answered readily.

"Why are you looking for things to worry about, my Steven. Why do you insist on working yourself up to a tizzy? You need to pull yourself together, my love."

"I suppose that with our run of bad news these days, I have this sense of dread."

"And you worrying yourself sick would change the outcome? Does that make sense?"

"I suppose not, but..."

"No buts, Steven. It will all turn out well. I just know it. Have faith, my sweet. Faith!"

"Okay."

"Now come back to bed, please."

We went back to bed and cuddled up until we both fell asleep.

Zenyatta was up before I was. She was showered and dressed, and she had ordered up breakfast. We decided to take a brief walk up Queen Street, peering into shop windows, and generally shooting the breeze. I suspected it was Zenyatta's way of getting me to relax, distracted.

When we got back at the hotel, there was a message from Robert Ploude. He asked that we return the call. We called as soon as we were back in the room.

"Good morning, My name is Steven DaSilva. May I speak to Dr. Ploude, please?"

"Please hold a minute," came the pleasant female voice over the phone.

Robert came on: "Hello, Robert Ploude here."

"Good morning Robert. It's Steven DaSilva. How are you on this fine New Brunswick morning?"

"Hi Steven. Good morning. I'm well, thanks. I spoke with Liam Hurley of the Law School. He would be happy to meet with you this afternoon. I also spoke with Omar. He was a bit nervous, but I convinced him that you did not seem interested

in your homeland politics in the least. He is willing to meet any time in the evening."

"Wonderful on both counts. Thanks for doing this, Robert. Zenyatta and I really appreciate your help. How about dinner tonight at the Lord Beaverbrook? Both you and Omar."

"That sounds good, but I will have to leave earlier. My wife has plans, and I can't get out of that with my head intact," we laughed.

"Okay. So we'll see you and Omar Hussein this evening at six?"

"Perfect, see you then."

I conveyed all of this to Zenyatta, and we planned our trip to the campus to meet with Dean Hurley. We arrived at the Law School at two. It was a modest building, clearly more recently built than the buildings we'd seen. Rather square, rather without distinction by virtue of architecture and age.

We asked someone for the Dean's office and were directed up a flight of stairs. Dean Hurley greeted us in friendly fashion as we introduced ourselves.

"London School of Economics, eh? Impressive. I had the pleasure of visiting there once, and it was quite an overwhelming experience. The history of the place, its reputation...all quite intimidating."

"Yes, our reaction was exactly the same upon arriving there. Maybe more intimidating since we're from the backwoods and you're from the great Canada."

Dean Hurley smiled at the compliment to his country.

"I had the honour of meeting David Galloway. I had read some of his work, and I've always been an admire, albeit from afar. He was as impressive as his work, I must say. Do you know him?"

"Oh yes. Professor is a friend, and he is indeed formidable. The voice and the pipe adds to his aura, I think. But he really is the loveliest man there is. We've gone out to dinner and drinks many times, and it never fails to be interesting. There is also a young professor who Professor Galloway is mentoring—Roger Powers."

"Yes, I remembering him vaguely. Slight young man, rather quiet, as I remember."

"Oh yes, that's Roger. But always willing to help. Kind and generous. He becomes quite talkative when Professor Galloway is not around." Zenyatta added, and we three chuckled.

We shared stories about David Galloway as mutual friends would speak of another admired friend. Then, rather abruptly, Dean Hurley changed the topic.

"So, Steven, you'll be a lawyer in just over a year, correct?"

"Yes, Sir. I certainly hope so."

"And your grades, standing, I mean?"

"Roger says that I'm top-of-class, but I really don't know. I can say that I'm doing well, academically speaking."

"And Galloway?"

"Professor seems to think that I may be one of the best they've seen in recent years. He's as much as told Roger that in my presence."

"Would you consider coming on board with us, Steven? That is if your transcript bears all of this out and if Professor Galloway and Roger give you excellent recommendations."

I hesitated, hardly believing what I was hearing. I could sense Zenyatta tense up beside me.

"That would be a dream come true, Dean Hurley. But I'm not a Canadian nor a Brit. Zenyatta and I are Guyanese with student visas to the UK and holiday visas to Canada."

He seemed to wave that off, "Yes, yes. But would you be willing to relocate to New Brunswick, Canada?"

I looked at Zenyatta, she at me.

"Of course we would, Dean Hurley. Without a second thought. Steven and I have fallen in love with this piece of God's earth. Truly." Zenyatta blurted.

Hurley smiled.

"I realize, of course, that there are many steps to be taken—the final year, standing, recommendations from the right people saying the right things, passing the bar, being in competition, etc.—but I am optimistic."

"Competition?"

"Well, yes. The position will be advertised nationally and internationally. I'd suggest you keep looking at The Chronicle of Higher Education's vacancies section. But I promise to write to you as soon as we're accepting applications. There are other administrative officials involved, of course, but you will certainly get my vote and support if the records say what I think they will say. It's a protracted process, but time is your friend in this case. I'd discuss this with Professor Galloway, if I were you. His words carry weight."

"We understand, Dean Hurley. We'll certainly discuss this with Professor Galloway and look forward to your letter about the vacancy. We also realize that this initial meeting is not a job interview but an informal discussion."

"Good, good. I'm hopeful, but there are no guarantees."

"We cannot tell you how grateful we are to you, Dean Hurley. And we are happily surprised that our quick courtesy visit has taken this turn. We really are grateful. Please forgive me, Sir, if I sound rude—I certainly do not mean to sound so, but I must ask why us, especially since you do not know us, why you have broached this subject. I hope you understand my puzzlement."

"Ahh, good question indeed. In order words, what do I want in turn is the question."

"Well, yes... if you'd rather put it that way," I made sure to smile, fearing that this could quickly turn hostile.

"Well, I do need you do do me a favour that is somewhat personal, but this may be too crude for delicate female ears, I'm sorry to say." Dean Hurley stammered. He was at a weak point. So was I since this conversation reminded me of the games I played at home.

"Oh! You're talking about Zenyatta, my wife? I assure you, dear Dean Hurley, that my wife has heard much worse, no matter how sensitive this may be. At any rate, I trust my wife with my very life, so we may speak without fear of indiscretion and offence of sensibilities," I retorted, smiling again. I could sense Zenyatta nodding solemnly.

"Okay then. I will be very straight-forward. I do not know if you've heard, but you have a countryman in the Department of English. His is name Omar something."

"Yes, we've heard of him. We were told he's a bright fellow."

"Yes, he is. He's also very charismatic and very—unbelievably, really—popular with the girls."

"We did not hear about the cavorting part," I said.

"At any rate, not a good combination if you mean to have a successful career," Zenyatta finally spoke.

"I agree, Mrs. Da Silver. Do you have children, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilver?"

"Steven and Zenyatta would be fine, Dean. But no, not yet." Zenyatta answered.

"I am, of course, much older than you two young people. I have two children, a boy and a girl. The boy is twenty, the girl just over eighteen. The boy is training to be a pilot. The girl is here, reading for her first degree in English."

"Aah!" Zenyatta exclaimed, as if it was nor clear to her were this was leading.

"She's my daughter, Mrs.—Zenyatta. My only daughter." The Dean stammered, his eyes beginning to mist over. The tears came, and he removed his glasses to wipe them away. Zenyatta got up, moved around the desk, and hugged him.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so very sorry," she kept saying. He seemed comforted enough to cry:

"Did you know he's married, with two sons?" He blurted out, the tears still flowing, Zenyatta still holding him close.

"We didn't know, Sir." I said lamely.

"This thing has been going on for months. One of our Campus Security guards caught them having sex in my car in the upper parking lot, for God's sake. He reported it to me and I just do not know what to do. Supposing she threatens to leave home if I voice my objection?"

He continued: "Then Robert told me of the two wonderful couple that are new in town. He mentioned your country and something about your education background. I was hoping you could help. I promise you that this job thing is not *quid pro quo*? I swear. I thought that you may offer me some way to deal with this, to end it. Please help e, Zenyatta. Please help us, Steven."

My heart ached for this father. I imagined that if this were my daughter and if we were home, I'd have him butchered and his pieces thrown in three rivers. But we were not home, and I was quite lost as to how we may help.

"Dean Hurley, we are scheduled to meet with Omar this evening for dinner. I promise you that we will do our best to break this off." Zenyatta said.

"Thank you, my dear girl. Thank you. He rose and gave Zenyatta a hug. He reached over his desk and shook my hand earnestly, "Thank you Steven. Thank you. Please save my baby girl. I'd really appreciate an update please." He scribbled his home number and asked that we call, regardless of time.

"We'll try, Dean Hurley. As Zenyatta promised."

We made our way down the stairs, got into our waiting car, and went straight back to the hotel. We did not speak, each wrestling with our own thoughts. I tried in vain to keep at bay thoughts of my own criminal treatment of Raina and Rayma. Once we were in the privacy of our room, Zenyatta spoke:

"My heart broke for that poor man, my love. Were you not moved by his plight?" She asked.

"Yes, it is not what children should be putting their parents through." Even as the words escaped my lips, I realized that I was being neutral in an almost cowardly way, almost indifferent. Zenyatta saw right through my callousness.

"How could you be so cool after seeing that man—that father—weep like that in front of strangers, in front of us? Tell me Steven, How would react if you saw our daughter being taken by the hand by a married man and lead down the path of ignominy and shame? What would you do, Steven?"

Zenyatta was upset, and rightly so. Raina and Rahma and others were on my mind. I was the person leading them to death and destruction.

She raised her voice, a thing most unusual, "Answer me!"

"I'd kill him, Zenyatta. I'd butcher the fucker." I responded.

"Good! I would join you too!" Then she smiled, a thing like sunshine, like a fresh breeze. I smiled back at her and hugged her.

"How should we handle this without creating a mess, my love?" she asked.

"I think we should let the conversation proceed naturally. We want to know about him, about what he thinks about our homeland and its rulers. And about his ambitions. We make this about him, not us, not Dean Hurley or his daughter. That will come when it comes, but be assured that it will come."

"I love you, my husband," she kissed me. She was assured now.

"I love you, Zenyatta. Just be you."

"I'm hungry," she said, "Let's order something brought up…sandwiches or so."

I called down to the kitchen and ordered.

Chapter Eighty

We went down at six thirty. It was still bright. Nancy was working, and we chatted with her for a while. She took our order, scotch in a tall glass with lots of ice and ginger ale; Coke for Zenyatta.

We had not yet taken a sip when Robert Ploude walked in. In his wake followed a young man who was obviously Omar, our fellow-countryman. Robert introduced us:

"Omar, this is Mr. Steven and Mrs. Zenyatta DaSilva. As I told you, they are visiting from the UK but hail from Guyana. I thought it may be good for you to meet and have a chit-chat. Omar shook my hand, then Zenyatta's while we remained seated.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva," Omar said, rather stiffly.

"Oh, Just Steven and Zenyatta will do, Omar. Do sit, gentlemen," said Zenyatta. They assumed their seats. Nancy came around and we order drinks for them; Robert, a beer; Omar, a rum and coke.

"Now that's a wonderfully West Indian drink, rum and coke," I observed, jokingly. Omar smiled.

"So tell us about Omar Hussein, this bright young man about whom the Chairman of the Department thinks so highly." I queried.

Omar was medium height, maybe two inches taller than Robert. Well dressed, ironed shirt, tweed jacket, no tie. He was neat, casual. His hair was a large mop of curls; they did not seem combed or brushed. Large black beard. Maybe he was going for the wild, revolutionary look. The neat clothes may be the work of the wife, I thought. West Indian wives are noted for being sure to send their husbands out dressed well, lest "people" say, "Look how she get that man dressed like a beggarman." It always seem to fall on the woman should the man not appear well in public.

Omar had a slight scar over his right eye, and his front teeth were broken. He was a shade more light-skinned than Zenyatta. But the most conspicuous feature were his eyes. Behind the hazel eyes, something smouldered, something dreadfully intense, curled, waiting.

"Nothing much to tell, really. I'm from the countryside, grew up in what some would call "privileged" circumstances. Went to the capital for UG, did fairly well, got a scholarship to UNB, and here I am." He smiled.

"Was it a government scholarship? Commonwealth scholarship?"

"God, no! Those thugs would never grant me a scholarship. Never! And even if they did offer me some sort of scholarship as a bribe, I will tell them to go to hell where they truly belong." There was the fire behind the smouldering, I thought.

Robert chose this moment to excuse himself. He had promised to be home for supper with his family.

"Keep safe, Robert. Please say hello to the family for us," Zenyatta said.

She turned back to Omar: "I admire your steadfastness, Omar. And in many ways, I agree with you. Any moral compromise leads to more and greater moral compromises. Do you admire Dr. Ploude?"

"Gosh, yes! Robert is not much older than I am, but is much respected by everyone in the Department, faculty and students alike."

"Academically, they seem to respect you too, Omar," Zenyatta asserted. I noted the "academically".

"You know, Omar, we're new here, but we've met a goodly number of people from the mayor to the university president, deans, and so on. They all have respect for Robert. I can tell you that that respect is for the principle of that man. You are steadfast in your politics, and that is admirable. Robert is faithful in all ways, academically and otherwise." She continued, circling.

"I agree with you completely, Mrs. DaSilva."

"Good. I'm glad you agree. That good man places his family first, even before his career. Did you know that?" She asked, more pointedly.

"To be honest, I never discussed that with Robert," Omar replied.

"Too bad. Maybe you should, Omar. Lots to learn there."

"I suppose you're right," he replied tentatively.

"Oh, I'm right, alright," Zenyatta snaps back, "In fact, when it comes to fidelity you would not want to broach hat subject with Rpbert Ploude because you realize that you are much the opposite. Am I not on mark here, Omar?"

"Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva, did you invite me here to insult me? Is that the whole intention here, because it certainly feels like it."

"Do you hear that, my love? This boy thinks we invited him here to insult him! It could not be that we are trying to guide you away from disaster, from sullying your reputation with wanton philandering, regardless of who gets hurt in the

process. Your career as a good, solid academic will be worth nothing on the global market if it gets around that no female is safe around you. So much of the civilized world is shut out for you, Omar. And if you find yourself back home, and continue with your womanizing, I promise you that no good will come from it, Omar. I promise you that, brother. "

I had spoken very little up to this point, and felt that Zenyatta had given me an opening.

"The last thing we intend is to harm or insult our countryman. We offer you caution, that is all. Your reputation with the girls will be your professional undoing. Guaranteed. Now let's say you find yourself back home. Let's assume that for a second. Let's assume that sooner or later you mess around with some politician's relative or the relative of a friend, especially since you despise the current government. Do you really believe they will invite you to drunks and dinner to insult you? Or guide you? Or just warn you off?

Look, Omar, I assure you that they will not. I happen to know people like Rudolph Lewis and Henry Green, people with power. These chaps don't fool around, Omar! They don't give you a warning or put you in prison or so. They cut you up into little pieces and bury you all along the fucking coast. Then they come for your wife and children, then your parents, and anyone else you hold dear. They are ruthless, Omar. There will not even be a funeral, no death announcement, not even a line in their newspapers. Nothing."

"What are you asking me to do, Mr. DaSilva? Mrs. DaSilva?" The smouldering look was gone, replaced by fear.

"I am Steven; this is my wife Zenyatta. We're not much older than you, so drop the Mr. and Mrs. crap. Please. We are asking you to be more careful with what you're doing, be more attentive to your career and your family. That's all. Look, we know that you're young and passionate and bright. The girls will always be attracted to that, but stay away from anyone with any kind of connections."

"Connections? I am not dating anyone with connections, Steven."

"You are screwing Dean Hurley's only daughter, Omar. Jesus! Wake up, man!"

"So I should stop seeing her?" he asked, almost timidly.

"Yes, for starters. Immediately. Clear?"

"Yes. Clear. I will meet her tomorrow and break it off. I'll tell her that my wife found out and has threatened to go to the university authorities."

"Tell her what you like, but end it." I insisted.

"Okay. I promise you both."

"You should try to avoid going back home for now, Omar. It's a really bad place for anyone who speaks out. Try and find a way."

"Keep on doing well academically. Get this Ph.D. and find a job in the USA or Canada or anywhere else. Do not go back to that God forsaken place, Omar. Not yet, anyway. We will leave our UK phone number with you in case you think of any way that we can help." Zenyatta was being her habitual kind self.

"So we are in agreement here, Omar?" I asked.

"We are, Steven. I want to thank you with all my heart. On behalf of myself, my wife, and my two boys. Thank you. Thank you Zenyatta." Omar's voice cracked with emotion, but no tears.

Zenyatta changed the topic: "Hey, Steven invited us to dinner. I'm famished, aren't you, Omar?"

"Well, I'm a little bit hungry."

I signalled to Nancy to fetch us the menu. I ordered fish and chips, Zenyatta ordered spaghetti and meatballs, and Omar ordered a steak and mashed potatoes.

"You should order something to take to the family. That would be nice." I said.

"You are both very kind. We tend to live of a shoe string. Alia—my wife—helps out by taking in a bit of sewing now and then."

"Then order away for them. Anything at all." He ordered salmon and baked potatoes.

"We should meet up again before we leave. Bring your wife, if you like."

"Yeah. She would like that. It's not as if we have a chance to wine and dine every day." Omar chuckled for the first time.

"Day after tomorrow then?" I asked. It was settled. We had but days before we travelled back to the UK.

"Where do you live, Omar?" Zenyatta asked.

"We have an apartment in the married students' residence. It at the top of the hill on Prospect Street, above Saint Thomas University." He answered.

"Do you have a car?" she queried.

"A car? A car? Naah. We can't afford that…maybe some day. I hope."

"We'll get the hotel taxi to take you back home," I interjected.

"But…" he was about to say that he did not have money for that. I cut him off:

"Don't worry about it, Omar. It's our pleasure."

I beckoned Nancy to tell our driver that we need him to take Mr. Hussein to the married students' residence. It was arranged. Omar said goodbye, repeated his

gratitude, and promised he and his wife, Alia, will be here at seven for dinner the day after tomorrow.

Zenyatta and I sat there playing with our food.

"Well?" I asked.

"I think it well as we could have hoped, although you did have me worried when you mentioned Lewis and White by name. But the point went home. Omar was receptive, at the very least. So good work, my darling husband."

"Well, you did most of the work, my love. I am confident that he'll keep his word about the girl. We may have set him on the good path…at least I hope you. I empathize with him, really. I some ways, he finds himself in the same situation in which we find ourselves."

"Yes, I saw that." Zenyatta pondered. "I wish we can help him a bit more concretely though."

"Aah! You're thinking of money. I agree. Let's talk about that later. We need to call cousin Peter as well."

We called as soon as we got back to the room. Zenyatta called:

"Is this the Honourable Peter D'Aguiar?" she began, giggling.

"How lovely to hear your voice, dear Zenyatta!" I could hear him.

They exchanged pleasantries, and Zenyatta ran him through the things we did, including a bit about Omar Hussein. She handed me the phone after a while.

"Hey cousin Steven. Tell me more about this Omar fellow."

I gave him the details. Peter asked pointedly:

"Is it safe? Could he some kind of plant?"

"No, Peter. That makes no sense. Why would anyone plant someone here, of all places? New Brunswick?"

"Yeah…you're right. I'm just being over-cautious, Steven. I'm sorry. I did not mean to question your judgement."

"Hey, it's okay, man! I know where your heart is, Peter. Zenyatta and I were thinking of giving the family a few bucks to help out."

"Yeah, sure. Do what you think is best."

"How are things on your end, Peter?"

"It's good. Business is good. Things are stable. Barry sees more optimistic about the application with each passing day. He says it's just a matter of time…maybe eighteen months on the outside."

"That's excellent. Zenyatta will be happy to hear that. Thanks, Peter. We'll call just before we leave for Toronto."

"I'll be there at Pearson's International Airport, have no fear. Bye."

"Barry said it's only a matter of time before Landed Immigrant papers come through for us. Eighteen months on the outside."

"That is great news indeed, and the timing is good too. We should both be done with our studies."

"Yes, my dearest Zenyatta. We will have to start moving money out soon. We'll write to your father and mother as soon as we get back to London. As much as we can without arousing suspicion."

"Of course. How much can we afford to give to Omar and his family? Maybe five thousand. One thousand in cash and we can write a cheque for four thousand."

"That is generous, my love. Thank you for doing this, my Steven." She hugged and kissed me. "This may be the best way to return the kindness and generosity that others have shown to us. We show kindness and generosity to others."

"You may be right, my love. In spite of the risks we run, people have been kind: Professor Galloway, Roger, Cousin Peter, your parents, Monty and the others. Each kind in his own way."

"Tomorrow I will call Hurley and see if we can meet with him briefly and let him know that his daughter is now disentangled."

"Nice way to put it, Steven." We laughed.

The next day I did exactly that: called the Dean, and arranged to come in at one in the afternoon. I did not think it appropriate to speak of such personal matters by phone.

Chapter Eighty-One

The Lord Beaverbrook Driver took us up the hill. Dean Hurley greeted us warmly, rather like old friends. He came around his desk and hugged Zenyatta. We gave him the news that Omar swore to us that he would break it off with the girl, Dean Hurley's daughter. The relief came over his face immediately:

"How did you manage that, I curious?"

"Well, we simply appealed to his sense of right and wrong, family values, and we also explained how devastating this could be for his family ad for his career. He's a decent sort at heart, we think. We are confident that he will do the right thing. Of course, you and Mrs. Hurley will have to offer comfort to your daughter who will most likely imagine herself heart-broken. But she is but eighteen, and they tend to be remarkably resilient at that juncture."

"I agree, Steven. You two, I must say, are wise beyond your age. I am more grateful than you can imagine. I will follow through on the position here if you are still interested, that is. It is the only way I can think of to express my gratitude to you," he added sincerely.

"So where to now? More tours of UNB. I could show you are around if you like."

Zenyatta answered: "We were thinking of going up the hill and visiting with some folks at Saint Thomas University."

"That's a great idea. I will call Monsignor Martin and let him know that you are about to pay him a courtesy visit. He's a wonderful man. Great sense of humour, and a man of formidable faith. Are you Roman Catholic?" Dean Hurley asked.

"Well, I am," chirped Zenyatta.

"And your Steven?" he asked almost playfully.

"He is not what we would call devout, really. I'm working on it though." Zenyatta replied.

"Good. Even good men need the Lord's guidance at times. Same for me, I suppose," Hurley quipped.

I thought, "Fuck, if only they knew of my deeds!"

We instructed the driver to meet us up the hill at STU. It was but a minute's drive, but we chose to make the short walk and take the air. As we walked hand in hand, we looked up. The administrative/classroom/cafeteria building faced us. It was topped by a large cross, simple, unadorned. There were many students bustling around, talking, teasing each other, laughing. The difference between the two campuses was stark. UNB was more formal, more business-like, although not stuffy. Saint Thomas was much less formal although one would have expected greater formality in a Catholic university. The comradery at STU was as conspicuous as was the number of First Nation students and students who disabilities required wheelchairs. Later, we discovered that this relaxed atmosphere was a deliberate policy by the administration, especially Monsignor Martin. It was, I suspected, STU's "niche policy", the thing that set the university apart from its larger counterpart down the hill.

Each clutch of students we passed were quick to greet with their "Hi's" and "Good afternoons", all smiling. We also passed by several of the professors, all engaged in some discussion or the other with students. The main difference between the two campuses was laughter. STU was much more relaxed.

The central building atop the hill was flanked by dorms. To the left there was a large two-story building that housed offices for the teaching staff, an auditorium, and a small computer lab in the basement. We were told that there were several memoranda of agreements which ensured a sharing of facilities with the larger university, the labs and library being the most significant. It seemed a cordial and pragmatic arrangement.

We asked group of students to show us the way to Monsignor Martin's office. Rather than simply point us in the right direction, the escorted us to the president's office, walked into the secretary's office and told the secretary that there were two visitors to see "Father Martin".

The secretary showed us into Monsignor Martin's office. He was a very large man, six feet seven inches or more, rotund, black Cossack with the priestly white collar, with a round pleasant face that seemed to wear a smile:

"Welcome to Saint Thomas, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva. Dean Hurley called and told me to expect you," he said as he moved around his desk. He shook my hand and I bowed slightly. He took a moment looking at Zenyatta, he held out his hand to shake hers. Rather than shake his hand, she bent her head and kissed his ring. He held her by her shoulders, looking at her, smiling.

"Zenyatta! What a beautiful name for the most beautiful girl I have seen in my life. May the Lord bless and keep you, my child."

"And you, Father," she answered.

"Sit, sit, please," he said as he journeyed back around his desk. It was messy, books opened, papers scattered, paper clips everywhere, pens everywhere.

"I know, I know," he said as he assumed his seat heavily, "I need to clean up the desk. I've been promising to do that for six months now. Beth out there is not happy, and she lets me know it," he guffawed, his belly jiggling happily. He was the exact opposite of the UNB President.

"I also need to lose some weight, wouldn't you agree?"

Before I could get words out, Zenyatta said: "Why?"

"Well, because I'm about three hundred and fifty pounds. I eat too much and exercise too little. Beth quarrels with me every day about my weight." He laughed.

"Nonsense, Father. You fine the way you are," insisted Zenyatta.

"You have the frame that can carry the weight, Father." I added.

"You are two very kind people. Hurley tells me that you are visiting from the London School of Economics, so I expected two rather stuffy people…stiff upper lip and all that stuff," he laughed out loud. It was a wonderful sound.

"What's your interest, academically speaking?"

"I'm wrapping up my law degree and Zenyatta is wrapping up her degree in Clinical Psychology. We should be graduating next year or so if all goes well," I said.

"Law? Clinical Psychology? Yours will be an exciting home indeed, I think. Any children?"

"We hope for a calm home Father. We plan to start a family as soon as we've completed studies."

"Good. Children complete a home. Do you plan to go back to the West Indies or…I presumed the West Indies because I hear the lilt, the music, in your accents. It's not Jamaica, not Barbados, not Trinidad."

"We're from Guyana, Father."

"Yes, yes. I've never been there. The politics and those things. Our Church is quite opposed to the oppression that's put upon the people, but I'm ashamed to say that I have not paid much attention."

"May we speak in confidence, Father?" asked Zenyatta.

"Of course, child. I am still a priest, you know. Speak freely and confidentially."

"We are bound to return to Guyana for a while to clear up some things. But we hope to be granted Landed Immigrant Status here in Canada. We pray that the Lord leads us back here to Fredericton to raise our family."

"Of course I will keep you two in my prayers. Is there any way that I can help?" I thought he sensed that there was more to the story.

"I can't think of any way, Father. But thanks," replied Zenyatta.

"At any rate, here is my office and room numbers. If you think of anything, please call." He wrote the numbers on a letterhead and handed it to me.

"You are very kind, Father," I said.

"You know what I can say, however, is this. First, we do not offer a law degree here at STU. That's UNB, and I suspect that Steven will fit in nicely there. We tend to concentrate on the liberal arts here at STU. We have a good psychology department. They are excellent teachers, really. They lack publications and that worries me somewhat, but they are good at what they do in things like perception theory. We do not have a clinical psychologist. We need a counsellor, for one thing. Maybe you can teach a course or two as well, Zenyatta. I would certainly look favourably on your application if you choose to apply that is."

"Father Martin, we cannot thank you enough. We promise to keep in touch and keep you updated," Zenyatta assured him. "We'll be leaving for Toronto in three days, then back to the UK. But we will write or call."

"It was a genuine pleasure, Father. You are the most humble man of God I've ever met. Thank you."

"I'm happy you came in, Steven and Zenyatta. Travel safely, and go with God. I will keep you in my prayers and I look forward to hearing from you before too long."

He stood, gave me a hug, gave Zenyatta a hug, traced a cross on her forehead with his thumb, and saw us out. We made our way out of the building, still alive with the voices of students, onto the short flight of stairs. At the bottom, there was Nancy,

"Hi there, love birds. Old married couple!" she screamed.

"Hi Nancy. What brings you here?"

"Oh! You brought me here. I heard that you were on campus and thought you may need my expert tourist-guide skills," she giggled.

She embraced Zenyatta and shook my hand.

"How lovely to see you outside of work, Nancy. I'm afraid that we have very limited time, and we are headed back downtown to see the Mayor. You could come with us if you wish.

"The Mayor? Wow! I spent my whole life here and never met the mayor except to serve him breakfast once. No, I'll pass on that. I would be very awkward, really. Don't worry, I'll be at the Lord Beaverbrook tomorrow evening."

We got into the car and drove to the Mayor's office. His office was downtown, a short walk from the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel. The driver dropped us off, and we told him to return to base since we'll walk back. Mayor Bosnitch's office was simple and utilitarian. After a short wait, he came out and welcomed us as if we were old friends:

"Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva! What a pleasure! Come in, please. We sat on a double sofa; he sat on the matching single sofa.

"How are you finding our city? I hope we have all been good to you." He asked.

"We cannot think of any place we'd rather be, Mr. Mayor. It's a beautiful place, neat, clean, polite, welcoming. We are in love with Fredericton and New Brunswick." I emphasized.

"That is so nice to hear. Some people find us rather dull, I'm afraid." He responded.

"What some call dull, others call peaceful." Zenyatta retorted.

"Yes, yes. Have your heard from your cousin Peter?"

"Oh yes. We spoke two nights ago. He's preparing for our return to Toronto in three days, then we're off back to the UK."

"I honestly hope that this is not the last time we'll see you in Fredericton."

"Gosh, we hope not. In fact, we were thinking of buying a house or property here if we return. Any recommendations, Mr. Mayor?" Zenyatta asked.

"Well, in general, homes are debatably cheaper in New Brunswick than they are anywhere else in Canada. On the Southside, where we are now it's considerably more expensive since we're closer to the two universities and the schools as well as shopping and government offices. Across the Saint John River, the Northside, it's much cheaper. The houses there are larger with great land space. It's a matter of crossing the bridge to get over here for business, services, and shopping. It's a short trip—about a five-minute drive across the bridge. It would, of course, depend on your needs and your financial resources." He rattled off. He had been asked this question many times before, I imagined.

"Maybe we'll take a drive across there tomorrow," Zenyatta added.

"Great! Do let me know if you decide on anything. My office can quicken the paperwork and make things much easier."

We stood readily to leave, "Thank you so very much. We will be sure to call you from Toronto, from Peter's home. Keep well, Mr. Mayor, and we wish you all the very best." I said.

"And I hope to see you again before too long. Bon voyage."

We walked back down Queen Street, looking in at the shops that lined the street. Zenyatta decided to go in to one, seeking small gifts for Roger and Galloway. She found a very nice tie for the latter and a sweater for the former.

"We need to get something for Peter, don't you think?" Zenyatta asked.

"Yep. But what? He has everything he needs and wants."

"I know," she exclaimed, "We could buy him a *Mont Blanc* and have it engraved!"

"Yes, of course, my love. Only the most exclusive and expensive pen in the world!" I laughed.

We scoured Queen Street and King Street, found one shop that specialized in pens, but they did not carry *Mont Blanc* since it was simply too expensive.

Zenyatta was downcast at not finding what she wanted for Peter. As we headed back to the hotel, I tried to cheer her up:

"We are sure to find such a pen in Toronto. Don't worry, my love."

"We're just spending a day in Toronto, Steven. We won't have time."

"We could split up. I could be updated by Barry and Peter, and you could go find the pen. Easy."

"I am not going without you. I hate the expression "split up". I do not want you to use it ever again. Ever!" She started sobbing, and my heart contracted with grief.

"Don't you worry, my darling. We will find the time and get Peter his present. Me and you. Together."

The sobbing lessened. When she could speak, she said: "Yes. Together."

Back in the room, I helped my wife take off her shoes, undressed her, took her to bed, climbed in, and held her close until she slept. Father Martin was right. Zenyatta was the most beautiful woman there was. She was not just pretty, she was beautiful. She was all things pure and good and virtuous. My heart hurt with love for her.

Chapter Eighty-Two

By nine the next morning, we had already had a small breakfast and were travelling to the North Side of Fredericton. We were on the south side of the bridge across the Saint John River in under three minutes, and we had crossed it in another four more. As usual the bridge was sturdy and functional, absent ostentation of any sort. Safety and convenience came first: the Maritime Way, from what we've seen thus far.

The houses seemed less developed than it counterpart on the university/government side. They were spaced widely apart, with lots of land space, as Mayor Bosnitch had said. And the houses were larger, many of them eight-apartment buildings. Just behind the houses great swaths of farmland opened up. There were large flocks of sheep grazing to their hearts delight. Zenyatta called on the driver to stop. We got out of the car, leaned against it and admired the sheep for almost half of an hour. They were unlike the sheep we had back home. They were as white as Mary's lamb in the childhood rhyme we learned as children: their "fleece was as white as snow." And so thick was the wool that it just about covered their eyes. Our sheep were mostly thin, almost more bones than flesh. And, because of the heat, our sheep had no wool, just skin with ragged tufts of wool. There, people who owned sheep would simply turn them loose in the morning to graze by the road-side or what grass they could find. The owners would arrive just before sunset on creaky bicycles and chase them back home for fear of thieves. It was a regular occurrence to have on or two sheep stolen, most likely ending up in the pots of families. Mutton in our homeland was just shy of being a delicacy, the price at the market quite beyond the budget of the working class.

Zenyatta's voice broke into my reverie: "It would be lovely to awaken each day to a sight such as this, would it not, my husband?"

"It would, my love. It would." I replied. She looked up at me and smiled.

The driver, also out of the car, could not understand our fascination with the flocks of sheep before us. Having grown up with such sights, he took it all for granted. I suspected that this may be one of the dangers that Canada faces: people taking its freedom, its gifts, for granted.

"Have you ever heard of Ron Turcott?" the driver asked.

"Ron Turcott? The rider of the great Secretariat?"

"The same. The house where he was born and grew up is not far from here. He's one of our heroes."

"I've never heard of him, but we could drive by if you like," Zenyatta said. She was talking as much to the driver as she was to me.

"Who's Secretariat?" she asked.

"Oh, he was the greatest race horse to have lived, winner of the American Triple Crown—the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Belmont," I answered. The driver grunted his agreement, "Yes, Sir. True. Horse and jockey."

"I've never seen a horse race. Maybe I will one day, huh?" Zenyatta said rather absent-mindedly.

The sheer massive sprawl of rich pasture land was awe-inspiring. We drove on, more sheep, herds of cattle that looked like the ones on our condensed milk cans, things imported into our country from countries like Canada and the UK. We passed by Ron Turcott's house, large but again, without ostentation. I thought of our home in our exclusive area with our armed soldiers at the gate. The wages of my sin, I thought. There was a sudden bitterness in my mouth.

"We should head back," I said.

"As you wish, sir," answered the driver.

"What's the driving like in winter?" I asked him.

"Well, it can be tricky in the snow. But most people are careful and there are very few accidents. From across here, the trickiest part is the bridge. We have to be careful about black ice."

"Black ice?" Zenyatta and I asked simultaneously.

"Yes, black ice. The ice freezes onto the road and you don't really see it unless you're watchful. It seems like road, but it's a thin layer of ice that takes on the colour of the road."

"Okay," I said, although I did not understand.

On the was back to the hotel, we went to the MacDonald's Drive Through and ordered three Big Macs, three fries, and three cokes. One for the driver. Zenyatta and I took ours up to the room.

"Well, my dearest, what did you think of our adventure?" she asked.

"I think it beautiful, my loving Zenyatta. I do like the idea of space, since it provides us a sense of privacy, even a happy degree of isolation given the landscape that comes with so many properties."

"But..." I can hear the but coming in like cat's paws," she smiled.

"But... We must think of the disadvantages brought on by the famous Canadian winter. Some of those driveways are almost a mile in to the houses. Can you imagine digging out from that after a severe snow storm? We will need to invest in heavy machinery. Shovels or small snow blowers would not cut it, my love. We've heard of excellent snow clearing of roads and streets on the south-side; nothing about the north-side, not even about clearing major arteries."

"And then there is the dreaded "black ice" the driver talked about," Zenyatta added. I glanced quickly at her, but could not determine if she was being ironic. She continued: "And if things work out and we both have jobs, we cannot do what our fellow Guyanese do out of custom: be late like it was a religious imperative. New on the job and late! That would be intolerable in a civilized society."

"True," I responded, still unsure of her degree of seriousness.

"And also, we'd have to have two cars, since our schedules may be quite different. That's more expense to your industrial snow blower. And then, if we're driving separately at different times, I'd be worrying about you and you'd be worrying about me, and we'd worry ourselves to death worrying about each other."

I had had enough: "Zenyatta DaSilva!" I barked.

"Yes, my sweet husband? You beckoned me?"

And then, finally, she broke down, fell to the floor laughing herself to tears.

"Girl!" I lifted her up and threw her on the bed. She grabbed me, tore off my shirt, and we made love with all the intensity of a newly married couple.

We were panting from exhaustion, happy, contented. Between her laboured breathing, Zenyatta said,

"And also, we'd want to fuck right through the winter, and we'd just stay home. We'd lose our jobs!"

I rolled her over and smacked her backside playfully. She fell to laughing again. We made love again.

"You make me happy, my Zenyatta. I love you more than life itself." I uttered.

"And you, my love, are my life. You and life are inseparable." She began to sob, as if the love she felt could not be contained. I held my wife closely until it was time for us to get ready to go down to the dining area for our meeting with Omar Hussein and his wife, Alia.

We showered, dressed, and were down by seven forty-five. We assumed what had become our regular table, with Nancy chatting with us about how sad she was that we were leaving so soon. The Husseins turned up at about six fifty-five, five minutes early.

Omar, typical of many males, lead the way by almost six feet. I supposed that he was unaware of what he was revealing to anyone who noticed. I saw Zenyatta blink in distaste. He reached across to Zenyatta and shook her hand, then mine.

"Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva, may I introduce my wife, Alia?" He asked formally.

I stood and shook hands. Zenyatta stood, gave her and embrace and touched each side of her cheek with her own, French fashion.

"We're happy to see you, Alia. Please call me Zenyatta. Sit, please."

The couple sat. Alia was a homely woman with a good amount of baby fat around her middle. Black hair, dark brown complexion, dressed in a simple but well-cut frock. She wore flat shoes, and her fingernails were cut short and unadorned. A working woman who had no time for trivial self-adornment.

"Oh what a pretty dress, Alia! I love it. Where did you buy it?" Zenyatta gushed.

The woman smiled. She must have been the same age as Zenyatta, but seemed quite a bit older.

"Oh no. I never buy dresses. I just buy the cloth and sew the dresses. It's much cheaper that way, and I'm more assured of a better fit, especially since I know what new bulge I developed in a week or so," she laughed.

A sense of humour, I thought. Zenyatta laughed too, "That, my dear, is sensible. The problem, of course, is that not all woman are gifted with that talent or skill."

"It's really simple, really. Anyone can learn to sew. I learned at a young age, six or seven." She answered modestly.

I looked at Omar. He was looking at his wife and smiling, but he was hardly interested.

"Where did you grow up, Alia? If you don't mind telling me, that is?"

"I'm from a village called Port Mourant in Berbice."

"Aaah! That great place where all the fabulous cricketers come from! Kanhai, Butcher, Soloman, Kallicharan. Trim! Saviours of the West Indies! No wonder you're talented...it must be in the water, huh?"

Alia giggled somewhat uneasily. For all her sweetness and excitement, I felt Zenyatta coiling, like something about to strike. Yet her eyes were tender towards Alia. She was going after Omar! Jesus, I thought at the time.

She struck: "Omar!"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

"You must be very proud to have a wife such as this, right?"

"I certainly am proud of Alia. She is just a wonderful wife and mother."

"That's good. You should be proud and you should be as faithful to her as she is to you. But then you know that, huh?"

"Yes, Zenyatta, I do."

"You see, boy, no number of degrees and such things can buy honour such as your wife possesses. You'll be doctor this or that, but honour is a thing apart."

"I agree fully, Zenyatta," he answered tamely.

"Alia, Steven and I have decided to help you a bit financially," she said directly to the woman.

"Oh Zenyatta, you don't have to do that. We're quite okay, once Omar and I have each other and our boys. We're good." Alia protested.

I decided to speak. I could not allow Zenyatta to do all the work: "We know you're okay, Alia. But one never knows, you know. We'll help a little, and you may or may not use it, as you wish or as circumstances dictate. It's okay. Consider this a late gift for your two boys." I took out a cheque book, signed it, and passed it to my Zenyatta."

"I'm assuming it's A-l-i-a H-u-s-s-e-i-n, right? Zenyatta spelled out her name.

"Yes, it is," Alia whispered tremulously.

"See, girl? I can spell…unlike certain people sitting at this table," Zenyatta joked, titling her head towards me.

Alia laughed, as did I. Omar smiled.

Zenyatta filled in the cheque: the date, the amount of five thousand British pounds, and turned the book in my direction.

"Is this okay, my love?" she asked, quite unnecessarily. But I knew she was driving home a point, setting an example of what a couple should be.

"Of course it's okay, my sweet Zenyatta."

She ripped out the cheque and handed it to Alia.

"And Steven and I will give you one thousand Canadian dollars to get by. The cheque is from our British bank, so it will take a week or so to clear."

Alia kept looking at the cheque, her eyes wide liquid.

"This—this—is a lot of money, Zenyatta. This—this is more than one thousand dollars!" Alia exclaimed. She was starting to cry. Zenyatta leaned over and hugged her.

I turned to Omar, "Let's give the ladies a moment, Omar. Come, walk with me. We go outside for a minute or two."

He stood with me, and we went outside.

"Steven, thank you for everything you and Zenyatta have done for us. You hardly know us, but are generous beyond belief. Thank you from the bottom of my heart," Omar said. He was sincere, I knew.

"You're welcome, man. There is that condition in place, of course. No more fucking around with the dean's daughter, you got me?" I whispered.

"No more. I have ended that already. I promise."

"Good. Now if you go back on that, I will hear about it, you know. And those chaps I mentioned in our last conversation will be informed. I guarantee you this: they will hunt you down and fuck you up very badly before they butcher yuh skunt! Guarenteed!" I whispered again.

He was trembling with fear. I was now certain about keeping the girl away from him. At the same time, I knew he will find other girls to fuck around with. I was looking at myself.

I led the way back in. Zenyatta had succeeded in calming Alia. They were, however, holding hands in sisterly solidarity. I resumed my seat. Omar resumed his heavily.

"All is well, my love?" I asked of Zenyatta.

"All is well, my husband. You?" She asked in turn.

"All is well, my dear." I replied, "We should give Alia and Omar our numbers in Toronto and in London, just in case."

"I've already done that, my love," she said and kissed me on the cheek.

"Are your boys going to school yet?" I asked.

"Oh yes. Saint Dunstan's on Prospect Street. They take the school bus. It's a good school, we think." Omar answered.

"The school is Roman Catholic, and the discipline is reasonably good," Alia added.

"Yes, we mad the pleasure of meeting Monsignor Martin, President of Saint Thomas University. He's a lovely man." Zenyatta added.

"Any children yet?" Alia directed this to Zenyatta.

"Not yet. We plan to start a family when we're done with the London School of Economics and are gainfully employed.

"Do you plan to return home after studies?" Omar asked.

"Oh yes. We have some loose ends to tie up there, and Zenyatta has her family back home—her mom and dad and a rather wayward brother." I said, "Then there are other things like our house and staff to take care of."

"Where do you live, Zenyatta?" Alia asked Zenyatta.

"It's a place called *Elegwa Park* just outside the city," Zenyatta answered.

"Wow! I've heard of it. It's an exclusive area reserved for ministers of government and other big wigs." Omar interjected.

"Well, yes. But I'm no government minister. We just got incredibly lucky. It is a nice place though. Secure, big, comfortable. Right now Zenyatta's parents are staying there, making sure that things are as they should be."

"We've advised Omar that he should make every attempt to stay here, given his political views. Our country is not a place for young children at this juncture. Or for people who openly criticize the government."

"If you come back to Fredericton, you simply must visit. I'll whip up a good home-style supper. Omar thinks I'm a good cook, at least that is what he says." Alia smiled.

"We promise to visit if we're ever in this lovely place again," Zenyatta spoke up.

"Speaking of supper, we invited you to dinner, and we all forgot about food. Shall we order?" I added.

Alia spoke: "Gosh. I wish we could stay, but we have to get the boys. I'm so sorry, Zenyatta and Steven. I know this seems ungrateful after what you just did, but..."

"Not at all, Alia. That's called responsibility! But you can at least order and take away. Please. We'll get the hotel cab to take you home."

I signalled for Nancy to come over. They ordered four meals to be packaged, and Zenyatta and I ordered our meals to have right there. The food came as we chatted. The couple gave us hugs and left.

"While you were outside, I advised Alia to open her own bank account with the cheque and some of the money. She promised to do so," Zenyatta informed me.

"That's good thinking, my darling Zenyatta." I agreed.

"What did you and Omar talk about, pray tell?"

"Oh! I threatened him. I told him that if he messes with the Dean's daughter, I'd make sure that Rudolph Lewis and Henry White find out about his opposition to the government. I guaranteed him that they will hunt him down and butcher him. That's all."

"My God, Steven! That's just so wrong. How could you do that?"

She was alarmed at my threat. I offered an excuse: "Of course, I would do no such thing, my love. However, nothing will come of it, and someone like Omar needs to know that there are consequences to every crap that he does." I realized the

irony even of my words even then. What consequences have I faced for my fuck-ups? None!

"Well, once it goes nowhere. We both know that people like Lewis and White will not stop with him. They will devastate the entire family. We know that in our bones, Steven." She calmed down immediately, assured by my assurance.

We finished supper gave Nancy a generous tip, and headed up to pack for our flight tomorrow.

Chapter Eight-Three

We landed at Pearson International Airport, went through immigration, got our suitcases from off the carousel, and passed through customs check, and emerged through the sliding doors into the crowded lobby. Cousin Peter, true to his word, was there. He gave us both big hugs, took Zenyatta's suitcase and went to the massive underground parking.

On the way back to Peter's house, he asked, "Well, tell me about New Brunswick."

Zenyatta and I rattled on about the beaty of the place, the sheer sense of space, the sheep, the people. We told him about Nancy and the professionalism of the staff, about Omar and his wife, about the Dean of the Law School at UNB and his complications which we disentangled, about Robert Ploude. Zenyatta ushed over Monsignor Martin and her job offer; she also told Peter about my semi-offer to join the teaching staff at the Law School. We stopped in for coffee at *Tim Horton's*, a Canadian tradition, it seems.

"So I can assume you rather like New Brunswick?" he asked jokingly.

"We decided that should the papers come through, we will settle down there and raise our family."

"North or South-side for your house?"

"That's up for debate, but we'd love your input, Peter."

We were in his driveway before we concluded that discussion. Peter and I took the suitcases up to our room, Zenyatta in tow. Peter went back down to set up some drinks while we freshened up. By the time we were down, Peter had set up an ice bucket, a bottle of Glenfiddich, and a bottle of red wine, already opened and breathing.

"This seems a celebration, Peter. Gosh!" exclaimed Zenyatta.

"Well, it is my dear Cousin-in-law. It's a welcome back to Toronto for you and Steven," he chuckled.

"You are really doing too much for us, Peter. Really." I added.

"No such thing as too much, boy! Ask Uncle Peter, if you have doubts," he laughed.

We sat, poured and had our first drink. Peter returned to the topic:

"If it were me, I'd stay on the south-side in Fredericton. It's where the jobs are, really. The political and educational centre of New Brunswick. Travel in winter, as you said, can bring on unneeded complications. In fact, just grocery shopping would requite a drive across the river. One of the lovely things about Fredericton is that everything is within reach: shopping for anything, schools, the two universities, government offices and services, anything."

He continued: "If ever I retire, that's where I would go—Fredericton. Second place would be Halifax, I think. But then Halifax is a nice drive away. And the border is just fifteen minutes away from Fredericton, if you ever need to go to the US."

"Well,' said Zenyatta, "It seems as if Peter has made his case. South-side. Now the only thing left is for the landed immigrant papers…and that is really in the first place."

"True," said Peter, but let's look at the time-line again for a minute, shall we? It's summer, so be next fall you two should be done at university with your respective degrees, correct?"

We nodded.

"Good. Then you travel back home at around December, say, spend three months wrapping things up there very, very quietly, correct?"

"That's the plan," I responded.

"But by December you should have as much cash transferred to you from home to the UK, then you transfer from the UK to your bank here in Canada. This round-about way will take attention from Canada."

"By the end of…"

Peter's voice faded as if he was speaking from afar. It had suddenly occurred to be that neither of us—not me, not Zenyatta—had ever really enquired in any meaningful way about Peter. From the time of our wedding when he had done so much, to his steadfast support since then and now, we had taken his welfare for granted. We took for granted that he was thriving financially and in every other way, that he was a mirror image of the uber-wealthy Uncle Peter. I could not expect Zenyatta to think of that, of course. She would have left inquiring about the welfare of a family member to another family member. To her it would have felt like intrusion. I remember the very callous person I was. Cruel person. I felt a self-loathing that I had not felt for a long time, not since Rahma. Not since Raina. I shivered at the thought that the cruel, heartless Steven DaSilva was lurking somewhere inside of me, lurking, waiting. Waiting to devastate Zenyatta in the

identical fashion as I—as he did— to those two women who loved me at the expense of their souls. Those two, and more.

I awoke as from a fit, to Zenyatta's hands on my face, and to Peter's hand biting into my shoulder. I was soaking wet.

"Steven! You okay, man? Fucking Jesus! Are you okay? Talk to us, boy!" Peter was shouting.

Tears were streaming down Zenyatta's face.

"Please be okay, my love. Please God, please let my husband be okay."

"I—I—I'm fine. I'm okay. I'm sorry. I just lost it for a minute. It could be a slight jet-lag, I suppose. I'm fine now though," I stuttered then smiled.

"Hey, you should go rest for a bit. I'll order something in the meanwhile. Zenyatta take him upstairs for an hour or so." Peter ordered.

"Come on, my love. We'll just lay down for a bit and come back down." Zenyatta coaxed.

"I said I'm fine. You two are like two old hens!" I joked.

"But I could go up and have a nice long shower. That should do the trick." I offered.

Zenyatta held my arm as we mounted the stairs. She stripped off my clothes, ran the shower and put me under the streaming warm water. She stood there, watchfully, worriedly.

"I'm fine, my love. It's just a small lapse. I'm fine."

"Yes, of course you're fine my sweet Steven."

I must have sent thirty minutes under the shower. Then I towelled off, limbered up, dressed, all while she looked on.

"Let's go back down, my darling. I'm okay. Let's see what that man downstairs is up to."

She nodded and down we went.

"I could do with a stiff drink, cousin!" I insisted from mid-stairs.

"You sure boy?" Peter queried.

"I'm absolutely sure, mother hen." I laughed.

"Okay," he conceded. "Is that okay with you Zenyatta?"

"Yes, Peter. Thanks. He seems back to normal. The shower did the trick. But you boys should not over-do the do!"

"Yes dear," Peter and I said in harmony.

We all laughed.

"We were talking about time-line. Go on, Peter."

"Yes, I was suggesting that you transfer as much money as you have in the UK to your bank here in Canada, That way, you lessen the chance of being traced by those beasts."

"You stay home to wrap up should take three months, let's say. That brings you to end of spring or early summer back here. Then, from what I understand, you'll settle in safe and beautiful New Brunswick. That's the time line, although you can adjust a month here or there. By year after next year, you're settled and starting to churn out babies," he laughed.

"Easy for you to say, Peter," returned Zenyatta.

Peter had ordered in Chinese food, and we wolfed it down.

Zenyatta volunteered to do the dishes. Peter acquiesced, which left us alone in the dining area.

"Peter, I was feeling guilty about not enquiring about how you are faring. I'm sorry for that cousin. Not that there can be any excuses, but we've been living on a razor's edge. And it's hard to think of anything else, even about you, my dear and generous cousin. But please know that you are much loved by both of us, and that we are deeply grateful for all that you've done for us. Thank you Peter." I got up and hugged him.

"There is no need to feel guilty, Steven. None! I'm doing okay. No worries. And hey, I must say that Barry seems more and more optimistic each time I see him. So we're all happy about that."

I noticed his switch of focus back to us, but chose to say nothing. I regret my silence now.

Chapter Eighty-Four

Zenyatta and I decided to go downtown Toronto to do some shopping. She was positively ecstatic to have found a store that carried Mont Blanc pens. It was a thing of beauty, hand-made, roller-tipped, smooth, perfectly balanced. It was of silver. We bought extra refills. The packaging was lovely and tasteful as well. We had the pen engraved with Peter's name. We walked around downtown some more, spending most of out time in Cole's Book Store, a giant store in which we could have spent days. We got a few books on psychology and a few novels: a few by V.S. Naipaul, an epic poem by Derek Walcott, two by John Hearne, Sam Selvon, and several by the spectacular Wilson Harris, our countryman. Laden, we returned to Burlington. Peter had returned home from his office. Zenyatta decided to cook.

A home-cooked meal was a treat for Peter as well as for us: curried chicken, dhal, and fried plantains. We ate with our fingers, cleaning our plates. Zenyatta was as pleased as punch when Peter gushed over her cooking:

"Steven, you have married one of the wonders of the world, buy. Your wife is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen; she is kind and righteous; she is bright and caring; she loves you to distraction; and the woman can *cook*! Lawdy, lawdy!"

Zenyatta blushed crimson. "I cannot argue with any of that, Peter. Zenyatta is perfection." I added.

"Okay, okay. That's enough from you boys," she smiled.

"And it's your turn to do the dishes, Steven DaSilva," she added. I obeyed.

When I returned, we presented Peter with his gift. He played with the wrapping for a minute, then opened it:

"A Mont Blanc!!! WOW! I never had one of these in my life. It's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever given me. Ever! Thank you, Zenyatta. Thank you, Steven. I will cherish this as long as I live." He hugged both of us. I saw tears in his eyes.

We flew out from Pearson to Heathrow the next day. Roger was there at the airport to greet us. He was his usual cheery self, the recent happenings in the Law School tumbling from his lips in torrents.

"How's Dean Galloway?" I asked.

"He's unchanging, Steven. The man's an ox, I say."

"Good. We thought of you two every day."

"After you've rested, you need to give us all the details."

"Of course we will, Roger." Said Zenyatta.

Roger drove us to our flat, and Zenyatta began to clean and cook immediately. I unpacked. After I had unpacked, I began drafting a letter to Zenyatta's father about transferring money to us, with the explanation that we had encountered some unexpected expenses. I asked that he send as much as he could. Zenyatta insisted that we leave enough to pay the staff and take care of house-hold expenses. We hoped that the amount sent would be substantial since it would include my accumulated salary over the years.

After I finished the draft, Zenyatta went through it critically and sombrely.

"You should tell dad that we will be home in a year, but this should all be on the hush-hush. Only my Mom, Quincy and Monte need to know."

I added that bit, then wrote it over neatly and we both signed the letter with love. The nest day, we walked to the post office and sent off the letter by registered mail. It was all strangely exhausting for both of us. Zenyatta explained it,

"I suppose we're weary because we are living the lives of some character in a spy novel, with all the accompanying tensions that they don't show in movies. Spies are always so cool, right?"

I saw the humour and the logic in that. I smiled.

"We are not built to be spies, y sweet Zenyatta. But we are following through with the plan."

"We should also buy small presents for our staff: Quincy, the three maids, Melissa, the groundsmen, Monty and Gordon," she added, "They would appreciate that."

We spent the next day writing to Robert, Alia and Omar, Mayor Bosnitch, and Nancy. Zenyatta wrote to Monsignor Martin. We also called Peter and chatted for a while. The semester started, and we buckled down to studies. The only relaxation times were spent with Dean Galloway and Roger. Of course, we updated them on our plan, outlining cousin Peter's pivotal role in all of it. Galloway approved, although he did express worry about what would occur upon our return home. He also cautioned about concentrating on our studies since everything hinges on that. Both Galloway and Roger were delighted by our plans to settle in Canada and that our prospects at UNB and Saint Thomas University seemed good. He promised to write excellent recommendations; Roger promised the same. Galloway also pushed Zenyatta and me to have a few articles published in our respective fields. The

reputation of scholars are built, he insisted, on scholarly publication rather than on petty university politics and committee work.

The year flew by with the speed of light. We worked assiduously; Zenyatta's dad sent a substantial amount of money without raising eyebrows, and we transferred most of that to our Canadian bank. It was all going to plan, but we avoided being smug about any of it. We both did our finals. I graduated with distinction, as did Zenyatta. I had no doubt that my progress was being monitored by the chaps back home. Soon, we were packing and shipping some of our stuff back home and some to Peter in Canada.

I called Henry Greene as soon as our results were official.

"Hello, my good friend," I hailed over the phone.

"Aah, my dear Comrade! I heard that you sparkled over there! I conveyed this to our Leader. He was pleased and asked when you'll be back. Of course, I told him very soon. Lewis and I talk about you often as well. So, when will you be back?"

"Some time in December, I think. Things are pretty fluid, but you will be the first to know when we are back home. We'll have a nice get-together with all of our old friends and comrades."

"Good. Good. We can discuss things in detail then."

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

We spent the next few days shopping for presents for everyone, especially for Zenyatta's mother and father. We had already bought a Slazenger cricket bat for her brother. We had already shipped liquors and other items months before, but we also got a few bottles of single-malt scotch for these get togethers we may have.

It was at our farewell dinner for Dean Galloway and Roger that the idea of get togethers was brought up by Galloway.

We had booked a rather nice restaurant, Roger had picked us up and Galloway followed in his car. We were shown to our table and had ordered drinks. Galloway broached the subject immediately:

"I have no need to tell you, Steven and Zenyatta, that this may be your most trying time yet, these months spent in your country. You can be sure that these politicians will be monitoring your every move, your behaviour. They will be looking to see how your new qualifications may have changed you. They will listen to how to treat people, how dress, and especially how you speak. Avoid too many English expressions that are peculiar to us here in England. There should be no hint of change, not in anything at all. People are always reassured when they can say 'Oh, the same old Peter! He has not changed one bit."

"You'll probably be summoned in by the Prime Minister, but I suppose you'll get the lay of the land from some of your guests who are cabinet members. I'm almost certain that he will want to use you to make himself the "Supreme Leader" or some such rubbish. Never make snap decisions with these people. Give yourself time to think, to discuss everything with your wife. Avoid mentioning Canada."

The three of us sat there feeling that we ought to be taking notes like students in a class-room. But Galloway's multiple warnings never became unbearable. He was worried, even frightened.

Zenyatta spoke: "Dean Galloway, what you say makes the world of sense, and we will be as cautious as we can be. We promise you. Nothing that you've said will be in vain. Steven and Roger and I know that you care. For that, words are not enough to express our gratitude."

As Zenyatta was speaking, Dean Galloway busied himself refilling his pipe with fresh tobacco, pressing it down with his thumb, lighting, puffing. He hardly made eye contact with her, his bushy eye-brows twitching.

"I think I can speak on behalf of our Dean when I say that we are very worried about you both. You have become much more than students to us. We are friends. I hope friends who will see each other frequently in the future.

Galloway changed the topic: "I will speak to the Dean of Arts and Humanities to ensure he writes an appropriate recommendation for you Zenyatta. Dean Hurley will hear from me and Roger by next week, I hope, depending on the mail."

"Oh, and please say hi to your lovely mom and dad, Zenyatta. And also to Monty and Quincy, Melissa and the rest. That was holiday I will not forget. It's a pity that Dean Galloway did not come along. It was exciting, honestly."

Galloway smiled wryly, "I've had enough excitement in my life, Roger. All I wish for now is tedium, calm."

Chapter Eighty-Five

We landed at the Timehri International Airport at 1 p.m. on a Wednesday. We emerged from the belly of the plane and stepped into a wall of heat. We climbed down the narrow stairs that men had pushed onto the side of the aircraft, then stepped onto the blazing tarmac. The walk into the small building seemed a long one, and we were soaking wet by the time we got into the clammy shade of the airport. I thought that it was sheer vanity and delusion to attach the word "international" to this grubby place. The building seemed to have shrunk to coffin-size from the last that I was here. It had grown dirtier, more dilapidated, the immigration and custom people more surly, even hostile. By the time we cleared, our four suitcases were as four carcasses among and beneath many other carcasses littering the floor. There were no baggage handlers, no baggage carts. I pushed my way through the jostling mob and exhumed our suitcases, dragging them one by one to a small space where I told Zenyatta to wait.

After I had retrieved the last one and placed it beside my wife, I muttered under my breath:

"Welcome to fucking hell, DaSilva."

"I beg your pardon, my love? I did not hear you…too much noise."

"Oh nothing, my darling. Just saying 'welcome home.'" She made a futile effort to smile at my sarcasm. I lifted one suitcase with a grunt, meaning to take it outside where I hoped Monty was waiting.

"I can help. I can take one," Zenyatta half-shouted over the din.

"No, my love. You stay here to guard the suitcases from magically evaporating," I said loudly.

I lifted two suitcases, my muscles aching from the effort. Outside! And there was Monty and Gordon! I dropped the suitcases and hugged both of them. Gordon picked them up and headed for the car. Monty came back with me, disregarding the four cops—three males and one female—who were meant to be guarding the entrance. They, of course, were busy talking and giggling, the female the centre of the males' attention. Upon seeing us, Zenyatta screamed and ran to Monty,

"Monty! Dear, dear Monty. It's so good to see you!" She hugged him and kissed his cheek. Monty, poor soul, did not know how to react. He was not a hugging kind of man.

"Thank you, Miss Zenyatta. We all missed you very much." he replied. Monty lifted the two suitcases, the effort showing on his face.

"Their heavy, huh?" I teased.

"Yes, Sir. But it's not a problem."

Gordon was outside, and Zenyatta reacted the same way she did with Monty. Gordon reacted the same way Monty did. I chuckled to myself. The gentlemen put the suitcases in the boot of the big, black car. Monty opened the back door for Zenyatta; Gordon opened the other back door for me. Then we set off, Monty behind the wheel.

"I hope you had a good flight, Sir, Miss," Monty said.

"It was fine, thanks. It could always be worse, right?" she half-joked.

"That's right, Miss. That's right."

I remained quiet. I saw Monty glace at me in the rear-view mirror. The road—if one may use that word—had more pot-holes than I remembered. I gazed out the window as Zenyatta gripped my hand. The houses had shrunk, like the airport. They seemed on the verge of collapse. The rum shops were well attended, men drinking themselves to insensitivity and death. Too many yards were overtaken by bush.

"How are things here?" I asked, finally.

"It's a struggle to people, Sir." Monty replied.

"Gordon?"

"How are things in the homeland?"

"It's as Monty said, Sir. It's not getting better, I have to say."

"Yep. Have you seen Lewis at all?" I asked.

"Neither hide nor hair, Sir. But he is often in the papers. Looks like he's doing well." Monty replied, his voice dark.

"I bet," I said. I could feel Zenyatta's side glance. I could sense her worry awaken. She squeezed my hand.

I must have dozed off, for when Zenyatta shook me awake, we were by the gate. The two soldiers saluted, then began waving furiously. I lowered my window and they each reached in and shook my hand, then grilled and waved at Zenyatta,

"Welcome home, Comrades!" We smiled and said thank you.

Monty eased the car up the driveway and stopped where everyone had made a line of welcome, according to protocol. This had to have been Quincy's doing, given

his sense of protocol. They stood shoulder to shoulder, one foot apart from each other, Marjorie Qualis Heading the line, then Robert Qualis, then a now-tall Alvin Qualis, followed by Quincy, Melissa, the three maids, then the groundsmen. It reminded of the formal welcome given by the gentry in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, save we did not arrive in a carriage drawn by horses.

Monty and Gordon opened our respective doors, and we stepped out. The whole line bowed slightly as we approached them, and I could sense Zenyatta's uneasiness at having her parents bow and courtesy to her. She rushed up to her mother and hugged her tightly; her father and brother joined in. Robert Qualis beckoned that I join in the family group hug.

Zenyatta spoke first, her voice cracking with emotion: "Oh, I missed you all. I missed you so much."

"We missed you, our wonderful child. More than you know," her parents responded.

"And I missed you too, big sister," added Alvin, grown almost a foot.

They turned to me with the same emotional welcome, and I hugged each of them. Zenyatta went down the line, hugging each person: Quincy, Melissa, the three maids whom she called by name. I shook hands, choosing to be less familiar.

"Should the suitcases be taken to your room, Miss Zenyatta?" Quincy to business.

Zenyatta peered at the labels, "These two are upstairs, these two in the study," she said.

Quincy nodded to Monty and Gordon, and they took the heavy things up to our room. I found myself having to re-orient with the space that was my home, which now felt unlike my home. It was too large, too luxurious, too much. Zenyatta seemed immediately at home.

"Each of you have to give me updates as soon as we settle in. For now I'd really like a cup of tea. My darling Steven, are you thirsty at all?" She asked.

"I think I'd love a cold, cold beer, please."

Melissa rushed off to get Zenyatta's tea and Quincy got a beer for me. We sat in our dining room, inviting the Qualises to sit.

"How are things, Robert?" I asked.

"Well, counsellor, nationally things are not good…"

It was the first time I'd been refer to as counsellor, my lawyerly title. Everyone broke into applause. I stood and took a bow.

After the applause had died down, I returned to my question; "Tell me, please."

"Well, basic food items are more scarce, and almost unaffordable to most of the people; shop shelves are practically empty; people are more frustrated; and the future sees to hold little or no promise for better things tomorrow. We are fed a daily diet of 'we must tighten our belts, comrades!' by our political leaders. There is no good news on that front, my boy."

At the residence here, we've maintained the status quo for the most part, but there have been no gatherings, no parties, no dinners, and no visitors, much to our relief. We have held to the budget that you and Zenyatta set out; in fact, we have saved quite a bit. I'd suggest that we go into greater detail later after you are settled."

"I agree. And we shall get a familial update later as well," said Zenyatta.

"Good. We will go up for a couple of hours, re-acquaint ourselves with our room, refresh ourselves, rest a bit, and be back down, if that's okay with all of you."

"I'll start dinner soon, so that you can get your taste of home," smiled Melissa.

"And Melissa, please set places for yourself, Monty, Gordon, as well as mom, dad, and the two of us. Thanks, dear." Zenyatta requested.

We wound our way upstairs, and Zenyatta flopped down on our bed, arms spread wide in a command for embrace. I went atop her and kissed her passionately.

"Welcome home, my darling husband," she whispered tenderly, "I know that you are out of sorts, my love. I know."

"I'm fine, my sweet Zenyatta. I'm okay," I lied.

She whispered again, softly, almost forlornly, "Steven—"

"Mhmm?" I mouthed.

"Steven, do you love me?"

"Of course I do, Zenyatta. You know that. I have loved you from the moment I saw you in that store. I loved you then, and I love you more now."

"Do you respect and honour me, Steven?"

"I have never respected another human being as I respect you, my love. You are the most honourable person I've ever met! Ever!"

"When you love and respect and hold someone to be honourable, you do not lie to them, Steven. Not even a little lie, if there is such a thing. You know that I love you, and with my love comes my vow never to betray you, never to lie to you, never to be unfaithful to you. Is my love different from yours?"

"No, my darling wife. Our love is our love, indivisible until death."

"You are doing the same thing that you did at Peter's. You passed out, but insisted—like now—that you're fine. I did not probe too much. I thought that you will tell me in your time. But here you are again. So tell me what troubles you."

She was looking at me with those beautiful hazel eyes, with that face on which innocence and love were writ large.

"At Peter's I realized, quite suddenly, that I had never asked Peter how he was doing, if he was happy. I felt guilty, callous. I had taken a good man—my own cousin—for granted. Now, I feel the weight of this place, this country. I feel that it is hurtling towards catastrophe. I have this sense of dread. I have this terror that you will come to harm."

"And all of that comes from the chaos at the airport? The deprivation and hopelessness you saw on our way here?"

"Yes. Yes."

"But, Steven, you may be sympathetic to the people, but you cannot feel their pain. Was it not Jose Marti who said 'To talk about pain, you need to have felt the slap on your own face'"?

"Yes, I think so."

"But you have never felt the slap on your face, my love. You were always of the privileged class. No?"

"I suppose so," I admitted.

"Lemme tell you what I see, and you can tell me where I'm wrong or inaccurate, okay?"

I nodded.

You were distressed from the time we landed. The mayhem at the airport compounded that. You may have been unconsciously comparing what we saw at this airport to Heathrow, and Pearson and Fredericton. Not only infrastructure, but also people—the immigration people, the customs people, the cattle-like behaviour of our fellow travellers trampling over each other. Then the broken roads and broken houses that contain broken people who take refuge in rum and noise and lewdness. And that led you to slip into a depression. How am I doing so far, counsellor?" She asked, attempting to soften what she was saying with levity.

"I think you're spot on, my love."

"But by bringing me into it, by feeling this dread that harm will come to me, you are opening another door, are you not?"

"I really don't know. Am I?" I asked, sincerely.

"The door is the future, my darling Steven. You worry about today, but you dread tomorrow. Yo are depressed by what you see today, but you are terrified by what you may see tomorrow."

I pulled her to me, hard. "I love you, my Zenyatta. I love you so much." I broke down and wept. My wife held me for a long time while I cried all the tears I had withheld for so long. I wept for the people that I've hurt with my cruelty. And I wept for people that I will hurt tomorrow.

I must have dozed off for half of an hour. I awoke to her running her fingers through my hair.

"I slept," I said, stupidly.

"You slept," she smiled at me.

"Let's go in the shower...but no hanky-panky. We need to go down and be with our people. Hanky me later, if you wish," she laughed, stripping off her clothes, and getting in the shower. I stripped and followed her.

"Hey, woman! You are truly beautiful, you know. You are sublime in every way possible."

"Flatterer!"

"No, I mean it, my love. You are an angel, my angel. You are good and true...and built like a goddess." Zenyatta blushed.

We showered, dressed, and went down to have dinner with "our people" as she put it. They were all there, chatting, mostly about Zenyatta from te strains of conversation I could discern. Now, that's a topic worthy of discussion, I smiled to myself. I invited Mr. Robert Qualis to sit in the seat directly opposite me, and Zenyatta at my right hand. Each person had got up to get drinks for himself or herself. I got myself a scotch and soda.

"Now I wonder what Melissa has concocted as a 'taste of home'"? Zenyatta asked.

"Melissa stood, more out of pride than out of necessity, "Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva, on behalf of the staff, I welcome you back home. Mr. Qualis was wonderful to us in your absence, but I think he had no choice since he is married to Margaret, after all." Everyone erupted in laughter. "We missed you, Zenyatta. We missed you, Mr. DaSilva. Please lift your glasses to their safe return. Tonight, we will feast on lamb pepperpot and freshly-baked bread. And we shall also have duck curry with dhal puri with vegetables. Thank you. Cheers."

Robert Qualis rose and spoke, nervously and clearly:

"As you all know by now, the people that do the talking in our family are the females, my wife Margaret, and our daughter, Zenyatta. When Alvin and I are quiet, it is not that we have nothing to say. We just want to live to see the next day!" They all broke into hysterical laughter, while Qualis kept his face stone-like for as long as he could. I must thank Steven and Zenyatta for trusting us to keep the ship steady. I must also say that the seas have been rough since they left, and we all hope for some kind of change for the better. Now that we have an attorney-at-law in the family as well as a clinical psychologist, we may see positive change in our country. Congrats to you both on your academic success."

There were cheers and "hear-hears" all around.

Zenyatta gave me a nod signalling me to say something. I stood,

"Zenyatta and I are grateful to each and every one of you for your steadfast loyalty and support, even when we were not here. We know that times are hard, and there is no guarantee that they will get easier any time soon. But we can say with conviction that if there is a way that we can lessen the burdens you have to bear, we will lessen that burden. We make that promise to you. We will begin by giving each of you a Christmas gift of five hundred dollars tomorrow. This includes the groundsmen."

There were loud cheers and banging on the table in celebration. One voice spoke up, Quincy:

"I speak only for myself, Sir and Ma'am. I thank you very much for your kindness. You were kind to us from the start. You were kind to us from afar. I would say that we are all thankful for your Christmas gift. However, that gift is exorbitant, and I would humbly ask that you reduce that to two hundred dollars per person. That would be kind and reasonable."

Melissa spoke up: "Quincy, boy, yuh right. Yuh taakin fuh yuhself, yuh hear. I can do wid the five hundred raise. I am not refusing good, clean money from good clean people!"

Above the cheers, Marjorie Qualis shouted: "You tell he, girl. We tekkin the gift. Story end, bucket bend!"

More chairs. The motion was passed. Zenyatta went upstairs, brought down a heap of money, and handed it all to Quincy and Monty for distribution. It was already Christmas for them. We were all happy as we duh into our pepperpot and bread. Then into the duck curry and dhal puri. In between mouthfuls, Zenyatta said that we should start decorating the house for Christmas from next week.

"We will have a nice party and invite some of the usual people. We need to keep them on our side," she warned.

We all chatted. Most of the chatter was about the scarcity of basic food items: flour, milk, bread, canned goods, potatoes, dhal, onions, cooking gas. And when they were available, they were unaffordable. As the chatter got bleaker, Zenyatta kept glancing over at me as if to gauge the effect it was all having on me. I reached over and kissed her on the mouth. Her mother joked:

"Hey, hey, hey! You two already qualify as a old married couple, so behave yourselves." She laughed loudly. Everybody else laughed along with her. Zenyatta kissed me ever more forcefully, winking at her mom.

By nine, everything was cleared and washed up. Then the house was empty save for the two of us. I suggested that we take a walk around the yard. We walked. The grass was wet from the dew. Zenyatta removed her shoes and did her run. Fifty years at full tilt, graceful, powerful. Then she turned back, and I braced for impact. She ran headlong into me, jumped up, her legs around my waist. I fell flat on my back, she on top of me. I heard the familiar refrain from one of the soldiers,

"Well, now we *know* that dem come back!"

Zenyatta whispered in my ear:

"Take me upstairs and fuck me, my love!"

I muttered to her: "Old married couple, my ass!" We laughed uncontrollably all the way into the house.

We went up, got in the shower, into bed and made love with gay abandon. Then sleep came. We were up at eleven in the morning, hungry. Zenyatta had given everyone the day off, so we went down half dressed. She made four sunny-side up, and we wolfed that down with bread and coffee. Then back up, showered, and back into bed. As we lazed around in bed, Zenyatta suggested that we call her parents and bring them for an update on our plan. They deserved that, in her opinion.

Zenyatta called them and suggested that they visit at five in the evening,

"Oh, and dad! Leave Alvin at home. This is an adult conversation."

Her parents came at five. We poured a drink for everyone and a Coke for Zenyatta.

Zenyatta filled them in on our plan to migrate next year, if things go well. They listened attentively, absorbing the gravity of it all. We stressed the extreme sensitivity of it all, which is why Alvin needed to have been excluded from this conversation. We talked about money as well.

"I think you're good on the money end. Very little from your salary has been spent. I's suggest you take bits at a time so as not avoid raising eyebrows, Robert Qualis ventured.

"Agreed. We will withdraw a hefty amount for this Christmas bash and squirrel away most of it to our bank in England. We will accumulate what we can there, then transfer the whole amount to Canada."

"When do you hope for the Canadian papers to come through?" asked Marjorie.

"By next summer, we hope. Cousin Peter is working on this with his lawyer," Zenyatta answered.

"You realize that if you do this, you will lose the house, the cars, and they will seize all possible assets. And they will grill people like us." Robert asked pointedly. He was thinking about his family, of course.

"Yes, they certainly will. Which is why we're keeping this whole thing inside the family. For you, you know the general things…like we were planning to go to Canada or the USA on vacation."

"What happens to you two between now and then?" Marjorie asked.

"I expect to be called in and instructed on my role to keep them in power forever. Maybe Comrade Leader himself or Henry White. I don't know. After Christmas, we will see less and less of each other. We will do everything to keep you safe. Everything," I said firmly.

"You mean you will try to keep us safe. But my daughter is in the middle of this. You have put our daughter in the mouth of a beast, Steven," Marjorie screamed.

"Mommy, please, please. I stand with my husband, as you have stood with yours. The last thing we want is childish finger-pointing. So no more of this. No more!" Zenyatta answered. We were all struck to silence. She continued:

"We have a plan. We are following that plan to the letter, but we need your help to execute. If you're not willing to help, we will not force you. We're asking for your help. Grant our request or refuse our request. That's up to you. You will always be my mother and father, and I will always honour you."

"You will have our help. I promise." Robert Qualis said, quietly, finally. Marjorie nodded, got up, hugged her daughter, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Robert, you and I will go to the bank tomorrow. We'll see exactly what is there and withdraw half of it for our "Christmas Party" for the usual crowd. It's a

good excuse. Then we take out the rest gradually until little is left. No word of any of this to anyone, clear?"

We did exactly as planned: Robert came, we went with the big car with Monty behind the wheel, and withdrew a substantial amount of money.

"Two-thirds of this goes to the UK. We will keep the rest for our expenditures here," I told Robert as we waited for the bank manager to count out the money. I was relieved that there were no questions about my transaction.

We returned home to *Elegwa Park*, and Robert drove directly to his job at the sugar estate. Zenyatta and I went into the study, hoarded half of the money, and We took out the suitcases with the small gifts we had brought back for everyone.

Zenyatta and I had a quick coffee break in the breakfast room, then went back into the study.

I called Henry White, ready with my charm offensive:

"Good morning to my favourite Minister! How are you, Henry?"

"Steven DaSilva! My good man. I'm good, really good. I knew you were gonna touch base soon. Hey, we need to have a welcome-back get together, you know."

"Yes, of course. I look forward to picking up where we left off. Zenyatta and I thought we could double up and have a Christmas gathering at the same time."

"Good idea, my friend. But you must come in to see me before. Comrade Leader has been asking for you. Of course, he knows you're back."

"Sure, Henry. When you want me there?"

"How about tomorrow at eleven? That's good for you?"

"Hey, my minister calls, I answer. I'll be there at eleven. How about Lewis? Will he be there?"

"I'll call him and tell him you requested his presence."

"See you both then, Henry."

We hung up. I dialled Uncle Peter's phone. I got his secretary and asked for him,

"May I know who's calling?"

"Please tell him it's his nephew, Steven DaSilva."

Silence. Then, "Welcome home, boy! And congratulations on your success in the UK. That made me happy. How is that lovely wife of yours?"

"Thank you, Uncle Peter. I'm glad you're happy with the law thing. Zenyatta also got her degree in Clinical Psychology, and she's doing well. She is my north star, really."

"Yes, I realized that, Steven. She's the best thing that's happened to this family in a long, long time. Do tell her I send my love."

This was new. Uncle Peter has never used that word in my presence before. Zenyatta, sitting right beside me in the study, over-head, of course. She opened her eyes wide, and mouthed without sound: LOVE? WOW!"

"I will certainly do so. How are you and how business, Uncle Peter?"

"I'm fine. I have started thinking of retiring and moving to some place less tumultuous, less unstable."

"Oh! You have your next CEO in mind?"

"I have not told anyone as yet, of course. So keep your mouth shut. But I am looking at a few people. Nothing concrete. Are you interested?" he laughed.

"Gosh, no! I know nothing about the business."

"Of course you don't. You never showed the least interest. But the CEO of any company does not need to know about the nuts and bolts of a company. A CEO manages people, not liquids in bottles. I'd much rather consider Zenyatta than you, to be honest," he chuckled.

Zenyatta opened her eyes wide again, and I put my forefinger to my lips for her to be silent. This conversation was surprising to me. Uncle Peter asked,

"How's my name-sake doing, Steven? I worry about him from time to time."

"He seems to be doing very well, Uncle Peter. He seems quite happy with how things are going for him."

"Yes, yes, yes…it always *seems,* huh?"

"Hey Uncle Peter, we're planning on having a gathering for Christmas. I don't suppose you'd be interested in coming?"

"You're supposing right. I know the kind of goons you will have there, so no. I will visit when no one except you and your wife are around."

"We will certainly arrange that, Uncle Peter. Anyway, I'll let you go now. I know how busy you are. I'll call again soon, and you can call me any time."

"Okay, boy. Take care."

We hung up, and I teased Zenyatta: "'Send her my love'? Lordy, Lordy! Consider Zenyatta as CEO? I think that man has gone soft in the head."

"Or in the heart. But no need to be jealous, my darling," she teased back, as she waltzed around the study.

"Look! Go find something to do. You're very distracting!" I ordered jokingly.

"Oh, the jealousy! Why is everyone asking about Zenyatta, I wonder? Is it because she is simply married to you, and they're being courteous? Nope! Is it

because they realise who is the real talent in the family? Well, yes! And she is gorgeous besides!"

I got up, shepherded her towards the door, kissed her, put her out and looked at her dance away, smiling. I went back to my calls. Next was Rudolph Lewis.

I dialled. A female answered: "Yes!" I knew she was some private or lance corporal, if Lewis was still true to form.

"Put me on to Lewis!" I said in like fashion, in the fashion and tome of a superior.

Lewis came on: "Hello?"

"Since when are you allowing these people to answer your phone like that, General?"

"Steven! My boy! Steven DaSilva! Fuck, it's good to hear your voice, man! Welcome home! How you? How's my little sister? All good?"

"Yeah, man. Nice to hear your voice too, Rudy. We thought about you often, you know. Yeah, we're fine. Trying to get back into some kind of rhythm."

"Yeah, that always takes a few days. I did expect a call from you. In fact, I just got off the phone with Henry and he says you are requesting my presence in his office tomorrow at eleven. I look forward to that, and we can catch up. Henry tells me that you are having a Christmas bash soon. I hope it's not partridges again, man. Too rich for my stomach," he laughed his full-bellied laugh.

"No, no, no…things too expensive, man. We'll go local all the way." I retorted.

"Okay. Well, I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Yeah. Looking forward to it."

I called some of the others in quick order: The Education chap, Kwame, the VC and DVC, and a few others. The conversations were the same. I exited the office, locked the door, and went in search of Zenyatta. She was in earnest conversation with Quincy, Monty, and Melissa.

"Christmas plans?" I asked.

"Yeah. No time to lose, my love. You wanna help or hinder?" she smiled. I sat.

They talked about decorations, menu for the get-together, invitees, and such things. I thought about money.

Chapter Eighty-Six

I was climbing the three flights of stairs to Henry White's office at ten fifty-five the next morning. There were as many as twenty people sitting in the corridor, their knees clasped together nervously, waiting to meet with the Minister. There were three senior police officers in uniform, the hats on the their knees. They were the most nervous of them all. I walked by them and went directly to the secretary. Same woman, but with quite a few more pounds added to her previously considerable girth. She had her head buried in some document or another.

"Good morning, Miss," I said sombrely.

She looked up, then jumped up to standing position, "Eh, eh! Well good morning, handsome!" She exclaimed, coming around her desk, her fat arms spread wide to engulf me in an embrace. Then she held me at arms' length,

"Lemme look at you! Gosh, you even more good looking than when you left! If I was just a few years younger, mmhhm! I gone with you, boy."

"And I woulda run way wid you, gorgeous," I responded with as much flirtatiousness as I could muster.

"Henry in?" I asked, familiarly.

"He and Lewis waiting in there for you." She held open the Minister's door, and I walked in.

Lewis, in full uniform, stood to attention and saluted. Being in civilian clothes, I braced, my arms to my side, my fist clenched, my thinb running along the side of my trousers. Then his familiar bear hug,

"Lord! It's great to see you, my friend. You really are a sight for sore eyes. Welcome home, man!"

Henry had come from around his desk and embraced me as if I were a long-lost brother,

"You look great, Steven. Just great. Come, come, let's sit."

We all sat on the small sofas in the office.

"So, Steven, how are you settling in? It must be somewhat difficult to acclimatise, huh?" White asked.

"Oh no. Remember that this is my home. My time abroad was to get my law degree and return to serve our Leader." My answer was cautious, guarded.

"And things at the residence? How goes the settling in?"" Lewis queried.

"Everybody is already back to our usual rhythm. No hitches." Cautious again.

Lewis again: "How did you find the London School oof Economics?"

"Man, Rudy, the place is fabulous in terms of academic standards. Everyone was professional, and the work was challenging. I made it my business to learn about the administrative structure. I wanted to know how the place is run administratively and academically. I really think that our university is more than a century behind, and I hope we find ways to improve quickly. Our structures and degree programmes are archaic." I answered, knowing that these men are giving me some kind of test of loyalty.

"I'm hoping that we can help with modernising our university. They will need help from our government if we are to improve our standards." I added.

"I agree," said Henry readily, "Maybe we can get you to sit on the University Council if Comrade Leader agrees."

"As I said, I'm back home to serve in any way that our government needs."

"Good, good. Comrade Leader wants to meet with you as soon as possible. I talked to him last night on the phone. I'm sure he will position you to make maximum use of your talent." Henry White was becoming strident.

"Of course, I am always happy to avail myself to our Prime Minister. Always. Just tell me when and where, and I'll be there." I responded. I noticed that my use of "Prime Minister" rather than "Comrade Leader" did not go unnoticed by either man, but they said nothing.

"So when is this Christmas party happening, Steven?" Lewis queried.

"Zenyatta is planning. I will be sure to call you well before hand, though. Guaranteed."

"Good stuff. Make sure you stock up!" White laughed.

"Of course, man!" I answered good-humouredly.

"Henry, you have a whole army of people out there, so I'll take my leave, okay? Please let me know when our Comrade Leader wants to see me."

"I will. Rudy, you stay for a minute." White said. I shook hands and left, knowing full well that the greeting was much warmer than the goodbye. The mere use of "Prime Minister" rather than the communistic "Comrade Leader" had raised doubts in their minds. I should have known by now that paranoia is a permanent condition of the tyrant.

I was quiet on the way home, and Monty sensed my worry.

"You okay, Sir?"

"Yeah—yeah. I'm fine. I will be called in to see their Comrade Leader in a few days."

"Is that good?"

Fuck, I hope so, Monty. I certainly hope so." And we lapsed into silence.

Zenyatta greeted me in her usual enthusiastic fashion. She took my hand and led me directly into the study. She locked the door.

"Okay, tell me."

I told her about the more-than-enthusiastic welcome back, the much less warm farewell, what I thought was the reason, and that I was to meet with the Leader in a few days at his pleasure.

"You worry too my, my love. Look, you've been in a country where they call their political leader by the title Prime Minister. Here, it ought to have been the same, but they needed to separate themselves in childish ways. You've been in England for years; you've been back for a few days. At any rate, I suspect—as did Dean Galloway—that this chap wants to formalize his Comrade Leader title. That is what you must focus on right now. Plan your response. No emotion, just how you can serve his ambition."

"I suppose you're right, my darling Zenyatta."

"I'm right," she insisted. I hugged her.

"I also know that you were worrying about money, even as you saw us planning for the Christmas. Be assured that I have a handle on that. Trust me."

"You are the only person in this place that I trust. You know that, Zenyatta. If not for you, I'd probably be crippled or dead at this point." I said gloomily.

"Don't talk like that, please. We need to be optimistic. We have a plan, and all of this is just in furtherance of that plan. Concentrate on that, and let me handle the rest." Zenyatta firmness brought me relief from the fright I felt at the thought of having to face the Leader. We had met once, briefly, at the commissioning ceremony for the new building that I had caused to be built on the campus. Whether he would place my face with the name that he meant to be his instrument was another question.

Two days after my meeting with Rudolph Lewis and Henry White, the latter called to say that Comrade Leader will see us both on the next day at nine in the morning. There was a tremor in White's voice. Fear? Terror, even? I was not sure, but it was not excitement in that voice. Strangely, I was relieved that White was going to be there. My dread lessened; my concentration sharpened.

White had instructed that I drive to his office and use his car to go to Comrade Leader's office. I did as he bade me do. We arrived at his building at eight-forty-five, passing through a large gate guarded by what seemed like fifty armed soldiers. White was twitching with nervousness.

"Lots of soldiers, Henry. Your boys, of course," I said flippantly.

"Don't be a fucking idiot, DaSilva. My boys? Those killers are Cuban-trained, hand-picked by Comrade Leader himself. They answer to no one else, but the man himself. They are his personal hit men. To my knowledge, only Rudy has some sway with them, but Comrade Leader always has the last say. Just be careful how you use that that mouth of yours, for both our sakes. Understand?"

I became very serious, "I understand, Henry. Don't worry."

We got out of the car and were escorted by four armed soldiers up a flight of stairs. Two in front of us, two behind us. I wondered at it. If they could be like this to the feared Henry White, how would they be to some ordinary civilian who provoked the ire of the Leader. I shuddered at the thought.

We entered what was the ante-room or waiting area. Two secretaries banged away at typewriters. Once again the dominant presence was of soldiers, armed, unpleasant, their readily to kill worn more comfortably on their faces than their uniforms on their bodies. Two especially large fellows were guarding a large steel door. The two secretaries sat at their desks on opposite sides of the room. The walls were lined with plush sofas of fine-grained Italian leather, and I was struck by the stark contrast between refined furniture and crude men with crude weapons of death and the cruel attitude that it takes to snuff out lives at the wave of one man's hand or a nod of his head.

Henry White sat, close-legged, rather like those people I saw outside of his own office, like errant school children who were summoned to the head teacher's office for some misdeed or another. I sat beside him, going through notes I had made in preparation for this meeting. The walls of the office was festooned with large, framed photographs of Comrade Leader, some with the "shirt-jack" which he had decreed to be our national dress (the shirt and tie were unwanted reminders of our colonial ties of Great Britain); some photos were of Comrade Leader shaking hands with other national leaders like Fidel Castro, Mobutu Sese Seko, Fidel Castro, and so on. In those, he was smiling; some were of Comrade Leader in full military uniform, numerous medals pinned on his chest to demonstrate his valour in combat. Of course, he was nowhere in the vicinity of a war or conflict. All of the frames were of gold.

It was ten-thirty, and we were still waiting. I supposed it was a habit of those with power to keep his inferiors waiting. But the time gave me the chance to review my notes and observe my surrounds. I turned my attention to the secretaries. Lewis's two secretaries came to mind, but these girls were not in uniform. Their blouses were startlingly white, starched and ironed, the shirts black, just above the knee. Straight backs, knees pressed together, professional. They never once looked in our direction, although White and I were the only people I the place apart from the soldiers. Apart from the clatter of the typewriters and the rustle of paper, it was silent.

At eleven, the silence was shattered by a loud buzzer. White was startled, as was I. The full-breasted secretary rose, went through the massive door, returned within seconds, walked in her fashionable high heels to us,

"Comrade Leader is ready for you, Comrades," she hissed.

We got up creakily and followed her into what seemed a cavernous room. The Great Leader was not at a desk. He sat at the head of an enormous oval table of beautiful mahogany. The chairs were of Italian fine-grained leather. He did not rise. Henry was in front; I in his wake.

"White. Good. Sit." Henry White bowed deeply and collapsed into a seat five seats away from the Leader.

Then the Leader turned his gaze on me. He was assessing, measuring, reading.

"Comrade DaSilva! I am glad that you are back, Comrade. How was my *alma mater*? Did they treat you well?"

He reached out his hands to shake mine. I took his hand and bowed slightly.

"Prime Minister, it is an honour to be in your presence once again."

"Yes, yes, yes. That new building on campus, the new Student Union Building! I remember that, you did a good job there. Ah how is your lovely wife, Zenyatta?"

He was deliberate in seeming to remember without effort. It was a form of flattery, to be so clearly remembered by a man who could not be bothered about small events involving small people. But he did, and he wanted me to know it.

"Sit by my side, dear boy," he gestured to the seat to his right.

He asked about the university, mentioned some names and asked about them.

"Most of them have retired, but David Galloway is there now as Dean."

"Yes, yes. I remember Galloway. The war hero! He was young then, but I knew that he would one day head the place."

"They all hold him in high regard, indeed. He smokes a pipe now," I said almost irrelevantly.

"Oh yeah? He smoked the odd cigarette when I was there. It shows maturation, I suppose."

This was all banter. I knew it. So did he. The man's charm—his charisma—was almost irresistible. But I had my own charm offensive prepared as well,

"Dean Galloway remembers you distinctly, you know." I said.

"He does. Says you were as sharp as a tack and that you had great ambition." He laughed, a great booming laugh that seemed to ricochet off the walls. He seemed to take my statement as a compliment.

"And I am told that you graduated with excellence. You were a good investment, Steven. So was Zenyatta. Clinical psychology, I am told."

"Yes, we did well, I think," I answered with measured humility.

"We will need to find her a position suitable for station. If you like, that is."

"That would be good, Comrade. I'll certainly let her know that you asked after her and that you mentioned a position."

"Listen, boy. You have chosen well. And she has chosen well too. Cherish it." He was almost familiar, this man. He was getting me to let my guard down, to ease whatever anxiety that I may have. It was working too.

"We have spent a lot of money on you Steven. We have supported you in all ways, correct?"

"I would be ungrateful if I did not acknowledge that, Comrade."

"There are more rewards to come if you serve us well, as I'm sure you will." The eyes were becoming cold. I felt the chill.

He turned to Henry White,

"Comrade, give us a few minutes." It was a command, and Henry White obeyed wordlessly. He got up and left the room. Now real game will begin, I thought.

"I have plans for you, Steven. Big plans. But then you know that, right?"

"I suspected that you had your plans, Comrade."

"I need you to swear loyalty to me, boy. Do you?"

"Of course, Comrade Leader. Of course!"

"I believe you, but I must remind you that the price for disloyalty would be both unpleasant and dire for all involved. Do you understand?"

I knew he was talking about Zenyatta. The threat could not be clearer.

"I understand, Comrade. I understand perfectly. But disloyalty is not something you will get from me."

"Good. We would not want to have reason to fuck you and yours up." His voice was flat, as if he were taking about the weather.

"Let me tell you what I want, and you can tell me how to get it."

"You were right to call me Prime Minister, because that is what I am. But I want to be President. I was to shake off all vestiges of our colonial past, be apart from England, but stay within the Commonwealth. There are a few known hurdles: the opposition leader, my old comrade-in-arms, and there is this young chap, an academic who is growing too popular. He's actually started his own political party."

"So the people themselves are being swayed against you by this fellow?"

"The people? The people are an abstraction at this time. People always survive. We need to do what we must before we deal with the people. So how are you going to go about this?"

For some reason, I felt powerful. He was asking for my help. I was going to give him that help; it will further our plan.

"You're wrong, Comrade." I said, quietly, calmly.

"What the fuck did you say, boy?"

"I said you're wrong." I was gambling that his sense of outrage would be outweighed by his ambition to be king.

And there it was, the booming laughter, bouncing everywhere. I smiled.

"This had better be good, boy…or yuh wife ain't seeing you again," he was still laughing, but he was deadly serious.

"The people are never an abstraction, Comrade. The people are votes. That's their power. So, you take the votes away."

"And you think that's easy? You think that these people that oppose me just gonna stay quiet? Then they will have people voting for them in droves."

"You're wrong again!" I said. He folded his arms and leaned back.

I continued: "We spread the word that we're gonna rig the whole damn thing. The opposition chaps will call for a boycott of the elections…the referendum that will decide that we are now a Republic with a President. Then we have subsequent legislation that you're President-for-fucking-life!"

"Hold! Hold! You worked this out before?"

"Yes. I spent four years preparing for this meeting with you!"

"Arite! I gon play along wid you. Referendum. Boycott, therefore no votes. But how do we win the referendum? Who will vote for the people?"

"The army will vote. You put me in charge of the whole thing. Everybody answers to me…I answer to you only."

"You'll start a race war in this place, and we'll get caught in the middle!"

"No, no, no!" I protested, even while I took note of the "we".

"Look at me, PM. I'm neutral…I don't belong to the black side nor the brown side. You put me in charge because I'm neutral. Look at my colour. That was the reason why Lewis picked me in the first place, remember?"

"When you tell me to 'put you in charge' what are you thinking about…position-wise?" he asked.

"Comrade Leader, you are the head of things, I'm just about the tail. That is be left to your wisdom and experience."

"Well played, Seven. Well played. Flattery and just the right dose of humility."

This is a man who saw through people with ease. He was also shrewd and ruthless. The perfect politician, maybe.

"One other thing, Comrade Leader."

"Mhmm?" speak.

"You will need to call a snap referendum. Don't give the opposition time to plan, to campaign. You'll be pushing them into the boycott position. They will have no choice," I said with certainty.

"Genius! Good."

"This is what I have decided: Next week, we'll make a big splash appointing you the new Minister of Justice. At the same time, I'll announce the date of the referendum six months away."

"Six months? That's too long. Why are we opening the door for these chaps? Three months. There will be a lot of noise, but it's just noise."

"Three months then. And the ministerial position?"

"I'd be happy to take that up…and grateful, Comrade Leader," I said humbly.

"Take my personal number, and give me yours. From now on, we meet directly without intermediaries."

We exchanged numbers, and he pressed the buzzer beneath the table. The secretary opened the door; before she could enter, he commanded her to get White in here. The disdain in his voice was hard to miss. Henry entered, bowed deeply again, and remained standing at attention until Comrade Leader pointed to a chair.

Comrade Leader breathed deeply, then spoke with grave formality:

"Comrade White, my Minister of Home Affairs, I'd like for you to meet my new Minister of Justice. You will stand and salute him."

Henry White took a moment to overcome his surprise, then he stood at attention and saluted. I stood and braced. Then he came up to me and gave me a most affectionate hug. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Leader smile.

"This is good. Now both of you sit!" He growled. We sat.

"Henry, you will arrange a formal ceremony on Monday next week for Steven's swearing in as the new Minister of Justice. Special invitees only plus the whole cabinet. Also the newspapers and radio people. We have arrived at a plan for our native land, a plan that will ensure stability and prosperity by keeping us in power. Steven will fill you in at his pleasure. For now, I want you to follow everything he says to the letter. No questions! That goes for all other ministers. You got me, Henry?"

"Yes, Comrade Leader! I understand fully."

"From this moment on, Comrade DaSilva speaks with my voice by my supreme authority. Until I say otherwise, you and the others will follow."

"Understood, Comrade Leader!"

"Now both of you go and get things done."

We stood, bowed, and headed for the door. As I was halfway through, Comrade Leader half-shouted:

"And Steven! Do not neglect to give my regards to your dear wife."

"Yes, Comrade Leader," I responded meekly.

The killer soldiers marched us to White's car. We got in the back seat and drove back to the Ministry of Home Affairs. We did not say anything along the way, but as we were getting out of the car, White muttered:

"I will get everything arranged at the Ministry of Justice, Comrade. If you have specific instructions, please let me know."

"I shall, Henry," I said, formally, "Please get this done in the next two days, and call me, please."

"Yes, Comrade," he acquiesced.

Monty held open the back door of the big black car, and we headed off for home. As we were driving on the road that runs parallel to the seawall, I suddenly told Monty to stop and let me off for a few minutes. I walked to the seawall and sat overlooking the great Atlantic Ocean. The great Atlantic was at rest, and my heartbeat slowed to its calm. I remembered the times when I brought Raina to the seawall. I remembered her pain and innocence then. It became ugly and cruel when I made what turned out to be a moral compromise, a thing to which I was blind back then. I had said yes to joining these unscrupulous people, knowing full well

that they are rotten to the core. And soon, I was the most rotten of all. The consequences were unspeakable cruelty, exploitation, and death.

Was I now making a similar moral compromise, but on a much grander scale. What would be the consequences to Zenyatta? That was the question. With this new power, will I become as monstrous to those closest to me? I must guard against that for the sake of my marriage, for Zenyatta's sake. And I must guard against crossing these monsters with whom I am now in bed. And yet, was this not in furtherance of our plan, as my wife had put it? The plan was to escape. This was the primary reason why I insisted on shortening the schedule for the referendum. Was I not sacrificing this whole country in order that we go off and live in peace. I knew in my heart that this scheme I have conceived will result in new tyranny, new blood, new suffering.

And how do I discuss any of this with my clear-minded wife, my love, my Zenyatta? How do I tell her about my fears without telling her about my deeds? It was an irony of enormous proportions; a man who had meted out such injustice upon people like Raina and Rahma is not to be named Minister of Justice. The malevolent Steven DaSilva was alive in me, ready and waiting to unleash all manner of cruelty against an entire nation of people. I must fight him with all that I have.

I walked back to the car. Monty was keeping an eye on me as he braced against the vehicle. He opened the back door, and I got in.

"Are you okay, Sir?" he asked.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine, Monty. I fine," I lied.

We arrived home, and Zenyatta was waiting in the doorway. She hugged and kissed me, then examined my face for news. I simply said, "Upstairs, my love."

I led her by the hand and we went into our bedroom. I dropped my shoes and we lay beside each other.

"Do tell, my darling," she asked.

I gave her what was a detailed description of my meeting with the Leader. She listened intently, and I could sense her weighing and measuring the implications of what I said and what was said to me during that meeting. We were silent for a while after I had finished my tale.

"It's risky, my love," she ventured, and yet, I do not see that you had much of a choice but to go on the offensive. What do you think would have happened if you had said no to the Minister of Justice offer…well dictate?"

"I have a sense that I would not have left the building alive," I responded gloomily.

"That's what I mean. I know, of course, that you're also playing for time. I know that. The other question is: Can you pull this off?"

"I think so, but I will need support from people like White and Lewis and the rest."

"I think that is guaranteed. They would not want to provoke the ire of their Supreme Leader," Zenyatta said with confidence.

I worry that this move can create a living hell in this country, Zenyatta. I worry about that."

"Let me tell you, Steven, from everything I've seen and heard, this country is hell to most people. People are starving right now. They are dying from poor health care and no medicines. The doctors have already fled, the nurses are fleeing. It's an exodus, my love. Do you think that voting or not voting will be on the minds of parents who are terrified for their children's lives?"

She continued: "All you can do in your new station is to minimize the damage. Do what you can for ordinary people. For instance, you can stop the wholesale bribing of judges and magistrates. To start."

"I had not thought of that at all. Maybe some good can come out of this."

"Oh he asked for you twice, girl…by name!"

"By name? He actually called my name?"

"Yep."

"And what did you read into that, my love?"

"I was surprised he remembered your name. I don't think that anyone can forget you…but the name? I was pleased, of course."

"Pleased? He meant to flatter you, Steven. He also meant to threaten you…he knows everything about you and everyone attached to you. He was informed, reminded. And I'd bet the culprit is Rudolph Lewis." Zenyatta insisted.

I was alarmed at this, and I felt foolish for not seeing the threat.

"Fuck!" I blurted out.

Zenyatta was calm: "Look, don't be alarmed; be alert. Both of us need to be alert at all times, especially at this Christmas gathering. I think they will all fawn over you, flatter you, and bow and scrape. We cannot fall for it, although we can pretend to. You know Napoleon's thing, 'Keep your friends close, and keep your enemies closer'."

"Excellent, my sweet wife. Thank you for awakening me, my love."

She kissed me, and we wound our way downstairs.

"In case you're asked to make some statement at this swearing in, you need to prepare. Choose your words carefully. Do you need me there?"

"Of course, I need you there and want you there! Come on, girl!" She smiled at my exclamation.

I spent the next two days refining my plan for the referendum and the moves to be made after. All in service of Comrade Leader, but also with a vague hope that the people will see positive change. Three days after my meeting with the Leader, I called White to inform him that I'll be visiting the Ministry of Justice Building for a brief inspection. I warned him that my visit there should be kept under wraps and that I will need him to accompany me. The appointment, I reminded him, should not be leaked until the official announcement. I'll be there as his guest, a visitor. He agreed, of course.

The building which housed the Ministry of Justice was about a ten-minute walk from White's building. The two buildings were identical, save that the Justice building seemed newer. We had driven there in my car, since I wanted Monty and Gordon to see the layout of the place. There were five cops at the entrance; they were having a good chat, it seemed. When they saw White emerge from the vehicle, they all snapped to attention. We entered the building on the ground floor. There was a cage of some sort—a cashier behind a sheet of glass. I could not think of a reason why the Ministry of Justice would have a cashier.

We mounted a flight of stairs onto the second floor. There were about two dozen desks at which sat what I supposed were clerks of some sort. It was an even number of males and females who seemed to have just come from all-night drinking spree: half-closed eyes; some leaning on their forearms asleep; a few reading the newspapers; nobody seemed to be doing anything constructive. Behind these half-asleep or have-awake clerks was a fellow at a larger desk. He spotted White. Got up briskly, and came towards us. He bowed slightly to White who then introduced me,

"This is Comrade Steven DaSilva. I'm just giving him a tour of the building. I shook hands,

"Welcome to the Ministry of Justice, Comrade DaSilva, I am comrade Rory Fraser." he said smartly.

"What do you do in this section, Comrade?" I asked.

"This is the legal research department. We help in the research needed for writing up briefs and we do legal research as needed."

Two or three of the clerks looked up casually and put their heads down again.

"And the offices around you, what's in there?" I asked with the curiosity of the casual tourist.

"Those are our prosecutors and legal investigators," he replied.

"Thank you, Comrade Fraser. You'll be seeing us again." White said, the threat not to subtle.

White suggested that we walk around and peer into the offices. We did. Some of the offices were empty; others were of mostly men who were also half-asleep or reading last Sunday's papers.

"Government inefficiency at its best, eh Henry?" I half-joked.

"Steven, you should fire the whole fucking lot of them!" Henry responded.

We then climbed another flight of stairs to the third floor. This housed "experts" in various fields of law and the Permanent Secretary. We chose to see the PS first. Small, stifling ante-chamber with two secretaries, both very young. The Permanent Secretary's door was slightly ajar. Henry White:

"Is the PS around?" he asked. It was obvious that the poor teenage girl did not recognise him.

"Tell her that two comrades are here to see her!"

Rather than get up and speak through the doorway, the girl picked up the phone and spoke to the PS:

"PS, there are some comrades out here who want to see you."

We could hear the bark through the door as well as over the phone, Tell them I'm busy! Dem can come back next week!"

Henry White went berserk. I knew that some of his outrage was genuine, but some of it was also for my benefit. He pushed hard at the door, and I banged against the wall upon flying open.

"Who the fuck do you think you are, eh? Who the fuck do you think you fucking are? Come back next week?" he screamed.

The woman jumped out of her chair, sweating, dishevelled, terrified:

"Com—com—Comrade White! I'm sorry—Com—"

"Save your shit for someone else! Do yuhself a favour and shut yuh fucking mouth!"

"I was giving Comrade DaSilva a quick tour of this Ministry as requested by Comrade Leader himself," he said more calmly now. Then he turned to me, "Comrade DaSilva, maybe we should tell our Comrade Leader that the PS told us that she busy and we have to come back next week! What do you think?"

The woman was crying now, trembling with fright. Through twitching lips, she tried to speak:

"Com—" but Henry White put up his index finger for her to be quiet.

"So what do you think, Comrade DaSilva?"

"I think we will do what the PS told us to do. We'll come back next week. She'll know her fate then."

"So be it, Comrade. Next week," he turned his back to her and flashed a smile and a wink to me. He knew that she would spend one week in turmoil over her uncertain future. We walked out, leaving her a slobbering mess. We turned right, passed a conference room, and then along a corridor lined with chairs, and into the secretaries' office. There were five females. They stood as we entered—or as Henry White entered. He introduced me to each of them and then opened the door into what was to be my office. It was similar to Henry's office, but the furniture was much more expensive and tasteful. The sofas were new and of fine leather; a large wooden table around which twelve people can participate, a coat and hat hanger, three telephones on what was to be my desk. Four well-designed, sturdy wooded chairs in front of the desk, and a comfortable Lombard-supporting chair in which I will sit. There was, of course, a large framed picture of Comrade Leader that seemed to dominate the office. I told White that I needed four bookshelves made before next week, and he made a note of that.

"This is nice, Henry. I looks just like yours," I said.

"Yes," he lied, "I almost thought it was my office. I think I should order some bookshelves for my office too."

"Absolutely!" I said, not wanting a sense of rivalry to develop.

"You know, Steven, you should find a new permanent secretary. You may also want to consider some expansion of your security detail."

"Good ideas, my friend. I'll get on those asap. Of course, you know that I will need your support and guidance through all of this, right?" I responded.

"And, of course, you know you will always get it, my boy." He said, as he gave me a friendly slap on the back.

We drove Henry back to his office and headed back home.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

Zenyatta greeted me in the same old way, rushing to me and throwing herself at me. I lifted her up and kissed her.

"Well, husband, speak. How was it? How was the new office?"

"Upstairs, woman!" I said with fake harshness. I heard someone giggle.

Upstairs in our room, I told her about the building, the office, the PS, Henry White's outrage, and his full support.

"Henry insisted that I should dismiss the current PS and find someone who is better. He also suggested that we may need an extra layer of security. Where in the heck do I find a PS out of thin air in such a short notice? The extra layer of security I could discuss with Monty and Gordon."

"I agree about the extra layer of government-paid security. The PS, I'm supposing should have a degree in accounting as well as a degree in Public Management, correct?" She queried. "Well, who would know better than the university people? Talk to the VC, but avoid telling him about our new position."

"Great idea, my sweet. Great idea indeed. I'll go on campus tomorrow and meet with him in person. Have you decided on the date for this Christmas do?"

"December 21, I think," she responded.

"Good. That would give us a few days to ourselves and our people. For Christmas Day, we should be gloriously alone," I smiled.

I planned to spend the rest of the day in my study planning my political moves on behalf of the PM. I locked the door behind me and settled down to work for two hours or so. After that I went out and beckoned Monty and Gordon. I invited them into the study and had them sit.

"Gentlemen, I have some news that would necessitate a few adjustments." They looked squarely at me with unabashed curiosity, but they sat as soldiers do: straight backs, palms closed around their knees.

"What we say here will have to be in strict confidence, at least until next week when it will all be public. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir. Understood," they both said.

"A few days ago, I met with the Prime Minister or Comrade Leader. I will not go into details, of course, but he elevated me to the position of Minister of Justice."

Gordon jumped up, leaned over my desk, his hand out for a handshake, "Congratulations, Sir! This is great news for us here and for the country as a whole."

Monty reacted more cautiously. He stood, bowed slightly and sat back down. Then he spoke: "If you think this is good for you and Miss Zenyatta as well as the rest of us as citizens, then this is good news. I must confess, however, about the things you will be asked to do, what compromises you will be asked to make. It is not that I have doubts about you, but I hope you will proceed with caution."

I responded: "Yes, you are right, and I shall be going forward with absolute caution. I assure you."

"What are these adjustments, Sir?"

"We will need to beef up our security. I cannot trust soldiers and I do not trust the police. We need people from your circle, people you trust with your lives and ours. Rather like the way you brought in Gordon, Monty."

"How many?" Monty asked pointedly.

"That would be your decision, Monty. Of course, you consult with Gordon."

"I suppose the detail will be tasked with covering home, office, and when you're in public." Monty said.

"Or at some rally or another."

"Yes. All of those. I'd also like for at least one to be with me at the Ministry."

"Give us a day to work this out, the logistics, if that's okay. We will also contact some of the best and most trusted from our platoon."

Good, Monty. Get this done asap, please."

They both rose, offered congratulations, and left.

I dialled the university's Vice-Chancellor. A female voice answered.

"Good day, may I speak to the VC, please?" I asked.

"May I know who's calling?" she asked politely.

"Please tell him it's Steven DaSilva."

I was asked to hold, then the VC's voice came over the phone:

"Steven—Steven DaSilva! Welcome home, Comrade! I heard you were back, but then I thought you'd be busy settling in, so I did not try to reach out. How are you adjusting?"

"Oh, we're doing very well. Adjusting, as you said. Hey VC, would you have some time tomorrow? I need your input on something rather important."

"Of course, man! You want the DVC there too?"

"Yeah, sure. That would be nice."

"How about 10 a.m.? Good for you?

"Great," I said.

Those two things done, I went back to work on my plan to create a president-for-life. As I set about it, I found myself almost believing the rubbish I was thinking and writing, my justification for having a president-for-life. I was almost starting to convince myself with my own lies and half-truths. The country would be more politically and socially stable because the policies would be consistent. The economy will improve dramatically as will the life of every citizen in the land. Our President pledges to make education free at all levels, build new roads, more schools, have housing for those that cannot afford it. We will have bridges over all of our major rivers. Our children will have parks in which to play under the watchful eyes of parents. Political, social stability will lead logically to a steep drop in crime, and a much more favourable image abroad. This means an increase in imports and exports. And the lies kept piling up culminating in the country's "Golden Age". I was starting to feel queasy, so I stopped. Coming out of the study, I felt as if I was surfacing for air.

I walked a few steps and wobbled. Zenyatta was there in an instant. She called to Monty and Quincy to help me up the stairs as she followed. She lay with me putting a cool towel on my forehead. I fell asleep. When I awoke it was dark. Zenyatta was still at my side.

"How are you feeling, my darling?" she asked.

"I feel rested, my love. I needed that sleep. What time is it?"

"It's eight thirty. You rest. I had Melisssa make some chicken broth for you. I'll bring it up. You rest."

She went down and returned with a bowl of hot chicken broth. I finished it in quick order and asked for more. I had three bowls of the delicious stuff, my Zenyatta smiling with each spoonful that I gulped.

"I smiled back at her, but only after I had emptied the third helping, "I was hungry!"

"You don't say!" She laughed out loud.

"You have been tense and stressed out for days, my love. So much has happened in such short order that it is no wonder that you were exhausted."

"Yes, my love. All of it, plus the lies that I am about to foist upon this nation. That makes me sick. It makes me sick that I am about to justify tyranny," I said as my eyes became teary.

"You *will* find a way to make it better, my love. I have confidence in you. You will," she assured me with a certainty that I did not feel. She hugged me tightly, and I fell asleep again.

We were both up before six the next morning. We did our morning ritual and went down. Quincy, Melissa, and the three maids were already there.

"Wow! Everyone is early today! What's going on?" I observed and asked.

Zenyatta answered: "Noone left last night. They all stayed in case they were needed. Everyone was worried. Monty and Gordon just left to freshen up and come back." I was moved by this undeserved show of affection, but I simply said,

"Thank you all. Thank you." I set about having my three slices of toast, two sunny-side-up, orange juice and coffee.

"I have a meeting with the VC this morning, so I'll be going to the campus," I said to Zenyatta.

"Do you want me to come with you? Just in case?" She asked.

"You need to stop worrying about me so much, my love."

"No I don't. I worry about you the way you worry about me, my Steven. But you seem energetic today, so I will not insist. Of course, Monty will be there, but do take Gordon as well."

"Okay. We'll be back at eleven or so. I'll make my chat with the VC as short as possible."

It was only eight-thirty, but I went into the shower and dressed. I chose a casual shirt and a sporty black pants. All the while, Zenyatta was looking at me.

"Gosh! You look more like a student than you do a minister-in-waiting. Young and handsome!"

"Girl, when you talk like that, I want to ravage you."

"Fuck me, Steven!"

I tore off my clothes and we made love. When we were both spent, I glanced at my watch. It was nine-fifteen.

"Shit! You've made me late, woman!" I screamed. She laughed in the most delicious way and dressed herself quickly, as did I.

I was at the back of the car in no time, looking back to see her blowing kisses at me. I waved. Old married couple indeed. I smiled.

Monty was driving; Gordon in the passenger seat in front.

After I bade them good morning, I asked: "So how's the search coming along, gentlemen?"

Monty pointed to Gordon, giving him the cue to speak, "It coming along rapidly. In fact, we already have a short list of six and are about to vet them. Those who pass muster and are available will be brought to you for a face-to-face interview. You should get the list before this evening, Sir."

"That's good. Very good," I replied, "Are they from your platoon?"

"Not all of them, Sir. But these are all men who have proven reliable and very cool under pressure. Above all, they have all proven loyal to the best values of the military. They are professional."

"Can you whittle it down to four? In that way, I will be introducing myself to them, and you'll be introducing them to me. I will leave you to get into the weeds about what is required, and I will speak about salaries and such things. It will save time, and this swearing in is a few days away. Are they all retired from the army?"

"No Sir," Monty answered. "Two of the six are active soldiers; I do not know how you will organize that."

"Okay, but let's try to get this wrapped up by tomorrow so that we can supply them with the tools of the job. For the two of you—as proven true and loyal as you have over and over—I will seek an increase, of course. Monty will, of course, serve as Chief of Detail, with Gordon as Deputy Chief. Are you comfortable with that?"

"Yes, Sir! And thank you."

Monty parked into one of the spots marked "RESERVED PARKING". I smiled at his daring and his unspoken acknowledge of my change in station. He opened my door, and I stepped out.

"Gordon, you're with me," I commanded.

We marched up three flights of stairs to the VC's floor, walked down the corridor, and into the secretary's office. The sole secretary stood behind her desk and shook hands with me,

"Welcome again to the Campus, Comrade DaSilva."

"Thank you very much."

She led me into the VC's office. The two men—the VC and the DVC—were at the conference table. They both stood and greeted me with the warmth of a long-lost friend. The VC gave me a big hug, as did the DVC who simply followed his lead.

"Let me say congratulations, Counsellor. Well done. We are all very proud of you, Steven."

"Thanks, VC. That seems a long tie ago, strangely." We all laughed since it was mere months since I joined the ranks of officers of the law."

"I will not beat around the bush, VC. I know just how busy you both must be. I'm here to personally invite you to our Christmas gathering at my home in *Elegwa*. It's on the twenty-second at six or so. Nothing really fancy, but I hope you will come. And do bring along the Registrar and Bursar."

"Of course, we'll be there, Steven." They both assured me.

"Second, I'll like your help to find a candidate for a rather important job. He or she, at a very minimum, must have certification in accounting, a degree in Public Management, and can communicate with clarity and excellence. Can you help?"

"This means that we cannot consider current students?"

"I'd prefer someone who has work experience, frankly."

"You know, Steven, I think we should get the Registrar up here. He would know best."

"Sure," I said. He got up, went to his desk, dialled,

"Registrar, please come up to me right away. Just for two minutes or so."

He came back. He'll be here in two minutes.

"Hey Steven, what is this important position, if I may ask?" The DVC queried.

"I really cannot say at this point, gentlemen. I'm sorry about this intrigue, but it will all be clear very soon. I promise."

"Now we really are intrigued, Steven," the VC joked.

The Registrar entered and we hugged and exchanged pleasantries. Then to the matter at hand.

The Registrar, Waldron, listened intently.

"Accounting. Public Management. Work experience. Tough. He closed his eyes, brows furrowed, concentrating. The three of us watched as he went through what was obviously his ritual.

"Don't you see it, Steven?" he asked me pointedly.

"What don't I see Waldron?"

"You looking for your old side-kick, Kwame. He has a degree in Public Management. He has some kind of diploma in accounting too." He blurted out.

"Where is he now? What's he doing now?" I asked excitedly.

"I don't know for sure, to be honest, but I think—I think—he is a clerk in some ministry or the other. A waste, if you ask me."

"Do you have any kind of contact info on him? Address? Phone number? Anything?"

"Not right now, but I could check it out and get back to you asap."

"Good. Good stuff. Do that, it's important." I gave Waldron my number.

"I hope to hear from you before the end of the day, please. And VC, make sure you bring this gentleman to our Christmas gather."

"Gladly," said the Vice Chancellor.

"Listen guys, I have to run now. But thanks. I'll see you on the twenty-second, and I look forward to info on Kwame

Before the day is done." We said our farewells and I rushed out. Gordon was sitting in the secretary's office. He stood and we went back down to Monty and the car.

"Straight home, Monty," I said.

"Yes, Sir!"

Back home, I told Zenyatta about Kwame and how he was so very helpful when I was running for Student Union President. I also stressed his dependability and confidentiality. In those regards, he certainly fits the bill for PS. Now I need him to have the qualifications. She listened, then, "Good. But now you need to get into a hot bath and relax."

I agreed, but insisted that I need to talk to Monty and Gordon in the study.

"I think you should be there too, my love."

We updated Zenyatta on the beefed-up security arrangements. We needed four bodies. Monty repeated what he had told me about the short list of six.

"Once Monty and Gordon have chosen the four, we will meet with them here, okay Zenyatta?"

"Sounds good." She answered, "Now your hot bath, my love."

The two men took their leave, and I was escorted upstairs and put into my hot bath where I spent an hour under the watchful supervisory eye of my wife. I got dressed, and we headed back down> Melissa has prepared sandwiches as snacks. After snacks, I went into the study and I dialled Henry White's phone.

His now-more-than-girthy secretary answered,

"The Office of the Minister of Home Affairs? How may I help you?"

"May I speak tp the Honourable Minister, please?"

"Is this my handsome Steven DaSilva? My dream man?"

"Girl, behave yuhself," I laughed.

She patched me through to Henry.

"Good day, Comrade. What's up, my friend. I told him that I planned to beef up my security with four men and that Monty will bring the names and details to him. I will also send a list of requests for arms for them and the salaries for each of the members of my six-person detail. They will need an appropriate vehicle."

"When?" he asked.

"I'll get the details to you tomorrow, and I need you to act promptly on this stuff. The remember that the swearing in is right around the corner, and I want them ready. Their names must be on the books with the salaries. I also want a risk allowance attached to the salary, Henry."

"Okay. Just send it to me, and I'll see it all done."

"Henry, I hope you're doing the same for your detail," I said, with some warning on my voice.

"Don't worry, Steven. I'm doing the same. Lewis is doing that for me. How about the PS thing?"

"Working on it, even as we speak."

"Good stuff, Steven."

We hung up.

An hour later, Waldron called,

"Good afternoon. Steven? It's Waldron. I have the details on Kwame, but I cannot swear by how up-to-date they are. I have his phone number and address. You got a pen and paper handy?"

"Shoot," I said. I wrote down the details, thanked him for his promptness, and reminded him of the gathering on December 22.

I called the number Waldron had given me for Kwame. A female answered the phone.

"Good afternoon, may I speak with Kwame, please?" I asked. She did not ask who was calling, but shouted out:

"Kwame, phone for you!"

"Kwame here. Who's calling please?"

"Kwame, old friend. It's Steven—Steven DaSilva—"

"God Lord! You're the last person I expected to be calling me! Lord! You back? How you doing? How's Zenyatta? Children yet? What you doing now?" He asked rapidly.

"Kwame, I am delighted I found you, man! I got your info from Waldron and called you immediately. I not too long came back home. Kwame is this still your address?" I read out the address that the Registrar had provided.

"Yes, unfortunately," he replied.

"You free this evening—say 7 or so—I will send a car to get you and bring you to my place. We can have dinner and drinks."

"That would be great, Steven. I am so excited to hear from you again after all this time. I wish it was six instead of seven."

"Arite! Six it is. Look out for my car. Bye Kwame. See you soon."

I notified Zenyatta about Kwame's impending visit and summoned Monty and Gordon to decide who will drive to get him. We decided on Gordon since we had Kwame's address and had given him a rough description of the man. I have always remembered Kwame's part in getting me elected student president. More than that, he had kept quiet about the wrongs that he knew I did.

Six o'clock came round quickly enough, and Gordon brought Kwame exactly on time. He came through the door and rushed to give me a great big hug,

"Steven DaSilva! Steven DaSilva! My friend, my dear friend," He kept saying over and over. There were tears in his eyes, and I sensed that it was not just his nostalgia for our past closeness. There was something else, a pain, a disappointment.

He hugged Zenyatta and gave her a kiss on the cheek,

"Zenyatta. You look even more beautiful than when I first saw you. Honestly."

"Thank you, our dear Kwame. You are too kind."

"Zenyatta, Kwame and I will retire to the study for a bit. Will you tell Quincy to bring in a bottle of scotch, two glasses, water, and a pitcher of ice, please, my love?" I asked.

We went into the study, and I locked the door after Quincy had brought in our drinks. We poured, clicked glasses and made a toast to our friendship. Then I asked him straight out:

"Tell me all of it, Kwame. The whole thing," I said.

"Does it show? My position, my failure?"

"Yes. Your disappointment shows, Kwame. So tell me, my friend."

He took a deep drink then spoke: "I did fairly well at the university in Public Management. I remained president of the union keeping your work alive and finishing some of the things you started. I studied for two more years and got a diploma in accounting. That was only because I wanted to stay on as president of the union and because there were no employment opportunities arising. None. I graduated in Accounting, and after months of searching and applying and begging, I got a job at the Ministry of small business as a clerk. It paid a little more than what they pay teachers, Steven. The money I make barely supports my wife and three children. Sometimes, my wife and I go to bed hungry so the children might eat. You should see the shack where we live, Steven. You'll cry, I swear." He was crying now.

I moved from behind my desk and put my hand on his shoulder. Then I went back to my chair behind the desk. Lisyen to me, my friend. He looked up at me.

"You have been through the valley of the shadow of death, the dark times. Those times are at an end. I am here."

"I'm sorry Steven. I did not mean to break down in such an embarrassing way. Jesus!"

"That's okay. It really is okay, Kwame."

"Tell me about you and Zenyatta, Steven."

I told him about getting close to White and Lewis, about the government giving me this scholarship to do Constitutional law, most of which he knew, of course. Then I told him that I graduated with the degree, passed the bar, that Zenyatta got her degree as a clinical psychologist, and now we have returned home to pay back the government by do whatsoever they asked me to do. I told him about my meeting with Comrade Leader, leaving out some details."

"Anyway, the bottom line is that the PM will name me Minister of Justice in four or five days. I want you to be my Permanent Secretary."

"Steven, you jokin', right? Jesus, man!"

"I'm not fucking joking, Kwame. I went out of way to find you, Now here you are! Look, it will not be easy, but I've seen you work, and you are amazing. You get shit done, man! I need that. I am making you an offer, my friend."

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes, yes, a million times! Me? From lowly clerk to PS? Lord!"

"Good. You will need every once of that initiative and drive which you showed so often at the university. All of it. You will also need all your knowledge of Public Management. And you will need all of your accounting skills. Then you will have to learn protocol…quickly. Clear so far?"

"Clear!"

"I need to get personal for a moment, Kwame. I hope you don't mind."

"No, Minister!" he said. I smiled at him.

"How much are they paying you now?"

"Two four and fifty dollars."

"How does three thousand sound?" I asked.

"Sounds like redemption songs to me!" he quipped.

"Okay, okay. You drive a hard bargain. Five thousand then! That's my final offer though!"

Kwame jumped out of the chair and did a little dance.

"Now, will you give me a minute. I need to make a call." I said.

He moved to leave the study, but I halted him, "No, no. You can stay. The call is about you, after all."

He sat. I went through my personal phone book and found Henry White's home number.

"Hello, good evening. May I speak with the Honourable Minister, please."

"May I know who's calling?"

"Please tell him it's Steven DaSilva."

"Please hold."

"Steven! Good to hear from you, man! What's up?"

"Henry, I am sitting here with my new PS—I—"

"What? Already? You don't fuck around, Comrade. Talk to me!"

"No, Henry, you *know* we cannot fuck around with this stuff. You know that! So here's the deal…write it down!"

I waited a minute while he got paper and a pen, "Go!" he said.

"Arite. His name is Kwame—"

"Same Kwame I met at your parties?"

"Yes, same one. He starts on Monday with a salary of six thousand monthly. He gets a car but no driver, so he drives himself. He gets a government house as soon as possible. Furnished, of course. Nice part of town. He geta a maid, government paid. And he gets an entertainment allowance of five hundred. Clear?"

He repeated what I told him. I continued:

"Good. How soon can you get that house and have it furnished, Henry?"

"Two days, latest."

"Excellent. As soon as it gets set up and ready for the family, you call me with address and I'll bring him myself to his new home. Oh, and Henry, what you wanna do wid dat rude bitch?"

"Fire she skunt!" he shouted.

"Well, then, *you* have the pleasure of firing she skunt!"

He laughed for what seemed at long time.

"Don't worry, Steven, I will do the necessaries. Keep the secretaries?"

"Yes. Keep them. They seem like two nice girls. Can you get the contract done by tomorrow afternoon…say three?"

"Sure."

"Good. I'll be there at three with Kwame to sign all the documents. See you then."

I put the phone into its cradle.

"That's done!" I said. "Now shall we pour us a celebratory drink to you new position?"

"I'll pour, Minister." He poured us each a generous helping of scotch, a dash of water in each glass and ice.

"Cheers!" I said and we clinked glasses and gulped down our drinks.

"Steven, my friend, thank you with all my heart. I can't think of any other way to express my gratitude for what you just did for me and my family."

"It's okay. I needed you too, you know. Let me make a few more points though, Kwame. This is a government contract, not a contract with me. If, for some reason, I fall out with them, that does not mean you lose the job. The house is the government's. Same deal. The car is also a government car, but you are entitled to it as long as you hold the position. I'll see ifnthere are other benefits as well, but I can't think of any right now. So do the job well. You'll be handling the budget which will be massive for this year. I will, of course, have final say and decide on policy. Learn fast and learn well. If any ministers come in there, be ultra respectful or else they will come after you, especially if I'm not there or not in favour. There are two secretaries as you heard. They seem okay, but you decide and let me know, okay?"

Kwame spoke up: "You mentioned being out of favour twice. Why is that?"

"It's politics in this place. It changes with the whims of the Leader. No one is on firm footing, really, but they all pretend otherwise. A few days ago, it was Henry Green calling the shots and everyone else falling in line. Now I'm calling the shots and he has to fall in line. The PM has his own agenda."

"It also implies that I cannot appear to be too close to you, right?" he asked.

"Exactly! You see, you're as sharp as a tack!"

He changed the topic back to more pleasant things: "Wow! In one hour, you've changed my whole life. My whole family's life, Steven. I still think I'm dreaming. Damn, Steven, I can't wait to break the news to Elsie."

"Elsie?"

"Oh, my wife is Elsie, Elsie is my wife," he giggled at his own awkwardness.

"Hey, Kwame, you could call her if you like." I said.

"We don't have a phone," he said gloomingly.

"Shit! Sorry. That was insensitive of me. But your new house will have a new phone," I said to cheer him up again.

"Kwame, if you'd prefer, I can have them pack supper for the entire family. No problem at all."

"You sure? What would Zenyatta think? I never want to offend that girl. Never!"

"Well, let's find out how she'd feel about it all, then." I stood, unlocked the study door, and called for Zenyatta. She came in. Monty stood and bowed.

"You don't have to bow to me, you know, Kwame. So I suppose my old husband has told you the news, huh?" she smiled.

"Your husband is the best man in the world, as far as I'm concerned, Zenyatta. In one hour he has changed my life from really bad to great. He has made me his permanent secretary with an unbelievable salary increase, a government house, a government car, and more," he gushed.

"I'm happy for you, Kwame. I really am. If you need anything else—or if your wife or children need anything else—please let us know.

I spoke up: "Kwame's wife is Elsie, Zenyatta. He was thinking of skipping dinner with us and rushing home to tell her the news. Would you mind? You could have Quincy or Melissa pack for the entire family of five. Well, pack for six."

"I'd hope that if my husband had news, he would rush home to tell me. So I have no problems with that. Oh, and Kwame, we have our Christmas get-together on the twenty-second. Please come and bring your Elsie with you. Please."

He hugged her, "Thank you, Zenyatta. Thank you. Thank you again, Steven. Thank you, Minister." Kwame said without a hint of irony.

Before Gordon and Monty drove him home with a huge package of food, I reminded him that I will pick him up at three thirty to go to Henry White's office. Zenyatta and I awaited the return of the two men in the study. I took the opportunity to tell her about Kwame's transformation from near-despair to relief and joy.

The men returned, and I asked about progress on the added security front. They had four names: Royston Crowe, Junior Cranshaw, Ralph Persaud, and Alvin Flatts. They were all non-commissioned officers that worked alongside Monty. I wanted to meet with them before making my final decision, even though I was certain of Monty's judgement. Really, I wanted to assess their feelings towards Monty. Their loyalty to him would be a good yardstick for their loyalty to us all.

Zenyatta voiced an interesting question: "Have you gentlemen noticed that we have six males in the security detail? Of course you haven't! I'd suggest—maybe insist—that you consider a female soldier to be part of the security detail. As I'm sure you know, my darling husband, that there are many areas and circumstances where females can function much better than their male counterparts."

"Monty? Gordon?" I queried.

"I think it's an excellent idea, ma'am," Monty responded immediately.

"I fully agree with Monty. I apologize for our collective myopia, Miss Zenyatta." Gordon said.

"What a lovely word, Gordon! For the use of that word alone, you three blind mice are forgiven," she smiled. The three men chuckled inn their embarrassment.

"Then let's have a female added to the detail, Monty. Quickly but carefully, of course. I scheduled the days after the next to meet with them.

The next day, Gordon and I drove to Kwame's place to get him. It really was a shack, although the small front yard was neatly kept and fringed with flowers in pots. Kwame came out with his wife Elsie and the three small children. eleven nine and six, as I discovered later. I stepped out of the vehicle, noticing that the children's eyes were wide with wonder at the big black car. They were eleven nine and six, as I discovered later. Upon being introduced as "our best friend" to Elsie, I shook her hand and gave her a gig hug. She held me tightly, stifling a sob. She was a pretty girl, but her dress was drab and her face set with a kind of fatalistic determination. This, I thought, was the face of most of this nation. The face of dogged survival.

"I will be much better from now, Elsie. I promise." I said. The tears came fast now, streaming down her face. Kwame came into our embrace.

We were soon on our way to White's office. We stepped out from the car and right through the door, up the flights of stairs. I pointed to the PS's office and told Kwame that his office would be identically located. We walked pass the two rows of people waiting to see the minister. White's secretaries stood as we entered.

The large head said loudly, "Mr. Good Looking is back! Come gee me a hug, boy!" I obeyed, then introduced Kwame. She shook his hand stiffly, and we went into White's office. The minister came round his desk and gave me the customary hug. I introduced Kwame:

"Honourable Minister Henry White, I am delighted to introduce to you my old friend Kwame, our new permanent secretary for the Ministry of Justic. Kwame, our Minister of Home Affairs." I was, of course, very formal. They shook hands.

White said: "You know I remember Kwame from the university. I think it was the commissioning of that new building. And, of course, we met at your place a few times, so Kwame is no stranger. Nonetheless, Comrade Kwame, I welcome you into the fold."

"Thank you, Comrade. Comrade DaSilva has indeed honoured me, and I thank you for helping in the many ways I know you've helped."

White invited Kwame to sit and shouted for his secretary to bring in the papers. Kwame signed the places marked X. I went through the document quickly, focussing on the salary and benefits section. It was all as it should be. Then I suddenly decided to make a different proposal:

"Henry, I have an idea. If, instead of giving Kwame and his family a big government house which will be taken away at the end of his tenure as PS, is there a way to give him a house of his own, in his name? Same with the government car? He is gifted his own car to come to and from work as well as to take his children on trips and such things. Can you make that happen, my friend?"

White furrowed his brow in thought for a few seconds, then said: You know, Steven, knew that you were going to come wth some turn or twist. But yes, Comrade Leader had instructed that we put up a small scheme of medium and small houses just outside of town for the party faithful. They're nice, and Kwame can have a medium-sized house in his name. The car will be a smaller car, but it will be his. He will have to decide."

"What do you think, Steven?"

"Is it ready for occupancy, Henry? Furnished and so?"

"Yes. It is furnished with the basics. It has four bedrooms, stove, fridge, living room furniture, a nice dining room, three full bathrooms, beds, dining table and chairs. It is spacious, and the houses are well spaced out so you don't bounce into neighbours at every turn."

"And yard space?" I asked.

"That's my favourite part. Lots of that, my friend. Perfect for children to run around."

"Can I see it? I'd like to take a look with my wife, it that's okay."

White looked at me. I responded, "Sure. After we're finished here, I will have Gordon drop me home and come back for you and Elsie. Henry, once he decides, you can have your girl outside adjust the paper work. Kwame must have his transport by next week. Of course, our Minister White will give you a settling-in and inconvenience allowance, right Henry?"

"Yes, Steven, of course. You know that yuh pushing though, right?"

"I know, Henry. But the man is true and tested, and he's one of us, man! Plus the man has a family."

"Stop, Steven! For God's sake. Whatever you want. Fuck!"

"Done, then! But only if you say yes, Kwame!"

"Jesus, yes! Yes, yes, yes!"

"Okay, one more thing, Henry..." I ventured.

"What now, Steven?"

"Zenyatta and I have this Christmas gathering, and I invited Kwame and Elsie. They will need to get new clothes, so I think we can give him a 'settling in' allowance of say...four thousand. From my budget, of course."

"Steven, I know that you and the man tight these days, but don't come hey and insult me skunt, man!" He screamed. I laughed. Kwame was wide-eyed. Just a short time ago at the university, I would not have dared talk to a minister—any minister—much less the greatly-feared Henry White.

"He will get it from my budget! Fuck your budget!" He pulled out his cheque-book and wrote a cheque for four thousand.

"Now, Comrade Minister and PS, please go!" White was smiling and shaking his head. We got the precise address from my favourite secretary and left.

In the car, Kwame found his voice, "Steven DaSilva, you have changed, boy. You man-handled the man. I actually felt sorry for White." I heard Monty giggle in front.

I became serious: "Do not make that mistake. Henry White will eat us alive the first chance he gets, Kwame. Steer clear." He nodded.

We got Elsie and the children, dressed as they were. They bundled into the car. I was in front with Gordon; the father and mother on each side of the children at the back. It was a ten or fifteen-minute drive south of the city on the east bank of the river. WE turned off onto a side road, and there was the scheme of about a dozen houses, neat, quite apart from each other, some smaller than the others, but all quite lovely. We stopped at one. Gordon checked the number to be sure, and we went in. I used the key to the front door, and I allowed Kwame and his family to enter first.

Elsie turned to me, "This—this—this is ours? In our name? They cannot take it away?" she stammered.

"They cannot take it away," I said, even though the word "legally" was upon my tongue.

Kwame bent down to the children and told them that this was their house. They erupted, running in every direction.

"Your car should be delivered tomorrow," I said.

Gordon and I left, but they hardly noticed. On the way, we stopped at the car park, and Gordon gave instructions to a taxi driver to go to the house and drive the family home whenever they are ready. Then we went home. I was pleased with the way things turned out for Kwame and his family. My only worry was that it can all be ripped away from him should he become entangled with me. For his sake, I will have to keep him at arms' length.

The next day, the new members of my security detail showed up, precisely on schedule. I was upstairs when Quincy came up and informed me that Monty's "new people" were here. I gathered myself up, walked by them, beckoned to Zenyatta to join me, and we went into the study.

"I want you to sit in to this, please, my love," I asked.

"I thought you would want me there, darling. I see that a female has shown up, and you want to know if it's the female, huh?" she smiled.

"Show them in, please, miss smart Alexis," I returned.

Monty led the way, Gordon bringing up the rear. They lined up before us, one arm's length apart and at attention.

"At ease!" I commanded, and they all put their legs apart, arms behind their backs. I am sure that the right hand was inside the left with the thumbs crossed.

Introduce yourselves, please. They did from right to left.

Royston Crowe, Sergeant, Sir!

Junior Cranshaw, Corporal, Sir!

Lucianne Sain, Staff Sergeant, Sir!

Ralph Persaud, DSM, Sir!

Alvin Flatts, Sergeant, Sir!

I was pleased to see their adherence to military formation, the female in the middle being the shortest. Royston Crowe and Junior Cranshaw were built like tanks, with biceps almost as big as my waist. Lucianne was slim, lithe, almost coiled. Although she was as tall as Monty, she was the shortest of the set. It was she who radiated a sense of menace that seemed to overshadow the rest. Persaud was the as tall as Junior, and Flatts was almost the height of Crowe. I joked in my mind: "Lord, I hope Monty and Gordon did not select them merely for their size and muscularity".

"I am sure that Monty has explained things like your duties, the hours, salaries, and how we tend to do things around here. Am I correct?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"How many years have you spent in the armed forces?"

Royston had 18; Junior had 15; Lucy, 16; Ralph, 20; and Flatts, 20.

"Here are some questions for you all:

1. How many stairs lead from the bottom to the top of my inside stairs?"

They all answered: "28 stairs, Sir!"

"There are soldiers in from and at back of our home. Is that adequate security for the home and the people inside if we should come under attack?"

Royston: "There are four soldiers at the front gate and two at the back. They are half asleep and can be easily overwhelmed by a team of good soldiers, both front and back at the same time, with coordination. You would then be wide open."

Junior: "Agreed. One of the signs of unpreparedness is the dust on their weapons. They have not been oiled and cleaned in about three weeks."

Ralph: "From the time they came into our view, we noticed that their primary activity was chatting and giggling with each other. These are not serious people, Sir!"

Flatts: "All of the above, Sir, is accurate. Apart from their deterring presence, they offer superficial or no real protection."

Would you dismiss them, Sergeant Sain: "No Sir! I would have them re-trained them for the specific needs of your household. Better and more serious demeanour, more presentable uniforms and weaponry, a greater sense of alertness, etc., Sir! It would take a heavy hammer, but they can be beaten into shape, Sir!"

"If you had to defend the household from attack, how would you go about it, Ralph?"

"Well, Sir, I would obey instructions from our Chief of Detail. Lieutenant Monty has more experience than the rest of us; and, at any rate, we will need to obey instructions from him and work as a team to accomplish the task. From him and from you, of course." There was an almost imperceptible smile in his voice.

"What specific instructions would you expect from Monty should we come under attack?"

Ralph spoke first: "I would expect that four members of the detail fan out around the yard and cover all possible entry points. This means we split up into teams of two, standing back-to-back at the V of the fence. Each team would have two sides of the fence in their vision. All four sides of the compound would be protected from intrusion. I would expect two members of the detail to be commanded to remain inside the home, ready to defend the points of entry and egress. Our main goal would be to defend the principals al all cost."

Sain added: "As the only female in the detail, I will be more focussed on Mrs. DaSilva. If there is a breach of any sort and for any reason, I will use my speed and hand-to-hand skills to neutralize the enemy, Sir!"

"Excellent! Would you agree Chief?" I asked Monty.

"One hundred percent, Sir. Sain can stand her ground in hand-to-hand, even against Royston. But her speed is legendary. In fact, she was the Commonwealth champion over the two hundred *and* four hundred yard distances. Everyone before you understands fully that their job is to protect the principals and those around them at all cost. They have taken an oath to that, and these are soldiers who take their oaths seriously, Sir. I will vouch for them upon my life, Sir and Miss Zenyatta."

Zenyatta: "And that alone is good enough for me. We are happy to have to on board. You will be treated as part of our family, as I hope Monty and Gordon can tell you. With your permission, my husband, I will take my leave since I have some other matter than need my attention."

I nodded. She got up and left the study.

"Monty and Gordon, I expect a comprehensive list of equipment that our detail will need. WE will certainly need weaponry, but also vehicles. Three more, maybe?"

"We will submit the list by this afternoon, Sir."

"Do you have any questions for me?" I asked them. They looked at each other.

Ralph Persaud spoke: "It is clear you've been trained in the military. May we ask where, Sir?"

"I've received a bit of training, but nothing as extensive as yours. Nothing professional." I knew I did not answer the question, which may explain the slight sound that emitted from Monty.

"Very well, Sir," Ralph replied.

"I want to welcome you again, and I hope that you live up to Monty's high expectations. He has certainly spoken highly of each of you. What, pray tell, do you think of him?"

Royston spoke: "I am confident that I can talk for everybody here, Sir. That man standing right there is the best of us."

The rest nodded in agreement.

"Good. Monty and Gordon will show you around. Quincy will supply you with water, soft drinks, and snacks."

They filed out and Zenyatta said: "Wow! They are serious people, huh? Almost scary."

"Yes," I said, "exactly the kind of people we want protecting us."

Monty returned to get our opinion on the recruits.

"Well, they are certainly large and stone-faced," Zenyatta said.

"They seem professional enough, I think. Disciplined, for sure," I said.

"Yes, Sir, ma'am. But that's the least of it. These are individuals of honour, and they will put themselves between you and harm once they've promised to do so. It is that sense of honour and commitment that makes them the best we have. They are also among the most skilled at what they do, and I would trust them over the rest of the army and police forces we have today."

"Well, get them ready, Monty. Get the vehicles from Justice and get the arms they will need from White. I would suggest two closed jeeps and one SUV. They should be equipeed as official government vehicles. And get them ready for the swearing in. That event will be their first test.

"They will be prepared, Sir! I promise you and Miss Zenyatta."

Chapter Eighty-Eight

The swearing-in ceremony was a muted affair. Comrade Leader was in agreement with me that it should be so. The cabinet were there as were the party big wigs. Zenyatta and her parents were in attendance as well. I was worn in by Henry White while Comrade Leader sat at a large table over which was spread a lush green cloth. The government-controlled press corps were allowed to take some photos for the week-end papers. I read one of these, knowing that there will be no variation nor any opposition press.

The picture of Zenyatta, White and me was quite flattering; the article brief:

"The Honourable Steven DaSilva was sworn in today as the country's Minister of Justice. As the chief law enforcement officer, he is expected to bring the crime rate to its knees, thereby making communities safe for our citizens. He has the full confidence of our Supreme Leader and his Cabinet. The position is one of the most senior in the government, and the impact of this appointment is expected to be felt in quick order."

There was a small reception at the office the Leader where we all mingled and exchanged pleasantries. The only instance of note was when Comrade Leader came up to me, threw his arms around my shoulders and, laughing, said: "Get this fucking thing done, boy!" Then he turned to Zenyatta and said with honeyed voice, "You are now married to an important man. I am sure you will take good care of him, Zenyatta. We need him, and you both need us" He did not wait around for a reply, and left without a word to anyone else.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Monty and Sain standing by the doors. We exchanged a few words with White and the Minister of Education, and left. I was pleased to note that Kwame was there in his capacity of permanent secretary. I winked at him as we were walking out.

The next day, I went into the office. The two secretaries stood, bowed, and bade me welcome. I shook their hands and thanked them. One of the secretaries was black, the other of Indian descent. The former, Jennifer, was a mature woman in her early forties; the other, Dianna, was in her mid-twenties and quite fetching. I instructed Jennifer to call Kwame to be in my office in thirty minutes, then I told them both to come into t see me.

"Sit, please," I said pleasantly. They sat, breathing sighs of relief. "What is it you do, Jennifer?"

"I am your senior secretary, Honourable Minister. I make and receive calls, make and ensure appointments are kept, take notes as you dictate, type them out, put them before you to be signed, and send them off. I also liaise on your behalf with other ministries and agencies, and execute any instructions that come from you. I also keep you updated on the goings-on within your ministry, if any matter warrants it. This is a brief description of what I do, Honourable Minister. The rest are what any other secretary does, like getting you coffee or tea or so from the kitchenette down the hall."

"Excellent. Concise! It does sound as if you are the proverbial fly on the wall in your "updating" duty though," I laughed. Both women giggled, the younger's hand covering her mouth is winning shyness. They were relaxing.

"Dianna?"

"Yes, Honourable Minister. I assist Jennifer whenever she needs help. I am more on the legal end of things. I draft briefs when you need, especially if you are prosecuting a case or having a case prosecuted. I also read and summarise any case that comes in that requires the Minister's attention. I also learn as much as I can about the people here from Jennifer. It serves to keep me on my toes."

"You are both wonderfully concise, ladies. I appreciate that. You are both quite pleasant, and I like people who can smile and laugh. You will find that I'm quite easy to get along with, although I can be rather unpleasant when crossed. I think we'll get along very well. I hope so, anyway. Is there a legal division in the Ministry?"

"Yes, there is, Sir. There are eight lawyers, mostly flirting with the females and twiddling their thumbs on the second floor, if you will permit me to be candid."

"Please be as candid as you can with me, ladies." I returned. "How many people do we employ in this building?"

"There are one hundred and ten people, fifty males, the rest females. That does not include janitorial staff, groundsmen, and security staff, Sir. From my observation over the years, they are quite busy playing dominoes and cards, reading the newspapers and comic books, and gossiping."

"That's true, Honourable Minister. I've observed much the same. They are also openly disrespectful to me as I come up, whistling and making lewd comments," Dianna added.

"Well, it seems as if I've inherited quite a den of vipers, huh?" They both smiled at my comment.

I continued: "I need for you to work together and compile a list of every employee here, their designations, one-sentence job description, and colour-code the lot of them. Green for important, yellow for functional, red for unnecessary or redundant, and purple for undesirable. Clear?"

"Clear, Sir!" the chorused.

"You will notice that there will be armed security just outside of your office. Get used to it. There will be another walking through the building when I'm here. There will also be two downstairs by the main door or around the yard. Do not be alarmed; they are here for my protection..." I was interrupted by a light knock on my door.

"Come in, Kwame." He entered. "Have a seat, PS. Ladies, I suppose you've met the new PS, Kwame?"

"We have had that pleasure, Sir," piped Jennifer as they both smiled at Kwame.

"You've already charmed the ladies, I see," they all laughed.

"PS, I want you to promote Jennifer to Senior Administrative Assistant, and Dianna to Confidential Assistant, with the relevant pay increases, retroactive from January. Benefits too, of course. With immediate effect. Oh, and if, for some reason, these designations do not exist, *create* them!"

Jennifer jumped out of her chair, screaming, "Lord! Oh Lord! Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Most Honourable Minister. I could hug you here and now!"

Dianna's eyes were wide and liquid, "Thank you, Sir. You will never know how much this means."

Kwame spoke up: "Yes. He always seems not to grasp the effects of his kindness. That is our Minister in a sentence."

"Okay! Enough from you three!" I said with fake harshness. "Get about doing as I asked, girls. I will see the PS alone."

They both got up, bowed, and exited, shutting the door behind them.

"Okay, Kwame. How are you settling in, my friend?"

"I am still combing through the wreckage that you inherited, Minister. The staffing here is very messy, and I believe there are several political operatives that serve as plants to bring and carry news. The budget, however, is most interesting. As of a few days ago, there has been an inflow of funds from the Office of the Prime Minister. It amounts to several millions of dollars. There is no cogent explanation, but I can speculate with confidence that the funds came in as a result of your assumption the seat of Minister of Justice. The funds lack any guidelines regarding spending, so spending seems to be at your exclusive discretion."

"That is good, right?" I asked.

"Yes, it's good. But it depends on what Comrade Leader expects from you in return. Does it not always work like this?" He chuckled sardonically.

"True. But it's there, so we spend it on essentials that are compatible with my agenda," I said, with a confidence that I did not feel. "We will cull the number of people working here as soon as we identify the redundancies and the spies…and the assholes too. To begin with, I want you to send those eight lawyers on administrative leave, then fire them effective January 1. Prepare the letters and send them to me for my signature. We'll get a team of three good lawyers to replace them. These cuts will save us millions, by the time we're done. We can use the money to help people who're catching their asses out there."

"Steven, are you sure? This is quite a radical move, you know," Kwame warned.

"One can never be sure in this environment, Kwame. If you're ever sure, you're a fool." I insisted.

"Gotcha, Minister."

"What's the condition of the yard? I'm asking because I've seen the rubbish heaps at White's place."

"Our compound is not as bad, but it is not picture of neatness and health. Lots of work needs to be done to make it presentable."

"Then hire a team and get it done. Give them one week to get the work done, or they don't get paid. Also, check the cafeteria for hygienic conditions. I had the dishonour of seeing the location of the cafeteria at White's ministry. It was right alongside and in very close proximity to an overflowing toilet. Disgusting and unhygienic. That's not going to happen here, Kwame."

"I got it, Minister."

"That's all for now…and thanks, Kwame."

"Yes, Sir. Any time," he said as he left.

In my moment alone, I realized that I was merely skirting around the edges of my primary mandate. However, in doing that I became aware that I can be useful to individual and groups of individuals, even entire communities who were under severe financial pressure. All I did so far today was to plan a cleansing of the Ministry. A call from Comrade Leader or one of his mouth-pieces was inevitable, and I did not look forward to that. However, I planned to sell the idea that cleaning up the ministry and helping the poorest of communities are ways of moving towards a snap referendum to create a republic with a president-for-life who will continue paying attention to governmental efficiency and to those who were suffering most

economically. I was gambling that the Leader would buy that argument. His counter argument would be time. Referendum in three months! But I must make the case to the people, and that—I can argue—is how we can get there with some support. If they want me and my Ministry to launch this charge, then we must do so from a position of strength.

My phone rang. Jennifer said it was the Minister Henry White on the line,

"Hey Henry, old friend! How you?" I said cheerily.

"The usual over here," he answered glumly, "I just called to find out how you were doing, man."

"I'm doing well, so far. Just getting caught up on the place. I need to get familiar with its workings and deficiencies very quickly before we move on that thing, as you know only too well."

"Yes, yes, yes. That is how it should be done. Don't forget that I'm here if you should need me, okay?"

"I hear you, man! Thanks."

And that was the end of the feeling out call. I called home to check up on Zenyatta, and we chatted for a few minutes. I called in Jennifer.

"I want you to call as many members of the press as you can reach. All newspapers, both radio stations. I wish television had reached our backward nation, but...anyway, get as many of them as you can into our conference room. Day after tomorrow. Ten in the morning. No one except you and Dianna should know of this, understood?"

"Very well, Minister!" she said in soldierly fashion.

"Now I will speak to Dianna."

"Yes, Minister." She left, and Dianna entered.

"Dianna, I want you to draft a statement for me. I will be meeting with members of the media to make a statement. I want to say that we are calling a snap election in two months because we must put this nation on a firmer governmental footing if we are to move toward being a republic. I want you to list ways that this will benefit the people, understood? This press meeting will be day after tomorrow in the morning at ten. This means that you will have to spend the rest of the day and all of tonight. Hand it to me tomorrow at eleven. You can sleep later, clear?"

"I am clear, Minister. And this, of course, must be confidential."

"That my girl. Now go to it! There is more riding on this than you will ever know. You have until ten tomorrow morning. Go!"

She hopped out of the chair, clutched her notepad to her breast and was almost at the door. I stopped her,

"Dianna! Use the conference room. Lock the door."

"Yes, Minister."

The look of terror in her eyes forced unwanted memories to the front of my mind. I packed papers in my briefcase and headed out. I needed to be home. I needed to be with Zenyatta.

Chapter Eighty-Nine

Zenyatta immediately sensed the tension in me. She led me into the dining room and had Melissa make us a pot of tea.

"Tell me about your first day, my love," she said softly.

"I missed you on my first day, my Zenyatta," I responded.

"That's not a bad thing. I missed you too. But tell me about the work."

"The Ministry is a mess. We have eight lawyers who are worse than useless, dozens of redundant staff—probably the relatives and friends of party folks given a chance to get a salary for doing nothing except to play cards, dominoes, and gossip. Kwame seems to be learning fast, and my two secretaries seem very professional."

So it tends to balance out somewhat, huh?" she offered. "I have no doubt that you will get the place stream-lined in a week or less! No doubt!"

I smiled at her confidence in me, "I think I can do with a small nap, my love."

"After your tea, we'll go up and relax. Maybe a nice bath will help relieve the tension," she offered, then asked one of the maids to draw the bath. I spent a long time soaking. Zenyatta then put me into the bed and watched over me as I slept. I awakened an hour or so later, and we went downstairs. Monty and Sain were waiting for us. The four of us went into the study.

Monty spoke first: "Sir, we are being shadowed." He was a calm as could be.

"What do you mean? Shadowed?" Zenyatta asked.

"Followed," I said.

"Yes, ma'am. Each member of our detail has a shadow, a tail, if you want to put it that way. They are meant to track our every move, where we go, when we go, who we meet."

"What do you advise?" I asked.

Sain spoke up: "Nothing. We do nothing at all, as if they do not exist. They will get lulled into thinking that they are so clever, so subtle, that they will make mistakes. In my opinion, they are not even worth going after. It was easy to spot them, really. The haircut alone was a give-away. They were clearly selected from the current batch of soldiers. All in their twenties, all with the play-soldiers' swagger, all six identified by our detail within two hours. On your word, Sir, we could take them out in five or six minutes. Easy pickings." She smiled.

"Monty, your thoughts?"

"Sir, Sain is correct. These chaps present no threat at all. In fact, what it shows is that someone higher up is terrified of you. They are scared of something you may do or say that will end them. These young soldiers were given orders, and they are too young or too spineless to say no."

"Who do you think is giving the orders?" I asked.

Without hesitation, Monty said: Rudy Lewis! No doubt about it! None!"

"Okay, then, we go about our business as we do anyway. Where do you think they are now?"

"They are holed up three houses away, probably observing through binoculars. We have eyes on them." Sain said.

"So no need for us to be alarmed, Zenyatta," I said, holding her hand.

Monty added, "The Minister is spot on, Miss Zenyatta. Nothing to be worried about in this case. This does not mean we should be careless, of course. Our detail will remain vigilant. You are safe."

"I just can't believe that Rudy Lewis would do such a thing! I just can't." Zenyatta protested.

"My love, Lewis is just following orders. That's all."

"Orders from?" she asked.

"You know who gives orders in this country! The rest just follow...for their own good. Comrade Leader orders, they obey."

I turned back to Monty and Sain, "I take it that the others have been briefed, yes?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Okay. Keep me posted."

"Of course, Sir!"

"Okay, back to work then...and thanks."

The two soldiers left.

"Lewis is a fucking snake!" Zenyatta blurted out.

"They all are, my love. Every last one of them. But we will host our Christmas gathering, be polite and hospitable, and follow through with our own plans." I tried to be reassuring.

"I know, my love, that you need to concentrate on your end of things—do what it takes for us to get out, while doing as much as you can for ordinary folks. But I can elp with the second part by thinking of ways that we can be effective in helping.

And hope that the immigration papers come through as Peter's lawyer says. Meanwhile I will transfer money out to our foreign accounts."

"That sounds good, my darling Zenyatta. I've called a press conference for day after tomorrow. I'll lay out the plan to get the Leader to grab more power, and add a mountain of horse dung in the mix."

Zenyatta smiled wryly, "Well, I'll leave you to the cow poop. I'm going off to the bank with Lucy and Gordon."

I began my draft.

"Members of the media, through your outlets, I'd like to outline our government's plan to advance our nation's development in leaps and bounds. Comrade Leader has made clear his desire to feed, clothe and house this nation by 1990. This includes free universal education of the highest quality; free technical training in the crafts; innovative teacher training; innovative police training; a better civil service that truly serves the needs of our people; better health care; a more just and efficient judicial system, just to name a few.

To do this, however, we need to establish a much firmer political foundation than the one we have inherited from our former colonial masters. Our leaders walk on eggshells at international forums. Simply, we have to be more firm in our footing nationally and internationally if we are to make a case for investment in our homeland. We are not blind to the needs of our people. We are not deaf to their pleas for help and support. Comrade Leader and his cabinet are unanimous that in order to establish ourselves more credibly on the world stage, we need the overwhelming support of our people. With greater political stability we will be able to address the needs of every single individual in this beautiful country of ours, but we need to get the permission of our people.

Therefore, we will be implementing a national referendum in exactly two months from today, and we urge our citizens to come out in the numbers and vote YES to our proposals. It's a "yes or no" vote. If it is the will of the people to have better jobs, better education for their children, better wages, then they will vote YES. If it is the desire of our people to have an abundance of food on their tables, firmer roofs over their heads, and nice clothes to wear, they will vote YES.

Of course, our people will ask "How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?" That is a good question. With our new status as a republic with a President, we will be able to open up new trade links with non-traditional partners like China and India, like countries in Africa and South-East Asia. This does not mean we will abandon England and Europe and America; what it means is that we are giving ourselves more options, more access to different markets for rice, sugar, bauxite, manganese, and other resources. We will have access to a greater pool of expertise to help build our own expertise. We will have more access

to soft loans. It means more money flowing into our economy and more money in the pockets of our citizens!

Comrade Leader wanted you to be the first to know this plan so that you can convey this to our nation. He is doing this through me because I am here to ensure that the laws are not being violated in any way. I will give you copies of this brief statement so that you may quote me accurately. I thank you for your time.

I read through the statement again and had Quincy ask Zenyatta to come in to the study. I read the statement to her.

"So, what ya think?"

She thought for a few seconds and said, "It's a pile of cow dung, indeed. But it smells like roses! If I were hungry and poor enough, I'd believe it, Steven. You're good. Really good. Too good, if you ask me."

I mouth contorted into a smile.

"Well, my darling wife, we each must play our part," I said sardonically.

"Hear me this day, Mr. Big Shot husband, do what you have to so that we can get out of here and keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. Just don't mangle Shakespeare in the process."

"I'm trying, my love. I am trying."

"I have a thought for you. If you are going to have multiple copies, why do you have to call a meeting with the press? Why not simply have the statement delivered to every media person and every radio newsroom? You call the press into a room, and some intrepid young reporter who wants attention may just ask questions that you do not want to answer."

I thought about it. Zenyatta made sense.

"Damn! I did not think of that. You're right. I mean, the government owns and controls every news station and every newspaper, but…"

"Exactly! Cancel it and send copies to them."

I was in my office at seven the next day. Jennifer came in at seven-thirty. I called her in immediately.

We exchanged greetings, then I asked if she had called the press.

"Not yet, Minister. I though it would be okay if I called them this morning. I'm sorry."

"No, no, no. I'm glad you didn't. I've changed my mind about that. Don't call them. We'll make copies of my statement and have the delivered to them. Type up a letter to them to read it on every news hour on the radio. Then type up a letter for

the newspapers and request that they print the statement verbatim. I just need see Dianne before I finalise the statement."

"Very well, Minister. Thank you."

Dianne was in at nine, and I was thankful that she did not come in as late as I had suggested. She handed me her hand-written notes. Her script was neat, and her points were numbered. She sat there as I went through, her hands clasped so tightly that her knuckles whitened. She tapped her feet with nervousness. I pointed to her feet and the tapping stopped immediately. I was ticking off her points one by one, but looking up every now and then, took note of the quick breathing, her breasts rising and falling, breath in and breath out. I remembered my old self, my demonic other. I knew what he wanted to do to this girl. I knew. I knew!

She had made twelve points. They were well-written, clean and tight language. I crossed off one; it was somewhat redundant. I put down my pen and stared at her. She was fetching, this girl. She was looking at me with those eyes, wide with fright. I smiled.

"Don't be nervous, Dianne. This is really good. Really good." I said, my voice even, studied. She breathed out heavily in relief.

"Thank God! I was so worried that you would just scrap it. Thank you, Minister!"

"In fact, I drafted a statement last night and read it to Zenyatta, my wife. She said I was good at piling up cow shit! But I was good at it!"

Dianne giggled, putting her hand over her mouth.

"You covered every point that I made in my statement, so I know that we're on track...or on the same page, if you prefer. I crossed off one of your points. I thought it redundant."

"I'm sorry, Minister."

"Do not apologise for very good work, Dianne."

"Sorry, Minister."

"I gave Jennifer a copy of the statement. She will type it up and Roneo off copies. I've cancelled the press briefing. We'll sed the statement to them instead. See if Jennifer needs your help, please. Help her if she needs it. If she does not, you work on the breakdown of people in this building. Oh, and tell Jennifer to send a copy to Henry White."

"Yes, Minister. Anything else?"

"No. Let's get this stuff done."

She rose, and went out. I breathed.

I decided to get out of the office and do a little walkabout in the building. Crandon was in the waiting area, standing, alert.

"Let's walk around the other floors," I told him. He immediately got on walkie-talkie and alerted Junior. Both of these giants on either side of me, I felt safe. We walked down the flights of stairs to the second floor. Upon seeing me, they all stood.

"Good morning everyone," I said pleasantly, then spoke louder: "I have come to learn that many of you are good at cards and dominoes. That's a good thing at wake houses and in your homes, maybe. But if anyone is seen playing games, I will send you on permanent leave instantly. Any female who is harassed in any way—cat calls, sexual suggestions or advances, and so on—should climb these stairs and report those to me directly. I will see to it that you never befoul the inside of this building ever again! Am I clear?"

"Yes, Comrade!" they all answered.

"Very good. We will all be professional in our dress, our language, and in our relationship with each other from this minute onward. Now, I want each of you to type out three lines telling me exactly what you do here." Once your done, take it upstairs to my Admin Assistant, Comrade Jennifer. make sure your names and the dates you started here are on the top of the page. One by one. You have fifteen minutes." They sat hurriedly and busied themselves. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Crandon smile slightly. Then I heard it loud and clear, a long suck-teeth. I nodded to Junior who moved to the culprit, grabbed him by the neck and led him to me.

"Name?" he stammered his name. "Junior, take him back to his desk, give him three minutes to gather his belongings and show him to the gate. Inform the cops downstairs that he is not to be allowed entry into this compound ever again." I said this loudly that they whole lot of them should hear.

"Who is the senior person on this floor?" I barked.

A woman in her forties, hair greying at the temples, stepped forward from the doorway of one of the offices.

"I am, Minister," she stammered meekly, whisperingly.

"And what do they call you?"

"Mrs. Mary Corte, Minister," her voice tremulous.

"When you speak to me, you can drop the damn 'Mrs.', for it does not make you exceptional in any way. You betray your ordinariness by voicing your marital

status, Corte! You may use your very ordinary 'Mrs' for the cleaning ladies and the janitors and you washerwoman…if you have one. Is that clear, Corte?"

"Yes, Minister. It will never happen again."

"See that it does not, at least not in my ministry, not within my earshot! Should I hear it, you shall be shown the gate. You will also ensure much greater discipline on this floor!"

"Yes, Minister."

"Junior, take this scoundrel out of my sight!"

Junior kept his grip on the fellow's neck, half-lifted him off the ground, and he was gone. I turned my head and saw Kwame on the stairs slightly above me.

"PS, Good that you are here. I want you to busy yourself removing every rotten egg in this place. You have one week!"

"Very well, Minister."

"And start with the ground floor and work your way up."

"Understood, Minister!"

I went up again to my office, deliberately left my door ajar, and dialled Comrade Leader's number. One of his secretaries answered.

"Put me on to our Comrade Leader, please. This is Steven DaSilva."

The voice came over the horn: "Steven, how are the plans coming along?"

The booming voice rattled around in my head. I answered: "They are coming along nicely, although I've decided it would be wise to move up our schedule."

"Why, boy?"

"To give any opposition rat less time to mobilize! We'll hold the referendum in two months rather than three. We must get more aggressive. We can organise much more quickly than they can. But, Comrade Leader, we need to call an emergency cabinet meeting tomorrow, with your permission, of course." I said, trying to disguise my terror.

"Look, boy! I put you in charge of this operation for a fucking reason! So lead! Just do not forget who you answer to! You understand me, Comrade?"

"I understand, Comrade Leader. I will get Henry White to round up the troops, and we light a fire under their asses at the cabinet meeting tomorrow. I want Rudolph Lewis there. The army will play a pivotal role in this. How's eleven for you, Mr. President?"

There it was, the booming laughter, "I like that, boy! You're speaking with the voice of your president-for-life! For now."

"I got it! Eleven, then. Your conference room, if you would have it so."

"Permission granted! Do your stuff, Steven! Lemme see you in action, see my investment in action!" He hung up.

I immediately dialled Henry White's number. Again, my favourite secretary,

"Put Henry on, dearie," I said.

"Steven. What news. I just read your statement! Wow! Fireworks by tomorrow! I hope the great man agrees with you boy or…"

I cut him off, "Henry, I just got off the phone with our Comrade Leader. We are calling an emergency meeting of the cabinet. Eleven a.m. in the Leader's conference room. I've decided to move more quickly and more aggressively, but you will know more tomorrow. Every member of the Leader's cabinet must be there, and I want Lewis there as well. Call each of them, Henry. Thanks, man!" I hung up.

I called in Jennifer, "The statement has been sent?"

"They are under way to each of the targets, Minister. I expect the statement to be broadcast at eight o'clock tonight, onwards. Every hour on the hour. The print media will carry it tomorrow morning."

"Good. Comrade Leader and I have called a full emergency meeting of the cabinet for tomorrow at eleven in the morning. I need copies for each minister plus eight more just in case. I expect either fireworks or complete silence and obedience. There will be no in-between. And, Jennifer, work closely with the PS to weed out undesirables from this place."

"Very well, Minister," she said, seeming not to commit one way or the other.

Crandon and Junior drove me home, and I enjoyed a cup of tea with my wife. She waited for me to give her the usual report of my day's adventures. I deliberately let her wait, sipping my tea with leisure.

"This is good tea, my love," I said, trying not to smile.

"Steven DaSilva. You know that I have more patience in my little finger than you have in your whole body. I can wait you out for days, boy!" She was laughing.

"Tell me something, my darling husband. Don't you find it somewhat disorienting when you think that just the other day we were simply students and now you're a government minister?"

"I suppose. To tell you the truth, I do not think about it too much. Everything seems to gallop along at breakneck speed."

"Yes. Dramatic changes in a short period. Student to minister. No real authority to great power. London and it's claustrophobic apartment to this mansion with staff. History all around and stability. Freedom of movement to constant tension and anxiety. It's different, huh?"

"It sure is, my love. I think in many ways, I prefer anonymity to this kind of fame, if I may use that word."

"Me too! I suspect we'll find that in our new home elsewhere. I hope so, anyway."

"Agreed. I take it you sent the finance to our account?"

"I did. We also have to give some thought about my parents and my brother. Their security, I mean."

"We'll deal with that as soon as I'm done with this political bullshit. I called Comrade Leader today and explained why we needed to quicken everything."

"How did our Supreme Leader respond?" she said with obvious irony.

"He was good with it after I explained my rationale. I also insisted that we call an emergency meeting of the cabinet tomorrow…and include Lewis." She looked at me squarely in the eyes.

"I hope you don't confront him, Steven. He's dangerous. This shadow detail frightens me."

"I don't plan to, but Comrade Leader will control the army, and Lewis will follow orders, or else…"

"The best part was when he repeated that I was speaking with his voice, and told me do 'do my stuff. I know it's pushy and risky to push the others around, but I do not think they would dare question my strategy in front of their Dear Leader."

"Just be careful, Steven. For God's sake, be careful."

"I will, my darling wife. I promise you."

Chapter Ninety

The next day began with all the fireworks that I'd predicted. The opposition leaders were full of outrage. I had decided to give them full access to the radios and newspapers. The entire nation needed to hear about their plans to boycott the referendum. I was hoping that most of the population would listen to them and stay away from the voting stations. They were playing into our hands. They had no time to go around the country and mobilize their supporters. They knew we would cheat, and they were very clear about that. We knew we cheat too, but they could not imagine the scale at which we planned to.

Monty and Gordon drove me to my Ministry at eight, and Crandon and Junior followed in another vehicle I had requisitioned. Sain and Persaud stayed at the house with Zenyatta. Jennifer and Dianne were already at their desks.

We exchanged the usual morning greetings, and I went directly into my office. I reviewed my statement, and designed a plan to execute the campaign for the referendum. The secret, I thought, was to keep it all very simple. I left the office with Gordon and Monty at ten, meaning to take a few minutes talking with the Leader. At eleven forty-five, I was in the big man's office. He actually seemed happy to see me,"

"Good morning, Champ!" he boomed.

"Good morning, Your Excellency. I thought we might share a few words before we go in there. Also, if we go in together, it will send a clear message to the rest that there was no room here for doubts. One more thing, Comrade Leader, did you give anyone orders to have a shadow detail on me?"

"What? What yuh taking about boy?" He barked.

"Someone has put a shadow detail on me and my family."

"Who the fuck would do that without my express orders?"

"It cannot be White. He was here at out last meeting, so he knows that you have left this responsibility to me. I'm sure it's Lewis, I said."

"Well, he will get what's coming to him. That is a direct challenge to my authority, and I will not tolerate that for a second."

"I will beg of you, Comrade Leader, to leave it to me. I think I can deal with it at our meeting without ruffling feathers."

"Okay. This should be entertaining, at the very least," he laughed.

"Comrade Leader, you will need to get everyone 100 % committed. No ifs, and buts here. This will enable you to identify the weak links in this group."

"Let's see, DaSilva! Let's see," and we walked into the large conference room. Everyone stood to attention. Comrade Leader waved an imperious hand and they all resumed their seats.

"Steven, you sit on my right!" He commanded. There were some sideway glances at this. The Leader spoke, his voice bouncing off the walls:

"Welcome to this emergency meeting. Let me make myself clear about some things right away. First, this nation is at a pivotal point in its history, and you are commanded to play your part in making sure we move in the right direction. There will, of course, be severe consequences if you fail. Consequences to this nation and consequences to each and every one of you! Is that clear?" The menace in that voice, in those eyes, was as real as a gun pointed to the head.

They all bleated: "Yes, Comrade Leader!"

"I have put Comrade DaSilva in charge of this operation. In front of you is a statement which you shall read later. Some of you may not know Steven, but you will now. I have told him three times now that in this instance when he speaks, he speaks with my voice! So you'd better listen. I will not tolerate disobedience! There will be no discussion, no debate! There will be directives! You get your directive, you obey! Over to you, Comrade DaSilva!"

"Good morning, Comrades."

"Good morning, Comrade!" The chorus.

"Comrade Leader has decided that we will call a referendum in two months. We must, therefore, mobilise quickly and efficiently. Comrade White will be working alongside our Comrade Leader and myself. We aired this in the press already, and already the opposition is in disarray. We have given them no time to get organised, thanks to the wisdom of our Leader. They are already calling for a boycott, which will be to our advantage. The referendum will rid us of Prime Minister as leader and replace that with President of the Republic. This will lend political stability to our nation and reinforce our standing in the world. We will open new avenues for trade, alliances, and financial resources, all of which shall benefit out people.

This is how we will proceed. Comrade White will assign a district to each minister. They will hold public meetings, using the statement as the basis of your speech. These meetings will be held consistently over the next two months, starting

next week. Every corner of this country must be accounted for. Comrade White will keep tabs.

I asked Comrade Leader and Comrade White to have Comrade Lewis to this meeting for a reason. We will need the army to ensure victory. Comrade Lewis, how many trucks do you have in the army?"

Lewis was sitting on a chair along the wall, "About twenty-five or thirty." He was sitting as he answered.

Comrade Leader slapped his hand hard on the conference table. I was startled. He bellowed loudly to Lewis,

"Stand the fuck up! When a minister addresses you, you stand the fuck up and at attention!"

Lewis jumped up and stood to attention, his face red at the humiliation. "Now answer properly as if you were a fucking soldier!"

"Twenty-five or thirty, Comrade."

"You will ensure that they are filled with soldiers, fully armed, fully supplied with rations. Five trucks to each of the two outer counties. Fifteen remain here in this county. Make sure they are based strategically at either end of the county and in the middle for the outer counties. Here, we keep fifteen trucks at the base. All leave will be cancelled. You will need every single soldier to vote at several polling stations. Rotate them. I think we can be confident that the civilians who turn up to vote will be ours, since the opposition has called on their people to boycott. And Comrade Lewis, send those six soldiers who are shadowing my detail to the farthest reaches of the country. Keep those six there for one year. Understood? Comrade White and myself will be monitoring that."

Lewis's eyes opened wide, and I saw what I though was the flicker of a smile on the Leader's face. White nodded his agreement.

"The soldiers will vote from the time the ballot stations open to the time they close. That will give us the numbers. There may be pockets of protest. Quell them as peacefully as you can. Comrade White and myself will stay here in this county with Comrade Leader and give our talks here at strategic points in the city."

I continued: "We can expect a few of the opposition leaders to show up with their placards. Handle them with care, but detail them for a few hours for disturbing the public peace."

"Comrade Leader, should we entertain a few questions, just in case anyone is unclear?" He nodded.

Silence. Then White spoke up, "The plans are wonderfully clear and simple, Comrade DaSilva. But should we have an additional minister here in the city and surrounding areas to ease the burden on our Comrade Leader and the two of us?"

"That's good thinking, Honourable Minister. The Minister of Youth and the Minister of Education can remain here with us. Good?"

"Perfect, Comrade," returned White.

I turned to the Leader, "Any further instructions or comments, Comrade Leader?"

"Yes. Lewis, put your best officers in charge of these operations. It must go as smoothly as possible."

"Absolutely, Comrade Leader!" Lewis answered, still standing at attention.

"Now go, digest Comrade DaSilva's statement, and fan out around the country." Comrade Leader commanded.

We all stood, and they began filing out.

"Comrade DaSilva and Comrade White, stay a while with me." We resumed our seats.

Empty now, the large room seemed all the more cavernous.

"Well, boys?" the Leader asked.

I think that Steve was very clear. Simple and straightforward," White offered.

"Agreed! The two of you must be on your toes. The execution is important."

"Yes, Comrade Leader."

He slapped me on my back in congratulations and walked out. Even as the congratulatory slap on the back landed, I became aware again that an axe will soon follow. As soon as I am no longer of immediate use, it will descend.

"You did well in there, Steven. The man was happy with you," White disrupted my thought.

White headed for his car as I did to mine. I could see the worry on Monty and Gordon.

I sat in the back and assured them: "It went very well, my dear chaps. Very well indeed." Gordon breathed out audibly.

Gordon did the walkabout and Monty stayed just outside of my office. The two ladies seem anxious. I called them in,

"Don't look so worried, ladies. It went exactly as we planned. It went well."

Jennifer raised her hand, "Thank you, Jesus!" Dianna smiled broadly.

"Any progress on the weeding out?"

"Yes, Minister, we're working with PS and should have something."

"Jennifer, send one of the fellows downstairs to get lunch for five of us ... me, you, Dianna, Monty, and Gordon. Something nice, whatever you want." I gave her the money.

I half-ate my lunch, called Zenyatta, and told her about the cabinet meeting. She cracked up when I described how the Leader had humiliated Rudolph Lewis. She was relieved that the shadow detail was no more. I left the office after an hour for home. I decided that I should get together with the detail and arrive at our own strategic positioning of soldiers for the referendum. Of course, I did not mention the part about truckloads of soldiers voting multiple times.

Monty and the five others gathered around my desk in the study, and we mapped out every conceivable location and numbers required to ensure "secure voting". I was surprised that I was selling this with a straight face. It took a certain callousness to do that, but callousness was my old friend. I did not ask Zenyatta to the meeting.

The Christmas gathering came and went without incident. Almost all the cabinet members came, eat and drank their fill, chatted, and left. The VC, DVC and Registrar were also there, but they remained apart from the politicians, too intimidated to engage. They left early. After all of it, Zenyatta and I sat quietly, breathing sighs of relief, as if we had just endured an ordeal.

"I cannot say that I look forward to another one of these," Zenyatta breathed, "they are all so obsequious, my love. Although it was fun to see them kissing your ass with such vigour! Rudy was friendly enough, but clearly mere distant. That man will never forgive you, Steven. Never! The rest though, wow! How can grown men humiliate themselves like this? No dignity at all."

I did not answer that question. She added, "I'm glad we did not invite my parents, to be honest."

"Yes, we need to establish some distance between us and them. The same for Kwame. The less they know the better. The key word for us is vacation. We needed time alone after all the stress and anxiety of politics. Vacation! They can contact us through cousin Peter—if the immigration thing comes through, that is."

"I am praying, my love. God will grant me this wish. I believe."

"I need you, my loving Zenyatta, to give some thought to the staff. They will be at greater risk because White, Lewis and the rest will assume that the staff knew of our plans to leave, to escape. Monty, Gordon, and the rest of the detail will come first. They'll be fired by White, then arrested and jailed. Then they will come for the house staff—Quincy, Melissa, the maids even the ground staff."

"Jesus, Steven! Is any of this probable or likely or is this some kind of paranoia?"

"I promise you, my darling Zenyatta, this is almost predictable. I have no doubt that we will win the referendum. In a way, the results are already in…unless something goes terribly wrong. Then the President will be happy with me and start demanding more. If I don't deliver, we're finished—everyone is finished. He will unleash White and Lewis with their soldiers. If we leave, we will be sought after, but who will think of New Brunswick, the Maritimes, Northeast Canada? So that takes us back to people who have been loyal to us from the beginning."

"What can we do for them, Steven? What?" she queried, her face a mask of worry.

"Money! We give the enough money to last them a couple of years until the dust settles."

"How much is enough to go into hiding?"

"I was thinking ten or fifteen thousand for Monty, ten for Gordon, five each for Said, Persaud, Crandon, and Junior. Ten or fifteen for Quincy and Melissa, five for the three maids, two each for the groundsmen."

"That's more than one hundred thousand, Steven. We will have very little left to travel, although we did send some abroad. That's not enough to start over in NB."

"We'll have jobs, steady incomes. Do we have a choice here?" I asked pointedly. "Maybe we can work more on the figures themselves?"

"I'll do that, my love," she answered.

"Meanwhile, I'll pursue the idea that we can assist the poorest areas in the city in some way using the Ministry of Justice funds. Kwame tell me that the Leader has infused a good amount into the Ministry's budget."

"Just be careful, Steven. Please. I have a feeling that things are close now, that good news will come," she perked up.

The next morning, I stopped by Henry White's office to give him the logistics map me and my detail had generated.

"Henry, I thought this might make your job a little easier. Please don't see this as me invading your territory. I just though it may help."

"This is good, Steven. It shows Comrade Leader that we're working together to fulfil his agenda," He said with what seemed relief.

I then suggested that we go in to meet the leader and update him. He agreed very quickly.

"Eleven?" I asked.

"I'll be there. Don't worry."

We arrived at our Leader's office. A secretary went in and informed him. Almost before we sat, we saw two people emerge from the office, and we were ushered in.

"Steven! My boy! The man of the moment! Hey, you too Henry!" He bellowed, smiling widely.

"I had to send those chaps out as soon as the girl told me the two of you were outside! So, tell me! How are things shaping up?"

"Very well, Comrade Leader. Very well indeed. Steven has a firm hand on things!" Henry White said.

"Comrade DaSilva?"

"As Comrade White said, very well. I am confident we will get the desired results, Comrade Leader," I said confidently.

"I was proud of how you handled things at that meeting, boy! You showed leadership. Maybe I should watch my back with you, huh?" And the laughter boomed. It did not reach his eyes. They were cold, dead.

"I'm always your servant, my President! You know that."

"Yeah, I know that, Steven. Nonetheless, I want you to keep an eye on this boy. You hear me, White?"

White smiled, "Of course, Mr. President. He working hard for you."

I spoke up: "Comrade Leader, I had an idea that just before the referendum, we should distribute hampers to our people. Just small things: Flour, sugar, rice, onions, powdered milk, the basics."

"Why the fuck would I do that? Maybe you chaps are not as confident as you make out! Fucking hampers!" He was out of control, screaming. This chap was frightened. I finally saw it, he was terrified of losing power. I finally saw how I could use this fear.

"Comrade Leader! Do not shout and scream! It is not the behaviour of a fucking president! It just is not! So stop it!" I raised my voice. He turned his head to me, and there was this look in his dead eyes. It was not cold, deadly power that I saw there. It was panic, hysteria.

"Aright! You're right!"

My voice softened: "You have put me in charge of this operation. You have to trust me to execute the operation. I told you the plan was coming along very well. Don't go messing with it. Don't! Or else we lose—we all lose, and you lose the most.

Why would the strongest, most important link in this command insist on looking like the weakest, Mr. President? Why?"

I heard a whimper. It was from White who had collapsed into a chair. He was trying to say something, but could not get it out.

"Mr. President, look at the effect of your outburst?" I pointed to White, "Is this man who believes in you motivated—inspired—to get the job done?"

"White looks as if he about to shit himself!"

"Correct! That, my President, is not motivation. It is not encouragement."

He calmed down, "Okay. Tell me why you would spend money to give shit to people if you were sure they would support me?"

"To guarantee that they support you. To guarantee that they know their interests lie with *you*! *You* are doing all of this for *them*! You are giving them proof that things will be better, even before the change is made. You are their saviour!"

"I see it, Steven. I see it now. It's clever, my boy."

He was seated, calm now, thoughtful. "Tell me more."

"One week or so, we coordinate with everyone, hand out these hampers as a sign of good will, as a kind of promise to them that it will only get better. From our perspective, it's an insurance policy that we will win in a crushing landslide. My Leader, we both know that it is unwise to put all of our eggs in one basket, all our hopes on one organization. I'm simply suggesting that we reinforce our support base. We want results that say 99%, 99.6%!" I was insistent, almost strident.

"Where will you find the money and the goods for this, Steven?"

I turned to Henry White, hoping for something like support. He sat there, limp, petrified, still.

"Henry! Say something, man!" I shouted at him.

I could see the smirk whisp across the Leader's face.

"Okay," I said, giving up on White, "we get some money from your budget, some from Justice, some from Home Affairs, and any other Ministry you instruct. How can they say no to our President? How?"

"I see," he said, without being too committed.

"We use that money to purchase basic from Trinidad and Surinam. We buy bulk at discount. All you have to do is pick up the phone to their leaders. They will not say no to you! Never!"

The double appeal to his vanity worked. He mused for a few seconds, and I could feel him calculating, doing the political mathematics.

"Okay, my clever boy! Get it done! If it fails, it's your fucking head on a block, Comrade!" He laughed his booming menace of a laugh. The man was deadly serious.

"Oh, and yours too, White! Two heads on a block!"

"Yes, Comrade Leader!" I said.

"Now you too get out before I get upset."

We hustled out. As we headed for the cars, White turned to me,

"DaSilva, I think you have your own fucking agenda. Next time you want to see the Big Man, leave me the fuck out of it, understand?"

"I understand, Henry. I will need five million from your budget." I responded, smiling. He gazed at me with what could only be malice.

I went back to the office and had Dianna call Kwame to see me. He was there in two minutes, and I called the two ladies into my office.

"Kwame, Jennifer, Dianna, I just came from seeing Comrade Leader. He agreed with my idea to give relief to our poorest people. This will be in the form of hampers with basic food items: flour, sugar, rice, peas, and so on. I need five million from our budget. White will put the equivalent amount, and Comrade Leader will give five, I think."

I want you three to identify the areas that will be given this relief. Kwame, get in touch with Surinam and Trinidad. Buy the items that we need if you cannot get them locally. Go as cheap as you can so that we can give to as many people as we can. Arrange it within the next month or five weeks, just before the referendum. Then contact Lewis to get soldiers to provide security and transportation. Choose trusted people from our ministry to head the missions. I will do the handover to three or four villages nearby. Dianna, draft out a message for the press. I will do the radio stations. Get on it, please. Dianna, you stay."

Kwame and Jennifer left, the latter going off to a late lunch. The girl remained seated. There she was, wide-eyed, full-breasted, round-hipped, waiting to please me, waiting to do my bidding. I was startled by my phone. I picked it up, still looking at her,

"Hello?"

Zenyatta's voice: "Hi, my darling husband!"

"Hi!" I answered, then I covered the mouthpiece and waved Dianna out of the office.

"Hi, my love. Sorry about that. I was just finishing up giving my people some tasks." I said, unsteadily, guiltily.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, my love," she said, "but I was anxious about how things went with you-know-who."

"Don't be sorry, my love. In fact, I think you just saved me—"

"Saved you? Saved you from what, pray tell," I could hear the humour in her voice.

"Saved me from what would gave been one more hour of giving directives," I chuckled. She laughed,

"Then I'm glad I disturbed you. But how did it go?"

"It went very well, although it was very rough at first. I got everything I wanted. Fifteen million to buy or acquire basic food stuff for the poorest areas. I took Henry White with me. He was worse than useless. In the first minute as the Leader was barking his opposition to my plan, I looked to him for support. He had fallen with terror into a chair, struck dumb by fear. Not a word from him!"

Zenyatta answered, "Henry White? Without words? The always falsely jovial Henry White?"

"Yep. The bully struck dumb by the bark of a bigger bully!"

"Once you did what you meant to do, my love. Be comforted by the idea that your motives are pure."

"Okay, my love. I'll be home in two hours or so. I feel like a nice hamburger and fries," I said.

"You wish is my command, my dearest one. Bye."

On the way home, I asked Monty to gather up the detail in my study. Zenyatta greeted me in her usual fashion, and we went onto the study, the detail training behind.

"I want you to identify three or four of the poorest areas within the vicinity or within the city, please. Just give me the names."

There was some discussion, and they soon arrived at four impoverished areas. I imagined that it was not too difficult since it was hard to identify areas that were not under financial duress. I thanked them for their input, and they filed out. I turned to Zenyatta:

"I think that things will start moving very quickly, so we need to start acting to get our people out of harm's way soon. This includes you parents and brother. They can go to some place in the country, as far away from the rotten centre as they can get. Give them money to support themselves. Maybe your dad can take a year of no-pay leave or simply retire."

"I will get to it immediately. I'll go to them this evening with Crandon and Sain. I've also worked on the numbers for the staff. I adjusted them downward somewhat."

"Okay, but don't say a word yet until we hear about our papers." She nodded.

"Now tell me more about your meeting today. I need a smile at White's expense."

I told her the details. Even though she was fully aware of the menace which those two men embodied, she smiled. I saw the worry in her eyes.

Chapter Ninety-One

Everything went like clockwork. The relief hampers were delivered on time and with relative order being maintained. I personally delivered to four of the poorest districts with the full press in tow. The referendum came around, and, helped by the decision of the opposition to boycott—and with the soldiers voting multiple times in multiple voting stations—the government won a handy majority of the rigged referendum. I estimated that the figures were almost 58% in favour. Of course, Comrade Leader insisted on making the constantly repeated claim that he won by 99.6% of the vote. That, of course, was the figure I had floated to him months ago. We were on our way to becoming a republic with a president-for-life, although there were no plans to carry through with unprecedented prosperity for the country and its citizens. All in all, my plan was heralded as a huge success, and Comrade Leader proclaimed me a strategic genius. His investment in me had paid off.

In the midst of the celebrations, Cousin Peter called. It was a necessarily brief and cryptic conversation.

"Steve, listen carefully. I know that there is much excitement in the camp over there. You and Zenyatta need a holiday. You will go the Trinidad. Go immediately to the Canadian High Commission in Port-of Spain. The papers will be there. You then travel from there to the USA. Spend a week in New York at some cheap hotel in Queens, then fly to Toronto. I'll be here waiting. It's all arranged, but be as quiet as you can. Got it?"

"Yes, Cousin Peter. Thanks, man! We owe you our lives." He hung up.

Zenyatta swung into action, now that it was confirmed that we're going off to Canada. She called Monsignor Martin and asked that he solidify the position from the summer if that's possible. She instructed me to call Dean Hurley to try to get an appointment as soon as he can. We both called in Monty, Quincy and Melissa. I asked Monty to take the lead in explaining to the staff what we were doing, why we were doing it, and ensuring that there were no wagging tongues. Zenyatta talked about the generous termination package. Monty suggested that when we leave for Trinidad, he will start the exits of staff one by one so that nothing is too conspicuous. I also suggested to Monty that if he could sell the furniture in the

house, the proceeds should be divided equally between Melissa, Quincy, Duncan and himself.

I announced at a cabinet meeting that my wife and I were going on a badly-needed three-week vacation to Trinidad and some of the other islands. The President spoke:

"Well-deserved, Steven. Well-deserved." Everyone cheered. I smiled, thinking to myself what a relief it will be to escape from this den of sycophantic vipers.

Two weeks later, Monty and Sain drove us to the airport. The four of us were silent for most of the journey. For Zenyatta and me, it was difficult to leave home, especially with such finality. It was heart-breaking to leave people that we loved so deeply. Leave, maybe, never to see them again. I held my wife's hand tightly in mine, trying to convey to her that we shared the same grief at departure and the same hope where we settle. She looked at me, her eyes liquid, then she turned away and gazed out the window as if she would absorb each setting, each scene, each life, each tragedy.

Monty and Sain got the luggage from the boot of the big car, and we walked into the small airport. Monty gave the our tickets and passports to the flight attendant. She clearly recognised me,

"Welcome to our airlines, Honourable Minister. This will just be a second. Monty was about to put our suitcases on the scale. She stopped him,

"No need for that, Sir. WE do not need to weigh the Minister's luggage. We walked to the immigration section, had the passport stamped, and passed around the security scans. The cops and soldiers sensed that they should avoid stopping Monty and Sain from coming through with us. We went into the small waiting area, sat, still silent.

"We will miss you terribly!" Zenyatta blurted out.

Sain chocked back a sound and nodded, "Me too, Ma'am. All of us."

I sensed that the always stoic Monty was close to losing that stoicism. Sain's face was starting to muffle up. I was starting to worry that Zenyatta would lose her tenuous hold on her composure. I was also on the edge. Thankfully, a flight attendant came up and asked if we would like to board first. I stood immediately, affirming that we would. We went out of the building, Monty in front, followed by the two of us hand in hand. Sain was behind us. We went onto the tarmac to the stairs leading to the plane. A line of passengers had formed behind us.

We were about to mount the stairs, when Monty grabbed me in a hug, almost lifting off the ground,

"Sir! It has been the honour of my life to have served you these many years. I will miss you more than you will ever know. You are my friend. Both of you are friends," his voice cracking with emotion.

"Yes, my friend. You are as dear to us as anyone."

Zenyatta and Sain joined in the hug. They were both in tears. As we went up the stairs, the two soldiers stood at attention at the bottom. I sat on the window seat, Zenyatta on the isle seat. As the plane took to air, I saw the figures of Monty and Sain grow small, and faded like a memory. The brown of a great river stained the great Atlantic. I swore to myself, almost audibly:

"I shall never return to this Godforsaken place ever again! Never!" And even as I said that, I knew the keen pain of almost being aborted while being caught in the bloodstream of a new beginning.

I turned to my wife. Her eyes were blank with hurt and hope. She looked at me. A tear overran the bank of her eyelid. I brushed it onto my fingertip and placed it in my mouth.

"It shall be well, my beloved. It shall be well." A whisper of a smile escaped her lips.

Chapter Ninety-Two

In one and one half hours, we landed at Piarco Airport, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. We were first at the immigration and customs, first on the flight to feel the stare of the officers. They had that look that we reserve only for people we loathe. Absent was the "Welcome to the United Kingdom" in England or the "Welcome to Canada" in Toronto.

We got into an airport cab and booked into a hotel close to the Canadian High Commission. The room was hardly luxurious despite the price, and there was no restaurant. We showered, changed, and sat for a while, each of us having a Coke.

"I feel shipwrecked, even though I know where we are supposed to end up," Zenyatta observed.

"Yes. I suppose one does not leave one's country without feeling what we both feel, especially if return to the homeland is unlikely," I offered.

"I've tried to comfort myself by thinking of the destination rather than the departure and the journey, my love. But it's hard to sustain that concentration when memories insist on intruding. I will miss our people, my mom and dad and brother, our family."

"We both will, Zenyatta. But, hey, at least we will not remain here in Trinidad, huh?" I laughed.

Zenyatta smiled, "You've got a point there, my sweet."

"You know, my love, we left with the excuse that we needed a vacation, so why don't we make this a vacation. The added advantage of travelling around a bit is that we are avoiding a straight line from Trinidad to Canada. What sayeth thou?" I asked.

"It's a good idea, but we don't have money to burn, Steven. We need to be judicious with that. Our expenses will be enormous when we get to our destination."

"Okay. Then I'll call Kwame to advance me three months salary in USD from the Ministry's budget. That should cover our circuitous route and allow us some relaxation."

"Is that ethical? You know they will fire you after you don't show up after a month or two," Zenyatta questioned. She was right, of course.

"Ethics, Zenyatta? These people will be so bent on revenge, on hunting us down, that the last thing they will be thinking about is ethics. We will have our vacation at their expense. They owe us that, at the very least," I insisted.

Zenyatta was silent.

"Please do not be upset with my darling wife, not now, not ever," I pleaded.

"Oh, I'm not upset with you, Steven. I would, however, ask that you consider if lack of ethics is to be met with slighter lack of ethics. I don't know. This is your decision to make, dear heart."

"Let's go down and ask for the receptionist to recommend a restaurant, shall we? I need to think on a full belly," I laughed.

We went down and they suggested a nearby restaurant that specialises in fish dishes. We walked the short distance to the restaurant. The place was pleasant enough, though somewhat rowdy. We ordered grilled tilapia and fried breadfruit to go, walked back to the hotel and ate in the room.

"I'm glad we did not stay to have dinner there," Zenyatta commented.

"Yeah! Trinidadians tend to be very loud."

"And Guyanese are so refined, huh?" she quipped, smiling.

We were at the Canadian High Commission at nine the next day. They may have been told that I was a Minister of Government, because Zenyatta and I were treated with great care and respect, even beyond the famous Canadian politeness. We were introduced to the High Commissioner, a very pleasant man from Quebec. He claimed to know John Barry, Cousin Peter's lawyer, very well. John had filled him in on the details confidentially.

"I understand the risks involved here. Let me assure you, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva, that you are not the first high-level official to flee that regime in recent time. They may try to hunt you down, and Canada will do all it can to protect you. Of course, I'm sure that we all hoping they forget about you, right?" He laughed good-humouredly.

"Exactly, Your Excellency," Zenyatta added.

"Please, call me Pierre. I'll give you a card with my personal numbers here. You can reach me if you wish or if you need to."

He presented us with our papers, bemoaning the fact that there could be no photographs of the event. We went back to the hotel, and I called Kwame. I told him to advance me three months' salary, deposit it in my account in the bank, and say that I want them to wire it to me at my hotel address in Trinidad. I assured me that it will be done today and arrive by tomorrow.

I knew that there would be no red flags since we were only gone for a day. The flags will go up soon enough, I thought. We have another week to tour the islands. We decided to book tickets from location to location rather than string our travel plans onto one ticket. It was more expensive, but more difficult to track. The night we were off by to Saint Lucia. Three days in Castries and we went by boat to Antigua. Then by plane to Barbados. Two days in Bridgetown, and we were off to Kingston, Jamaica. We passed by Sabina Park, the major cricket ground in Jamaica. I asked the cab driver if there was a test match going on since there were long lines of people waiting to get in. The man laughed loudly,

"Naah, man! Is no test cricket dem brethren ah wait fah. Is Rohan Kanhai coachin' we yout dem! Thousand people go fuh see de man him bat!"

Rohan Kanhai, the great Guyana batsman, here in Jamaica, coaching. Of course they would not have him back home in his own country. Typical. In our country, we simply ignore our sports heroes. There were no villages or roads named after our greats…Kanhai, Trim, Soloman, Butcher, Kallicharran, Lloyd. There were no plans to do so either. What talent we have produced, we kill from neglect. Like our writers, they flee to other places where their talent may be recognised, rewarded, and put to good use. Escape is the only road to life for us.

We eventually arrived in Toronto. Cousin Peter was, of course, there to greet us. He was effusive in greeting us at the airport. He gave Zenyatta and me big hugs, and drove us to get *Tim Hortons* for coffee. We filled him in on the details: the Christmas get-together, the hiring of four more security, my meetings with the Leader, my raise to the position of Minister of Justice, the fraudulent referendum, and our escape.

Peter listened to us intently, drinking in each word, each intonation, observing each mood. In spite of his attentiveness, in spite of his joy and joviality since greeting us at the airport, there was a tension about him. I noticed the new lines on his forehead, the crow's feet at the sides of his eyes, the dark worry in those brown eyes. Zenyatta had picked it up too. She asked,

"Enough about us for a while, Peter. Do tell us how you're doing? The truth, please."

Peter started. He looked at Zenyatta, then at me,

"It's been somewhat trying these days, I must admit, dear cousins. I will tell you all about it in time, but this is not the time. This is a time for celebration. The two people closest to me are about to start a new life, and that is something which cannot simply pass," he smiled.

I decided to take Zenyatta's plea, but less directly: "It would be interesting to know what 'trying' constitutes for Peter D'Aguiar. We will hold you at your word, of course. You know, Zenyatta, that may be the single thing that our families have in common: they don't go back on their word. It is admirable. So Peter will open up to us before we leave for Fredericton. Right, cousin?"

"Right, my ministerial cousin!" he laughed.

I had the sense that Peter needed to talk to someone about this 'trying' thing or circumstance. Zenyatta may be the ideal person.

"How's Barry?" I asked.

"Oh, he was as happy as can be that the papers came through. He really did push hard. He's a good man, although I sometimes question his politics."

"As I'm certain you question Steven's politics!" Zenyatta quipped. We three laughed heartily. The tension eased off immediately.

Zenyatta continued: "Peter, would you mind if we spend the weekend with you? From today until Monday morning, say."

"Zenyatta, my dearest cousin, you know how I feel and you and my cousin! You know that you two are as close to me as my own heart. How, then, can you ask such a question?" There was a melancholy in his voice, yet something resembling good-natured teasing.

"Thank you, Peter," I said. Zenyatta got up and kissed him on the cheek.

"We'll plan a little get-together with John Barry for Sunday," he changed the subject.

"What's on for tomorrow?" I asked.

"Tomorrow, I'm taking you two to the Woodbine Race Course to see some horse racing!"

"Horses! Gosh, I just love horses. They're such beautiful things!" Zenyatta screamed, almost beside herself with excitement.

"Yes, they are the perfect blend of speed and power, and yet they are very fragile creatures. I think we'll have some real fun."

"I've never seen a horse race. The government banned that kind of thing. Aren't you excited, my love?" She asked me.

"Yes, yes. It would be interesting, I think. I've never been to a race course either, so we're in for a new experience!" I conceded.

"And you can even make a wager or two," Peter grinned. Then, of course, he had to explain what a "wager" was, how it works. Things about win, place, show, exacta, trifecta, and such things.

We arrived at the house, left most of the suitcases in one of the rooms downstairs, took one suitcase up with us, showered, dressed, had supper which Peter ordered in, and talked more about horse racing deep into the night. Zenyatta was positively enraptured by the whole thing, and Peter was only too happy to rattle on. I was riveted by the two of them, but I was also interested in the complexity of the sport. All about the "going" or state of the track, about breeding, the distance, the jockey, the poll position, the number of turns, and such things. I was quite taken aback by the number of variables involved, the uncertainty of it all, the gamble. My mind cast itself back to our trip to the casino some time back, our winning, and Zenyatta's joy.

Woodbine met and surpassed all our expectations. The drive was some one hour and fifteen away, and Peter continued where we left off about horse trainers and the role they played in the conditioning of the horses. We drove into a massive parking lot (I though, fancifully, that the place for parking was about the size of our capital city), found a parking spot, and walked to one of the entrances. Zenyatta and I noted the number of shuttles that took people from their cars to the large building. Peter said that most of the people were there to play the slots on the ground-floor casino, but the stands and betting places were up an escalator. Nearby the foot of the escalator, we bought racing programs, a small booklet that had all the details about the horses running in each race. Like almost everything in Canada, the Woodbine building was massive, we walked some five hundred meters to another escalator to go up to the stands. The people heading for the casino as well as the racing folk shared one thing: a look upon their faces, a tone in their chatter, voices that conveyed hope of walking out with pockets bulging with cash. Winning was everything.

Peter had given Zenyatta two hundred dollars and she gave me three hundred from our funds. Together, the two of us had five hundred dollars to bet if we so desired. Peter decided that we'd have a better view if we sat in the seats outside the glass-fronted building. The horses were already on the track for the first race, the post-parade. I followed the horses by looking at the program and attaching the names to the numbers on the saddle cloth. The race-goers comments filtered through my concentration in fragments of sound:

"He ears up!"

"He on his toes!"

"He sweatin' too much!"

"Husbands winning this shit, I'm tellin' ya!"

"Man, Chantal can ride better than Husbands!"

It was constant, as the horses made their way to the six-furlong gates. The loading of the horses into the gates was remarkably efficient. And, exactly on time, the race was on its way. The voice of the racing commentator boomed over the din of the crown,

"And theerre off!"

The crowd was already up on the feet, screaming for the horse on whom they put their money. It was really a wondrous sight, these noble, beautiful animals going at full tilt, jockeys poised with the behinds in the air, feel in the stirrups, and holding on to the reins. When they rounded the two-furlong turn, the screaming crowd went wild; yet, over the raucous I could hear the thunder of hooved hitting the ground, horses and jockeys at full stretch. The number three horse won by a neck. I had my attention wrenched away by Zenyatta's tugging at my arm. She was drenched in sweat, breathless,

"I knew he would win! I simply knew it, my love! I knew!" she screamed at me.

I smiled, "Gosh! Pity we were too late to place a bet. You would have won, my sweet." I said, with no irony intended. She glanced at me to make sure that I was not being caustic. I kissed her on the cheek, then turned the page of the racing program.

"Okay. Now pick the winner here, and we will ask Peter to bet, right Peter?" He seemed quite distracted and did not respond. His head was buried in the program, looking with grave intensity at the horses for the next race.

"You okay, Peter?" Zenyatta asked. Peter seemed startled.

"Oh yes, yes. I'm good. Just looking at who will win the next race," he said, then got up and left. When he returned, I asked,

"Did you place a wager?"

"Yes. I put five thousand on number five to win. He should win this one easily. Who do you like, Zenyatta?"

"Oh, I like number eight. I like the name," she responded.

"Maybe I should have put my money on number eight. But he really can't go a mile."

As it happened, Zenyatta's choice proved right again. His horse was fourth. Peter looked awful, his eyes drooped, sweat was running down his face, and he slumped. He got up and told us to follow him.

"I want us to have a closer look at the horses. We'll go down to the area where they saddle the horses. "

We walked out, went down two escalators, though a sliding door and to the area where trainers were getting their charges ready, some of them talking animatedly with the jockeys. A steel rail separated the people from the horses. The crowd wad five or six deep at the rail. We stood back, satisfied that we could see the horses, all saddled, lead by grooms, as they went round and round.

"Which one do you like, girl?" he asked Zenyatta, a touch of condescension in his voice.

"I like that black one, number ten. He is so beautiful."

"First off, it's a she, a filly. Second, that horse is forty to one! Third, my dear girl, she's dark bay!" Peter exclaimed.

"I still like her, Peter," she said calmly.

"Okay then, I'll bet on number seven, but I'll put five hundred dollars on your choice."

We went back upstairs, and Peter did as he said, putting ten thousand dollars on his number seven and one hundred on Zenyatta's number eight. Both were to win. We put twenty dollars on Zenyatta's choice to win. In the mile, number seven shot to the front and opened up four lengths within the first furlong. They went round the track, Peter's horse tired in the last four hundred yards, and Zenyatta's won by half of a length. Peter was beside himself with what may have been anger or despair. He swore mightily,

"Fuck! Fuck that asshole jockey! He lost the race, that goat!" He slumped back into his seat, took out the tickets and tore up his losing bet into little pieces. It hurt him even more when it was posted that the horse paid two hundred and ten dollars to win. We collected four thousand two hundred dollars; Peter collected twenty-one thousand dollars, doubling his total investment so far for the day. The money in his pocket, he turned to us,

"Hey, you two love birds, I'm sorry about my behaviour. I really get excited at the tracks, and Steven knows how I hate losing. Please forgive me!" Zenyatta gave him a big hug, and I slapped him on the back signalling my forgiveness.

"Gosh, he was always a sore loser! Always! Just like Uncle Peter!" I said to my wife. We had a good laugh. We resumed our seats, looking at the programs. Zenyatta chose her horse, number 6. I chose number 1. Peter decided that he will skip this race since the horses were all running for the first time. We put five dollars on each of the horses we chose. They ran out of the money.

We went down to the paddock area to see the horses for race 8, the race that Peter was most interested in. The throng of fans was even larger than before, almost

eight or nine deep. Once again, we stood back. Once again, Peter bullied his way to the front. He leaned on the rail, waiting to catch the attention of someone in the enclosure. He raised his arm in the air, and one of the trainers held up his arm in recognition. He finished up saddling and tightening the girth of his charge, a big, long, rangy, grey colt. He crossed over to Peter, and they had what seemed to be an animated conversation. The horse wore saddle-cloth number 2, white cloth with the number in black.

Peter waded his way through the crowd, coming back to us with a smile.

"Okay, Mr. All-smiles," I said, "let us in on the secret!"

"I just spoke to the trainer of the grey. He's a good friend. He assures me that the horse will win. Sure thing!"

"Is there any such thing as a 'sure thing' in this sport?" I asked. Zenyatta squeezed my hand hard in warning to shut up.

"I like him too, Peter," she said, maybe shielding me from Peter's wrath. Peter smiled.

We went up, lined up at one of the betting slots. My eyes almost fell out of their sockets when Peter counted out fifteen thousand dollars and put it on the horse to win. Zenyatta instructed me to bet one hundred on the horse. I also bet on a horse that I had found attractive, a chestnut colt, number 8. Peter suggested I play a twenty-dollar exactor, 2 and 8.

"Play it straight!" he instructed. I did.

We returned to our seats which were thankfully still unoccupied. The horses emerged onto the track, held fast by riders on lead ponies. They were magnificent, these race horses. The big grey was indeed the stand-out, his head high in the air, his bearing so noble that a king would be envious. He turned his head to the crowd with what seemed to me to be disdain. I wondered at the skill it must take to get these animals in such spectacular condition, the knowledge, the patience. I wondered at the dangers face by the jockeys, small, powerful men, who were aboard these one-thousand-pound beasts, going at break-neck speed. The skill, the control, the strength, and—above all—the courage of these men. One mistake or one bounce or one stumble would be all it took to kill them. I looked at Peter. He was as tight as a drum. Zenyatta was wringing her hands with nervous anticipation. I could hear my heart thumping in my chest. It would be easy, I thought, to get hooked on this sport.

The race was set for one and one-sixteenth of a mile, so the horses had to pass the grand stand twice. They were off. The horses shot of out the gates and the

jockeys hustled to position their mounts in the most advantageous spots. The number 1 one horse shot to the front as they rumbled pass the grandstand for the first time. The grey, the overwhelming favourite, was dead last. My number 8 was at the middle of the pack in between horses. With five furlongs left to run, the grey was stilllanguishing at the back of the field, some twelve or fifteen lengths behind the leader. Peter has started to yell at the jockey,

"Come on! Get him moving! Get going now!"

Zenyatta had her hands over her mouth, and I had started to sweat. Then, as if the jockey on the big grey heard Peter's instruction, he shook the reins of the horse. The response was immediate and decisive. They grey swept to the outside of the pack and began to overtake the others with seemingly little effort. By the two-furlong turn he was second. My second choice, number 8, was in front. The grey challenged, and at the one-furlong pole, they were neck and neck. They, suddenly, they grey seemed to find another gear and swept past to win by four or five lengths. Number 8 was second.

Peter was jumping up and down, Zenyatta with him, and I found myself doing the same with the two of them. We were hugging, laughing, high-fiving each other, as gleeful as children at Christmas upon finding their gifts from Santa Claus. We practically danced to the teller. Peter collected sixty thousand dollars, a fortune. Zenyatta and I collected four hundred for the win bet and four hundred for the exacta. We had won a fortune. We went back to our seats, gazing at our racing programs. I was about to ask Peter about which horse he liked when two burly fellows came up, tapped him on the shoulder, and one of them beckoned with his index finger for him to follow them. I stood up to go with him, but he stopped me,

"It's okay, Steven. You stay with Zenyatta. I know these guys. I'll be back in a minute."

He returned in about five minutes. "What was that about, Peter?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a small bit of business, but I took care of it. Don't worry, boy." He tried to sound confident, but I could see his uneasiness.

"You know,' he said, "I think we should leave while we're ahead."

Zenyatta agreed, and we got into the car. Throughout the drive, Zenyatta and I babbled about the race, while Peter stayed silent.

He broke his silence, blurting, "What should we do for the small get-together tomorrow?"

Zenyatta answered: "Well, it really should be our treat to you and John Barry. After all, we would not be here without you, Peter. We will never be able to repay you for our very lives. Never!"

"Don't mention it, my dear girl. You are my family, my only family, really. It may not seem like that to you, but you two are also the only friends I have in this world. Truly."

There was a quality in his voice that made any reply unnecessary. I reached over and squeezed his shoulder. He turned to me with a wistful smile. In my mind, I wondered at his exclusion of Uncle Peter, but I said nothing.

"I'll cook! It would be good for Peter to have a home-cooked meal for a change. I could make a real West Indian dish! Pepper-pot and bread! How about that, huh?"

"Yummy my tummy," Peter said.

We stopped by a West Indian store and got cassareep, five loaves of bread, cloves, and a few other things that Zenyatta deemed necessary. Then we stopped by a supermarket and got some excellent cuts of Canadian Grade A beef, a whole chicken, livers, and Italian bread. Then we walked across to the liquor store where we got two bottles of Laddie single-malt scotch and two bottles of wine. Zenyatta insisted on paying for it all, and Peter raised no objection.

Back at Peter's house, we had supper. Afterwards, Zenyatta went into the kitchen to prepare her meats for tomorrow. She refused offers of help from Peter and me. We sta there having a drink, talking abut the situation in the homeland, my role in it, and then to the more pleasant topic of horses.

"I just loved being at the races today, Peter. Loved it. But I must say that I'm glad we're gonna be in New Brunswick away from it. I think it could consume both of us, me and her."

"I think you're right, Steven. In fact, I know you're right. It's certainly consumed me, but I'm hanging in there. I am."

We were silent after that confession. Zenyatta was done in the kitchen, and we went up, showered and went to bed.

The next day went be quickly, with both of us men helping Zenyatta in the kitchen. Five o'clock rolled around, and the small group of people began arriving. John Barry was first, anxious for a drink. We showered him and Peter with the thanks they richly deserved. The others came in, mostly people from John's office. It was very pleasant. No one in the group had ever had pepper-pot, and they were enchanted by it. Zenyatta had also baked a chicken with stuffing. They ate their fill and drank and talked. Peter was back to his usual hospitable, entertaining self. We

were tired, and asked to be excused since we were travelling early the next day. We retired, packed as much as we could, and went to bed.

The next morning, Peter drove us to Pearson International Airport. He had already booked our stay at the Lord Beaverbrook for one week. He had also called the Mayor, asking that he use his resources to identify three houses on the South-side of Fredericton that were up for sale. He reassured us that he was but a phone call away in case we needed him. We told him that we will always be there for him as well.

Chapter Ninety-Three

Landing at the Fredericton airport felt for all the world like coming home. The sense of freedom was palpable, and Zenyatta walked with a sense of confidence, with a lightness in our steps, that we had not felt for a very long time. It was all friendly, orderly, easy. The Lord Beaverbrook driver, our old friend, was out of the vehicle, trunk open, waiting to load our luggage. He greeted us cheerily, said how much they all missed us and hoped that we were here for a much longer stay. I smiled and thanked him. We got the same wonderful reception from everyone at the hotel, with lots of handshakes and hugs and kisses. Someone shouted,

"We'll make sure you never leave the Maritimes again!"

Zenyatta responded coyly, "We'll see." I hoped that the person who said that was right. By the time we got up to our room, the suitcases were already there. We unpacked quickly, showered and changed clothes, and walked across to Mayor Bosnitch's office. The tall man greeted us warmly and showed us pictures of three houses which were up for sale. He outlined the advantages and disadvantages of each, the prices, the physical condition of each, and other variables that we needed to consider. He had arranged for us to visit the houses within the next few days, and we set up a schedule for those visits. We walked back to the hotel, and I called Dean Hurley. He assured me that the offer was open and that I can join the teaching staff in September. He suggested that I come in as soon as I could to get "the lay of the land," meet the faculty, and look at the courses I was to be assigned to teach.

Zenyatta then called Monsignor Martin of Saint Thomas University, and the reception was equally warm and welcoming. Father Martin asked that she come in to see him the next day. Having done as much as we could, we tried to relax enough to have dinner. Nancy was there, and that helped. Even her chatter helped to distract us somewhat.

"We should really wind down, my love. Everything seems to be working out perfectly. Your job, my job, the house, our wonderful welcome by everyone. Wow!" Zenyatta said, holding my hand. I seem to draw strength from her.

"I love you, woman," I blurted out.

"And I adore you, man!" she smiled.

"Do you realize that you are the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen? I could ravish you right now!"

"Let's go up, my husband. My only."

She was already standing. I dropped my cutlery, got up, held her around the waist, and went up. We were unclothed before we hit the bed. Our love-making was both violent and tender, each in turn, and both simultaneously. We were both spent at the end of it, both of us panting, flat on our backs, holding hands. We remained like this, breathing heavily, until she finally caught her breath,

"Is it not wonderful that we are still discovering each other after all these years of marriage?"

"It is. It is, and we are still discovering ourselves, maybe." I responded, turning on my side to look upon this vision, this wife of mine. She giggled, almost girlishly. We held each other and slept.

We were both us early, went down for a leisurely breakfast, and then dressed for our respective meetings with Monsignor Martin and Dean Hurley. We arranged to meet again in ninety minutes by the hotel car. I was there first, having chatted with Dean Hurley and being introduced to several of the professors. Hurley had me sign a contract for one year as a probationary period. Upon proof of teaching excellence—verifiable and measurable—publications and community or university service, I would be in line for a tenure-track position. My former position as a Minister of Justice held me in good stead. After being shown around the building and my new office, I went to the car and awaited Zenyatta. She showed up about thirty minutes later, beaming. She got the job immediately as university counsellor. She also had to teach two psychology courses to undergrads. The salaries were reasonable. We were both quite happy with the way things went. We were now employed.

We then went to two of the houses that the mayor had identified. We were given the usual tours. One of the houses was one of those semi-detached things. We both felt claustrophobic in the place. Two rooms, a tiny kitchen, a small living area, no yard space to talk about, and a narrow space at the side of the house that would barely accommodate one small car. We thanked the realtor for his kindness and patience and promised to be in contact within days. We thought he knew how we felt. We were both aware, also, that the place seemed all the more cloistered because of our previous mansion-like house at home. Yet, this was not the time for looking back.

As we travelled to the second house, Zenyatta gave me a gentle nudge,

"Did you know that your displeasure with that house was written all over your face, my love?"

"I know. Because there was much to be displeased about."

"Agreed, my dear. But if we see one that you like, don't show that you like it. They tend to jack the price up."

"I hear you, my gorgeous one," I smiled. She made sense.

The next house was attractive to us from the start, but I was mindful to keep my feelings contained. The house was just east of Fredericton, about ten minutes away from the universities. There was never any travel to speak of in this wonderful city. This was, thankfully, not New York or London or Toronto. The house was a structure on its own, built in the 1800's, with the kind of rugged sturdiness that one expects from that time when there was pride in work. There was a relatively large yard, a two-car driveway, a large kitchen, four bedrooms—three upstairs and one downstairs—a roomy living room, and a den. It was just off the public road, which meant some shovelling in winter, and the price was just beyond our reach. I thought it best to let Zenyatta do the talking. The female realtor kept looking at me for some kind of reaction. She should have been looking at my wife, I thought whimsically.

"We are interested, Mrs. Wilson..." Zenyatta opened.

"Oh, Veronica, please, Mrs. DaSilva."

"And just Zenyatta would do, Veronica," my wife responded. She saw, as did I, that this woman was anxious to go through with the deal.

"We are truly interested, although there are some improvements to be done, and it would cost serious money to furnish this space. All you have here in a fridge and a stove and a bed in one of the rooms. To furnish this house with furnishings appropriate for such a structure would be quite expensive. And we'd be quite some distance from the universities where we work. That means two cars, of course. Unfortunately, the price is outside of our range."

"Well, Zenyatta, we can see what we can do to bring it closer to your budget," she smiled, "but it would take some persuasion for the owners to lower the price."

"Can you get them to bring it down, Veronica? It would mean much for us, two relatively young people, recently come to Canada and New Brunswick, just starting out." Zenyatta said, touching the arm of the realtor.

"I don't know, Zenyatta. They seemed quite firm about the price, but..."

"Please try, my dear. It would mean more to us than anyone would know, although I'm sure you have already sensed how much it would mean to us."

"Will you excuse me for a minute, please, Zenyatta. I'll contact them right away."

"Before you do, would I be right in thinking that we ought to be able to pay ten percent down?"

"Yes, dear. Ten percent, closing fees, and the rest can be handled if you secure a bank loan."

Zenyatta steered her away from me by a few feet, as if the two women were conspiring against the only man in the place.

"Woman-to-woman, we're hoping to start a family. We'd need to price to come down, but we can provide twenty-five percent as a down payment in cash. Plus the closing fee. Make the case for us, please."

Veronica walked through the front door, asking us to look around while she spoke with the owners. She fished into her bag, dragged out a large, clunky-looking hand-phone, and dialled.

"She's now advocating for friends, helping a young couple of new Canadians, and for a woman. We are not nameless buyers with strange accents," Zenyatta whispered into my ear. I winked at her and pulled her closer to me.

He realtor returned, "They were pleased by the cash downpayment. How soon can you get that to us, Zenyatta?"

"Tomorrow morning, if you wish. As soon as the bank opens its door."

"Wonderful! They are willing to bring the price down by ten thousand."

"If you can get them to go down by fifteen, Veronice, you have a deal," Zenyatta said, clearly putting the onus on the

Realtor in a somewhat flattering way.

"I'm confident I can get them to do that, Zenyatta. Leave that to me."

"Then we have a deal, my dear Veronica! Congrats to the two of us!" Zenyatta gushed. They gave each other a hug, and

Zenyatta gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek. I stood there, the seeming on-looker, with a satisfied grin on my face.

"I'll draw up the papers by tomorrow. If you could stop by our office by eleven, that would be good."

"We'll be there, armed with a cashier's cheque and the closing fee," Zenyatta returned.

We went to the campus branch of the Bank of Montreal, equipped with every document imaginable: Passports, landed

immigrant papers, job letters from the two universities, and material about the house. The Loans Officer, a plump, pasty-

white, middle-aged woman, was pleasant enough though somewhat officious, expressed worry about my one-year

probationary deal with UNB. I suggested she re-look at the contract and notice the tenure-track clause or call Dean Hurley

for confirmation.

"And you can call Monsignor Martin too if you have doubts about my contract," Zenyatta added testily. She called Hurley,

but did not call Father Martin. I supposed she knew better. At any rate, we got the cashier's cheque and cash for the closing

fee, as well as money for furniture and other expenses. In the end, she conceded that we should be able to secure the loan,

and that she will call to confirm by the end of the work day. We then went to the office, submitted the cashier's cheque and

the closing fee, and informed Veronica about the loan.

We got the call that afternoon confirming that the loan had been approved. Zenyatta and I huddled together to talk about

finances. After all the expenses, including a car, we had enough left for four to five months in reserve. However, we

could count on salaries from August 1. We agreed that there was very little wiggle room, but we could endure if care was

exercised. We spent the next day buying basic furniture, and the hotel driver advised us on a good second-hand car.

Two weeks later, we moved into our new home. We furnished two bedrooms upstairs and furnished the downstairs bedroom

as my office; Zenyatta had the den as hers. We had our first home-cooked meal in our new home. It was quiet, and we were

happy. We chatted until late into the night. We talked about home, how we felt about leaving, about the potential dangers

that those we left behind may yet face, about our new home and hopes, our new jobs. Then our chat was interrupted when

Zenyatta suddenly pushed back her chair, got up, and rushed to the downstairs bathroom. By the time I caught up, she was

bending over the toilet vomiting violently. I rubbed her back steadily, until she seemed to have brought up her entire supper.

Then I got her a glass of water. By the time I was back, she was at the sink, washing her mouth and gargling with

Mouthwash to rid herself of the taste.

I held her and escorted her back to the table, "I've never seen you sick, my love. You were under a great deal of stress over

the last two months. It can't be something you ate since we both ate the same things, so it must be the stress. I'll make you a

nice cup of tea. That will settle your stomach. Just sit still, my darling."

I returned with the cup of tea, "Just sip, my sweet," I cajoled, drying her face with a paper towel. She finished her tea,

saying she felt a whole lot better.

"I think some fresh air will do me well, my love. We could go for a short walk, maybe?" she suggested.

"At this time of night?" I asked, "Oh, new place. Fredericton, quiet, orderly, safe Fredericton. Yeah, let's go for a short

walk, my love." And so we walked along the public road, hand-in-hand, breathing the clean, crisp summer air.

"I rather like the smell and feel of freedom, my darling husband," she said, forcing back a sob.

"Yes. It is good for mind and body, but you will spend tomorrow in bed, and let me pamper you. No stress, no anxiety about

anything." She smiled at me, and we returned to the house.

"Gosh, I feel so much better. The air did me well. Thank you, my darling husband."

We went up to our room, Zenyatta had a shower while I sat and looked on. I also had a quick shower, went down to turn off

the lights, made sure the doors were locked, collected a book from the bookshelf, and went up again. I read her a few

paragraphs from Hemingway's A Movable Feast. By the time, I had finished the first paragraph, she was fast asleep. I read

a bit more, enjoying Hemingway's clear prose, then turned off the bedstead lamp, and turned to look at the face of my

beautiful Zenyatta. It was always her looking after me, always me who had crumbled under pressure. It was strange that it

was now reversed; she was the one who was always the more composed, the more durable. At the same time, I was grateful

for the chance to take care of her.

As I lay there in that twilight zone of not being fully asleep nor fully awake, my mind bent to back home. The time will

soon come when the powers that have ravaged my homeland will realise that something was amiss, that some betrayal was

afoot on my part. And they will raise hell. Of that I was sure. Not because they saw me as important to their mission to

amass power and wealth, but because they will feel the threat of secrets leaked, the malice at being jilted. I looked upon the

face of my wife, this woman that had unknowingly brought me out of the moral pit in which my cruelty had deservedly put

me. I was afraid for her, for they would seek to exact revenge upon me by hurting her.

I was up early. Zenyatta was still asleep. I went down and made breakfast: scrambled eggs, toast, and fresh-squeezed orange

juice. Zenyatta came down wen I was just about done.

"Good morning, my darling husband. Oh, how lovely! Breakfast all ready, but you did not have to, you know. I'm much

better now. Pink of health as they say." She kissed me on the cheek.

"Please sit, my love. Allow me the pleasure of serving you for a change." I said. She sat at the table and watched me set the

Table, pour coffee, set the plates and cutlery, put the orange juice. She gulped down the juice and started into the eggs and

toast, sipping at the coffee as she ate. I was pleased.

"This is delicious, my love."

No sooner had she said that when she was up and in the bathroom, I ran after her. She had her head over the toilet bowl. I

rubbed her back. The vomiting fit was not as bad as last night, but it was worrying.

"I must have caught a bug or some such thing. Or maybe I ate too quickly," she said.

"Well, you did eat at a rate," I said. I got some seedless grapes from the fridge for her, felt her neck. She did not have a

fever.

"Should we go to a doctor?" I asked.

"Oh, come on, Steven. I bit of throwing up and we run to a doctor? That's an abuse of Canada's free health, and we are not

about to abuse that," She said, firmly.

"Okay, my love. But we go if this continues," I said with equal determination.

She ate the entire bowl of grapes, each chewed slowly. That stayed down.

"See? I'm fine," she smirked in triumph.

We went to our respective workspaces to prepare for our jobs. She was designing questionnaires to assess mental and

emotional well-being; I was working on course outlines for the courses I was assigned to teach. I was also planning out the

outlines of a paper on "When Political Power Challenges the Law". After an hour, Zenyatta looked in to me office and said

she was going to lie down for a bit.

"Do you want me to come with you, my love?"

"No, no. I'll just rest my eyes for an hour and be down."

By lunchtime, she was still asleep. I made light sandwiches of whole wheat bread, edam cheese, peanut butter and jam. I

took some up for her with a Coke. I woke her up and insisted she eat. She sat up,

"You do not have to baby-sit me, husband. I'm fine, just a little tired from the hustle and bustle of the last few weeks.

Besides, you need to get on with your work."

I sat with her and made sure she ate slowly. After she was finished, I waited around in case she threw up again. Thankfully,

she kept the sandwiches down, and I thought the Coke helped. Within an hour, Zenyatta was downstairs again, having

showered and dressed. She stood in doorway of my office looking a vision of beauty, like something from Rosetti's

painting. I gaped at her beauty. And yet, she was in a jeans and a red tee-shirt tucked into the jeans.

"I feel like having lamb chops, my love. Can we go into town and get some. I'll bake them when we return."

We zoomed off in our second-hand Honda Accord, windows down, enjoying the breeze. I glanced across at her. Zenyatta

had her head on the headrest, enjoying the freshness of the breeze, her face set in a smile. She was better, I thought with

relief. As we entered town, I glanced at her again, and she was crying. I pulled over to the side of King Street.

"Why are you crying, my love? Are you not feeling well? Please talk to me Zenyatta," I pleaded.

"I'm fine, my darling one. Really. It's just that I love you so much that I think my heart would burst from it." I reached

Across and hugged her tightly.

"And I love you, my sweet wife, my Zenyatta, my love."

She smiled through the tears, took out a tissue and wiped away the tears. We drove to the Sobey's supermarket, got a

shopping cart, and strolled in the most leisurely way through every isle.

"Isn't it wonderful just being able to walk unhurriedly, simply doing a spot of shopping. Nothing in Fredericton is hectic,

no place is too crowded. I have the only man I've ever loved beside me, the only man I will ever love. It's perfect, it's

heaven, my Steven."

"It is, my love. It's heaven indeed," I agreed.

We got a small sack of Prince Edward Island (PEI) potatoes, a bunch of asparagus, thyme, tomatoes, two avocadoes,

peaches, grapes, and six lamb chops.

"Oh, I wish they had limes, I feel like having a large jug of lime wash. Pity." Zenyatta said.

"No limes, but they have lemons, It's just as good."

"Yes, yes...but we will have to get vanilla essence," and off we went on our quest for vanilla essence.

"Hey, husband, did you notice that every single person we met had a smile and a 'good afternoon' or a 'how are ya?' for us.

Every single person! God, Steven, I love this place. This is home." She gushed.

I chuckled, "Yes, I noticed. And yes, this is indeed home."

We finished shopping, went to the checkout, paid the friendly teller, and rolled the cart to our car. Our items in the trunk, I

returned the shopping trolley to its rightful place, and walked back to Zenyatta. We were home in about seven minutes.

Together, we prepared the lamb and baked potatoes, and put both in the oven. Zenyatta instructed me,

"Red meat is baked with low heat and more time. It ensures tenderness. The potatoes may take a bit longer." She seemed to

Enjoy dispensing her wisdom to one such as my lowly self. She was having a great deal of fun, peacocking around the

Kitchen. I was happy at the whole performance.

We had what turned out to be a delicious supper. We ate at an easy rate, chatting away about how wonderful we were as

Cooks, praising ourselves in light-hearted ways. Afterwards, Zenyatta took a tall glass of lemonade into her office and got

to work. I went into my office with coffee, alert to any sound or sign that Zenyatta was unwell.

As the summer sun was setting, we went for a walk. We walked slowly, zig-zagging along the side of the road, shoving

each other like teenagers, giggling, hugging, stopping and kissing. It was something like a return to innocence, to the

newness of things. It was dark by the time we got home again. Zenyatta dove into the peaches, eating five of the eight we'd

bought at Sobeys. I could not take my eyes off her. Of course, she saw me gazing at her,

"Stop looking at me, boy! Like yuh wan' bad-eye me or wah?" She laughed.

"Hey, girl, looking at my wife is my basic marital right!" I responded. She almost spat out her bite of peach.

"Look at what you almost made me do?"

I decided to work for a bit, and Zenyatta went up for a bath. After fifteen or twenty minutes of trying in vain to wrestle my

mind away from her and towards my course outlines, I gave up. I went upstairs and looked in on her in the bath.

"God! You are a vision, woman! I swear!"

"Come in with me, my love."

I stripped and got in the bathtub with her. We lathered each other, and I dawdled the sponge on her full, firm breasts. She

knew. I knew. Neither of us felt rushed. We towelled off, climbed under the sheets, touching and caressing each other anew.

Our love-making was long, tender, fluid, as if we would luxuriate in our love for eternity. Afterwards, she curled up in my

arms, her head on my chest, her golden leg over my legs, and we slept.

I was awakened the next morning by the sound of her gagging in the bathroom. I hustled from beneath the blanket and

rushed to her. She was straining from the effort, but nothing was coming up. She looked at me, her eyes almost teary.

"We should visit a doctor, I think," she said. It was almost nine, and I thought of who I could call. We went downstairs, and

I made her a cup of tea. Zenyatta suggested I call Mayor Bosnitch. I called and asked him about a doctor he'd recommend.

He was very kind and sounded quite concerned.

"The best is Dr. James O'Brian, Steven. I'll call him immediately and let him know that you and Zenyatta are coming in.

His office is right next to Saint Dunstan's School on Prospect Street. He'll see you immediately upon your getting there. We

were at Dr. O'Brian's at around ten, and he saw us right away. He was a middle-aged man, average height, starting to bald,

a kind face and a gentle voice. He welcomed us, said he had just talked to Mayor Bosnitch, and assured us that all will be

well. He took Zenyatta's vitals. The pulse, blood pressure, and temperature were all normal. He asked that she provide a

urine sample, and took a blood sample as well.

"This is just to be sure that nothing is amiss. We'll get the results in fifteen minutes or so. In the meanwhile, you can have a

seat in the waiting room. The receptionist will give you some forms to fill out. I'll come and get you as soon as I get the test

results." he assured us. We thanked him and went out. The receptionist gave us two forms each on clipboards. We filled

them out, returned them, and sat down again holding hands. Within minutes, Dr. O'Brian emerged,

"Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva, please." We stood and followed him into his simple office. He sat at the small desk; we sat on two

Chairs beside the desk.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. DaSilva. Mrs. DaSilva is pregnant," he said kindly but matter-of-factly.

Zenyatta's nails almost bit through my skin.

"Are you sure, Doctor?"

"I'm sure," he replied, smiling. Zenyatta's face had turned red, and I could feel the blood rush into my head. I hugged and

kissed her unabashedly.

"Oh, my love! My love, we are blessed. Truly blessed by the Almighty," she cried. I was in tears as well. I was speechless

with joy. The doctor gave us a few minutes to gather ourselves, then he instructed,

"We'll make an appointment for next month. I'll give you a more thorough examination then to be sure that all is as it

should be. You may have a few more days of morning sickness, but there is no cause for alarm. It's just the body going

through some hormonal changes. It's all perfectly natural. In the meanwhile, take it easy for the next week or two. No heavy

lifting, no strenuous exercises, that sort of thing. Congratulations again."

We thanked him profusely and went out. The receptionist made the appointment for next month and assured us that she'll

call to remind us of the appointment. Outside the office, we hugged each other for a long time. I kissed her forehead, her

cheeks, her eyes, her lips, her neck, her hands. I wanted to kneel and kiss her feet.

"Can we go see Father Martin, please?"

"Of course, my love." We drove up the hill to Saint Thomas and walked into Father Martin's secretary's office. She called

and showed us in to his office. Monsignor Martin rose from his chair, came around the desk, and reached out his hand to

Zenyatta to shake her hand. She took his hand and placed it on her head,

"Father, we just found out that I am with child. You are the first I wanted to know so that you may bless me and the child I

carry." Her eyes were downcast. The Monsignor did not try to hide his pleasure:

"My child. This is glorious news, and you have my blessings and my congratulations. You too Steven. I pray that our Lord

keep you and your child from all harm, from all evil. I pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Raise up thine eyes, child, for the Lord is with you." Zenyatta raised her eyes and looked into the eyes of the priest. She was

tearful. Father Martin wiped the tear fallen upon her cheek, "Weep not, child! Rejoice." He hugged her and beckoned that I

join the hug. We held each other for a long while, the he said to us,

"I hope you will join us for mass on Sunday, my dear children."

"We shall be there, Father. Thank you."

"Who is your physician, child?"

"Doctor O'Brian, Father," I said.

"Good. Very good. He is a good man and a good doctor…and he is Catholic," he chuckled. Zenyatta and I smiled.

"Now, Steven, if you or your dear wife should need anything, you must promise to call me directly."

"I promise you, Father."

He gave us a sort lecture on rest, on avoiding stress of any sort, on eating well, and other health-related things. We left.

Zenyatta seemed at peace, and I was happier than I've ever been in my life. We were heading back down towards Prospect

Street, when Zenyatta said,

"I only just realize that these two campuses have no walls, no fences, nothing at all that separates them from the

community."

"And no soldiers!" I added.

"This is how universities are supposed to be, my love. They should always be part of the communities in which they exist,

Always."

"I agree, my darling wife. I suspect, though, that changes come very, very slowly to universities. They have always seen

Themselves as above so-called ordinary people, apart from their daily struggles and triumphs. Towers made of

Marshmallows and arrogance."

"But Father Martin has already told you to rejoice, my Zenyatta. No gloomy thoughts!"

"I feel like eating strawberries and blueberries and pineapples."

"You wish is my command!" And I turned towards Sobeys.

We spent the next few days ensuring Zenyatta did nothing strenuous. I did most of the cooking and cleaning, although she

insisted on doing the dishes. We spent a great deal of time discussing the baby, eating, and preparing for work. In the

evenings we went for short walks. There was only one more episode of vomiting.

One morning Dean Hurley's secretary called. She told me that a large brown envelope was in my pigeon hole for two days

now, and she suggested that I drop in to pick it up. I thought it best to keep this to myself. I told Zenyatta that I'll be back in

thirty minutes or so, that Dean Hurley needs to see me about courses. I went to the Law School, got the envelope, and went

to my modest office. It was from Peter. I opened it.

There was a short note from my cousin saying that he had received this from the Qualis family. He hoped that all was well

with us, and he promised to call soon. He sent his love. Within Peter's large brown envelope was another, brown, frayed,

discoloured, all the signs that it came from a Guyana caught in the clasp of oppression, hunger and want. There was a small

newspaper clipping with the headline, "Minister of Justice MIA" and a letter from Marjorie and Robert Qualis,

Our dearest Zenyatta and Steven,

We hope you are well and safe. We are sending this to your cousin with the hope that he can get this to you. We thought

that you should know that eyebrows are being raised about your absence, although hell has not yet broken out. It soon will,

we think. Please be assured that everyone here is safe, although we are keeping a very low profile. Monty has been very

good at keeping everyone informed and making sure that we're all safe. We all talk about the two of you all the time. We

miss you terribly, but we know that what you are doing is for the best. We pray for you both every day.

May God bless and keep you, our darling Zenyatta and Steven.

Yours always,

Marjorie and Robert

I re-read the letter, folded it and put it in the top drawer of my desk. I then picked up the phone and called Peter.

"Hey, Peter."

"Hey there, Cousin Steven. So you got the letter, I take it, yes?"

"Yeah. Thanks for that, and for having the wisdom to send it to UNB. I don't want Zenyatta to know anything about any of

this at this point. We just found out that she is pregnant, and we need her to be worry-free for now."

"Hey, congrats, man! This is great news…the best news I've had in a long, long time. I'm happy for you both. You will be

great parents. I know that in my heart, Steven. I hope it's a girl and that she looks like Zenyatta!" He laughed.

I laughed along with him, "Peter, I'll call you later tonight, if that's okay. I'll call from home, and you can talk to Zenyatta.

I don't want us to mention anything about this letter, just to be safe."

"Hey, that's understandable. No mention, and I'll be as surprised as anything by the news that I know nothing about," he

joked.

"Later then, dear cousin, Bye for now."

On the drive home, I replayed the letter in my head as well as my brief conversation with Peter. He still worried me

somewhat. I then thought of a credible excuse as to why Dean Hurley wanted to see me. Zenyatta was in her office working

away quite excitedly.

I kissed her on the head, "Are you resting or stressing yourself out on some psychological test or the other?"

"I would have you know, my lawyerly husband and father to our child that there is much fun in work. I'm as relaxed as can

be. How was your meeting with your dean?"

"Oh, it was nothing, really. He asked if I'd mind exchanging one course with another chap. I told him that I'm already

working on outlines for the courses I was assigned. He was okay with it. We talked a bit about nothing, really."

"Did you tell him about our news?"

"No. He is no Father Martin," I smiled.

"Now, my lovely wife, what would you like to eat?"

"Well, now that you ask, I'd like fried chicken and fries and ice-cream from Dairy Queen. Chocolate, if you please." She

said with eyes all a-blinking.

"Okay, girl. Milk it all you can. I can't blame you."

I was back in the car to get what her heart or tummy desired. Zenyatta ate with enviable relish. In-between mouthfuls, she

insisted that we get a wrap-around earphone for her tummy to play music for the baby.

"I'll play Mozart, Vivaldi, Some Bethoven, Wagner, and some Chopin. It's proven to stimulate the baby's brain. And, of

Course, we shall take turns reading out loud to her."

"Her? Her?" I asked, teasingly.

"Yes, her! She'll look like you, of course." She flattered. I laughed.

"You know, we should call Cousin Peter with our news, don't you think?"

"Of course. We'll call this evening."

We called Peter, and I broke the news to him as if anew. He reacted again with genuine excitement and demanded to speak

to Zenyatta. My time on the phone amounted to less than two minutes; Zenyatta and Peter babbled for an hour. It was all

about the baby, about the gender, the looks, the up-bringing in a place as conducive as New Brunswick, about intelligence.

They also teased me quite a bit, both hoping that she does not turn out to be as lazy as her father. I feigned offence, which

Zenyatta ignored. They talked and laughed and giggled. At times, Zenyatta blushed from what I was sure were compliments

from Peter. He must have asked if she needed anything for herself or the baby, and she said she needed CD's of the

composers she had mentioned earlier. She also asked him to send prints of Van Gogh, Monet, Manet, Dante Rosetti,

Leonardo da Vinci, De La Croix, and others.

Thankfully, they hung up. Zenyatta looked at me with a twinkle in her eyes,

"Oh my, my!' she said, "Are we feeling a bit neglected? Somewhat abandoned?" She got up and patted me on the head with

Deliberate, playful condescension. "Don't worry, my pet, I'll take you for a walk," she burst out laughing.

"Woof, woof!" I barked. We both fell into fits of laughter.

"Okay, my love," I conceded, "we'll go for a short walk."

"A little longer than a short walk, my sweet husband," she said.

"So be it, my queen." Off we went for a not-so-short walk, but at an easy pace. It was more of a stroll in the moonlight.

In three days, a large package arrived, and Zenyatta had me up on a ladder, pasting the prints on the ceiling above where we

Planned to put the crib. She got the wrap-around "tummy-phones" and played the music at low volume for the baby. She

was bent on having a genius, and I was quite enchanted by the idea.

We went to mass on Sunday, and Zenyatta took the communion conducted by Monsignor Martin himself. I did not, but I

prayed more fervently than I ever had. I prayed and begged for our child to be safe. I begged God. I begged the Christ. We

also made Doctor O'Brian's appointment, and were given assurances that all was as it should be. No problems, no

complications. Another appointment was made two months after. We began preparing an upstairs room for the baby: crib,

paintings on ceiling, small speakers for music while she sleeps, paddings for the crib, and so on. We took turns reading to

her whilst she nestled in the womb.

By the time the two universities started the Fall semester, Zenyatta was "showing". When I looked at her and her steadily

increasing belly, my heart ached with love for both mother and child. Any fear or threat from those who were our enemies

receded. We had reliable salaries, enjoyed our jobs at good, caring, and well-organized universities. The faculty and

students of Saint Thomas doted on Zenyatta, and she loved them for it. Father Martin was like a guardian angel. I got along

well enough with most of my colleagues, although a few were bothered by what they thought was the dean's preferential

treatment towards me. I was too happy and too saturated with hope to be bothered. We both took the time to behold the

falling leaves of Autumn. The grass of the campuses was covered in leaves of gold and vermillion and green. Then they

were raked up into small hills beneath the many trees on the campuses. Children of all colours romped and climbed and

dove feet-first into the hills of leaves, and their laughter rang in the air like tiny bells. And Zenyatta and I we were blanketed

by the peace and beauty of New Brunswick, Canada. Each night, we bundled up and walked in the brisk night air of

Fredericton, New

Brunswick. It was perfect in its peace and beauty, in its celebration of colour.

Chapter Ninety-Four

And then, without warning, the peace and calm and beauty came crashing down over our heads. One night, as we were

having supper and talking about our baby—now just about five months away from coming into our world—the phone rang.

I answered it. John Barry booming baritone came over the phone,

"Steven, I have some dreadful news. Are you sitting? Is Zenyatta with you?"

"Yes, John, I'm sitting, and Zenyatta is right beside me. What's this dreadful news, John?"

"Steven, it's Peter. It's Peter, Steven—" his voice broke, and he sounded like he was trying not to sob.

"What about Peter, John? Come on, talk to me!" I shouted. I felt Zenyatta's hand on my shoulder.

"Peter's dead, Steven. He shot himself earlier today."

"Is this some kind of fucking joke, John? Peter dead? Peter D'Aguiar shot himself? My cousin?"

"Yes, Steven. I'm sorry, Steven."

"He was due back in court today—"

"In court? Why was he in court, for God's sake?"

"He's been on trial for a few months now for defrauding his own company and for defrauding the government. The verdict

Was to be handed down today. He had pleaded guilty yesterday to all charges. He was facing fifteen to twenty years in

prison, Steven," he was crying loudly now.

"I'll call you back, John." I put the phone back in its cradle. I looked at Zenyatta. She had a hand covering her mouth, her

eyes wide in shock. I stood and pulled her head onto my chest. We both wanted to cry; the tears would not come. She found

voice, "Dial John's number and give me the phone," she instructed icily.

"Hi Steven," came John Barry's voice.

"John, this is Zenyatta. Tell me what happened, please, John."

"He pleaded guilty to siphoning off millions of dollars from the company. He was losing money on the horses. Then he took

loans from some ruthless people. He was also guilty of tax evasion over eight years. The government has seized everything,

everything. The RCMP and Ontario Police have already ruled it suicide."

"I see. Please call us if there are further developments, John. Please."

"I will, Zenyatta. I promise." They hung up.

We sat there dazed, speechless, sombre, wide-eyed. Zenyatta kept her hands clasped on her belly, as if she would protect the

child from bad news. I took one hand and led her upstairs. In bed, we stayed on our backs, gazing at the ceiling. In my

mind, I replayed the part Peter played in my boyhood. Of the many cousins, it was only Peter that shared his toys with me at

Christmas; it was Peter who taught me to fly a kite during Easter; it was he who stood up for me when I could not stand up

for myself; and it was he who taught me to stand against bullying cousins while he stood right behind me. It was Peter who

sponsored our wedding flying in all manner of exotic dishes and drinks. And it was he who got us here in Canada, thereby

saving our very lives. It was Peter who paid for our initial stay at the Lord Beaverbrook in Fredericton, introducing us to

key figures like Mayor Bosnitch. It was Peter who provided a financial safety net in case of need or want. No on else did

that, not one single one of them. And now, Peter is dead at his own hands. I thought back to my sense that something was

amiss with him during our last visit to Toronto. I remembered the two thugs that beckoned him at the Woodbine Race

Track, and I remembered his freneticism that I mistook for enthusiasm. He had warned me about gambling. Now, in the

event of any emergency, we had no one.

I found myself sobbing, softly at first. Zenyatta turned on her side and held me. I began to shudder, then the grief came

pouring out in a torrent of tears. Zenyatta was crying too, but held me in her comforting arms. Together, we wept for this

good man, this kind, generous, lonely man.

"He just sent us prints and music for our baby. Just hours ago!" And we wept anew.

I went to the funeral in Toronto. There were seven people there: John Barry and his wife, two horse trainers, one jockey,

and me. Just seven people who had it in them to pay a final farewell to a good human being. At the grave-site, I saw Uncle

Peter. I was surprised, but there he was stone-faced. For some reason, I was angry with him. It was he who approached me,

"How are you holding up, boy?" He asked, his voice flat, unemotional.

"Uncle Peter, just fuck off! Just fuck the hell off!"

Uncle Peter did not miss a beat, "Where are you staying? We can have a drink."

I told him the name of the airport, and we went back there after the funeral. We sat in the almost-empty hotel bar and

ordered double scotches. It was clear that he was trashing around for something to say,

"How is Zenyatta?"

"She is well, thank you. We're expecting a baby soon."

"That's wonderful news, Steven. Wonderful news, indeed. Congratulations to you both of you. Look, I give you a small gift

for the baby. He reached into his suit, got out his cheque-book, and write a cheque for ten thousand dollars. He held it out

and, when I did not take it, he put it on the table, face up.

"Look Steven. Peter is gone, but I'm still here. I'm still here, Steven."

"Uncle Peter, you were never there, you will never be here for anyone except you and your fucking money-making

company. You are just as bad as those fuckers ruining the country! Take your fucking cheque and your congratulations and

bugger off!" I saw him squint in anger as I stood. I turned and walked to the elevator. As the doors of the lift were closing, I

saw him pick up his cheque, fold it, and put it back into his pocket.

I went up to my room and called my wife,

"Hi my love."

"My darling husband. I was sitting by the phone waiting for your call. Are you okay?"

"I am, my Zenyatta. There were only seven people at the funeral, my love. *Seven*!" I sobbed.

"Be of good courage, my sweet husband. I'll be at the airport tomorrow morning. We are both waiting for you, my love. Be

strong, my love. Be strong for us."

"I will. I'll be strong for all three of us, my love. I'll see you tomorrow."

The flight left precisely when it should, and it landed exactly when it was scheduled to do so. I vowed never to take this

aspect of Canada for granted. My own people place no value whatsoever on time or punctuality. It was as if they took

pride in being late. I stepped into the modest airport, and there was my reason for living, my wife, my Zenyatta. She was

wearing a Fall coat, boots, gloves, and a red scarf. Even through the long coat, one could see the bulge of her pregnancy.

I dropped my carry on and hugged and kissed her. I got to me knees and kissed her belly through the coat. She beamed. My

fellow passengers stopped and smiled. I got back to my feet and hugged her. She held me tightly, reassuringly,

"It's okay, my love. It's okay. We're here."

Her voice calmed me. We walked to our Honda and drove home. Within the warmth and safety of our home, we took off

our coats. Zenyatta was wearing the prettiest "pregnancy" dress I've ever seen—sky blue with pretty little flowers. For a

moment, I forgot about the tragedy of Cousin Peter.

"Well, tell me about it, if you're up to it," my wife prodded.

"Seven people, Zenyatta. That's all there was. No one said a word. The trainer of the big grey colt was there, as was the

jockey."

"The loss of a good, kind man like Peter is hard to bear, especially for us. And then the circumstances that led up to him

taking his own life. It's awful. But there was something else that bothered you, yes?"

"Yes. Uncle Peter was there. He invited me for a drink at my hotel. He asked after you. I told him that we're having a baby.

He wrote out a cheque for ten thousand dollars. I told him to shove it, but not so politely, and I walked away. He looked

angry. I don't want to curse in from of our baby."

"Okay. I'm glad you did not take his bribe. We owe Cousin Peter so much. We will carry him in our hearts and remember

him in our prayers."

I changed the subject, "Let's have a sandwich and rest for an hour or so, shall we?"

"Of course, my love." We had our sandwiches and went up to rest. I slept for three hours and awoke to see Zenyatta looking

at me with love and worry in her eyes. I hugged her, and read to our baby a bit from Julius Caesar, the book closest to me on

the nightstand.

"Would it not be wonderful if all couples could quarrel in the manner of Brutus and Portia?"

"It would be, but it would take a heavenly couple."

"We, my love, are a heavenly couple. I think so, anyway." She smiled. Neither the love nor the worry left her eyes.

It was twilight by the time we went down. We had a salad, and Zenyatta topped that off with a fried fillet of haddock. Then

she suggested insisted we go for our walk. It was already dark.

We kept to a routine. It helped us to deal with the loss of our cousin. It was up, off to work, meetings at times, back home at

four or so, prepare supper, eat, rest, snack, walk. WE went for the six-month check-up, and Doctor O'Brian seemed quite

pleased with how the pregnancy was coming along. An ultra-sound showed that it was a boy. Zenyatta suggested we name

him Peter. She had started to waddle, growing larger by the hour it seemed. She began sitting in the manner that pregnant

women do, holding her back, and using the free arm to grasp the chair handle, easing herself into the seat. Her ankles began

to swell, and her behind got enlarged, as did her breasts. I could not resist the temptation of teasing her at every turn. Her

response:

"I have an excuse for my added weight. What excuse do you have, Steven DaSilva? And just you look and see, I'll be back

in fighting shape in three months after our baby comes." And so it went. Of course, Father Martin demanded that he be

updated daily, much to Zenyatta's delight. She wanted Father Martin to be the baby's godfather.

"That's good, but I hope he does not become a Jesuit priest. We need grandchildren." I half-joked.

"We're not stopping. We need five children, so he may be a priest if he wishes," she returned gleefully.

Chapter Ninety-Five

Winter was almost upon us, but we held to our routine. Zenyatta was in her seventh month. We were on our walk. A car

passed us and stopped. A tall figure emerged, and I stood in from of Zenyatta. A gunshot shattered the silence into

fragments; a flash split the dark. I felt myself falling. Another shot came before I hit the ground. I felt it tear through my

arm. I finally hit the ground. My head hit something that was not the road. Zenyatta was flat on her back. I crawled to her

head. There was blood coming from her mouth.

"You okay, my love?" She asked, her voice a rasp through the blood.

"I love you, my husband. It was Rudy Lewis, Steven. They found us, my love." Before I lost consciousness, I heard a car

door slam, a screech of tires, and a car roared away. It was cold.

I woke up in a hospital bed. There were people hovering over me.

"Mr. DaSilva, wake up, Mr. DaSilva," a voice commanded.

"Where am I?" I asked in a voice that did not belong to me.

"You're in the Everett Chalmers Hospital, Mr. DaSilva. You were the victim of a shooting—"

"Where is Zenyatta? Where is my wife. I want her here!"

"Mr. DaSilva, Mrs. DaSilva was hurt in the shooting. You were out for three weeks, Sir."

"I want to see my wife! I want to see Zenyatta and our baby!" I felt a small pinch in my arm and it was dark again. I think I

kept waking up, and they kept putting me under because I must have become agitated at Zenyatta's absence. I cannot be

sure. The next time I awoke, I struggled with the nurses. Of that I'm sure. The next thing I knew, Monsignor Martin was by

my bedside. I breathed a sigh of relief. I wept, and he held my hand until I stopped.

"Father, they won't let Zenyatta come to me, nor would they take me to her. Please Father, in the name of God, tell them."

"Listen to me, my dear child. You were very seriously wounded. The doctors are doing their best to heal your wounds. Let

them do what they do. Do you think it would do Zenyatta any good to see you like this, my son?"

"No, Father. I would be harmful to both her and our baby," replied, crying.

"It would do no one any good, so let's look after you first."

"What happened, Father. We were on our evening walk. I heard gunshots, Father. I heard them, Father. But I don't know.

I'm glad you came, Father. Zenyatta would be happy you came. You know how she loves and respects you. Comfort her,

Father. Tell her I'll be home in a wink to loo after her."

"Christ Himself will comfort your Zenyatta, my child. I will pray for you all. Rest now, and let the doctors do their work."

Father Martin's visit calmed me, and I willingly submitted myself to the doctors' care. The nurses too. It was they that fed

me, and sponged me, and cleaned me up. I was in the hospital for what seemed an eternity. When I was more lucid, the

RCMP came. The hospital psychiatrist came accompanied them. They were kind and asked questions in a tone that

conveyed their sympathy,

"Do you remember anything about the gunman, Mr. DaSilva. Any detail, no matter how small, will be of help I

apprehending this perp."

"It was male, tallish, but he was a shadow. You can ask Zenyatta, my wife. She saw him. Before I lost consciousness, she

told me that it was Rudy Lewis. He is the Brigadier General of the army back home in Guyana. This, clearly, was new to

them. The scribbled the name. There were two shots. One hit me through my stomach, and another one grazed my arm as I

went down."

The psychiatrist stopped them, "That's enough for the day, gentlemen."

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. DaSilva you've been very helpful. We'll be back when you're better."

Two reconstructive surgeons came in later that day. They explained to me in some detail my injurie: "You took a bullet

through the stomach. It went through and shattered your spinal column. You were also shot in the arm, but that has started

to heal already. We've already repaired the damage to the lower intestine. Now we will to the column. We'll do our very

best, Mr. DaSilva. Hopefully, you'll regain full use of your legs."

"And if the surgery is not successful?" I asked.

"Then we deal with that when we come to it. The nurses will prep you tomorrow morning, and we'll see you in the OR."

The operation was not successful, and I was to spend the rest of my life in a wheel chair. Once I had recovered, Father

Martin came to see me. He was accompanied by the psychiatrist, a soft-spoken, blonde-haired, middle-aged woman. The

priest sat closer to me, the psychiatrist next to him. I knew in my heart why they were there, but I did not want to hear it.

And yet, I knew I must face this thing that was coming at me.

"Steven, my child, we need to tell you something. It is not good, but the time has come for you to know. You are physically

stronger now, and we can no longer keep the truth from you," the priest, his big voice tremulous with pain.

"I know, Father. I know, so you have no need I know to tell me brings pain to you; it re-awakens grief. And you are too

good a man for me to cause you grief, Father. I realize that you loved her as a daughter. As deeply as I love her as my wife

and the mother of my baby."

"Tell me what you know, my dear Steven," he responded gently.

"I know that my Zenyatta is dead. I know that my son was murdered in her womb. I know who did this, and I will rain

down hell upon them all if I can."

"Yes, my dear son, we have lost her and your son. But the Lord has chosen to take her to His side."

"Yes, all this nonsense about "deliver us from evil" and "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me"! Your merciful God

did not stop monsters from raining death and destruction upon a good woman, a gentle and kind and loving woman, and a

child not even given the chance to breathe the air! Merciful my ass, Father. Your God is fucking useless. That is if he exists

at all."

"I understand your anger, my son. I do. I understand you doubts."

"Maybe, Father. But you cannot understand my emptiness. You cannot understand my purposelessness without them."

Father Martin was silent, his eyes misting over. I saw in those eyes a pity that I've never beheld before, and it made me

weep. The psychiatrist woman was about to say something. I stopped her,

"Lady, please do not say anything to me. Please. Please leave me to my own emptiness, my hurt, my rage. Go!"

She left. Father Martin blessed me and asked that I have the nurses call him if I needed him or anything else. He stood.

"Where is she buried?"

"In the Roman Catholic Cemetery, my son. She was given pride of place. The university took care of everything. If you

wish to visit her, I would like to go with you."

"Thank you, Father. You're a good man, Father Martin. Thank you for all that you've done for us." He nodded and left.

I broke down for hours, my grief unbearable, my anger unfathomable.

I spent the entire winter in the hospital. I was now a physical and moral cripple, jobless, almost penniless. I lost the house to

foreclosure, sold the car for a song, and ended up in a home for the "disabled". They kept coming up with different and

more palatable terms for crippled, things like "physically challenged" and "differently abled", as if any of it would make

things better. It was intolerable, and condescending.

Chapter Ninety-Six

And so, here I am in a house for the disabled, a peripheral member of a peripheral community of variously crippled, the

flotsam and jetsam of community. With the loss of Zenyatta, I was bereft of hope, of purpose, of direction, of love. But I

have my rage. That was fully intact, and I cuddle it, nurse it.

The residence is on the North-side of Fredericton, and I subsist on Social Security which I use to post letters, buy an

electric typewriter and paper, writing pads, envelopes, pens, and such implements. I also use it to buy anything I felt like

eating. Everything else is free, thanks to Canada. Back home I would have been on the streets, on a rice bag, begging for a

coin or two, probably stationed on the pavement in front of the store where I had first seen and met Zenyatta.

Three years ago, it dawned on me that since I had nothing left to lose, I would write to people back home. I write to

Margaret and Robert Qualis, letting them know about their daughter. I was deliberately dispassionate about the whole thing.

They would probably think me cold. I asked for Monty's address or that he should send me a brief note. I got a note from

Monty. Things were tough, he conveyed, but he was making sure that the team was relatively okay. Kwame was still

Permanent Secretary, and he helps when he can. I wrote back to Monty, detailing the murder of Zenyatta and the baby. I

told him that I was shot and now confined to a wheel chair in a home for the disabled. I told him that Zenyatta had

recognized Rudolph Lewis as the shooter.

Monty's reply came in the form of a newspaper article. The small headline read:

"Body of retired army General found in Cummings Lodge"

"The body of retired General Rudolph Lewis was found in the middle of a garbage heap in Cummings Lodge. Lewis had

been shot through the head, and his body was decomposed. General Lewis was known for his great leadership skills and his

service to the country...". It went on for a few more lines, but I was most attracted to Monty's note at the bottom:

"Nothing else needs to be said, Sir!"

I was happy for a while. I remembered Kurtz's scrawl at the bottom of his manifesto in Conrad's Heart of Darkness:

"Exterminate all the brutes!" For Kurtz, it was a moment of utter darkness; for me it was a moment of well-directed

vengeance.

I had made a friend of sorts in a male attendant at the home. He was nice enough to me, taking time to chat about this or

that. I had spoken to him often about my Zenyatta, and he spoke to me about an incestuous small island in the Bay of Fund

from which he hailed, from which he fled. I arranged with Joey to get a Taxi—*Trius* they were named, to take us to

Zenyatta's grave site. He helped lift me into the taxi, folded my wheelchair and put it in the trunk. We drove across the

Bridge connecting the two sides of Fredericton, and to the Roman Catholic burial ground. Joey and the driver brought out

the wheelchair and deposited me into the chair. He pushed me to the grave. It was painted white, with an angel tombstone.

Zenyatta DaSilva. I had Joey fetch me a nice stone and asked to be alone for a few minutes with my wife. I chatted with her

and imagined that she answered me. I told her that I exacted revenge upon the killer. Then I put the newspaper article on the

grave and put the stone on it.

"Read it when you can, my love. I love you, my Zenyatta. I always will. See you soon, my beloved wife."

We went to the New Brunswick liquor store, and I had Joey buy us two bottles of Johnny Walker Scotch. Joey bought a

large Coke and a large Seven-Up. That night, we waited until the people in charge had gone, then went out back where

there were several picnic-style tables. After Joey and I had had two drinks, some of the other residents got wind of our

drinking session. They fund their way out back. I gave them a bottle and soft drinks and told them to sit elsewhere. Joey and

I spoke. He spoke about a girl he had met in Fredericton, a waitress. H esaid he loved her. I talked about Zenyatta,

endlessly.

"You know Steven, you talk about your wife all the time. There is no other topic for you. You're a bright buy, you can read

and write, you've lived, you've lost. You are still in love with your wife—"

"What's your point? Get to it!" I said loudly.

"My point is that you can honour your Zenyatta by writing it all down. A book! Write a fucking book and stop yapping!"

I calmed down quickly, "You mean like a novel? A memoir? An autobiography?"

"I don't know what you call it, but write it. Do your wife that honour, and be fucking truthful about it all."

"Boy, I am not a Naipaul or a Dickens or a Conrad—"

Joey cut me off, "I don't know those people, man. I know you though. I know you, Steven."

I remained silent for the rest of the night, ruminating on the idea. We finished the bottle, and I went in. I was drunk. Even in

my state, I loaded a blank page into the typewriter. I tapped out with two fingers one sentence:

"I am drawn to her with the force of inevitability, the force that drives the wave to its ending on a beach where it dies in a

smooth surf."

I started this book with Raina, with my moral compromise, with my cruelty. I am not concerned if anyone reads it. What is

important is that I wrote it to honour my wife, my Zenyatta, the best of women. Her love—steadfast, pure, unalterable—

redeemed me, and this my way of saying "Thank you, my darling, my Zenyatta. See you soon, my love."