

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

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CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU

Copyright © 2012, 2026 Christopher Chibueze Onyekuru
First published in 2012 by BookLocker.com, Inc.
This revised edition published in 2026 by Commons Press.

ISBN: 979-818-451966-1

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In Spain, John is a man on the edge. He's desperate to save his family from poverty, but the promise of easy money pulls him into a dangerous world. One phone call during the holidays changes everything, plunging him into a web of lies and betrayal. In this world, trust is an illusion, and danger lurks in every shadow.

When he is framed for a murder he didn't commit, John becomes a hunted man. With time running out, he must fight through deception and violence to uncover the truth. But this isn't just about proving his innocence—it's about confronting his past, battling his inner demons, and taking down those who want him destroyed. The stakes are life or death, and John will stop at nothing to reclaim his freedom and protect the ones he loves.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the insightful encouragement they gave me as I made efforts towards getting this fiction completed and published, my respective appreciations go to my friends Hortensia Garcia Celdrán, Miss Aurora, Renata Janas and Lourdes Santandreu Herrero. Special thanks to Pilar Giner of the Hotel Opera Valencia.

Thanks to my brothers and sisters, Austen, Godfrey, Emmanuel, Charles, Joy and Roseline, for their moral supports in this project. To my cousin, Dr Samuel Onyekuru. To Joyce Onyekuru for her support.

Thanks to the following people for the invaluable patience they took to listen to the concept of my story and criticize my manuscripts in constructive manners: Frances Uchechi Obioma, Angelita Nuñez, Akunna Adazie, Scholastica Ijeoma Ikeri, Charles Obaraeze Uba, Patrick Obinna Ejimofor, Emeka Ejiaku, Okechukwu Anamelechi, Benneth Anyiam, Steven Gozie Okoye, Ogechi Benedith, Emma Kanu Azu, Chigozie Onumaegbulem, and my lifelong friend, Peter Chukwudi Ononiba. Thanks to Mr. Uwadiae Thompson Aikhionbare for his assistance during the editing of this book. And thanks to Pastor Sunny Omoiho for his word-of-God inspirations to this book. Writing this fiction took God's favor.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Christopher Amadi Onyekuru and Mercy
Nkechinyere Onyekuru.

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PROLOGUE

NIGERIA. JUNE, 2004

The young man strolled into the building, unaware of the trouble ahead. Most Sundays, when he got back from the church service, and had his lunch, he went to visit his best friend since childhood, and spent the rest of the afternoon with him.

He stepped inside the bathtub-size, ramshackle one-room apartment. A thick curtain covered the aperture that formed the only window in the room, preventing him from getting a clear view of the inside. He waited a few seconds before his eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness. Sappy lay on the bed, face down.

“Hey, wake up, I’m here!”

No response. Sappy may be having a nap, the young man thought. He looked around and spotted an old rusted metallic chair in the corner – the only one in the room. He sat down on it. Sappy didn’t want to be disturbed, he believed.

Five minutes later, the body lying on a mattress with almost no foam, fitted over a small old six-spring Vono bed, stirred.

“We’re going to make some cash,” Sappy said. To the other man, his voice had never been so icy.

“You talk about money all the time,” the young man said, irritated. “OK. Yes, we’re broke, but we’ll wait for our time to come.”

“No, it’s tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” the young man repeated, his flickering eyelids revealed his surprise. “How do you mean...tomorrow?” He then sat in horror as he stared down the barrel of the gun trained at him.

“How about this?” the holder of the gun asked him.

The young man said nothing, but remained transfixed by the weapon, his eyes wide open, his jaw sagging, and his heart thumping as the gun remained pointed at his chest. It occurred to him that in any moment a red-hot bullet would fly out and pierce his heart. And he would be dead, murdered by the friend he'd known since childhood.

"Oh, Sappy," he said in a whisper. "Please, don't kill me!" He raised both hands up above his head.

Sappy laughed aloud. "Cool it down, Rhino. There are no bullets inside this thing. This," he tapped on the barrel of the pistol with his left hand, "is a Beretta automatic. It belongs to one politician."

The young man dropped his hands and clutched his chest. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in, struggling to control the rapid beating of his heart, trying to reduce the effect of the shock he had just experienced. He opened his eyes and looked up at the man who he had thought was his friend. "Sappy, you're going too far! I thought you wanted to kill me!"

"Why would I want to kill you, Rhino?"

"I don't know. You have been going through some rapid changes since we came into Lagos. Why?"

"Are you asking me that question?"

Rhino nodded slowly.

"Because it's what life's all about in this country, my man: change." Sappy looked hard at his best friend. "But from good to bad, not from bad to good, as you are pushing."

Rhino returned the look just as firmly. "What are you doing with a politician's gun?"

Sappy ignored the question. "Let me teach you how to load and cock a gun, man." He jumped out of the bed and went to Rhino, now no longer pointing the gun at him. The boxer shorts and the dirty white singlet he wore revealed the well-formed

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contours of his masculinity in a perfect manner. "I know you've not had the opportunity to see and touch a gun before."

"Don't teach me anything," Rhino said, "I want nothing to do with a gun!" But that was already changing as he rested his eyes on Sappy's hands, while his friend fed bullets into the device.

"Come on now," Sappy said as he finished loading the pistol. "Me, you, DJ Trouble and the Giraffe, we're going to rough up a certain man tomorrow. We're going to teach him some good lessons, say, break one of his kneecaps so he gives up his intention to run for next year's councillorship elections for this ward. When the job is done, he will bow out of the race. And my friend, the other politician, pays us fifty thousand Naira for our efforts. What do you think about that, man?"

Rhino sat dumbfounded, gazing at Sappy.

"We're not going to do him with the gun," Sappy went on, smiling at the now loaded automatic and fondling it. "But in case anything goes wrong, you know what I mean." His smile widened. "This thing is just personal protection belonging to my friend, the politician. You know him, don't you?"

"I don't," Rhino said, his voice harsh and tense. "And I don't want to know any politician any more than I want to know about that gun."

Sappy stopped playing with the loaded gun and stared at his friend. "Why are you sounding very hostile?"

"I can't make money through harassing politicians for other politicians. It's very bad, because these people keep using the poverty and ignorance of the masses to commit unbearable atrocities in this rich country."

"What has our making money got to do with the wealth or poverty of this country?" Sappy stared at him, appearing furious. "Look now, I keep wondering why you have changed from the ever-respected man who was always in command of

the English language and very strong with fisticuffs – the Rhinoceros I used to fear back in secondary school days – to a good-hearted, patriotic citizen of Nigeria. This quality will only make you a wretched man.” Sappy paused for a moment and smiled at his friend. “Why don't you make good use of your brilliance, Rhino? You're the kind of machinery politicians are seeking.”

Rhino stood up from the chair, but remained silent.

“Let me ask you something,” Sappy said, looking hard into the eyes of a man dwarfing him by almost a foot.

“What is it?”

“How long ago did you leave the east for Lagos in search of a visa?”

“A year and nine months. How does that matter?”

“And you're twenty-one right now, aren't you?”

“Yes, like you.”

“And you still want your old parents to sell the only remaining piece of their precious land to sponsor your travelling overseas with the money.”

“Well,” Rhino thought for a moment, “as long as the money doesn't come to me in a bad way.”

“Rubbish, rubbish, rubbish!” Sappy paused, then continued. “Six months ago, they sold one out of their two tiny pieces of land, your family's only landed property, and you took the money to Senegal, wanting to hit Europe through the shores of Dakar.” Sappy paused again, as if trying to choose his words correctly. “But what happened? Your liver failed at the sight of the sea, and instead, you ran back here in search of a visa. You wasted a huge sum of their money. Now you're still depending on help from your miserable old parents.”

Rhino stood speechless, listening.

“You know what, Rhino?”

“What?”

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"Your actions are so abnormal that I think something has gone terribly wrong with you."

"Something wrong with *me*?"

Sappy ignored him, looked away and continued to ramble to himself, demonstrating with both hands. "I mean, in this prime time of our lives when every young man in Nigeria is cracking his brain, hustling to grab fast cash." He turned back to Rhino. "Somebody here is thinking beyond his limits."

Sappy waited for a response. But none came. Only a firm stare. He placed the palm of his left hand on Rhino's right shoulder, elevated his head and again locked his eyes with Rhino's.

"Listen guy, nobody thinks good for this country as you think you're doing. The best thing you would do for yourself and for the sake of your family is to forget about this nasty honesty you are trying to build up. The country is a bad one. It has been bad, and it will continue to be bad. It's a society of survival of the fittest, so the only way to survive here is to harden your mind." Sappy pounded his right fist, which held the gun, on his chest. "We have to raise the money with which to travel abroad ourselves." He took his hand off Rhino's shoulder.

"We have to do that by terrorizing politicians' opponents?"

"It's their time. Ours is coming. We get to Europe and hunt for the cash, wherever it is. When we make the money, we come back here and buy our ways into the political forum. Then we'll have the chance to join in cutting the national cake – with a big axe."

"The national cake?" Rhino said, surprised at the new terminology coming from his friend's mouth.

"Of course, we'll join in looting the country's treasury. That's how it goes. That's where every politician's eyes are – from the head," Sappy touched his head, then bent down to his toe, "to toe, since the country's independence."

Rhino was shaking his head.

“Look man, I want Nigeria to remain bad until I've got my own share of the national cake,” Sappy emphasized. “I need to enjoy my life, and then save things for my children, and children's children, before I die.”

“Not even thinking about the welfare of the Nigerian populace?”

“I am out to earn for myself and my family, man. We have seen poverty and lived with it.” Sappy's annoyance with Rhino's words registered in his voice. “No politician is concerned with the welfare of the Nigerian populace. The problems of Africa are eternal, so we live with them.”

“Sappy,” Rhino called out in a husky tone, tired of listening. “Stop, please. Anything that has to do with a gun, a politician, just count me out.” He turned and began walking out of his friend's room, no longer caring whether a bullet would hit him.

“Rhino!” Sappy called out abruptly. “You must keep to yourself what you know; else...you know I own a gun now.”

*

At the end of a long, narrow passage, Rhino emerged from inside the dilapidated building housing the miniature room where Sappy lived. Sappy shared the small room with two other guys he referred to by their nicknames, DJ Trouble and the Giraffe, who had both gone out to do anything in search of livelihood. He, Rhino, lived with a distant relative somewhere in the neighborhood.

Rhino reached the edge of the smelly open sewage system that crossed by the building and stopped. Instead of walking over the wooden platform, he first did what he did each time he wanted to cross a sewage system around there. He stared at the numerous number of the small diameter PVC pipes running on the floors of the open sewage system and shook his head in the

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knowledge that the water he drank everyday came through those same pipes. He took a closer look at the leakages of the poorly fitted pipes that enabled the sewage water to seep into the drinking water.

How horrible!

This was the source of the hepatitis, typhoid fever and many other sicknesses from which the people of the neighborhood, and numerous other neighborhoods across Lagos, suffered.

Rhino considered thoughtfully. Sappy said he was thinking beyond his limits. Could this be true? But he didn't see any benefit in not wanting to be morally good as he moved on from the juvenile stage of his life.

Rhino left his standing position, praying to God to grant him the grace finally to be able to get out of this ghetto synonymous with hard life and poverty, and travel to a world where there was an easy life, electricity and good health; a place where he could put in energy, work harder and help his family out of the present poor situation. He walked across the sewage through the wooden platform, into the half-tarred and half-muddy street.

Little children of the slum swarmed from one end of the long street to the other, many naked, some in tattered clothes. Rhino looked up at the sky and knew why. The cloud had come down. It was going to rain soon, and the ghetto children were waiting for the rain to begin so that they could start their street football in the rain, play away their problems and their distress.

That's what's experienced in Ajengunle, Rhino thought, an overpopulated, dirty district in the city of Lagos, known to have produced stars – famous Nigerian footballers and musicians. Yet Ajengunle is famous for hoodlums and bandits.

Rhino looked again at the mammoth crowd of children in the street, his expression pained. He knew that just a few of them would turn out to be well-known footballers – the likes of Samson Siasia, Emmanuel Amunike and Taribo West. Some

would become famous musicians, like African China, Daddy Shokey and Baba Fryo. A few others, film actors, maybe.

But what really troubled Rhino was that he knew his was a society where the rulers lacked good public service and leadership ideas; where due to their voracity for money, the government cared little about the citizens. The majority of these small children out here in the street would become infamous hoodlums and bandits, machines for political killings for politicians. Just as Sappy his friend had suddenly become.

*

The next day, the news came to Rhino: Sappy and his men had beaten a certain man into an unconscious state. And the man had immediately surrendered and backed out of the councillorship race, for which he had been a better candidate.

Sappy and his men were not satisfied. They had to turn back to their employer and demand more money with a life-threatening seriousness. Their employer, having heard about what had happened to his opponent, then tripled their payment.

1

DECEMBER 26, 2008

He lay in a pool of his own blood.

“The money, the money, the money,” the masked gunman sang out slowly. “Where is it?” He was squatted beside the dying man, tapping the muzzle of the pistol he held on his left palm.

The African lay face down, shivering on the floor of his family house, covered with thick blood oozing out from the back of his head. The gunman looked at the opening in the African's skull as blood gushed out of the hole he had created with the butt of his gun. But he didn't care. Breathing in the smell of human blood turned him on during an operation of this nature.

The gunman stopped tapping the pistol, lowered it once more and pointed it at the African's left ear, threatening further. “I must have all that money or you will be dead in the next few minutes!” He was shouting now.

Not yet satisfied, the gunman turned the butt of the gun and struck the African twice on the same bloody spot, widening the wound and creating more gushing of the red body fluid.

The African cried out and violently recoiled on the floor as more waves of pain swept through his body.

The broad-shouldered gunman stood like a looming creature with a vicious temper burning inside. It was better for the man lying on the floor that this gunman was in a mask, because his face represented that of a monster, born out of bottle and knife injuries he sustained over a multitude of fights in public places

and during the robbery incidents the gunman had been carrying out since he was fourteen.

The African lay writhing in pain, dying. But a little part of his mind still stirred him back to life. His mind raced in thought: why couldn't he fight this gunman? Yes, despite the African's own tallness, the man towered over him. And the man also possessed a more intimidating chiseled physique than the African could have imagined. But the man on the floor knew he possessed some skills that could help him to fight back. Somehow he couldn't find them and make use of them. Where had his little skills gone?

The African heard his own groaning voice, "Please... please don't kill me. I...I have given you all the money that I came back home with. Please...please search this whole room. If you discover that I have lied to you, then kill me—"

"Shut up, you stinking fool!" his assailant roared, angrier now because of what the man on the floor just said. "I am working on information." He bent down and went to the African's ear, making sure the man on the floor heard the next important statement correctly.

"Listen, you fool, if you ever thought I undertook the long journey to this lifeless village to waste my time with you, then you're a loser. You hear me? A big loser! I was properly informed that you're loaded with ten fucking thousand Euros, and that's what I came here for."

The gunman stood up, pulled out a packet of Benson and Hedges from his trouser pocket. With ease, he selected a cigarette and lit it with a match.

"Now let me ask you, if you didn't have money, why did you come back for Christmas, big fool? Why did you?"

Not waiting for any response, as he wasn't ready for one, the gunman began kicking the African with his legs. This time he kicked and jabbed the man on the floor many times in the rib

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cage with the strong military boots he wore. The impact broke one of the African's ribs.

“Did you forget you were going to pay your tax as soon as you landed home? Did you forget that you had certain people to pay homage to?”

“What is two thousand Euros, fool?” the gunman continued to rage. “What were you doing abroad? Washing dishes, I guess.”

The African wriggled in pain at his cracked ribs. A trickle of blood dripped from his mouth. He no longer heard the gunman's words. He had lost a lot of blood and was beginning to fade away. Yet as he went fainter, he wondered what might have happened to all the people sleeping under the same roof as him this night, including his parents. Had this lone gunman killed everybody and then turned on him? he asked himself as he waited for the moment when a bullet would cut through the back of his head and end his dejected life. Why couldn't the whole lot of them fight back together and subdue this lone gunman?

And why did he even come back from Spain? Why? He remembered.

His parents!

He was here to see his parents: his bed-ridden father and his aging mother whom he had missed so much, after a long period away from home. He had saved all the money he could to be sure he came home to spend the Christmas with his beloved parents and other family members and extended relatives. But it didn't happen the way he had wished. Now, instead of being happily asleep, with all the relatives who came out here to welcome him, he lay in his own blood, death knocking at his door. And nobody could save him.

Outside the house, an owl hooted from one of the numerous tall trees surrounding the small village. The African heard the

sound distantly. But he understood its significance: Death was around the corner.

Where on earth are the police? Oh God, this is not happening to me. I am dying. God, I am dying.

He heard the harsh, icy voice again. "I am going to search your boxes now, fool," the gunman said. "If I take the pains and discover where you hid the money, I will hack your breath away."

The African didn't respond. He had no strength. But he never knew though, strength or no strength, the gunman never left any traces after his operations. He was a condemned man.

The gunman crossed over through the African's head to where his legs rested on the floor, moving towards the wardrobe. But things changed all of a sudden. Somehow, the gunman slipped on the African's blood and skidded. He stumbled, lost balance and crashed down on the floor.

Abruptly, something in the African energized him and within a split second, he was up. He broke away from the gunman, turned and began running with his last strength. He must be away from the gunman as much as he could before the man recovered from the fall. The African ran, cupping his throbbing opened skull with his left hand to prevent the increasing oozing of blood from his head; holding his broken ribs with the right hand so as to prevent it from disintegrating.

The African drew nearer to the main exit of his family house and forced himself to shout out to the neighbors inside the compound. His mouth formed the words, "Help, please... help me!" But no sound would come.

Still he ran. He knew that even if he shouted and they heard him, nobody would come to his rescue. Everybody was scared of being hit by a bullet. He had some strength to run, he thought. Thank God, at least.

But some force was drawing his legs backwards.

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The gunman was back on his feet. The African glanced over his shoulder a trifle, in time to see the man raise the pistol, aiming it at him. But there was nothing he could do other than to keep running. He ran.

He dashed out of the building into a blinding darkness, in confusion. Then he remembered that there had been a power outage, and that the gunman was using a beam of light from his own touch. In the blindness, the African's drive hauled him to an obstacle, which he felt with his hands and understood quickly. It was the high, aging block fencing guarding their house. He clamped both hands on the fence, struggling with last effort, his body throbbing. He hopped up and was almost on the outside of their house.

The gunman was out too, and closer. He targeted and fired. He didn't miss his aim. The bullet hit the African at the back of his right shoulder and shattered the scapula into fragments.

His breathing almost halted now, the African scaled over the fencing with the gushing blood and dropped outside the family compound. He gritted his teeth and ran without direction.

He was still running when he felt the vibration of his mobile phone that he always kept under the right side of his pillow before going to bed.

2

The African woke up with a start, his mouth open, panting and breathing from the exercise. Confused at first, he clamped his right hand on his chest, but then understood where he was and went for the light switch. He stopped midway, deciding against switching on the light.

My God, it was a dream. I went home to my country.

He tried to fight off the superstition that immediately bombarded him.

I am not going to like the message this phone call will convey.

The whole blood in his body surged toward his brain, and the bad dream generated an instant headache.

The hunger of the masses has created insecurity – a big threat to our nation. What do we do about this?

The phone's vibration continued. The African fumbled for the device, dragged it out, his eyes still shut to the illumination of the phone's light. He opened his eyes a little to view the identity of the caller, not allowing himself to be fully awakened in case he didn't want to take the call: It was unusual for anybody to be calling him at as early as five o'clock in the morning.

“Whoever you are, damn you!” he cursed, “calling me at this time of the day with a private identity.” He tossed the phone back to its position.

The vibration continued a little more and stopped. Two minutes later, the call came again.

The African sat up, now unable to avoid being woken up. He thought about the dream, about the long hooting sound of an

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owl, and worried. He remembered that at home he had two aged parents whose health conditions always got him worried.

I hope nothing has gone wrong.

He picked up the phone, touched the answer button and connected the line. He listened for a voice. None came. Then he said, "Hello?"

"Rhino!"

The African frowned. Out of the darkness that surrounded the room, anger smoldered in his half-closed eyes. "Who's this?" To his greatest astonishment, the male voice which hammered into his ear from thousands of kilometers away sounded excited. Or were there voices? A voice seemed to be saying something in the background. And then, a clatter of glasses.

"Rhino," the voice called again.

The African immediately knew who the voice belonged to. The caller's tone was different from that of any other of the secondary school mates he had back home.

Rhino breathed in relief.

Thank God this isn't any emergency about my parents, or my family.

If it were, the call would have come from one of his family members.

"Nichy, what a surprise that you're calling me," Rhino said in their native African language, maintaining a friendly attitude, while addressing the other man by his own nickname, "and at this time of the morning!"

"Why do you sound this way?"

"This is an odd hour, you know."

"I don't care what hour it is. Why are you surprised that I am calling?"

“Why not? I call you from time to time. And you have my phone number, but refused to call, not even for a minute, just to say hi.”

“My man, know this: phone calls are only meant to be thrown from overseas, not the reverse.”

“I see,” Rhino paused a little. “Now that you've broken the rule, I hope all is well.”

“Man, Merry Christmas. I called you because I wanted to be the first person to break the good news to you.”

Rhino's heart sank into his stomach in anticipation of what news this could be. From the background noise and the jangling of glasses, he guessed Nichy was with a woman. They were drinking, and were perhaps in some small hotel room.

So Nichy still lives his hotel lifestyle?

Rhino's mind wandered about in the split second of pausing over the phone. But he couldn't guess what the news could be. Though Nichy seemed excited, Rhino didn't like receiving news from someone drunk or someone battling with a hangover. Such news may be as bad as otherwise expected.

“What news, Nichy? I am listening.”

Now, say what you want to say, please, and stop wrecking my nerves.

Rhino waited for a reply. It took a long time.

Finally, Nichy spoke. “But first I want to ask you a question which has lingered within me for some time now.”

“Please do. I would like to go back to sleep a little.”

“My dear friend, are you really the man we sent to Europe two long years ago? Or should we give your place to another man?”

The question hit Rhino by surprise, though it angered him even more. In an involuntary gesture, he withdrew the phone from his ear and stared at it. He placed it back to his ear.

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“You've still not changed from your drunken and ill-mannered way of talking to people,” Rhino said.

“Look, who says I am drunk? We were doing it together down here, and I know you've not stopped, because you can't stop it.”

How a day could begin!

“If you called me all the way from Nigeria to lash insults at me, then thanks. But I have to go back to bed, because I'll have to wake up in the next hour and prepare for work.”

“Aha! Yes, your chicken dirty work. Sappy has told me all about it. You even do the dirty job on a day like the twenty-sixth of December, Boxing Day?”

Rhino stirred in his bed, restive now. “Sappy told you what?”

“About the stupid and dirty poor man's job you do, of course! How much did Sappy say they pay Rhino?” Nichy had dropped the phone and was throwing his question at someone with him over there. Rhino heard a voice in the background call out eight hundred Euros per month – the voice of the female he suspected was with his friend. Rhino wondered why he should be listening to someone drunk like this. But the mention of the name Sappy kept him stuck to the phone.

Nichy's husky voice came back again. “They say you earn eight stupid hundred Euros over there. It's unbelievable.”

“I see you have no news to deliver. In that case, goodbye,” Rhino snapped the phone out of his ear and began to press the cut-off button. But he stopped on the way as, out of the surrounding quietness, Nichy's voice came from the distance.

“The good news, mate, is that Sappy is back.”

Rhino clamped the phone back to his ear. “What did you say?”

“I said Sappy is back for Christmas!”

There was a long hostile pause as Rhino's lips went dry, his mouth parting in disbelief over what Nichy just said.

My God, he has been tormenting me, trying to let his news sink into me very slowly.

"Sappy is back for Christmas," Rhino repeated. "How? With what residence permit? In this deep global economic recession? That is impossible!"

"Look, who says it's impossible? Oh, well, yes it is, for a poor, dirty working class boy like you. Sappy told me all about it, man. The economy will remain static for you because you don't want to put your eyes to the ground and follow what others are doing there. Rather you choose to do useless, dirty jobs. Well, you've chosen poverty."

Rhino didn't respond. He had nothing to say, and could only listen and absorb the insults being thrown at him.

"He is not just back for Christmas," Nichy went on. "He came back as a made man. Sappy has made it, man! Sappy has just become one of the biggest boys in town. He came back loaded with plenty c-a-s-h, a lot of goods and a clean Jaguar X type 2-0-0-7 model."

No response.

"Sappy is a rich man now. So what does he have to do with the European residence permit? He throws in his passport at any of the embassies tomorrow and the soon-to-be-titled-chief is granted a one-year visa. What are you doing, man? You're no more the sharp Rhinoceros we used to know in those old secondary school days. What came over you, mate? You must wake up and follow others in what is going on..."

A deep fear struck Rhino to a halting position, sending his pulse racing. He couldn't believe what he was being told. He suddenly plunged into thinking, not concentrating as his old school mate continued to rant on the other end of the line.

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*Sappy is back for Christmas? How possible could this be?
And he has become very rich!*

Sappy went to Switzerland six months ago, from Rhino's house. He had refused to call Rhino ever since he left. Rhino could not recall anything wrong he had done to the chap. He never treated him badly during the short time Sappy stayed in his house. Their plan had been to travel to Europe together, but Rhino's arrangement went through before Sappy's; and one year passed before Sappy succeeded with his own plan.

"Right now," Nichy was saying, "his family is enjoying Christmas because there is money flowing around. But your own family...I don't know, still in penury while they have someone like you out there. This is just hard to believe..."

Rhino's mind came back to the phone still gripped to his ear. He heard Nichy's voice saying, "Guy, you need to wake up! Remember, this is your second year abroad – in Spain for that matter, where all sorts of things are happening. You were one smart boy here at home. Let yourself do something, my guy. Get rich, come back here and give us the good time."

There was a pause, the man on the other end allowing his message to be absorbed.

"We are all inside the city, and have been staying in a five-star hotel since the past week, and Sappy is footing the entire bill. Guy, we wait for you to come back and do the same for your friends and kinsmen here. And we wait for you to help us financially too, in order to join you there. Please quit that naughty job right away and turn into being a bad boy and look for the c-a-s-h."

Nichy went on ranting at him, but Rhino had heard enough. He touched the end button of the phone, though not before he heard the suspected female voice say, "Come home rich, honey. We are waiting for your fun. Or we find a way of deporting you to this our God forsaken country and replacing you with a faster

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guy.” This was followed by a roaring laughter from both the woman and Nichy his old school mate.

Rhino dropped the phone back to its position and immediately drifted into deep thought about his situation.

*

Two hours later, Rhino rose from bed. Not that he had slept again since then. It was time to prepare and go to work. But he needed to say thank you to God for His mercies over his life and his family's.

Rhino knelt down by the bedside and began. Words wouldn't come. He tried again. It remained the same. In lieu of that, his mind strayed back to his village. What would Sappy be doing now? Especially, what would he be telling the people against *him* and his inability to commit crime?

Unable to continue with the prayer, Rhino stood up and began preparing for work.

3

“Stop hauling me,” Rhino begged in his native African language. “Stop, please!” He turned his head to his right side in a defending movement and stared into the empty space surrounding him, then threw the working materials he held to the floor and cupped both hands around his ears in defense from further attacks. “I’ve said I can’t do it, never!”

His attacker moved further in on him, not cowed by the young man’s defensive efforts. It had the gripping power of a reticulated python over Rhino such that, as he struggled to wage further attacks, the attacker wound its long and massive body around him, suffocating and crushing with no mercy.

Just that here, there were no swamps or grasslands or scrublands, no trees in the open jungle – the battlegrounds of a python. The place where the force hauled Rhino was just an open space in a hotel.

-You must act now. Do something fast to save your family’s wretched situation! Nothing will be achieved with this dirty, low paid job you’re doing here, the attacker hammered again – the fifth time today.

“No,” Rhino screamed now. He went down on his knees, still clutching tighter to his ears as if he would coil away from the shadows of his terrible tormentor. He forgot where he was – a zone of absolute quietness in the hotel. He forgot that the noise he made could be overheard by a senior member of the staff, or could even be reported by a client in the hotel. “Don’t push me against my wish, I am in Europe to work and fend for myself and my family! I’m not going to deal in drugs, ever!”

Moments passed, and Rhino remained kneeling on the floor, his inclined head resting on the transparent glass wall. Then it

seemed to him that the attacker – a voice within him – had withdrawn. The hostile voice that had been insistent and violent, building up inside the African since the daylight had come up, was now at the point of gaining the negative effect it wanted on Rhino.

John – they addressed him as John in the hotel – found his mind again. He hauled himself up from the floor, picked up his working materials once more and got back to work. He tried concentrating on his duty, but the mental exhaustion had come into evidence. The phone call from home thousands of kilometers away when he had woken up earlier in the morning today had triggered him into series of thought-driven panics.

In the last days of December of this year, Valencia City was witnessing intensified winter weather condition as cold as four degrees Celsius. John dreaded the cold. Normally, when at work in such a low temperature as this, he always reduced the freezing effect of the water on his hands with the aid of warmed water. Now, he dipped his hands into the bucket of cold water beside him, wetting the cleaning material, but unaware of the freezing of his hands.

John shrugged, stood motionless awhile, his eyes damp with tears. Then, as though he had regained focus on the job he did, he used his right hand and swept the cleaning tool on the glass covering he was working on. He stared at the glass, not believing it. Despite his efforts, the covering looked dirtier than when he had first seen it this morning. He knew it wasn't the man who always did the job doing it today.

- *My son, resist it, a new inner voice cried out for the first time. A good name is preferable to great riches. Things will be OK. Success is patience. Manage your job well. Don't act faster than your pace.*

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John paused to listen to the new voice. It brought him more courage for the resistance he craved. He raised his left hand, the right holding the cleaning tool motionlessly against the glass covering. He made gestures he didn't understand their meanings as he tried to listen to the new voice again. It carried the message of wisdom and truth. But the former had gained too much of the upper hand with its insistence.

John advised himself: As an African, he was young at twenty-five years old. He hadn't come to Europe to rush things and make the anyhow money like many of his countrymen had. No, he wouldn't do that. It was just a matter of time before he settled into the system. He had plenty of the time. And not only time, he had the energy to work too.

-You come from a Christian family. That dignity matters more than your family's poor status, the second voice warned.

John considered this remark for another short time. This was true, he thought. He couldn't bring shame to his family, committing crime. No matter how difficult it might be for them down there, he must follow the rightful ways of earning a living.

-Bother not about your Christian background! Your friend is also a Christian. Yet he has made it, the first voice insisted. *Wake up and know what is happening here in Europe. After all, you came all the way from Africa down here, for the easy money. Not to suffer. Do something for your poor family!*

The voices battled within John. The African closed his eyes time and time again, sinking deeper into a more psychologically unpleasant and confused state. His face became ashen and wet with sweat.

John had been a staff of the Ivory a little less than one year now. The hotel, located in the heart of the new Valencia, was an eight-storey building with excellent modern and high profile

architecture, its name having been derived from the ivory-product art work used for its interior and exterior decoration. The hotel had two hundred and fifty rooms, which included eight VIP stays.

To John, the art work gave the Ivory a uniqueness that distinguished it from many other hotels of its standard he had seen in the city. He believed that this was why, the Ivory Hotel had been rated the third best amongst more than fifty others of its kind in Valencia this year. He also believed that the Ivory's exceptional management efficiency had also contributed in winning the rating. Its location near the city's historical Oceanography Museum, and its proximity to most of the city's biggest commercial stores may also have helped.

John also appreciated the hotel's nearness to the Valencia Seaport. To him the Ivory was well suited for tourism. And he knew that most of the tourists at the Ivory were attracted by the hotel's mezzanine. Sometimes, when they came down to this floor for their breakfasts, he would be stationed in a good position to see how they reacted to the sight of the Mediterranean Sea, which was partly visible.

To take a view of the sea two kilometers away from the hotel wasn't the real attraction, rather making the viewing through a specially designed glass partition. The transparent glass formed a wall from one end of the big mezzanine facing the sea to the other, giving it a sight for every first time guest, as the highly magnifying glass drew the sea much closer to where the clients stood, reflecting its deep blue coloration that seemed to close up to the sky. They constructed the trick for little children who were always delighted with it.

Because of its importance, the hotel's management always kept the glass fencing clean and spotless, both on the outer and inner parts. And to make this possible required an everyday cleaning, first thing in the morning, throughout the week. For

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this maintenance to be kept running, the hotel had employed John, the African. This was his most important task, though he also did many other jobs.

John's extreme black skin made many of the hotel staff mistake his country of origin as Mali, or Senegal, instead of Nigeria, although his height of one meter, eighty, his nice facial features, and his broad chest drew attention away from his blackness.

Still in a troubled mind, John felt the weight of his belly labor him. Before now, the belly never disturbed him in his job. So as he tensed, he also wondered why he had allowed beer to swallow his chest. It was one habit of inducing happiness he had tried to stop, as his Christian religion forbade it. But it had not been easy to quit. And drinking had got him into trouble on a few occasions. He knew his other unchristian habit – affairs with women. He felt happy, though, since he hadn't really allowed that to distract him since he had landed in Europe.

His worries came back.

I came here for my aged parents: my disabled father and my ever struggling mother, to be able to work and provide funds for their healthcare and for their feeding.

Instead of this, the pressures on the African came from the numerous numbers of younger cousins, nephews and nieces, generated from the ancestry of his great grandparents. He wondered how anybody could go on to have up to eight wives, under the pretext that he had had no brothers or sisters during his childhood – an only child. And the man had gone on to have seven children with each of his wives, creating kindred of descendants.

The telephone calls had kept coming, all within a space of one-and-a-half years John had been in the foreign land. There were so many of the calls that he found it difficult to remember them all now:

“Uncle, I need forty thousand Naira to pay up for my next term's school fees,” one of his nieces called to say one day. John's coming abroad had made him an naive uncle, so he did no other thing than respond to the young girl's request. He wired two hundred and fifty Euros the next day.

“My brother, please we need your assistance!” John's sister had cried out tearfully one day. “Ama is hospitalized and the doctor requires a fifty thousand Naira deposit before any treatment will be given to him. Please help us before we lose our boy.”

They needed to deposit the sum of three hundred Euros at the hospital. Fifty thousand Naira was almost half of what John earned as salary. And the problem was that his sister's demand came in the middle of the month. Salaries hadn't yet been paid. But John didn't have to tell her that.

“OK sister, there is no problem,” John had said. “Ama will be fine. Please ask the doctor to go on with it. I will send the money as early as possible tomorrow.”

John had rallied round, begging one or two of his fellow staff – whites – explaining the situation to them. They pitied him and helped him the much they could. But at the end of the day, the money wasn't enough. The next day, to save the little boy, John did what he swore he wouldn't do in his life as an adult.

The young man shook his head from where he stood, wheeled his mind from that particular subject, trying not to recall it. He did send the money for Ama's hospital bill as he had promised. But it was used for the purchase of a small coffin for little boy's burial. The kid died ten minutes after John called his sister and gave her the money transfer number. The doctor had refused to attend to the kid until the deposit was made.

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The guilt John felt over the death of his younger nephew had not left him until now. And it had been like that. The pressure continued to build up on him.

John thought that troubles came not only from the family members and relatives. Many phone calls came from outside his family circuit too, all centered on the same issue – encouraging a very fast financial breakthrough.

“Hello, Rhino. I got your phone number from your cousin,” a woman friend of his during his secondary school days had called one day. “I trust that intelligence you have. Just put your mind in what others are doing there, good or bad, do it and you will succeed. Remember, you are abroad to make the money. And time waits for nobody.”

Countless other calls and text messages kept rolling in from the people John knew in Nigeria. And also from those he didn't even know.

John's heart thumped as his job stood still and he thought about all the obligations. Despite the cold weather, he noticed his armpit was damp with perspiration.

Searching for cold air now, he undid the large buttons of the faded Chinese-made leather jacket he wore over another Chinese-made turtleneck sweater. To most of his fellow countrymen in Valencia, John's dress looked odd. But he in no way cared about how they saw him. The jacket he unbuttoned reminded him of a day when they were in a gathering to mark the Nigerian independence celebration, when somebody he didn't know well walked up to him and posed a question in a way that embarrassed John.

“My friend, I have observed that you enjoy wearing inexpensive and inferior made in China garments. Why?”

John had stared back at the man, annoyed, and said to his questioner, “Appearance should be more about neatness of dress

than cost.” John’s annoyance really extended to the general African problem. He knew that while Africa could hardly manufacture any of these goods, his own people knew how to distinguish quickly between the inferior and the superior.

His mind reverted to his work, and to where he was in the present. Today Friday, twenty-sixth December, was to him like the beginning of a new week due to the holidays he had had over the previous past two days. The hotel recorded many clients during the last two days, and amongst them, children holidaying with their parents.

The abundance of fingerprints and lip marks on the lower part of the glass wall told John that the kids came into contact with the transparent partition during their breakfast while trying to embrace the sea. And that was why he had been asked to get it cleaned before the clients' arrival for breakfast this morning.

As John stood there and stared through the glass, his mind left the job he was doing once more. Finally, he lowered the cleaning tool into the bucket of water and took up the glass wiper from the floor. He dropped the tool down again. And unconscious of what went on around him, the African stood immobile, moving into another world, relating some past events with the news he heard a few hours ago.

4

When Sappy later got through with his travel arrangement, he landed in Spain and headed directly to Valencia. John took his childhood best friend in and accommodated him. The apartment was a small three-bedroom flat that John shared with three other Nigerians. The older of the two boys occupying the biggest room rented the apartment in his name. The two were distant blood relatives of John, coming from the same maternal extended family lineage, and it was the older of the brothers who had helped to make the arrangement by which John had come over to Spain.

The occupant of the third room did not come from the same tribe as John, and his relatives were instead from the western part of Nigeria. The elder of John's cousins and the westerner had met each other during their refugee camping days in Ceuta, the Canary Islands, and were later posted to Valencia together.

With Sappy's arrival, the flat became more crowded. But for Africans in this country to be able to afford the bills and save enough to send to their families back home, the communal system of living had to be practiced.

"You will have to exercise more patience," John said one day, in their native African language, having noticed a form of sadness in Sappy as soon as he dashed into the apartment from his now routine evening strolling around the neighborhood. The time ticked seven-forty five in the evening. Sappy was standing by the entrance door, staring at nothing. Only the two of them were in the house. The others hadn't returned for the day.

"What you're experiencing now is what I went through when I arrived here," John told him, remembering his own

ordeal. He hissed. "When I arrived in Valencia and came into this apartment, it took only one week of sightseeing and idleness before I got to business and faced reality. My relative told me I had to enroll for Spanish language studies."

Initially, John's reaction had been like Sappy's – vexation. But after a thorough explanation, John accepted his fate and went for the studies, determined. And for the next eight months, he did nothing but struggle to perfect his ability to speak the language. That was just the passport to securing a job.

"Be happy," John advised, "that you already had a friend here before you came. Else it would have been a tougher case for you, without shelter."

John was sitting relaxed in the upholstered chair in the sitting room. He lowered the volume of the television through the TV's controller. "I am optimistic that we will be able to get a job for you as soon as you are able to understand the Spanish language, at least at the basic level."

Sappy shifted his head slightly and looked at John as if to say, "My entire predicament is your fault". His unemployment had lingered for seven months since he arrived.

"When I was back in Nigeria you told me that it would be easy to get a job as soon as I was over here," Sappy said. "If I can't get something going, then what am I doing here?"

"Please, you misquote me."

"What do you mean 'misquote you?'"

"I told you that an arrangement could be made to enable you gain employment, that this may not pose a lot of problems if—"

"If what? I borrowed plenty of money, which needed to be paid back as soon as I came. Now it has accumulated. And my family members are under a continuous threat."

John forced himself to ask. "You mean you didn't utilize the money you made from the politicians?"

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“That is none of your business.”

“But there is no way you can work in this country without a basic knowledge of Spanish language.” John paused a little, then continued. “Spain is a good country, my dear, so free and hospitable to immigrants. I’ve never seen a thing like it before.”

“You’ve never seen a thing like it because you’ve never stepped an inch out of this country.” Sappy glared at him with contempt in his eyes. “And never call me your dear again!”

“Why?” John asked, shocked.

“Because I’m not your dear. We don’t reason along the same lines.”

John left his relaxing position and sat up.

“What line of reasoning are you referring to?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Well, your words surprise me. But the only advice I can offer is that you try to learn the language if you want to get out of this predicament. In this country they speak Spanish, not English.”

“And I have no time to waste. Neither do I have interest in studying any stupid language. I am too old for such rubbish. There must be other easier ways of making good money here.”

“I understand working as the only way of making money here.”

“And I did not come here to do any manual job, after taking all the pains, paying a huge amount of money to the agents. As long as we are here in Europe, the definition of our stay is to make money as fast as we can.”

John watched in silence while Sappy did all the talking.

“People at home don’t care to know how long you remained here doing dirty manual jobs,” his friend went on. “Before coming out, we have seen a lot of other guys back from Spain and other parts of Europe, loaded with cash, Euros. Those people don’t have different money making brains from ours.”

John sat looking confused, as his friend said things he saw as silly words. He wondered why he had failed to understand before now that Sappy might not see things the way he himself saw them. Back in Nigeria Sappy had maintained his extraordinary get-rich-quick character. And now he was determined to achieve his aim.

"I have discovered a drug selling network," Sappy said. He moved forward and into the room, now standing in the middle, rubbing out some pain on his wrist caused by his chain watch.

John was still seated. He had just come back from work and was about listening to the 8.00 P.M. Mediterranean TV news when Sappy came in. He sat frozen and paralyzed for a moment, his lips apart. He couldn't relax in the seat anymore; his interest in the news had faded away. He heaved himself out of the chair and stood up quickly. He faced Sappy, hardly believing what he had heard.

"*What* did you say?"

"You heard it correctly. I have discovered a drug-selling network. That is the surest way to get rich in this part of the world. We have to wake up to what is happening around us, my man. There are many things to take care of back home."

John gaped at his friend, unable to say anything. No wonder Sappy had taken to moving around the city all day. He had been scouting out for people into drug trafficking all this while, not even caring about being caught by the police because of his illegal status here.

"I think you've gone nuts!" John shouted. "Do you know the penalties involved if you're caught trading in drugs in this country? Jesus Christ! Hey, watch your steps. I don't believe you are saying what I am hearing. You want to end up with ten years in prison. Or more."

"I don't care what the consequences would be. I am ready to face the music if caught! That's a prize that could be paid for

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committing crime.” To prove he meant business, Sappy dipped his hand into the right pocket of his trouser and dug out a small object rapped in a black plastic nylon material. He unwrapped the nylon and exposed what John thought was a white powdery substance. “This is a sample of cocaine,” Sappy pronounced in a bold manner.

John lost control of himself, flew into a wild rage, and advanced on Sappy. He threw a punch at him with his fisted right hand. Sappy's quick reflex saved him, coupled with his shortness. He dodged the hot blow meant for his face with a slight inclination of his head. But he couldn't save the white substance. The powder dropped out of his hand, spreading all over the floor, some diffusing into the air.

Sappy didn't charge back. He couldn't. He knew his limits. He stood there gaping at the Rhino with a profound hatred.

“You must leave this apartment if you want to do this!” John pointed at the remains of the substance on the floor. “I am giving you twelve hours of grace to find a place for yourself and your business. This apartment cannot in any way accommodate a drug dealer!”

“Just look at you!” Sappy found his mouth again. “You left a poor family in Africa. And they had celebrated all their Christmas better when you were at home than now. You must boost your morale, Rhino. Boost your morale!”

-Listen to your friend. What he has with him is money. Don't be a fool.

That was the first time the voice ever spoke to John. And it had continued to drive him harder all the while. But he'd vowed to use his resourcefulness and initiative to make an honest living in Europe, even under a severe, difficult family economic circumstance.

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The next day, John came back from his job and saw a letter written by Sappy, informing him he was on his way to Switzerland. That was it. Sappy never left an address or a contact telephone number, and he never called Rhino again.

5

John stood perspiring, still ignorant of what he did and where he was. Now, his mind drove him down memory lane to his family background and to other things of the past.

He only managed to conclude his secondary education in a dilapidated college building that had long lost the government's attention. He had performed well, however, thanks to his natural brilliance and intelligence. His spoken English was comparable to that of someone who went on to university level. But coming from a family with a background such as his, in his country, the issue of a university education wasn't usually discussed. John knew how costly education was to an untold number of families in Nigeria.

Local palm wine tapping was the family business. And John's great grandfather had flourished in the business in the olden days. His grandfather, his father and many of his uncles also joined in the business. But the profit in it later plummeted with the introduction of many modern brewing companies, coupled with the fact that the dealers in palm wine were unable to develop modern ways of harvesting and preserving the product so as to keep up the competition with beer.

John would have joined his ancestors in the business too, despite its disappearing profits, but the family had decided to withdraw from it because of series of frequent fall-from-the-tree accidents in the past. His great grandfather died from a tree fall. His grandfather and two of his eight uncles died the same way. His father was the last victim. Although he survived his own fall, it ended up giving him a spinal cord disorder, resulting in a permanent disability.

Nonetheless, John still had a determination to restructure the palm wine production business in the future, which was even one amongst the many reasons why he had travelled to Europe. It would only need the introduction of modern harvesting and packaging techniques, and possibly an artificial reduction in the height of the palm wine trees, while increasing their wine production capability. One day his family's treasured business may become rejuvenated. All depended on how well he could make savings for the industry and other businesses he had in mind.

After his secondary education, John had decided to learn a skill in computer programming in place of the wine tapping. He managed to attend the training for only three months and then stopped as the poverty in the family lingered. The situation in the country worsened every day. Petrol price increases was at their worst, and the leadership remained insensitive to the sufferings of the Nigerian citizens, never caring to offer good solutions.

Since the early '90s going abroad had turned out to be one good way for the poor to elevate themselves in Nigerian society. Emigration had become one of the greatest employers in the country since then. Many other families were doing it. And it manifested itself in many of these families because they somehow measured well with the families that had people in the government; although, a majority of the families never knew how their children suffered abroad. The end point of the game was to make good returns.

John's family had no one already abroad, so he saw it important to follow suit. At first, he had never wanted to travel, but each Christmas that came and went, he saw the men and women from overseas come and go, money spent during the period. All appeared to be doing very well. At least, they all

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appeared healthy. Then, at a time, the urge to get out of the country intensified.

John stood in the mezzanine, not doing his work, just lost in thought. This must be why a lot of boys wanted to make it fast when they saw their way to Europe, he thought. Financial pressures from home. Living abroad, to a majority of the people back home, was like hitting the jackpot. And when one said no to any request for money, one automatically became the bad man who didn't want to help one's people suffering at home.

John imagined a feeling.

In my society, each day that passes, it becomes more monstrous to be an honorable person than to commit crime, after all, as long as one makes money out of the criminal activity. My friend has made it. And to people at home, I am just wasting my time abroad. God!

The extended family system practiced in Africa has many associated problems. Though, it is a little advantageous in a country where the government does nothing about the welfare of its citizens. John believed the African leaders were to blame for the mass movement of younger Africans out of the continent. What would anybody be gaining back there in Africa? Constant electricity? Good water to drink? Medical facilities? Or food to eat? A good environment? Name it all. How about good roads for easy transportation of the food to eat? Nothing worked.

The basic amenities were far from the reach of the masses. Rather, people saw conflicts of all sorts, tribal and religious wars. The wars were on in Sudan, Congo, and Somalia, to name but a few. Even in sub-Saharan Africa's most respected Kenya. Politicking was the professional field where wealth could easily be amassed. Hence it had become the area of greatest interest in Africa; in Nigeria, in Zimbabwe. Even the aviation industry

mainly used by the rich in a country like Nigeria, was sick. Africa's self-proclaimed giant was yet unable to generate a country's backbone for development – constant electricity.

As John compared the situation in Europe with that on his continent, tears dropped further out of his eyes. What was really wrong with his Africa?

His greatest problem was that of the insecurity in his country. One got to the country and it wouldn't be news to hear that you had been knocked out by a gang of gunmen in a robbery incident, or by a gang of kidnappers demanding a ransom. Or even by men of the police and army authorities, the country's security operatives. All wanted your hard-earned foreign currency.

Something occurred to John. He refused to ponder it. But the question lingered in his mind:

Is it possible that as God has created the white race and the black race, as He has created the coiled hair and the hard hair, that He has also made their manner of reasoning and behavior to be in opposition?

No, it's impossible. He could see that the attitude of the black community in the United States of America challenged that theory. Those people were doing absolutely fine. The problems of Africa lay only in the mentality of the African leadership.

Yet John considered his theory.

But what could be the problems with Haiti and Jamaica?

They were well taught in History during secondary school. Why were those pure black countries in the western hemisphere not doing well in leadership and development?

John's mind wandered back to what History had told them about the situation of his own country during the neo-colonial period, when the whites still had some form of decisions to make in the country's governance. Things were well and OK

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then. The Naira had been strong against the US Dollar; education was within the reach of the poor. As far back as then the electricity supply was constant. Back then, money was even sent from Nigeria to people studying overseas. The Nigerian masses were well fed and breathed good air. But the situation plummeted in the post-colonial era, when indigenous Nigerians took over control of the country. Things reversed from orderliness to chaos – until now – worsening each moment as the country saw another day and another age. So it was in sister countries. And no single black African leadership wanted to take this up as a challenge. They all stood at the same level of negativity towards development.

The African suddenly wrinkled his nose, gathering the fragrance of perfume. The smell was concentrated, meaning that the wearer was not far away from him. John knew who the perfume belonged to; over time he had become used to the sweet scent of the product.

Then he heard the voice. John spun round and stood shocked in disbelief. *My God*, he looked at the man. *I am finished!*

How long had he been here? And he had been calling John's name for some while. John thought he had heard a voice earlier. But he hadn't been very sure about it; he thought the voice had come from within him.

Enigma had been standing behind John for more than fifteen minutes, calling the African first, from afar, and later, as he drew closer to him. As the man stood looking at him, John knew that the precious job he cherished and didn't want to lose, was now about to vanish. The director of the Ivory Hotel had caught him idling, not working.

6

David Lopez stood by the window of the Ivory Hotel room, gawping out at the hotel's well-tended garden many feet below. His eyes shot and opened rhythmically, a movement which had become part of him since his childhood, occurring only when he was bothered or angry, or both.

David knew exactly what he wanted in his life. His appearance testified to that. His masculine body was a deliberate creation, as he was a regular visitor to the gymnasium. He knew that being in his mid-twenties still gave him a good advantage in what he did. And because he was born and bred in Valencia, every nook and cranny of the city lay at the palm of his hands. David could sit down, his eyes closed and in matter of minutes, have the map of the big city drawn on a sheet of paper.

Now David turned to his companion. "Tenemos que seguir con el plan," he said. "We have to go on with the plan. I think we are wasting a hell of time on the whole issue!"

David Lopez was seventeen years old when he was seduced by a divorced woman ten years older than he was. Although, then he already had a nice-looking build, his experience with the woman exposed him more to knowing the importance of the possession of a masculine physique for a man. Then, whenever he went out with the woman to the discothèque, other women stared at him, using their eyes to tell him he was the guy they all wanted.

David later parted ways with the woman of his first experience. Then he turned into an institution in the game. He became the ladies' man. He decided to quit college, and instead, took up a job as a bouncer in one of the discothèques in the city.

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Later he appointed himself as a gigolo for any divorced woman or a rich single woman out to pay for his services – and on many occasions, for married women.

“¿Has oído lo que he dicho?” David asked from his standing position. “Did you hear what I said?” On the clean white T-shirt he had on was written, “Just For The Ladies.” He wore faded black Levis, slightly torn on both knees, and a flat black Nike canvas shoes.

David checked the time from the gold-plated Rolex watch tightened around his wrist, waiting with impatience for a response from the woman lying on the family-sized hotel bed who seemed deep asleep.

The woman stirred in the bed after what David thought a long moment of silence. She was lying on her stomach, a thick winter bedspread covering her body. A pillow shielded her head from the illumination of the daylight, which she thought had come too quickly. It was a quarter to eleven o'clock in the morning. They had been out all night on both the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth of December, jumping from one disco club to another. She found fun in dancing.

David hated dancing. He'd rather prefer walking about in the disco hall, showing himself off to every woman who cared to buy his services. But he had the obligation to do what pleased his companion here, and that's all he tried to do every time they were out in public. She was all he wanted, so all he needed to do was to be patient. Patience! He advised himself. This will soon be over. In truth though, the patience was rapidly running out.

“¿Por favor David, por qué no me dejas tranquila? the woman said to him. “Please give me a little break.” She removed the pillow and looked at her boyfriend with eyes red from unsatisfactory hours of sleep. “And stop bugging. I have warned you many times, we're working with an agent. His is

directing us on what to do, and his decisions over our plan are final. I would be happier if you get this into your brain.”

“Tell me. Why then are you going contrary to the plan? I mean, this is the fifth month, for heaven’s sake. The fifth month!”

“I am tired of moving. He will understand that. Moreover, I like it here. So why don’t we quit this place in March, after the festival?” She sat up in the bed, stretched her body a little, then reached for the hotel’s intercom and ordered their coffee from the room service.

David turned from the window and fixed a strong look at his lover as she made the order. Her slender curves filled his eyes. He softened, replacing the anger with a shudder in want for her. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met. Her appearance always kept him aroused whenever they were together – even when he was alone and thought about her. She had all the physical attractions he needed in a woman. Her good height suited her beauty. She would have made it in the movie industry if she had wanted. The problem, to David, was, she didn’t have the brain to think of developing herself towards that angle of professionalism.

To David, his lady here had another terrible problem: she always dominated their affairs. And David hated domineering women. They irritated him. He couldn’t see himself controlled by a woman the way this one tried to order him about. His mother did that to his father, and his father had to deal with her. David knew he possessed his father’s approach to women who dominated relationships. He had also had to deal with his past lovers like his father did to his mum. Though, it didn’t involve anything to do with violence, or death in any way. His approach was one easy way to treat them when situations like this came up.

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David continued to look at her. Soon, it would be over. Then the money had been paid. And she would have learnt some good lessons. What he would never know was that his judgment had a big error in it. It didn't occur to him that he too might not live to see the day he awaited.

It seemed a long time before a knock came at the door. Both stared in the door's direction, then at each other in awe. Were they expecting anybody? Yes, they remembered at the same time. She had ordered coffee a few minutes back.

"Room service," a voice outside at their door said. "Your coffee, please."

They didn't respond. And the waiter didn't expect their response.

Four minutes passed before David went to the door, opened it with great care, and picked up the coffee tray. Nobody, even the hotel's staff, was to come closer to an extent of seeing their faces entirely..

Three doors away from their room, inside another room, a man lay in the bed, waiting, staring up at the roof. He dare not let himself be seen. He had a task to execute. And he believed it took lots of patience to carry out every task, especially the hardest ones. He had known patience all his life, and that was why he succeeded in the hard things he did.

Right now this particular operation was becoming an enjoyable venture. It'd been ages since he had started it. But luck had been against him. They were careful, taking lots of precautions. But for him too, the resources were available. There had been no need to worry.

Things were happening how he thought they were going to happen; though he was still surprised at that. Surely, somebody must have run out of patience, and now it was his time to smile.

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But so many jobs yet needed to be done. He had already initiated it. So all there was to do was to wait.

Somehow, the man thought, he was lucky. On the three last occasions, he had always managed to lodge on the same floor – on the same hallway with them. Things were going to work his way. All he needed to do was to be patient. Be patient and wait.

7

December 29, 2008

In the last three days since the incident with Enigma, John didn't get a summon. Neither did he hear any rumors that he would be summoned by the management. It surprised him that the head of his department hadn't yet questioned him over this.

This morning, the third day, as he strode into the hotel, he felt relaxed and comfortable. Inside the hotel's underground floor, he walked straight into the men's toilet and changed into his working clothes. Then he went into the office of the head of his department for instructions. Instead, the woman called out to him.

"John, the director wants to see you in his office in your lunch time."

The African suddenly stood stricken. He looked at the woman and noticed a change in her attitude. Her eyes had become hateful.

"Perdone señora," John started to say. "I am sorry...I wanted to tell you how it happened—"

"No me digas nada. Don't bother to tell me anything!"

John stood in front of her desk, transfixed. Her manners towards him had never been like that ever since he had come to the establishment. This was a bad sign.

The woman looked at the African in the eyes. "You went too far. I have told you several times that I could accept your misconducts." She stood up, rounded her desk and stood face to face with John. "But I also warned you time and time again that the director would not. Today, the decision he's going to take on this stupid behavior of yours rests with him."

“Please...” Not knowing anything to say again, John knelt down on the floor for his boss; his voice wobbled. She was a nice woman. And he admired her patience in the leadership of the department. She treated him and the other female workers with motherly tenderness.

John saw the woman as lovely, despite her advanced years, and many times had been tempted to tell her that, but held it back. Where he came from, it wasn't that proper to say such words to a married woman.

John knew he went too far on this one. And now he felt bad, not only because he would lose his place at the hotel, but because he had failed the woman he so much respected. How could he explain to her?

“Whatever had bothered you, you should have waited till you're through with your work,” the woman went on advising. “I have worked with Africans long enough to understand you have many family-related obligations which throw you off balance most times. But you should also understand that losing a job you have because of misconduct can cause more harm than good.”

The woman went past him and walked out of the office. John got back on his feet and stood rigid. He considered the choice of not going to the director's office to take the official quit letter, but rather, quitting the hotel from here.

John looked around the office, the hotel seemed suddenly unaccommodating to him. No wonder, he thought, even his fellow workers, the cooks, the waiters and the others who worked in the other departments, all appeared not to have seen him this morning. He was being isolated like a leper.

“No,” John decided in his native African, “I can't run away like that.” I will be brave and go in there and find out what the director has to say, he thought.

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*

At lunch time, John lumbered up the stairs leading to Enigma's office, wishing he didn't have to go there. The Ivory Hotel director's office was on the mezzanine floor. John's body shook as he approached the door.

John feared Enigma terribly, not because the man was bad, he thought, but because the director possessed certain enigmatic qualities John admired. No, which he feared.

He drew closer to the director's office door. He stopped on the way, not making an immediate advance into the office. Rather, he paused for a short time and listened for sound from inside. He heard nothing. He knew the action was hopeless.

John knocked twice and opened the door. It gave way more easily than he had expected. He sensed why; he was being expected.

"Yes, señor, we will have it looked into carefully..." the director spoke into the phone as John came into the expansive office. The man was seated behind his desk, in a swivel chair, his back turned to the office entrance. John guessed he was reporting to the proprietor of the hotel.

The director swiveled his chair around and turned, looked up at John, signaling him to one of the two guest's chairs opposite. The man turned and continued his telephone conversation.

John stood there, stunned into confusion, not believing he understood the signal.

Impossible! Enigma is not asking me to take a seat.

John chose to remain standing till the man was through. Within the few minutes the director still spoke on phone, John drifted away, into another long thought, this time, about the director himself.

He had given the director the secret nickname, Enigma. He admired the man so much. It even took him up to three months

before he knew that the man seated here headed the management of this big establishment.

The man appeared too simple for his position. And John tended to respect simple and intelligent well-placed persons, who were capable of achieving the things least expected of them.

Many months back, when the African had just joined the hotel, he had been cleaning the surrounding outside window glasses of the hotel when a simply dressed man passed by, pretending not to have seen the person at work. John in his own assumption took him as one ordinary staff of the hotel, for the man had with him a helmet for a motor bike.

On Easter day, during a hotel staff photo session, John was amazed when the other staff addressed the simple man as the director. The chief cook of a three-star hotel in Nigeria would not go to his place of work on a motorbike, then to talk of a whole director. But John hadn't seen this man in a car since he joined the hotel. He always came to work on his motorbike.

The man also surprised the African on another occasion. That day John mounted a ladder, cleaning a huge transparent glass that protected the hotel's elevator, when someone called out his name.

“John.”

John turned to look at the caller of his name.

“You're doing a good job,” the director said. “But be careful.”

The director of this big hotel can even condescend low and know the name of a common cleaner from Africa? John wondered. Again, it wouldn't be credible on the side of the world he came. That day, John went home and celebrated his elevation to power with a few bottles of cold beer.

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“John Adi,” the director’s voice suddenly echoed, disrupting the African’s thought. “What on earth did you think you were doing the other day?”

“Sir?” John said, forgetting himself. The director had caught him off balance with the mention of the surname.

Enigma knows my surname too?

Nobody had ever addressed John by his surname in this hotel. Enigma could not stop surprising him.

The director pushed his chair backward and stood up. Looking at the African, he repeated his question. “I asked what you thought you were doing the other day.”

John opened his mouth, searching for words. No answer came. Instead, his breathing quickened, his uneasiness apparent. “I am sorry sir. I...I,” he stammered. “I was—”

“Please shut up with your excuses.” The director shot him a hostile look. “I’ve not got the time to listen to the lies you cooked up to tell me. We have ethics here. If you knew you had a problem, you could have informed us through the head of your department, rather than coming here and refusing to carry out your responsibilities.”

John stood there, quietly.

“Two months ago,” the director said, “I caught you in this same act and gave you the benefit of the doubt. I never told anyone about it, even your own boss. A few days ago, you repeated the same thing. I understand you pulled the stunt believing you are beyond reprimand.”

John felt a chill run through his bones. He shivered over the statement. He remembered that day. It was on a Saturday. He usually didn’t work on Saturdays. But they had called him to work on an emergency that morning. And the previous evening, for the first time since he arrived in Spain, he had gone out to a pub with a friend and they had got themselves excessively drunk. When the hotel called him the next morning, John didn’t

see the need to inform them about the headache and the hangover troubling him.

John had proceeded to the first floor to clean up the windows of some indicated rooms. He started doing the job, but the headache intensified, so he ran into the VIP suite. The lodge was hidden in a corner at one extremity of the hotel's hallway. Its position provided an alert whenever somebody approached it. John needed a little rest before he continued.

He laid there and rested. But the little rest turned into snoring. When the African woke up later, to his greatest shock, Enigma was standing there looking at him.

The man never summoned John. And he never let the incident out to anybody. John was forgiven.

"After considering your behavior," the director's voice boomed into John's head again. He pulled out a sealed envelope from his drawer and threw it across the desk, "I have decided that you have to go..."

That is it.

John stopped breathing. Frustration flooded and paralyzed him.

I knew it would result in this. Oh, my God! I have lost my job. Now the worst of my family's situation has begun.

From that moment, John didn't hear the words Enigma was saying.

8

February, 2009

“Damned unimaginable,” the younger of the two said. “Seven months gone. No word. No project.” He stamped his right foot on the floor continuously in frustrated rage and anger.

“No levantes la voz por favor,” the older one waved his hand to remind his brother of where they were. “Keep your voice down please. People may be listening.”

The two brothers were in their favorite bar. They liked the joint, not because it stood amongst the best in Xirivella. No. They liked it because it gave them all the comfort they needed in their operations. And its owner gave them the freedom to do whatever they wanted inside there. Being one of their fellow countrymen, the owner of the joint understood the type of job they did. So the place provided the kind of security and environment they needed to operate in.

“I don't care if someone is listening.” The younger of the brothers craned his neck like a bird, watching to see if anybody was paying any attention to them. No one was. He relaxed. The bar wasn't that crowded now. Just a few old men and women at a table in the middle of the space, sipping at their coffee while enjoying an early morning gossip. A young couple seated at a corner, bocadillos – sandwiches – held in their hands. In another corner farther down sat two men, South Americans, in their mid-forties, who the younger of the brothers thought had finished their meals and were waiting to go back to their construction jobs. “I am mad at the whole system,” he said.

Inside this bar, the brothers discussed the entire plan for the execution of their business. From here, they took off for the dispatching of any consignment they needed to deliver to a client. The owner of the joint didn't interfere in their operations. Why would he? He enjoyed a huge reward of one thousand Euros each month for his services. And it came as a six-monthly payment in advance. Having been paid a lump sum on three occasions, he had gotten greedier with the pattern, and it became part of their agreement.

It was late morning of a Tuesday in mid-February, with cold air and morning rainfall. The brothers went on discussing the way forward in their operation. The bar being spacious, the distance between clients seated at one table from the next provided the privacy needed for secret discussions. But the elder of the two also remained alert, making sure nobody got within earshot to hear what they were saying.

"I think the economic crisis is hard on him," the older one said.

"Damn him, and damn the crisis!" The younger of the two tapped his forefinger on the table. "What has the crisis got to do with a private illegitimate business? He is not paying any taxes to the government for dealing in cocaine, is he?"

There suddenly came a long pause while the brothers waited for one of the two South American men passing by their seat and heading to the toilet to disappear.

"True, he isn't paying taxes to the government. But realistically, the trade is dangerous at the moment. The system recently beefed up security against the business. So let's believe he's allowing things cool off."

"That's OK," the younger man paused and dipped his hand into his trouser's pocket. He took out a small white nylon wrap and a packet of Smoking Deluxe rolling paper. He selected a piece of the rolling paper and took his time to loosen the

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wrapped nylon. He collected fingers-full of marijuana, dropped it on the paper and began to mould it.

Minutes passed.

“Let's accept that your last statement made a little sense.” The younger man lit his drug and inhaled. He let the black smoke out through both nostrils and his mouth. “But tell me why he couldn't reach us from time to time to let us know the situation. I mean, we are badly out of money, and things can't continue that way.” He was rasping now.

The younger man, bigger in size than his elder brother, looked hardened in appearance and in action. The older one was just his opposite. He preferred the use of strategy in their job while delegating the physical action. The younger believed that his elder brother's disposition was mixed with fear, though he was jealous that the elder one kept their operation running smoothly with those qualities. The elder brother preferred to use dialogue rather than violence in whatever he did. His outward appearance had also seemed to be a good advantage for their job, as many of their clients would rather contact him than his brother.

They were Colombians, born in that country, bred in that country. Their parents conceived the two of them only. One month after the birth of the first, their father sired the second one, and their mother died giving birth to the second child due to the complicated difficulties in the delivery. The baby survived.

To bring them up as a single parent became a hard task for their father, but he took good care of them. He afforded them with the basic primary and secondary levels of education they needed. During their early teens, they sensed that their father was into a shady kind of activity, alongside his job in an auto mechanic firm. But they never understood what went on. Over

time, their knowledge of his activities was gradually and systematically developed, though. Their father had begun recruiting them into his line of work. And when they were approaching eighteen, they began to have a better view of the business their father was involved in. They knew the business operated between Columbia and Spain.

One day their father went to work at the car repair centre and didn't come back. Two days later the news came to his children: their father had been abducted and assassinated. They understood that their lives were in danger too. They went into hiding, until the day when someone met them and miraculously helped them to Spain to seek refuge.

The man who had helped them, now the owner of this bar, also introduced them to someone who needed their services. Their employer tested them through giving them a good number of jobs. Their performance was brilliant, and in return they got excellent rewards. During their five years working for him, they'd never once seen their employer, not even in business emergencies, when employees would normally get in touch with their chief and sit down with him to discuss issues. Their business relationship functioned only via the phone and email. But to them, it didn't matter. All they needed was to execute their own part of the job, take their own fixed percentage and deposit their employer's returns into a number of split accounts, as instructed.

"We have to find an alternative means of survival," the younger one went on.

"And what's on your mind, then?"

The younger brother took his time, first scanning the bar once more, then looking his brother straight in the eyes. "We will go back to extortion."

The elder brother choked. "We'll do *what*?"

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“That's the only way out for now. After all, we succeeded in Colombia.”

“This isn't Colombia.”

“Does it matter? We'll use our security to scare those prostitutes there in Nazaret.” The younger man inhaled a lungful of smoke. “Frightening them will make things easier for us.”

“Those things were handed to us for use only when self-defense is needed. We can't use them otherwise.”

“We'll use them anyway.”

“No. We can't. That's impossible!”

The younger man was staring at the marbled floor – at a tiny broken edge where his legs were rested – dropping ash on the floor as his brother spoke. He remained that way minutes after his brother said his last word.

He raised his head, his gaze was cold. “Do you understand that too?” He looked and nodded in the direction of the bar owner who pretended to be busy serving his clients. “He's demanding the next six months in advance? The current one expires at the end of next month. And our credit facility here is in a deficit of one thousand two hundred Euros. You remember that, don't you?”

“I'm aware of everything. We will find a better substitute before the time comes and expires.”

The younger man fixed his eyes on his brother, not removing them.

“Yes, there will be a way out of the mess,” the older one said. “But we must not do things contrary to the way we should.”

“Then search for that other way. I am running out of patience.”

“Why?”

“I can't live without money to spend. That's why. You know that.” The younger man stood up, as he always did when angry, ready to leave the bar. “Find an alternative as fast as you can before I go out of my mind.”

The older of the brothers looked after the younger for some time as he exited the joint. He began to weigh things up. At the moment, he truly had not thought up another option for their survival. And he didn't hope to find one soon. May be he could support his brother's cruel idea this time around. The more he considered it, the more he began to think that for the first time in ages, his brother's idea seemed to make some sense.

9

Things were going roughly for John. It was now one month and two weeks since he had lost his job. He had been thrown out of the hotel. It seemed to him like three months had passed, as he sat pensively on a bench inside a small park located on the Calle Dr Manuel Candela.

Today was bright and the sun was blazing, despite the cold of the mid-February winter. But at 11.00 A.M. the sunrays had yet not penetrated the interior of the apartment where he lived. Because of this, John decided to go outside and feel the heat of the sun.

His aim wasn't being achieved as, while he sat under the tall trees in the park, their thick shady leaves prevented the sunrays from penetrating the empty space. But John sat there, absent-minded, pondering a remedy to his situation.

The usual monthly allowance he sent to his parents had been due since last week – the first week of February. But he hadn't yet done that: there was no money to send. And John understood how sensitive his parents were. He didn't want them to sense the loss of his job. Neither did he want them to know something was wrong. It could trigger their worries and their health into a horrendous disaster. This alone worried him so much.

The African's mobile phone's message alert tone sounded. He brought out the phone and read the text: "*Call me now, please.*"

John hissed in annoyance. He put the phone back into his pocket. It was one of his elder cousins asking him to call him immediately.

The past month, John thought, had been like hell. Being unemployed in a land far away from home, with no salary, was a big sickness; especially in this economic predicament. One could easily go mad over it. And John thought he had really become insane.

They said the current unemployment rate in Spain was above fifteen percent, John thought. He had never really had felt it so much as these days of searching for another job but unable to find one. Painfully, of the meager salary he had received in December, John had sent the majority home to his family during Christmas. The remainder, he used to pay the major part of the house rent, so as to help the men he lived with out of their burden, though, an unpaid part of the rent was still outstanding. He alone also paid the bills for the utilities they consumed in the apartment during the month of November.

Offsetting bills had left John with no money for food in January. It was horrible. None of his flatmates had a dime.

John's phone vibrated again. Hesitating, he brought it out and stared at it. The same man who had sent the text, was calling. John answered.

"Hello?"

"My brother, I don't have credit. Please call me now."

"I don't have credit to call you either. What is it? Tell me now."

"You don't have credit to make calls either?"

"Credits are bought with money here. And there is no money right now."

The man went silent a moment, then spoke again. "My house rent has long been due and they're asking me to pack out of the house. Please! I need an immediate assistance!"

When will my people understand that it's not easy here, contrary to how they think?

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John cursed under his breath. "I am out of work at this moment," he emphasized.

"You mean there is no way you can help?"

"I'm sorry I can't do anything right now."

"I can't understand...I mean...what actually is happening to you?"

"I don't know what you mean," John replied. "Three months ago you asked for this same kind of help. You remember?"

"Yes."

"And I helped you out, didn't I?"

"You did."

"I'm sorry I can't help out this time," John struggled to control his tone. "I don't have money anywhere."

"Please, look for a way of rescuing my—"

John touched the phone. The connection ended.

For some long moments, he sat there glum-faced. He looked up across the park at a bank – the Caixa Catalunya. He saw people trooping in and out. People who had money in their accounts to withdraw. John had none.

Then he looked at Mercadona, a supermarket adjacent to the bank. People trooped in and out, their bags filled with food. John had no money to buy the food to eat.

He focused a long stare at all the activities until he was no longer comfortable with the environment in which he was sitting. The African stood up and began walking back home. There had to be a way out of his mess.

*

Five days later, hunger mounting, by eight 8:00 A.M. John got kitted out in old, tattered winter clothes and left the house. He trekked forty minutes away from where he lived, moving towards the city center. There, he located one of the outlets of Consum, a supermarket. John stood on guard like a sentry, then

began one of the hardest jobs for survival many African immigrants in Spain are engaged in – begging for alms.

The first day, after about ten hours of standing, he went home with two Euros. The second day, he took three Euros home. Then the third day, it depreciated to one Euro and fifty cents. On the fourth day, things remained the same.

Today, the fifth day, as John went home this night with one Euro, his eyes were sunken and dry. He had shed all the tears of frustration. He opened the door, went into the sitting room and dropped himself into a chair. Even before the sleep carried him away, he heard the snoring sound from inside one of the rooms and knew someone was deeply asleep, probably because of hunger.

Thirty minutes into his sleep, John's phone woke him up and when he picked it up, his eyes watered, not out of sorrow, but excitement. He knew it was good news coming. He answered.

“¿Señora?”

“John, you have been away for two months.”

“Si, señora.”

“Come back to work tomorrow,” the head of John's department in the Ivory said.

10

The next day, John went to the hotel, reporting to work twenty minutes earlier than his normal time. But as he stepped into the office, the head of department was at her desk, and this told John that there were plenty jobs in the hotel. She wasn't smiling. No welcome-back preamble, no embraces. She called out to him soon as he had changed into his working clothes and was ready for work.

"John please, the hotel has been full during the past four days. And many of our clients left this morning. I want you to give a hand to the dressers. They have many rooms to take care of today.

"Please go to these listed rooms," she handed him a piece of paper bearing a list of the rooms he would work on, "and as usual, remove all the used bed clothing, towels, and other materials."

What the African had been asked to do this morning was one of the hardest jobs he did whenever the hotel witnessed active events. He needed to strip those rooms naked and remove all used materials so as to make it easier for the room makers to work faster. The first day, many months ago, when his boss added this to his responsibility, expanding it, John had shot a fast corner-of-the-eye look at the woman, exploding within himself. Did this woman also want to convert him to a room maker or what? he'd asked himself. The vexation over his inability to complete and send the money needed for Ama's hospital bill the previous day had heightened his anger, and he had managed to conceal his irritation and proceeded to do what he was directed to do. As after all, he had no choice.

But today, as he quickly scanned through the list of rooms on the paper, his heart jolted with delight at such a coincidence. He smiled within, knowing that probably, at the end of today's work, he would be sending a little amount home to his parents. God Almighty knew how to take care of his own children, no matter what the suffering. He always had a way of preventing John from thinking of going into criminal activities.

"It's ok," John replied. And minutes later, he was climbing to his favorite floor. That first day, his boss had told him to start from the seventh floor and head down to the first floor. The second time, the reverse, which was to continue that way permanently. But John had convinced her it was better starting from the seventh floor. So he was going to start from there now.

He approached the room with expectancy, as he had done in the past. He knew, now that the Ivory had called him back to work, he would be doing plenty of harder jobs. But it was a big relief. When all hopes had been lost. The African shook his head in excitement, thanking his God again, for such a miracle only came from Him.

Now, he brought his mind back to the morning job he was going to do. Today, he would start with 717, in which his rich friend always stayed. During the last five months, this particular room had brought John luck a number of times – three times to be exact – so that he had had to memorize its number. He also brought himself to conclude that whoever stayed in that room was a very generous person. And John had thanked him on a number of occasions for the generosity. Or was it her?

Following the first and second incidents, John was even able to predict when he would strike his next piece of luck. He could predict the next time his client would be staying in the hotel, just like today, for the client always stayed in the hotel whenever there were festivities in the city. All he needed to do was to go to his boss' calendar and look for national or

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international conferences, seminars or other festivities with durations of minimum of four days.

The client must have a certain level of influence in this hotel, he thought, constantly keeping this particular room every time he came around. Or was it a she? Whoever it was, the most important thing was that John had easily deciphered the pattern.

-Be careful! Leaving huge amounts of money behind in a hotel room might not be a tip, but a trap for the foolish.

John wasn't listening. Instead, he remembered the first time he ran into luck in this room.

Late August 2008, summertime. Valencia was hosting its first Street Circuit Formula One championship. The battle featured Spain's Fernando Alonso, Britain's Lewis Hamilton, Finland's Kimi Raikkonen, Brazil's Felipe Massa, and others. It would be the first time John had the chance to see those car racing participants live: They were all staying in the Ivory.

The city was filled with foreigners. And all the rooms in the hotel were fully occupied. John and his colleagues worked harder during the period as there were lots of job to do.

On the last day of the competition, John was asked to report to work earlier in the morning than his usual time. Before he arrived, the indefatigable head of his department was seated in her position. She immediately directed him on what to do.

John had climbed to the seventh floor and began to work, starting first with room 711. He worked through to 716, rapid in the job he did.

Then John went to 717. He inserted the key, opening the room door. He stepped in and stopped. On the table there was a fifty-Euro note, with a few one-Euro coins of up to five Euros.

John opened his eyes wide, scared at the sight of the money. But the voice encouraged him.

-You needed the money. Pick it up – Your luck.

That's true. Fifty Euros was the exact amount he needed to complete the money he wanted to send to his sister for the little boy's hospital bill. This must be the Lord's doing for him.

John took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing mind. Had the client checked out? He needed to find out. He went to the wardrobe and opened it. There were no clothes, no boxes. He looked at the security safe box inside the wardrobe. It was open. That meant a lot.

John still needed to be sure. He dashed into the toilet. He checked for the bathing kits. There was none. Now he was sure the client had checked out of the room. He moved towards the money, fast.

He stopped mid-way. One more thing still bothered John. He needed to be sure that none of his colleagues, or even his boss and her subordinates had been there earlier. His mind raced.

No, he didn't think so. If they'd been here before, the money wouldn't be here now. Surely, his colleagues would have taken the money away. If they'd been here.

-My son, they are testing you.

No, John didn't think so. He'd worked in this hotel long enough. Thinking of him as a thief was out of the question. It was unthinkable, because he wasn't a thief.

Then what?

The monetary tip just came, out of the client's benevolence. John was just lucky to be the first to come here.

"Thank you, boss," the African said, "for giving me this pocket enriching part of this hotel job."

The African cursed, suddenly becoming jealous of his colleagues – the ladies who dressed the rooms. So, they always met this kind of fortune? And none of them would let it be known to him. Most times, they went home with a great deal of uncorked drinks, food packs, and none ever cared to extend

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some of their dividends to him. Their hidden bags were always heavy when they exited the hotel. Only when it came to their being helped, they came running to John.

John approached his big catch, now relaxed and convinced everything was safe. He extended his right hand and picked up the fifty Euros. His wallet already out, he folded the money and in a gentle motion, slipped it into the wallet. He took the five Euros coins and dropped them into a smaller space in his wallet.

That evening, when John got home, he made up the money he kept at home. He went to a nearby Moneygram transfer agent and wired three hundred Euros to Nigeria, to be received by his sister. He felt happy. God was great. Ama would be taken care of.

But Ama died. And that was the day John's trouble began.

Two months later, there came a four-day conference. John could no longer remember what conference it was. But at the end of the program, he had reminded his boss about helping the room dressers remove the used clothing. His boss had been very happy about the reminder.

John had rushed to the seventh floor and started with Room 717. He opened the door. Again, there it was. This time, the tip had increased, now eighty Euros – one fifty-Euro note and three of the ten-Euro denomination.

John carried out his security checks and slipped his money into his wallet. He thanked his generous giver.

The third time occurred during Christmas, a day before the hotel sacked John. The clients had checked out after Christmas and his favorite client left him another generous gift of eighty Euros. John was luckier as he also picked up a well-designed business card. The African always wanted information that might lead him to any good business opening. He slipped the business card into his wallet. Who knew? It might be needed for

a future business. He may have to contact the client in future, for a business proposal.

As he moved towards Room 717 now, John considered himself fortunate. When they jettisoned him from the hotel, another man was recruited. “But the new man only caused us more harm than good,” one of John's lady colleagues told him when he reported back to work last week.

“Where we keep towels, the man kept bedclothes,” the woman said. “Where soaps are supposed to be left, he dropped creams. We all got confused. This affected our efficiency. So we reported to the boss that we wanted you back.”

John drew closer to the door of Room 717. He knocked twice and waited a few seconds – which seemed like an eternity. He knew the room was empty. Yet he had to knock: The hotel's formality must be observed. He slid the electronic key, opened the door and slowly went in.

It was there. John approached it with rapid pace.

God, it's a hundred Euros!

He looked to the right side of the table. At one extremity, a wallet lay there – an attractive one. He shot out his hand and took it. He opened it. Inside the wallet, John saw another twenty-Euro note.

-This is a trap!

-You have struck a good luck!

-Little things, when overlooked, might put you into a big trouble.

-You are one hundred and twenty Euros richer today. Now you have a good amount of money to send home to your parents. It's a relief.

John stood there, listening, considering what to do. He battled between the two voices, and confusion engulfed him. Finally, he could do nothing about it. “Muchas gracias estimado

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señor cliente,” he heard himself say in Spanish. “Para esta asistencia.”

The money would become John's. But first, as usual, he needed to carry out his security survey; no stones would be left unturned.

He rushed to the wardrobe and began the check. A grave mistake. The time the African wasted on his considerations and routine checks would nail him.

11

In the Ivory's internet Wi-Fi space, a man sat in a chair, his small portable Sony Vaio laptop computer flipped open and sitting on the desk in front of him. The small travel bag he carried was dropped by the right-hand side of his chair. He pretended to be browsing through the internet: When he noticed the internet room the first day he came into the hotel, he knew it would be useful for his purposes soon.

Both of his hands were tense, indicating his uneasiness. But the man made efforts to concentrate on the screen of his laptop, going through the web pages news. It took an intelligence expert to detect that his interest wasn't in the computer he held. But the man was sure that in the immediate environment no one knew more about intelligence operations. And the knowledge made him relax a little.

An earphone, the cable of which he had attached to the computer, covered his ears. He wasn't listening to any sound from the internet, though, instead it was something else – a sound too – but from somewhere else: The earphone had a Bluetooth connection.

Long moments passed. The man glanced at his wristwatch, frowning. It'd been more than an hour since he came out here, he thought. May be the setup had gone wrong; it had failed. Relax, be patient, something told him.

The man obeyed. More moments passed.

A sudden sound hit the man's ears: The bang of a door. He was convinced of it. He stood up, abandoned his laptop and hurried to the reception counter.

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"Excuse me," the man said, all in Spanish, to a woman behind the counter, rummaging through a hip of client files.

The woman whirled around, "Si señor, may I help you?" she recognized the bearded face of the client, stopped and gave him her ears.

"I believe I have forgotten my wallet in the room. Please could I pick it up? Room 717."

"Yes, I remember your room number, Sir," the woman said, trying to make her guest understand his importance. She reached inside a drawer and produced the key to Room 717. She handed it to the man.

"My bag and the laptop are at the internet room," the man was hurrying away. "I will be back in a few minutes."

"Sir, if you don't mind one of us could help you get the—" the woman began to say. But the man had reached the elevator. The woman sighed, then hurried to the internet room to secure the client's belongings.

The man hit the elevator button again and again, as if it would hasten the machine's descent to the reception floor. Finally one of the three elevators arrived.

The man jumped in, narrowly avoiding a collision with an elderly woman coming out of the elevator.

"I am sorry, madam," he pleaded with her. "I have to get something upstairs."

The woman murmured negative words and disappeared toward the main exit of the hotel.

Inside the elevator, already climbing past the second floor, the man raised his hand to adjust the earphone he now had back on his head, but no longer with a connecting cable. The phone came to life in time for him to hear a murmur, "Muchas gracias estimado señor cliente. Para esta asistencia." An imperfect command of Spanish.

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He frowned in skepticism, holding his breath. Then he smiled, asking himself to hold it till he got there and saw it.

12

John relaxed. He had scrutinized everything and it remained evident that the occupant of the room had checked out. He went to the table and picked up the hundred Euros. He opened the wallet on the table and withdrew the twenty-Euro bills. He folded both bills together. Satisfied and happy, the African produced his own wallet from the pocket of his trouser and slid the money inside it.

Next, he picked up the client's wallet. John observed the marked wallet – D&G. In the past, he avoided taking any object belonging to a client other than uncorked canned foods. Today, he decided, this wallet would become his.

John took the holder and dropped it inside the left side of his trouser's pocket. He went back to work and continued removing the used clothing from the bed, trying hard to forget about the money for the moment and concentrate on his job.

A few minutes later, the door to the hotel Room 717 flew open and a man walked inside.

“Oh, it’s a man, really. I thought I was missing something here,” the man said in Spanish, talking all alone to himself.

John spun round with a start and froze. Fear gripped him as he stared at someone strange to him. John possessed some kind of memory and ability to recognize the long-term clients this hotel had accommodated since he began to work here. With this particular man, his memory failed him.

The African's legs couldn't move anymore. He couldn't stand firm to the ground either, as he stood looking at a strange man on whom he'd never set eyes before in the hotel. The man

possessed the same height as Sappy. But he was a bit heavier than John. His eyes were big. Both eyebrows were huge and his ears abnormally large. He wore an overgrown grey colored beard. The strange man wore a dark blue suit, and his shoes looked expensive. John believed the man could be in his fifties.

The man mused, then in a rapid Spanish, which John strained to understand, he inquired, "I forgot my wallet and came back for it. It's not here. Do you happen to know its whereabouts?"

John was only looking, not talking. It became apparent that this had been a well-set trap all along.

Despite his uncoordinated self, John decided to do one thing first – drop the money and the wallet back to their former position and apologize to the wealthy stranger for his misconduct.

If the director hears about this kind of incident again, I will be sacked from this hotel forever.

John managed to steady himself, then engaged the man with apologies. "Perdone señor," he pleaded with the man in a little difficult Spanish, "I am sorry sir...I didn't mean to take your wallet on purpose." His body began to shake again. "I was instructed to take care of this room, believing that the occupant had checked out."

The man looked at him a long time but said nothing.

The African stood rigid, looking at the man. For a moment, he looked down at the floor, ashamed of himself, then back at the man. If he hadn't transferred the money into his own wallet, he would have simply lied that he wanted to send the things to the reception. But he had already incriminated himself.

John dropped his left hand into his pocket, producing the wallet, "I am sorry sir, I never thought it was forgotten," he said, regretting what he did. He should have had a little patience about the switching of the money. He prayed inwardly to God

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that above all his boss or the director wouldn't come in there to meet them.

"Don't try it! I have—" the man was saying. But John's hand was already out, holding the wallet. He rushed his hand into the other side of his pocket and produced his own holder. He pulled out the money and began transferring it back.

It was as far as the African could go.

The man had prepared himself for such an encounter. His camera caught John's hand as he tried to put the money back into the man's wallet.

John's mouth went wide open.

The second snap was better. It caught his face boldly as he shut his mouth a little, staring at the camera in horror.

The stranger stood still for some time, satisfied with the pictures he took. He covered his bearded face with smiles and began to approach the bed. John remained immobile, gawping at him. The African was bewildered.

The man knelt down beside the bed and extended his hand under it. He produced a tiny circular electronic object.

"This is my beloved listening device," the man said, standing up. "It's sophisticated, with a listening frequency capable of detecting the faintest sound made two kilometers away from where it's planted."

The stranger held out the device for John's view. "The cost of production was high too. I'm sorry, but I had to use it for effective results." He withdrew his hand, making sure that the message had sunk into the young man. He put the device into the pocket of his trousers. "Everything that happened here has been recorded."

The strange man knew the results he wanted had been achieved. And within seconds he looked again, it started manifesting. He had frightened the young man.

"I am..." John swallowed hard. "I am being blackmailed?" He said after the man distanced himself further and took a seat in one corner of the room – closer to the telephone. The receptionist may call to know if he'd found the wallet.

Eyes steadied on the young man, the stranger took his time before he responded to John's question. He was being conscious of time. But five to seven minutes would be OK for the whole game. Ten minutes would become too long and might cause a disaster. Someone might come running up to find out what problem there was.

"No," the man said. "Don't call it blackmail." His tone grew softer and friendlier each time he spoke. "I just wanted to make sure you will calm down and listen to me."

"Your action makes me confused," John said, truly confused all discussions still in Spanish. The man's appearance looked gentle. But instinct also told John that the man was no ordinary man. What did he want?

The man didn't seem to have heard him. He went on speaking after a short pause. "I have double news for you, my friend: the bad and the good news." He looked the African in the eye, awaiting his reaction. There was none. He continued.

"Let me first start with the bad news. Stealing of a client's property in this country, forgotten or not, attracts a dismissal from your job. And if the client decides to take the issue to the police, the culprit will be subjected to a criminal charge of grand theft.

"He is liable to some prison sentences. You have stolen my holder, had already brought out and transferred my money into your own wallet. I've got the evidence on my camera." A pause. "The director of this hotel is a close friend of mine, so I could go down there right now and report this incident to him." The man gave the message some time to sink in. It did.

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“The director?” the African asked, his mouth open the second time.

“Si, claro,” the man said. “Yes, of course. Does that surprise you?”

“No.”

The director again! I am a dead man.

The man recorded John's reaction at the mention of his friend's, the director's name.

“You are an African,” the man said, “from the way you speak our language. Not from Equatorial Guinea. So I believe you will understand me more if I use English.” The stranger switched to English. Though his use of the language came with difficulty, John understood what he said now better than he had understood his rapid Spanish.

“There is a globally bad economy,” the man inclined his head, looking at the floor, “coupled with the high unemployment rate in this country. Africans are scared of losing their jobs.” He raised his head and looked at John, “I bet you're scared of losing *yours*.”

John nodded like a naughty little pupil whose teacher had asked a question. There was no option other than to accept the truth. This man held him at his mercy.

The stranger continued: “Good. I will never let you lose your job. Neither would I like you to go to prison. You look too responsible to go behind bars.” He stood up from where he sat and moved towards John. He heard the young man's heavy breathing as he drew inches closer. That's how he wanted it, he thought.

The man reached out with his left hand, sinking it into John's right trouser pocket. He probed, then pulled out the young man's money holder.

John didn't resist the action.

First, the man opened the wallet and brought out John's residence permit card. He held the card at hand. "You're using photocopies, friend. Why?"

John looked on, tense, not replying.

The man positioned the card and read out all the information he saw. "Name – John Adi," nationality – Nigerian... address... age..... His sharp memory absorbed all the useful information he needed. The strange man didn't go on to check the other contents of the wallet as he had taken what he wanted from the young man. This would later be a mistake he regretted making. He placed the residence permit card back in the position he found it inside the wallet. He extended his hand once more and threw the wallet into John's pocket.

"The good news is, John Adi, I have an important bit of business you must...I mean, must, help me to execute." The man glanced at his watch. Four minutes had passed. He had to speed up.

-Listen to him! He has a lucrative proposal.

A proposal? John's mind asked the voice.

-Say no to it before it's too late. It's a bad sign.

"It's a proposal," the man said. "But you can't say no to it. That's a condition. Else," he waited for it to go down, "I will change my mind and report the theft to my friend, the director. I will involve the police too. And when you are charged for the offence, a lot of other valuable things would have gone missing from my wallet."

The African was very quiet and listening.

"But your benefit will be immense if you help me solve my own little problem."

"What problem?"

-Be strong and listen to him. You have nothing to lose by listening!

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“That's an intelligent question. But I am running short of time. This meeting has been rescheduled. I have appointments to catch up with.”

-You're being lured into a situation. Go to your boss now and tell her the truth. That will help you out of the mess.

John considered one option as the man was still speaking.

I can kill him and run away, out of Spain.

John's attentions were now focused on the empty wine bottle inside a wastebasket in the room, hidden away. But, no, he couldn't bring himself to kill a soul created by God. He prayed to God to forgive him for initiating that kind of thinking.

“An expensive wine,” the man said. “I enjoy drinking it. Full of blood supplement. Don't even think about it!”

John stood stunned, his breathing heavy. This man could read someone's inner thoughts. He didn't respond.

After a long silence, the man said, “I'll leave now. But I will be staying in this hotel in—”

“No need to tell me,” John cut in, his frustration perceptible in his voice. He waited a few seconds, then spoke again. “Las Fallas festival begins in the next three weeks. You will be staying in this hotel; in this room, for one week, starting from the second week of March.”

The stranger's eyes flickered with intent and amazement, staring at the African. “You've already studied the pattern? I have to give you credit, my friend.” The man paused to look at his wristwatch. “I want you to be here in the morning on the thirteenth of March. Knock three times, at ten seconds interval.” He looked at his time. Two minutes to his maximum eight minutes timing. “Sorry, I have to leave now.”

The stranger started moving towards the door. He had no need to look back. It was a risk, but he didn't care. Everything had gone his way. The boy had given in. The man was reaching the door handle.

“Why did you have to choose me for this business?”

The man stopped and turned as if a piece of stone had been thrown at him. He faced John. “Ah that? It was a mighty coincidence.” He walked back closer to the African. “I never chose anyone in particular. I have waited for a long time to execute this business. But time flew at the speed of light, and with that I understood I couldn't carry out the little task myself.

“Someone else had to do it for me,” the man continued. “And as time went on, luck came closer to me. Things, you wouldn't understand, came to be how I wanted them. However, finding my helper became another problem. I had to devise an option. So I started setting my trap. Someone cleaned up this room. I was convinced that someone would be grateful for a good tip left behind by a liberal client. I knew that someone would get greedier as I kept increasing the tip.”

There was silence for a little while before the short stranger went on. “Oh, I forgot to add: I had to catch that someone in the act. The listening device was produced specifically for me. That's why it cost me a whooping amount of money.”

The strange man seemed a happy man for the first time since he came into the room.

“On the last day – today, having made a good number of tipping, I packed my small travel bag, cleared my things and officially registered my check out from the hotel. I left a most handsome tip and ‘forgot’ my wallet. Where I sat, I waited with patience but nothing happened. I almost ran out of endurance, thinking I wasn't going to succeed. I told myself to be patient.” The man's smile widened. “Patience is needed in every good business, John. So I continued listening.

“Then I heard the sound of the door. The way that someone stopped before entering the room, I was sure that someone had caught sight of my gift.” He steadied a look at the African, smiled again, and continued. “It's a simple psychology. I

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approached the reception and reported my forgotten wallet to the woman. She gave back the key to me, suggested I wait behind while they went and get the thing for me. I knew that was coming, but before then, I was already at the elevator. I nearly knocked down an elderly woman, who in return, yelled some abusive words at me.

“Inside the elevator, I heard a voice, 'Muchas gracias estimado señor cliente. Para esta asistencia.' A man's voice? I didn't believe it. I needed to see it myself. And when I came in and saw you, I knew I didn't only run into the luck I needed, but a perfect one. For all the time I have been working out my plans, I have always thought my helper would be a female. They're always the people who made the hotel rooms.”

The man looked at his watch. Ten minutes had come. He looked up at John. “See you on the thirteenth of March. And John?”

John looked at the man, but in a responsive manner.

“On the thirteenth, be here with the original of your residence permit card, not the photocopy.”

The man walked to the door, opened it, slid off and disappeared.

John stood a while, thinking. There was nothing could he do now. He was helpless and hapless too. The man had him where he wanted him. And the man had talked about patience. Now, John told himself too that all he needed to do was be to be patient until he heard what the stranger's proposal was.

He returned to the bed. With his hands still shaking, he continued his job at his fastest pace. He had run out of time.

-I knew something bad was coming. You should have listened to my words of wisdom!

13

March 13, 2009

Lately, each time his telephone rang, Mark was thrown into a panic. There were just two calls he hated receiving. One, calls from Africa. Second, calls from his supposed landlord. Well, apart from his mother's, he would never take any other call from far away home. There were plenty troubles there, followed by calls, calls, and more calls for money, and he wasn't ready for any of those pressures from home. But, unfortunately, he couldn't afford not to respond when the owner of the apartment where he lived called him.

As he stared at his mobile phone ringing now, he looked worried and tensed up as he had never been in all his twenty-eight years of life. His facial muscles were shot up and tightened, revealing the extent of his frustration as he gazed blankly at the number, unable to focus his mind. His house rent was overdue, and the fact that he didn't know what to do about it drove him nuts.

Mark picked up the phone, "Hello?"

"So, have you done something about your rent fees?"

"By His grace, I am trying to do something about it."

"No, you are not. If you were, you would have been in a noisy environment by now. But I know you are in the house idling away your time. And that is exactly what I can't take from you."

"But yesterday, after receiving your call, I went out and dropped off my CV." It was true. Mark understood tones of voice which carried seriousness when he heard them. The

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previous day, he was moved by the man's threat to throw him out of the house. And the warning had sent him scampering to recruitment agencies throughout the city, throwing in his hastily prepared curriculum vitae. But due to the economic crisis that bedeviled the whole country, he felt reluctant to believe he would get a job straight away. The worst of all was that he went about the job hunting on an empty stomach and on foot. It's difficult to believe it, he thought.

“Well, whether or not that's true, all I know is that you can't sit in the house every day, not wanting to find a job for yourself!” the man calling him said. “You must withdraw the idea of living on hopes that you will win La Quiniela each week that approaches.”

The man's statement reminded Mark of how he had generated the money to pay for the one-and-a-half year's rent of the tenancy he had been enjoying. He had been working in a building construction company then, having been lucky to find himself among the seven hundred thousand illegal immigrants granted amnesty in May 2005 by the government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero. Mark never had an idea about La Quiniela lottery until one of his fellow workers had introduced the game to him.

He took an instant interest in the venture. In the first and second attempts weeks he had been unsuccessful. Providence: the third week struck him a surprising eight thousand Euros win – a lottery he entered with only two Euros and marked thirteen points correctly, out of a very difficult fifteen.

The next day, being Monday, Mark received his payment and suddenly turned into a big boy. He quit his job with the construction company the following day, Tuesday. The third day, he also dropped what he immediately saw as a filthy apartment he shared with some other guys and went to rent another one room in a street off the Avenida Blasco Ibañez,

paying rent in advance for one and half years, including utilities bills. Thereafter, he bought a thirty-two inch flat screen television and got his room well decorated; making sure it became one of the best in town amongst fellow nationals. Later, he managed to send seven hundred Euros to his mother, his only surviving parent. That would see her through for at least the next eight months.

All expenses paid, Mark now had three thousand Euros in his possession. With this, the good time began. Every weekend, in a taxi, he went from one discothèque to another, jumping from one African girl who came his way to another. While his activities went on, each weekend that came and went, he believed he would strike fifteen all in the next Quiniela lottery and hit the mega money. And this was what the apartment owner had tried to caution him about.

The caller continued, in their African dialect: “Let me make it clear to you, the lottery you won a year and six months ago was luck that came from God. Hence, believing you will just make a forecast and win a kind of money like that again will also take more extreme luck from God. So, better go and find a job to do or other useful means of making money to pay your rent.”

Mark said nothing.

“I will be back in two weeks,” the man said, “be sure you have the three months' rent deposited into my account. Or, just get out of my house!” The man cut the phone.

Mark counted himself as one of the Africans who really had a hard time landing in Spain, crossing over to Los Cristianos, Tenerife, through the beaches of Dakar – in a miniature wooden fishing boat over-packed with young men and women with indefinable desperation in abandoning their mother continent.

Out of the blue, he dropped the phone and focused at the wall. Mark's thoughts left his immediate problem and took him

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back to the nightmarish journey. Three days and two nights on the ocean. Mark remembered he cried out aloud many times to his mother for help. That risk had not been worth taking and he regretted it. How would a small wooden boat capable of carrying only ten to fifteen people go on to accommodate up to forty-six individuals, packed like sardines? The action was like committing suicide. And the experience made him believe that the people who committed the act of taking their own lives experienced certain regrets at a stage when it must have been too late for them to withdraw.

Before embarking, Mark had always consoled himself by saying the journey was a suicidal mission. Until he got on board. To him, to see one's own death was life's most painful experience.

Many hours after they left the shores of Senegal and were on the Atlantic Ocean, Mark, like almost every other individual on board, had looked back, front and sideways and fear gripped him. The ocean closed up to the sky, with no single structure in sight. The odor of the water became unbearable. The air surrounding them became harsh on their skins. The tidal action of the ocean worsened the whole situation. And shortly before the end of the journey, they had begun seeing the outline of the city of their destination when their boat started taking in water.

Mark had thanked God that while a kid he had learned how to swim with the stream that passed through their village. He floated on the water an hour before the Spanish coastguard came to his rescue. God! He shivered now from where he sat erect in his bed. By then his already scaly body had almost been peeled off by the salty water.

Out of the forty-six people on board, eight managed to survive the tragedy.

Mark remembered the five-year-old girl who boarded the boat with her mother – the only kid aboard. While people were

terrified, searching for ways to survive, the young girl had kept asking her confused mother questions in repeated sequence. “Are we going to die mama? Are we going to die?” The kid's question made Mark shed tears, and he had wanted to take the little girl with him. But her mother refused. She would stick with her daughter. She swam well and could float with the girl till rescue arrived. But later, Mark got the news that the little girl and her mother didn't survive the accident. And this worsened his trauma. Too bad. A little girl on a hard journey to a land with honey died shortly before she could set foot on the land. He had always struggled to erase the horrific memory from his mind.

Mark shot forward from where his back leaned against the wall and jumped out of the bed. He was on his feet now, a La Quiniela coupon in his hand.

Mark appreciated living around the Avenida Blasco Ibañez: One of the busiest areas in Valencia. He enjoyed the excitement of being closer to students. They brought good night life, a lot of fun and happenings around wherever they lived. Especially the girls. The sights of most of those university girls residing around there gave him a chill from time to time. And though on many occasions he had been tempted to approach and talk to one or two of them, his courage always failed him. He never understood if he battled with the psychology of being only educated at primary level or something else; but to him, just like to many other of his African friends in the city, the young Valencia girls never liked socializing or having anything to do with Africans. Maybe it could be that they believed that all Africans in the city arrived via the sea just like himself. Or through the desert. Maybe they wouldn't want to associate with a people they thought were so desperate to move abroad that they took such terrific risks, Mark thought. Just maybe.

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So Mark had decided to leave them alone, only enjoying their presence here. The fact that he resided two streets from the back of the Valencia football club's stadium – the Mestalla – added to his boasting among his friends that he lived in one of the most bustling places in Valencia.

Now that his landlord had called as early as eight o'clock this morning, the payment of the overdue rent bothered him. Mark moved to the window and drew the curtain to one side as he brooded over this. His vacant eyes fell on a group of young men and women, dressed in their Falla festival robes, walking along the street.

Currently, Mark owed the man for accumulated utilities bills too. He had just managed to forget the problem a bit since the man had left for Austria two weeks ago. And the man had been pestering him too much these recent times. However, Mark never got discouraged by the other man's words. Rather, he sensed the man was ironically asking him to join the drug trading, just as he, the man, had. But Mark would never see himself get involved in such a business. The penalties were too high for him to contemplate, coupled with the family morals in him. He still had strong conviction that one day, La Quiniela lottery would lift him up, make him as rich as he wanted to be, and allow him fulfill the dreams burning within him.

All he needed to do, Mark thought, was to increase his stake, say, up to twenty Euros per week. He seemed to forget that he had been increasing the stake ever since he won his money. The only problem was, right now he didn't have money in his pocket.

Still by the window in his plush room, Mark appeared famished and shaky, the growling from his stomach indicating he hadn't eaten well since yesterday. And today he had nothing to cook and eat, save a small quantity of rice left inside the kitchen by the owner of the apartment. And some stew he had

prepared one week back. With this, he would have to survive until, by luck, he managed to borrow some coin from anybody who came his way.

It was still two weekends away before the owner of the apartment would come back, Mark thought and smiled, happy: he still had two Quiniela chances to play. He would hit it big this time. He smiled more deeply with optimism. And by the time the man came back, he would come begging Mark to stay. But Mark wouldn't stay. He would be renting an apartment somewhere around, in his own name.

For a long moment, Mark concentrated and examined, then re-examined the marked Quiniela lottery coupon he held at hand. He had chosen his markings well this time around, he thought. Nothing would bring a failure to click fifteen all. What he had to do now was to find a way of raising the money for the next entry, as he didn't have a cent on him. Oh yes, he remembered. Someone gave him fifty cents which he stuffed into the small pocket of the blue jean he wore yesterday.

Mark left where he stood and rushed for the jeans inside the small wardrobe. He searched and got the coin. He smiled again. The coin would help. Later in the day, he would be calling his most trusted friend for the little financial help he needed.

14

Valencia had geared into the hub of its grandest annual festivity since the eighteenth century. Las Fallas festival had finally arrived. Tourists had begun swarming all over the city. Hundreds of security operatives had also begun moving about. The Policia Local, the Guardia Civil, other plain clothed police officials, and the fire service men, were all working to ensure the safety of the locals and the tourists throughout the period of the festival.

The sounds of explosives and fireworks were being heard from every corner of the big and lively city. The key festival dates – March fifteenth to nineteenth, and then the celebration of St Joseph's Day on the nineteenth – were yet to arrive, though. These five days would witness parades in traditional Valencia costumes, concerts, beauty pageants, marching bands, bullfights, street parties and continued daily fireworks.

Cold conditions in Valencia were suddenly intense, the temperature plummeting from thirteen to ten degrees centigrade, as if the cold wanted to get to its peak before it became consumed by the heat to be generated from the burning of more than seven hundred Falla monuments mounted in the streets throughout the city on the last day of the festival.

For one man this year, the festival he had enjoyed in the past didn't seem to be going on. He was on his own, as if the city had forsaken him. The muscles of John's thighs and his shoulders ached as he walked out of his apartment at eight o'clock in the morning, heading to his place of work. The beauty of the series of magnificent festival lights hanging across the streets, still reflecting at this time of the morning, giving the city a pleasant

festive outlook, didn't give him any positive hope of escaping from his problem. Rather, out of his troubled mind, he was only able to notice the lights used to design a signboard advertising the existence of a private detective's office in a building he just passed by. The company's website, written with neon signs, was most attractive.

The three weeks of waiting had thrown him into a grave tension. To him, it was like an eternity. And during the waiting he had thought about his encounter with the strange man over and over again. It gave him lots of sleepless nights. He managed, however, not to let the burden affect the efficiency of his job this time. And one of the voices continued to urge John to call his boss aside and divulge the secret meeting with the stranger to her. But the other said no. It was better to keep the secret to himself until he met the man once more. Again, John hearkened to the voice which asked him to preserve the secret. He had even hidden the secret from the relatives he lived with, deciding he would tell them when he found out what the business was all about.

*

John walked into the Ivory Hotel through its back entrance. Moments later, he was inside the elevator used by the staff of his department, climbing upstairs. The elevator stopped at the mezzanine floor, where John was supposed to be headed for his first morning job activity. The African waited with impatience for the door of the machine to shut back. When it did, John thumbed a button again and the elevator began climbing to the seventh floor.

He got out at the seventh floor and stepped into the little multi-purpose office space reserved for the staff of the hotel. He walked across, to the door leading from the office into the floor's hallway – the client zone.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

John pulled the door, opening it. Conscious of the camera positioned opposite the door where he stood, he peeped out, pretending busy searching for one of the female room dressers. No sign of any of the management staff on the floor. Though, he would be able to take care of any non-management staff should he be seen, he didn't want anybody to see him approach, knock or walk into Room 717.

Convinced there was no danger around, the African eased himself out of the door, out of the camera's focal area, calm. Then he hurried towards the room.

Closer to the room, he paused a second time and inspected the long hallway once again. No sign of danger. He moved. He got to Room 717 and tapped the door three times at ten seconds intervals as he had been instructed. John told himself he had twenty minutes to spend inside the room: His boss would understand, if he developed a stomach purge and had to rush to the toilet.

He never knew how wrong he would be about the timing.

Almost as soon as John's last tap sounded, the door swung open. "Come in," the bearded man said in English, stepping aside. Unsmiling, he allowed John to move further inside. The African stepped inside the room, perceiving a faint smell of brandy. The stranger closed the door, bolted it and turned towards the room.

John turned too, facing the man. The man shot a long hard look at him, and then pointed at the bed. "OK John," he said, "I want you to sit down on the bed, listen to me and let's get on with business. This won't take long. There is no time to waste."

You are too mean now.

John obeyed. He went and took a seat at the edge down the bed, feeling uncomfortable with the strange man. But he managed to hold it back. In John's part of Africa, people referred to short men as mean and dangerous. Just like Sappy.

The African felt the muscles of his loose stomach beginning to ache as the man didn't sit down on the bed himself, but instead went to the table a bit away from the bed to sit down. John observed the stranger's dress. Another black suit, a well-ironed white shirt. No tie. His beard was sharper than on the first meeting. He wore a pair of black shoes.

"The original of the residence permit?" the strange man said. He threw his right hand forward.

John went numb, looking at the man in silence. The man saw the fear in the African's eyes.

"The original," the man repeated, now shooting out both hands.

"I...I don't have it here."

"You don't have it. Why not?"

The African shook his head. The man steadied a look at him for another moment. "May be I should call in the police now—"

"No...Please," John begged. "Don't."

"This means my guess that something is fishy about your identity is correct. You see, I have the idea that something runs suspicious about the identities of many immigrants living in this country. And I'm sure that with the involvement of police, we can find out what it is about you."

The tension in John swelled, dragging him into series of events the memory of which he had fought many times to resist. He felt the dripping of sweat under his armpit as he sat still, a chill running through him.

Two years ago, the journey had been hell.

*

The hard journey to Europe had begun with a visa to a country he had thought to be unfeasible. A journey he had been told would last only a week lasted a month.

John was called on phone one bright sunny afternoon to come and pick his visa to Europe. The news delighted him so

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

much that, instead of taking a public bus and getting down there in forty minutes, he mounted a public motorbike – the Okada – and got to his destination within seventeen minutes.

When he saw himself inside the well-furnished office, his helper, seated behind a large desk, waved him to the seat opposite.

“Congratulations,” the man had said. “You are finally in Europe.” He tossed the passport on the table across to John.

John, smiling, scooped the passport in a hurry, flipping through its pages in anticipation. Then... he stopped, looked at the visa stamped on the passport and his face fell. He gazed at the helper.

“Turkey?”

“Turkey,” the man said.

John couldn’t believe it. “Why Turkey?” he fumed, almost dissolving into tears. He knew it: he had been duped. “That’s not the visa to Spain you promised me.”

“When you get to Turkey, you will be taken to Spain from there. It takes only one week.”

“By who? My relative never mentioned a thing about Turkey to me.”

“Yes,” the man said. “He didn’t need to tell you that because he doesn’t know how we work.” He stood up and went to the large world political map stamped on the wall behind his desk. He placed a finger at a particular spot and began studying with concentration.

“I am not going to Turkey,” John said.

The man turned and starred at him, then smiled. “Nobody said you are going to Turkey. You’re going to Spain, but you are going to transit through Turkey.” Both men went silent a while before the man said, “It appears you don’t know anything about this country, the way you sound.”

"I know that Turkey is not one of the European Union countries. Nor is it in the Schengen area."

"The visa cannot take someone into these areas, is what you mean?"

"Yes."

"You're correct, but there are things you don't know. And we have been into this trade for so long that you can't simply teach us what to do." The man gestured to John. "Come here."

John went to him, reluctantly.

"Look here," the man said, "Turkey is a country situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This is why it has two sides: the European side and the Asian side. And where you will be landing is in the European side, in a city called Istanbul. It's friendly and beautiful. You will spend only three nights here to get things arranged before you are taken on a flight to here." The man placed the thumb and the forefinger on two points on the map.

"Here is Istanbul, Turkey and this is Thessaloniki, Greece," the man said. "Between Ataturk Airport in Istanbul and Makedonia Airport in Thessaloniki the total distance is five hundred and nine kilometers. So the nonstop flight already booked for you, it will take only thirty-nine minutes and you are in Greece – a Schengen area. You will only spend three hours in this city because of the scheduled flight booking, before you take another nonstop flight to Madrid. This will take you just another two hours and fifty-two minutes. How bad is that?"

"With what visa?"

"Don't worry, friend, we have made all the arrangements. All you need is to see yourself in a Schengen country, then on to Spain."

"I want my money back, please. I don't want to go to Turkey."

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

“You’re joking, right? Your money is non-refundable. I told you that right at the time.”

“This explains why you insisted that I pay you everything before the visa is out.”

“Of course it does. We had to procure documents that would make your journey look real. We had to settle with our partners in Turkey. They are the people who will make your journey to Greece a success. And they had to settle their partners in Thessaloniki. Else, you won’t be taken to Madrid. That’s how this thing works. And that’s why your money can’t be refunded.”

John stood confused.

“This travelling thing goes with trends, young man,” the man said. “And I can count how many youths I have sent across to Europe: Thousands. It started in the mid ’80s, when travelling to the U.S. and the U.K. became such a difficult task. We turned to Belgium, then to Germany. By then if anybody wanted a visa to Hungary people would have laughed at him. Hungary was referred to as Hungry. And nobody ever remembered Spain. Now things have changed. Visas to Spain and Hungary are the hottest cakes. You have seen the situation in our country. As living gets tougher, we are coming up with alternative travelling routes.”

“Read the newspapers and listen to the radio,” the man went on, as John didn’t say a word. “Just to find their ways out of Africa and into Europe, many have taken to the desert routes. These are the ones who couldn’t raise the fund for visa as you did. So they wanted a cheaper but more risky adventure. Others have decided to risk it via the sea. Go to Senegal and see what is happening there. Equally, you can try it out there yourself.” The apparently-turning-to-an-elderly man smiled at him.

John stared at the man, not believing the references being made to him. He had been to Dakar before. But he didn’t want

to delve into memories of the experience he had of that city. He was urged to tell the helper that his first attempt to travel to Europe three years ago had been via the sea, and made in Dakar. Then, the other agents helping him in Benin had made it easy – just like this same man was making it now. They all told the same stories. ‘It’s just a few hours on the sea and you are in the Canary Islands of Spain. The sea is calmer on board than it looks from the shores. All you need is a little courage on the sea, and Europe becomes your home.’

But when he had got to the shores of the beaches of Dakar and surveyed the small, light, almost wooden boats used for the journey, his guts crashed before he could go on board. Later, he came to understand that the journey was a 1,400 km voyage to Los Cristianos in Tenerife. And the voyagers would suffer from dehydration due to their unprotected exposure to the salty seawater environment.

John had decided if that was the only way to get to Europe, let the people who could risk it proceed. The morning of the following day, he was en route back to Nigeria. And three days later, The Guardian, a national newspaper, announced that thirty-five African migrants were believed to have died after spending three days at sea, attempting to reach the Canary Islands of Spain. When John heard the news, he believed he could have been one of those people who hadn’t survived the journey.

One year and nine months later, still desperate to run away from poverty, sickness and hunger, his relative introduced him to another helper. He never believed it would work out though, but it lasted another three years. And now he was being told that he would be boarding a plane to Turkey.

“When do I leave?” John asked the man.

“Have you decided to go?”

“Do I have any option?”

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

“In two weeks, then. I have to get your flight ticket arranged.”

The two weeks came, and after comforting his friend, Sappy, John left the shores of Nigeria. A fellow Nigerian received him at Istanbul airport. The man’s behavior to John wasn’t polite: no “Hello”, no “Welcome” and no “How are you?” John felt that his arrival was a burden to the man, but he couldn’t see why immediately. And it would be when after two weeks he hadn’t been crossed over to Greece that he began to ask questions and understood the reason.

When the man brought him into a two-bedroom flat on the fourth floor of a five-storey building located on the outskirts of Istanbul, John got his first surprise.

“Your passport, please,” the man said and extended his hand.

“My passport?”

“That’s the rule. I have to safeguard it until you get to Spain. If the authorities catch you with two different travel documents, you are gone forever.”

Reasonable, John thought. He released his passport to the man.

“You will be here indoors until arrangements have been finalized.” The man didn’t give any time frame.

One week passed inside the house and nothing happened. John couldn’t get out of the house. And he had no telephone contact to his relative in Spain. That was one solid rule. No contacting till he got to the final destination. After the eleventh day he asked questions.

“It’s more than a week, and I am still here. Why?”

“Because there is no money to proceed to the next stage of your journey.”

John’s eyes went wide. “I don’t understand what you mean,” he said.

The man gave him a hard stare. "Lagos failed to fulfill the whole financial agreement we made."

A sob caught in John's throat. "Why?"

"I don't know. May be you ask Lagos. He said you will conclude the payment here."

The young man's head ached. "But that's a lie. I paid him three thousand two hundred Euros in two equal installments."

"Well, that's not what he told me. And that's none of my business. May be you will have to bear the brunt."

"How much?"

"Four hundred and fifty Euros will take care of the whole thing."

"But I don't have money."

The man smiled for the first time in two weeks. "Then, I will show you how to go begging."

"I can't do such a thing," John said, stunned. "That was never part of our agreement."

"Young man, listen to me," the man's eyes were hostile now. "You have been here more than is appropriate. If you are not ready to beg, it means you want to make Turkey your final destination. So be prepared, you are going to live in the streets from tomorrow. Then you will become expert on how to beg."

"Will the amount solve the whole of my problems?"

"As far as I know," the man said.

"How long may it take me to get it if I go begging?"

The man looked at John a long time. "It depends on how fast you can learn. But it's a minimum of one and half months."

When John went to bed that night, he wept with tears with both sadness and joy. He thanked God for his mother. Nothing in life, to John, was like a mother's love for his child. The only money he had with him – five hundred Euros – his mother had given him at the last minute of commencement of the journey. When he asked how come, his mother had told him that she

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

didn't really spend her own part of the land piece sales, but had saved it for her son's journey. Now, if not this, he would have ended this journey to Europe in Turkey. On many occasions his mother's instincts had saved him from trouble.

John swore. With all these sacrifices made for him, he would have to do all the best he could to bring his family out of the present situation. The next day, from the small inner pocket which he hand-sewed to his jeans, he fished out the neatly folded money, selected four hundred and fifty Euros and presented it to the man helping him.

"Would this be sufficient for the whole of my journey?"

The man smiled widely. "Sufficient."

It would take another three days for the next travel arrangement to be concluded. And John was taken to one of the coastal port cities of Turkey called Izmir. He was holed up in an empty, long-abandoned office room for nine hours. By midnight, they took him to the front of the Aegean Sea.

John felt frightened when asked to hop into a small speed boat. He protested. "This is no airport."

"Friend, just shut your mouth and jump into this boat," the man helping him cautioned.

John stared at the boat and noticed that about three other young black men and four Pakistanis had all taken their positions. He summoned the courage and joined them. No going back, he thought.

The midnight journey of about three hundred kilometers lasted roughly above two hours, the speed boat shooting at seventy-two knots. And when they were being hustled to safety by a group of corrupt port workers, John didn't mind to know that he had been taken to Athens rather than to Thessaloniki. He only thanked God that he had spent only a short time and not three days at sea.

The man from Ghana they handed John to would keep him another one week, taking flight unavailability as the reason. He couldn't tell the young man that the man in Turkey just sent the money for the conclusion of the payment for acquisition of an identity two days after John's arrival in Athens.

John's flight to Madrid was smooth, with no strict, detailed boarding checking. And during the journey, he sat at the window and peered out far beyond the clouds at the blue colors of the Mediterranean Sea, then the elevated terrain of mountainous ridges of Spain. After a flight of nearly four hours, the plane landed at Madrid Barajas Airport.. When it taxied to a stop, John was a bit calmer than he had been during the ferry journey to Athens, because he had been told not to worry about Madrid. A local flight journey required no checking on arrival.

He came down from the plane, his bag strapped to his right shoulder, and proceeded to the arrival lounge. He checked his wrist watch. 2.00 P.M. Thirty minutes to wait. He relaxed. He had to wait.

John looked to his right. Someone was standing up from one of the public seats. He took a stride, got to the seat and sat down, excusing himself with a simple hand sign. He was tired and needed the weight of his body off his feet.

His eyes were still flashing around, looking out for the sign he had been directed to watch out for. He saw nothing. By the time he looked at his watch again, ten minutes had gone past the appointed time. He told himself to exercise a little more patience. He leaned back on the seat. He didn't know when he slipped into sleep.

He opened his eyes at the slight touch by someone's foot. He looked at his watch once again, and his eyes went wide. One hour past the time for the sign.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

The African became nervous. He scanned the horizon. *No sign*. His blood started to boil. His eyes widened. Maybe he had been deceived again, he thought. No, he couldn't believe it. How could they do that to him at this stage of the journey? He knew of nowhere to go. He was beginning to drown in confusion.

Then...he saw them. They were standing together, chatting and shaking hands like friends – as he had been described. Their clothes matched the description: black caps, red winter jackets and black jeans. They were women. But he hadn't been told they were going to be women. Summoning the courage, John approached them, and when he was nearer, he said in his local African language. "I think am missing my way, please. I need some help."

One of the women looked at him. "On the right track, brother," she called out the name borne on the travelling document.

Password's correct

Five minutes later, they were inside a taxi taking them to the bus station. From there, they would undertake another four-hour journey to Valencia, where the African's relatives lived. The woman sitting in the passenger's seat in front of the taxi turned and spoke, in African.

"What is your name, brother?"

John told her.

"Now, hand the document to my partner for safe keeping before the police confronts us."

John responded. The woman beside him took the permit. A glance at it, she said, "You can see that your face perfectly matched with the face of the owner of this paper."

The woman in front smiled. "It was a difficult search, but we're happy we did a good job. That's why it's always good to be lucky to have faces that match one's own. Our deal with you

CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU

is concluded. You are in Europe. From now onwards, you are on your own – without papers.”

Two years ago.

15

The tension now heightened as the stranger and the African faced each other inside the hotel room.

“So my friend, do you want me to call in the police to dig out more about you?”

John shook his head slowly like a little child caught in a wrongdoing. “Please.”

Looking at John, the man thought, no need to push the dumb ass further. The second game worked and he had it all. He could smell John's fear, and it made him relax, for the first time in months. “Do you have any comment to make before I go on?” he asked John, his eyes smiling.

There was a long pause, the African seeming not to have heard the question. But as the strange man began talking again, he interrupted. “Your own name?” John said the words he could think of at that moment.

The stranger smiled, exposing one of his stained teeth, having long expected the question. He produced his wallet and drew out his national identity card. He moved closer to John, bent down slightly and extended his hand for the African to read out the names written on the document. He didn't allow John to handle the card himself. He called out the names as he showed the ID card to John.

Castellon.

It registered in John's memory.

Convinced the African had the information he asked for, the man stepped back to his position. “For the past eight months I have been paying dearly,” he began to explain. “I am depositing huge sums of my money into someone's account. Blackmail. He

holds a piece of information, which if let out, will become a disaster for me. I will lose many of my clients. And the success of my business is a function of the number of clients I have.” The man paused.

He.

John noted, alarmed, hoping the answer to his question will be negative, “A member of staff in this hotel?”

“No. But he is a regular client here, with my money. I must stop him!” The man began shouting involuntarily. “I...we must stop him John, he gets more insatiable every day. He is draining my account.”

The man brooded a while. “I had an agreement with him, to pay him half a million Euros in return for the piece of information in his possession. I paid the money. He relinquished the information to me. And I thought I was safe. But this lasted only three months. He came back with other information, demanding an additional half a million Euros. He promised that all would be OK if I made the payment. Again, I stupidly agreed and made another transfer.” A tear rolled down from the man's eyes.

John sat confused by the strange man's action, and goose pimples invaded his skin. The man drew out a paper handkerchief from the inner pocket of his suit, then took time to wipe his tears. Was he trying to attract some pity from John? The African didn't know.

“The preceding payment merely lasted another five months, and he was back. This time he demanded a million Euros. One million Euros, John! Where did he think this money is coming from? And he is in this hotel right now, squandering my hard-earned capital.”

Now, John felt true sympathy for the stranger, hearing the amounts being mentioned. He wanted to know more about this blackmailer. “You mean his is in this hotel as we speak?”

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

"It's *they*," the man pointed out. "He is staying with a young woman; his girlfriend. You may have noticed them. They are in Room 714."

John didn't understand. "Do they stay here as often as you do?"

"Yes. I've been following their pattern."

Something fell into place, and John suddenly remembered an encounter with the young man and woman coming into Room 714 one day. When was that? About two months ago..., no in December, shortly before they booted John out of the hotel. He was on the seventh floor polishing the doors and the wooden panel that ran along the walls of the hallways of the hotel. When he reached the door to that room and began polishing it, moments later, he heard a shout at his back, in Spanish, "Who the hell are you? And what the hell do you think you are doing?" the young man has asked before he realized what John was doing. The young woman had already hid herself at his back, scared by John's presence.

John had turned, looking at the young masculine and well-dressed man. "Sorry to inconvenience you, sir," he said, explaining. "I am getting the doors dusted."

The man hadn't attracted John's attention then, but the woman had, with her stunning slender curves. Truly, the white woman appealed to him. Her lips were full and womanly. He recognized her clothing that day. A black long winter jacket covering her body from the shoulders through the knees, the perfect shape of her body in view. He couldn't remember correctly the colors of the clothes she wore beneath the jacket. Dark red? Or purple? But one other thing that attracted John so much to the woman was her makeup – very lightly applied. John had deep attraction towards women who didn't over-paint themselves. To him, there was a sense of responsibility in them. That day, he had thought they were a couple.

“How do you intend to stop him?” John asked, looking at the man who called himself his partner.

The man hesitated for a moment as if he didn't know the answer to the question. Then he said, “I must get the idiot's pictures together with the woman's. In the nude. That solves my problem. With the photos, I will be able to stop him from further extortion. That young woman is a rich man's wife.”

You hold my own pictures as your weapons for blackmail.

John eyed the stranger.

The man left his position and went to the African. Out of his suit's pocket, he produced his tiny Nikon camera. He brought it closer to John and powered it on. Within a few seconds the camera came to life. The man started scrolling through the recently taken pictures. When he got to the two photos of John he took weeks back, he called the “delete” option. The pictures vanished. “I never intended using it against you. I only wanted to make sure you heard me out.”

John's eyes narrowed over how easily the stranger could read his mind.

-Back out now! This man is evil.

Whether John was aware of it or not, his concern for the man had begun to register on his face. He hated someone blackmailing another. He hated extortion. Still seated, he brought out his phone from the left side of his trouser pocket and looked at its time, then dropped the phone back. Fifteen minutes had passed since he came in. Five more minutes to spend. He hesitated, and then asked the question burning inside him.

“How may I help you in this?”

The man gazed at the African, highly relieved. “I want them to be sedated. That is where you will come in to help me. “

“You what—?”

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

“But I must pay the price for your help. Just name your price.”

Before John could say more, the man went to the wardrobe in a swift movement. He pulled out his small travel bag from where he kept it in the upper chamber of the wardrobe. He dragged the bag, as if heavy, to the centre of the hotel room and dropped it on the floor. He ran his left hand through his suit's inner breast pocket, bringing out the miniature key he used for unlocking the bag. The man unlocked the bag and from inside it, he produced a small rectangular plastic container.

“This is all we need for the sedation.”

-You heard him. Name your price.

John clutched the back of his neck, feeling a pang at the recognition of the tiny object. “This?” he said, unaware of his shouting. “This is the hotel's branded saccharin. How do you want to use it as a sedative?”

“It had saccharin content, but not anymore. The new content is saccharin and a sugary sedative substance of the same granular size.”

John choked. “And how do you hope to plant it?”

“The sedative effect is gradual and works for only one hour, and they are back to consciousness. Between the two of them, nobody would be suspicious of anything after it had taken effect. They would only think they naturally fell asleep.”

“How do you hope to plant this thing?”

The man held the container up a little above his eyes level, his head a little inclined looking at it. “John, name your price. You are going to plant it, at whatever price you say. But, understand this. You can't back out from this proposal now.” The tone was threatening and domineering.

My price! John thought. At this point, the African understood how determined the man was in what he wanted to do. He also knew the man would blackmail him if he came up

with any resistance. It dawned on him that the revelation of the man's secrets to him had been intentional. Now, the insistent voice reminded him that backing out was dangerous. Moreover, the man kept asking him to name his price. Could it be bad and immoral for John, taking a little risk for a small amount of money that could help him towards solving his accumulated family problems? As long as nothing like death was involved?

John gathered his thoughts. Certainly, his flatmates would laugh at him and his good morals if they heard that he had backed out on a little business that could have fetched him a few thousand. He returned the look at the man who kept looking at him too.

"Your price, John," the man repeated.

-You're about to make an extra cash. This man is money. Save your ugly situation.

John's mind hesitated for a long while. Then, all of a sudden, he was thinking. With ten thousand Euros he could start a new life. He could leave Spain and go back to Nigeria. His first planned project to go into snail farming back home could be started up. He would buy a cheap piece of land and fence it round for the farm. With that he could thrive in his new life at home, and expand his business from there, before revisiting his family's palm wine business again.

"Fifteen thousand Euros," John said, as the noise from the man's croak broke up his thought. He looked on, knowing the man would surely object to and bargain for a lower price.

"What?" the man asked, his face grim as if struck by a stone thrown from many meters away. "Fifteen thousand Euro," he repeated as if he just heard depressing news. He shook his head, in disbelief. "Are you an African, John? I didn't expect the price you said."

John's mind shot out of his heart in confusion. The frequency of the strange man's change of mood befuddled him.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

He decided quickly. “No wait! I...I am ready to bring it down to ten,” he began to say. The man cut him short by a wave of his hand.

The stranger hurried to his bag again, bent down and opened it. He pulled out a bundle of neatly banded Euro bills. He stripped away the band and started counting the money. John saw five hundred Euro denominations for the first time. When the man counted forty, he stopped, put the forty pieces down on one side of the floor and replaced the rest inside his bag. Then he picked up the forty notes.

John's eyeballs jumped out of their sockets, wide as the man directed his hand towards him.

“I am going to pay you one hundred and fifty thousand Euros for this help, my friend. It's better than paying into a fool's account.”

The African sat there gaping at the man, gobsmacked and disordered.

“Making you richer by one hundred and fifty thousand Euros in order to checkmate him forever is better than paying a million to the blackmailer.” The man waited a few seconds for his information to sink in. “Take this twenty thousand as your advance payment. The remaining one hundred and thirty thousand, I will pay, in cash as soon as you have expedited this.”

John extended his shaking hand and took the money. His body exploded with fear, and then with excitement. He dazed at the sight of the money he had been offered, unable to think clearly at first. But then his brain promptly began exchanging the amount into the Naira. The sum of twenty-seven million Naira had just been offered to him for a little conspiracy, the sum of three million six hundred thousand Naira already handed to him as the first installment. He found it difficult to accept this was happening for real.

It must be another of those awful nightmares. In this one John was being offered an amount to commit a crime. He would wake up in the morning and all would be gone. He blinked his eyes to wake up from his dream. But his eyes remained opened and focused. Things were really happening.

The African sat there on the bed for a long time, in dumb silence, staring at the money in his hand. Then, John's spirit suddenly jumped out of his body and went to the stranger. First, it danced up and down before the man, then embraced and hugged him, then licked his shoes, for this man here wouldn't really understand what he was trying to do for John and his family in Africa. He steadied himself and managed to speak again.

"How do you want the substance to be planted?"

The man took time and explained the plan.

"What?" John froze. "There are security surveillance cameras all over in this hotel!"

"Don't let that bother you. I have observed them for a long time."

"Observed them? How?"

"The periphery of vision of those cameras is limited to the doors in the non-client zones, just to check unwanted intrusions. They are not meant to scan the entire hallway. It is very safe for you, my friend."

John didn't need to argue about that. Somehow, he would find a way of beating the camera and executing the job. He looked at the time on his phone. Thirty minutes had gone by already; they must be looking for him by now. But he didn't care anymore. All he thought about was how to carry out the task ahead. He had stumbled into treasure. Oh God, a blind man had marched on a big snail. It had come by chance, and John mustn't let it go. His relatives, and the other guy who he lived

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with would thank him for coming to save their situations. His family in Africa would call him a hero.

John needed to leave the room immediately – to prepare for his new assignment. He stood up, brought out his wallet and carefully stuffed the money inside it. He replaced his wallet and looked at the man. “I must go now.” He exhaled. “I have to prepare myself for the job.”

The man nodded his approval. John went to the table and picked up the sedative substance from where the man had placed it. He hurried off towards the door. Near the door, he stopped, turned around and stood looking at his stranger-employer. He gave the man a long, hard stare. “How did you intend to break into their room after they are sedated?”

This strange man froze and lost his composure for some time, looking at the African, with surprise. Yet if the question had taken him by surprise, he quickly covered this up.

“I trust the capability of someone who would help me. That is you, John. And that is why I have paid out a huge reward to make you happy and rich.”

John remained silent.

“When you have concluded the task, I expect you to bring in an access key to their room here, to me. And...John?”

“Yes?”

“Be ready for eleven o'clock. You only have three minutes of action,”

“I am not sure I follow.”

“Make sure you have taken your position few minutes before eleven o'clock.”

“You are certain it must happen at that particular time?”

“Absolutely,” the stranger said.

“And for sure, the request will be made?”

The man grunted with impatience. “I trained him, my friend. Three minutes is all you have got to act.”

16

In Room 714, David Lopez opened his eyes with deep reluctance. He felt the intensity of the rays of the sunlight penetrate his sensitive irises. He covered his eyes with his arm to soothe the pain he felt in them. He cursed that neither of them had drawn the thick window blind to prevent the early morning sunlight from filtering in and waking them up. But he knew the action was deliberate, as always, they had slept late, having come in at five o'clock this morning. And they needed to wake up early to keep an appointment, and the sunlight helped them to do that. Not that the woman by his side was sensitive to sunlight. No. She left the waking-in-time task to David.

Still lying on his back, David rubbed both eyes with the back of his palm, taking out some sticky substance that covered them. Then he yanked away the thick winter blanket covering his body and sat up on the bed. He turned around and dropped his thick-socking-covered feet on the floor.

He stood up, dazed from the alcohol he had consumed during last night's outing, coupled with unlimited rounds of love making he had had with the woman between the five o'clock they got back to the hotel and the six o'clock they finally went off to sleep. David thought, shaking his head, my lady could be insatiable.

David needed to shake off the fatigue and dizziness. In boxer shorts, the young man went to the lower end of the bed. On the floor space between the bed and one side of the walls of the hotel room, he stretched out his feet and began a press-up exercise. Within a couple of minutes, he had attained a hundred straight pumping up.

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The Valencian finally stood up, feeling his body muscles and stomach walls expand. He was back to normalcy, the hangover subsiding immensely. David went back to the bed – to the drawer beside the bed – and picked up his wrist watch. It was seventeen minutes before eleven in the morning.

“Breakfast?” He knew his companion was awake now. She had stirred during his press up exercise. That was one reason why David...hmm... loved her. She usually woke up at the slightest noise.

“Are you that hungry?” she asked.

“Sure. The sangria is still in my bloodstream.”

“Can we wait till we get to Benidorm in the next hour? Remember? We promised lunch with our friends.”

“Oh, yeah,” David recollected. “Then let's do with some coffee.” The Valencian went for the hotel's intercom.

17

Room 715 was vacant: John's wish. The occupants were a couple and their kid, a six-year-old boy. They went into the city at ten-thirty this morning. With his little experience in the hotel job, John knew that most couples with kids, when they went out for sightseeing, tended to return in a hurry. There may be the need to come back and change the kid's clothes. They may need to come get his toys or some other thing of importance. So he needed to be fast in what he wanted to do.

Earlier, John had thought of several ways of executing the operation. None came initially. But the thought about the money resting inside his wallet, and the rest to come soon kept stirring him into action. So he had gone to his boss, carrying a list in his hand.

"I observed that the windows to these rooms are very dirty. I think they need to be cleaned." Amongst the rooms listed down was Room 715.

"Nice idea, John," the woman said, delighted. "You can get on with it. Have you fixed all the clothing to their positions?"

John had replied yes, he'd done everything. He had taken up his cleaning equipment and ran up to the seventh floor.

Now as he tried to gain access to Room 715, inserting the universal key he held into the panel attached to the door, he smiled in excitement, his mind going back to the plans as the man had laid them out.

Three minutes to hell, John thought. He opened the door and stepped in. The room was a shambles; not yet made up by the hotel maid assigned to the floor. She was making the rooms at the other end of the floor. John's experience made him know she

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still had up to five rooms to make before she got to this one. That could take hours.

Scattered on the bed were children's toys of all types, and children's painting materials. The Harley Davidson motorbike and the Rolls Royce were the ones John could distinguish. There were many others he couldn't identify with the limited time he had.

John knew nothing about the importance of toys. The opportunity of owning some never came to him during his childhood. But something in him reminded that the money which could provide his unborn children with whatever toys they needed was now in his possession. He resisted the thought that he could also afford a car as costly as the price of a Rolls Royce if he wanted.

He closed the door behind and hurried in, carrying the bucket containing a small quantity of water and his cleaning materials closer to the window of the room. He pulled up the transparent curtain, but left the thicker blind half-raised. It must look as if he was doing the cleaning. In case someone walked in. Yet he must not leave the blind entirely raised up. Some elderly house owner in one of the buildings neighboring the hotel peeping out the window might become curious about John's movement and alert the hotel's management. Or even the police.

Certain he'd set everything in place, John relaxed, checked the time from his mobile phone. Ten-fifty-five. Five minutes more. The five minutes lingered to eternity. Yet, John must wait. The man, all the time, told him that patience was all one needed to succeed. The African walked to the door, stood behind it, listening and waiting. Then he frowned, wondering why he had begun to make references to what the man said, and what the man did.

*

Engrossed in the thought of what he'd be doing with the whole of what he termed his twenty seven million Naira, John's mind suddenly became alert when he heard a voice in the hallway. "Room service," the voice said. "Your coffee, please." The room service didn't come at the exact stated time, rather two minutes later. But the good thing was that the guests in Room 714 made the request as the man had said. John wondered why the man had such accuracy in the plans he made.

John took out his phone and set the phone's stopwatch. His heart began pounding harder and the nervousness made his legs heavy as if he suffered from elephantiasis. But the thought of his money and its effect drove his whole mentality, driving him into action. There was no room to losing of such an amount.

He checked the place of the small container he carried inside the inner breast pocket of his winter jacket, while counting down his time. His strained ears heard the scuffling and fading away of sound as the waiter passed the room where he hid. John opened the door a little bit, listening. He took a fast glance at the time on his phone and cursed.

Time was flying like the speed of light. Twenty seconds to two minutes.

At the sound of the closing door to the staircase, John knew the waiter was gone. He jumped out of the room with a fast acrobatic move. Within a split of seconds, he was standing beside the tray of coffee.

Two minutes, ten seconds.

John plunged his hand inside his jacket's breast pocket, tugging out the container, same time bending down to effect the change.

A voice came from behind him.

"Hi John, what are you doing here?"

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

John froze. He sharply withdrew his hand from his jacket's breast pocket and spun round, shocked by the presence of who stood before him.

The operation, John's twenty seven million Naira, everything had run into a hitch.

18

“¡Mierda!” the strange man said. “Shit! ¡Mierda!” He banged and shut the door he had left open a little while monitoring the drama. He rushed to the table and smacked his fist twice on it. The first time in years, sweats started pouring all over his body, like an athlete who just finished a racing competition; a sign of when he was infuriated. His anger wasn't directed at the African, though, for the man heard it all, he saw it all. The African had nearly been successful.

“The stupid waiter,” the stranger said. “If I lay my hands on the idiot, I will squeeze him...,” he lifted an uncorked bottle of Hennessy Cognac Paradis he dropped on the table and personified it as the waiter. The man gripped its neck and began throttling it with all strength. “...squeeze him till I've hacked away his last breath.”

The man swallowed hard. “My carefully laid out plan...”

The strange man dropped the bottle and moved three steps backwards. Then, as if not satisfied the breath had been smothered out of the waiter, he dashed forward again, snatched the bottle by its neck and started corking it. When done, he lifted up the bottle, tilted his head, facing up. The man took a long swig, gulping down the liquid like water till he had drained half of the bottle's content.

The alcohol hit him as he removed the bottle from his mouth and dropped it on the table. Since he began staying in the hotel, the man had ordered breakfast from his room. But today, he had no appetite for food. He had planned having a nice meal somewhere in the city when the plan had been executed. He

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wouldn't do that anymore. And now the hunger stabbing the walls of his intestines facilitated the liquid's effects.

“Some fool has foiled my well laid out plan.”

The man remained standing for moments, swaying, gathering his thoughts on what he had to do next, but nothing came to mind. The bearded man staggered backward and fell onto the bed.

19

The two Africans were seated in the living room, each engrossed in thought. They were two of the men who lived in the apartment with John, occupying the largest room in the flat. The older brother lay lounged in the longer upholstered three-seater chair, while the younger sat in a separate one-seater chair, stretching out his legs.

The quietness looming over the entire space signified how tired the brothers were. The afternoon had witnessed rainfall all over the city, disrupting the events of the Falla festival with an intense cold. As a result they had nowhere to go.

The younger of the brothers hadn't seen a job since the previous year. The older had been taking care of their share of the monthly rent, electricity and other utilities, and fed them. Until four months ago, when he became unlucky, and job cuts in the company where he worked affected him. And he wasn't qualified for the government's unemployment sustenance benefit. So they had managed the amount of money his employer paid as final pay-off until it ran out. Right now, they didn't have a cent.

"Afonna, the famine in this house is out of hands," the older one said in their native African language. He yawned, letting out a loud sound. "I feel faint with it."

"And you didn't call anybody for assistance when you went out this morning?" Afonna asked.

The older eyed the younger harshly, thinking. Afonna asked stupid questions most times. All the boy cared was about himself, especially for food. He never did anything to help him out and rescue their situation. The only thing he did as a daily

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routine was to wake up around eleven in the morning, when everybody must have gone out. He would eat any food he saw as breakfast and go to bed again, for another profound sleep.

Afonna would snore until 3.00 P.M. Again, he would wake up and go into the kitchen. Anything available became his lunch, whether the food belonged to him or not. Later, he would take his bath, would take time to fancy himself and apply his makeup. Then it was time for him, as someone had revealed to his elder brother, to go find members of his marijuana smoking club.

Any one looking at Afonna, as his brother did now, saw the effect of too much eating on him. The boy was as round and as heavy as a full sized African hippo. When asleep in the night, Afonna's noisy snoring hammered into his elder brother's brain, preventing him from sleeping. People in the other rooms complained about the noise, too.

If Afonna had crossed over to Spain, the elder brother thought, by means of the long journey through the desert as he, his elder brother had, hunger would have killed him on the way. If he knew, he wouldn't have helped the boy to Europe. It would have been more profitable to set up a store for him and allow him battle the hunger in Nigeria. Bringing him to Europe had done more harm than good.

"Afonna, I had no money to make calls," the older said. "And you know that."

"I thought you had some coins."

"I went on foot to seven people's houses. All failed to help out."

"Not a single person gave you anything?"

"None," the elder brother said, "I know they will think their thirty Euros wouldn't come back to them later. The unemployed don't have collateral for borrowing."

“Which still leaves us with begging for assistance from the only man among us here working,” Afonna added.

“No. We can't continue to disturb him. He settled last month's bills – electricity gas and water. It is frustrating.”

“Well, we can't help it.”

A sigh. “I am uncomfortable with his providing food for us,” Afonna's brother said. “If you understand what I mean. He has many responsibilities back at home.”

“I understand you, but we have no choice. If he were in our shoes, we would do the same for him. We can't afford to die of hunger.”

There was a long silence. His brother didn't say anything.

“I am seriously hungry now,” Afonna said. “What do we do?”

His brother brought no suggestion. Afonna gave the solution. “We will go into his room, take some rice and cook for lunch.”

“The room is locked.”

Afonna chuckled. He produced a key and placed it noisily on the table in the centre of the sitting room. “I have the key.”

His brother sat up and looked at him with suspicion. “How did you get his key?”

“Four months ago. He forgot the key at the door's hole while leaving for work. I took it and duplicated it with the last money I had. From the onset, I never liked your suggestion for everybody to lock his room when leaving the house.”

“I am avoiding incidences of going into someone's room without his consent. I have practiced this communal life system in the past to know the associated problems. I have lived in a house where someone walked into another's room, stole his bank card, then went and withdrew his money.” He scowled at Afonna. “I never knew you went on doing the same thing.”

“I needed to survive.”

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"How do you mean, you needed to survive?"

"It's obvious. You can see it, can't you?"

"I'm sure you've been surviving on the other guy's property too."

Afonna coughed. "What will it benefit me using my money to duplicate the key of a guy as unemployed as I am?"

"His situation is better than yours."

"That's nonsense."

"What's nonsense?"

"He may be better than me, earning some money from on-and-off jobs. I don't care. But inside his room, there isn't anything of interest to me."

"And in Lucky's?"

"Yeah, there is," Afonna nodded, smiling.

"Be careful. The other day he complained that the food he keeps in his room is diminishing."

Afonna ignored his brother's warning. "I am starving. Are you in this project with me or not? We need to eat something for the day or we starve to death."

For a long time, his brother didn't respond, rather yawned loud repeatedly. Later, he said, "I don't seem to have any choice, do I?"

"You can opt for starvation," Afonna smiled, "followed by death. That's a better choice."

"Bacteria are eating up my intestines." The elder brother waved a hand in approval.

"Are you in?" Afonna asked.

"I never knew what you were up to till now. I will deny being a party to it if he discovers his things are being stolen."

"OK, deny all knowledge if he finds out." Afonna was on his feet, moving toward the door to John's room. "I am doing it for the sake of us both, though."

Afonna got to the door, inserted his key, unlocked it and stepped in. He reached the light switch and turned the light on. The room was well kept; the bed spread neatly covering the bed as if it had been ironed for one whole day before fixing it. He perceived the fragrance of the pro ambient air freshener John always applied in his room. He liked the air in here – quite unlike the one in their room.

Afonna respected his relative a bit for his neatness and manners in arranging his things. Whenever he stepped into this room, he wished he could organize himself in such a way too. He looked at John's footwear well arranged on top of the wooden wardrobe. He took a fast glance towards the left corner of the room and saw how John assembled the newspapers and magazine he brought from the hotel where he worked.

The orderliness of John's things made it difficult for Afonna to steal things in here. It took his time because he must make sure that those things remained the way they were, before he left. John had the intelligence of knowing whenever the position of the smallest piece of paper in his room had been altered. That was why it didn't surprise Afonna when his brother said the boy had complained about the shortage of the uncooked food he kept in his room. But that didn't bother Afonna, as long as John didn't catch him in the act.

Amongst the things Afonna stole from John, his favorites were the small cubes of chocolate wrapped with colored paper foil with the name of the John's hotel was written. Despite being thirty, Afonna enjoyed eating chocolate. And John brought it home in plentiful quantities. For him, Afonna. They said chocolate consumption wasn't good for the health, but what did it matter as long as one enjoyed it.

Afonna remembered a day when he came into the room and the chocolate was in short supply. He got angry and had to

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collect the remaining small number of cubes he saw there, never caring whether the person who kept it found out or not.

Now he opened the wardrobe where the things were always kept and looked. Nothing. He looked around, then went under the bed. Nothing.

Afonna stood a long time and cursed, outraged. Out of the frustration, he started hazily to search in other directions. He didn't know that he now had John's things disarranged. Fifteen minutes later, he stood in front of his brother, anger brewing up all over his face. "He has changed his storage system," he announced to his brother.

The elder brother didn't hear him. He was already asleep.

20

It's my money.

Thirty minutes had gone after the failure of the operation and now, John was calmly strolling back to report to his employer. The money occupied his mind.

He made the movement through another direction – the hotel's emergency exit – got to door to Room 717, stood and knocked routinely. His own key at hand, and aware that nobody was watching, he inserted it and unlocked the door. Then he was inside.

The stranger lay still on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. He didn't protest at the African's unapproved entry into the room, rather he remained quiet. To him, John opening the door to Room 717 himself, he was proving something – he had the access key.

At the first sight, John thought something had happened to the stranger. He perceived the smell of alcohol that enveloped the air inside the room like clouds covering the mountain tops. He looked around and saw the bottle.

“You have done a good job, John,” the man said when John walked to the bed.

“But I didn't succeed.”

“I know. It's not your fault.”

John stood rigid, not believing what he heard. “Do you still have a monitoring device on me?”

“No. But I know you didn't succeed in the operation. There is no problem, success comes by retrial. We continue tomorrow.”

“I want to hand the saccharin back to you.”

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

“No, keep the material somewhere, safely. We do not need to meet tomorrow before you try again.”

“I don't have anywhere to keep—”

“We must succeed tomorrow, my friend. Our time is running out fast.”

Before the African could say more, the man was snoring.

John turned and left him in peace.

*

I can't let my money go.

Still on the seventh floor of the hotel, John reconsidered his failed attempt, ignorant of the powerful force of “sudden wealth syndrome” taking hold of him.

Each floor of the Ivory Hotel had a small-sized room reserved for its employees. They referred to it as their office. The office had multiple functions, despite its small space. For example, inside the built-in toilet in this office, the hotel maids on duty changed into their working uniforms and eased themselves when they needed to. The office also accommodated the materials brought out of the rooms from where clients had checked out: plates of food, used towels and bedcovers. Here, in another corner, were arranged the newly ordered laundered towels and bed clothing used for making up the hotel rooms.

Though, for John and his colleagues, the most important function of this space was that here they hid the small bags they used to take home. These contained whatever edibles they were lucky enough to get from the checked-out rooms.

John kept his own small bag on the fourth floor. He loved keeping it there because the woman who worked on that floor was nice to him. Out of generosity, she made sure that John had plenty of food and drinks to go home with at the end of the day. But aside from that, John went home with whatever he could lay his hands on. When a maid misplaced her possessions, it became John's, and when John or another maid misplaced *their*

possessions, it became some other maid's. Such a level of food theft existed among his fellow workers.

Inside the office, John was pacing from one corner to the other, nervous and angry at the failure of his operation. The determination to succeed in his next move tomorrow possessed him like a madman. He wanted that money to become his. He knew now that he was an African after all: A Nigerian. At the end of it all, it was obvious that the blood for money, money and money also ran in him. Within the short range of time the stranger had handed him the first installment for a job not yet done, he had lost all the strongly defined work ethics observed in the hotel. He had thrown every good moral to the wind and had become a man fully energized and determined in the business he was about, driven by an indefinable quest for the money. The more the voice inside him reminded of what he could do with all that money at stake, the more he developed more flashes of intelligence and brawn he needed to succeed in the next line of actions.

But John faced one problem now: he needed to safeguard the substance he had in his hand.

I am not going to take any chances with this thing.

He took another good look at the small container bearing the hotel's inscription. If any of the maids on the afternoon shift came across it, she may use it, get sedated and eyebrows would be raised. And it would be even worse if some maid took the substance home and got her entire family sedated with the hotel's sugar product. John had to be extremely careful.

He stopped pacing and went to the shelves where the newly ordered fabrics were kept. He bent down and surveyed the space underneath. No, that wasn't going to house it properly. He had hidden something there before, came back the next hour to find it missing. He stood up and started surveying another corner.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

John felt the vibration of his phone and hissed aloud as if an African big man was being woken from his sleep.

Who on earth is calling me now?

He pulled the phone out from his pocket, looked at it and recognized the identity of the caller.

John answered the phone. "My guy, what's up?"

"Are you busy with your job?"

"No, no. Nothing. Go on with the call." John wanted to add, I am now the boss of my own office! But he decided to let that wait, at least till he had concluded his assignment and got hold of the remaining payment.

"I have completed my own part of our deal," the man on the other end of the line said.

"What deal are you talking about?" John didn't remember.

"The forecast for this week," the man on the line explained. "This is our week, my man. La Quiniela must pay us this time. You can't imagine the brilliant combination I did. Just try and raise the ten Euros, and we are millionaires next Monday. Remember, it's a bote - jackpot this week. The cash has jumped to four million Euros."

John touched his wallet and felt its bulging. The security of the twenty thousand Euros with him made him laugh over what the other man was saying.

His friend paused. "What are you laughing at?"

John ignored him for an answer, but said, "I want you to do something for me urgently."

"Like what?"

"Now listen to me carefully, I want you to go to Ralph's and book for time between six in the evening and twelve in the night of this coming Saturday. For a party."

"I beg your pardon?"

“Guy, shut up and listen,” John said. “Tell them to include the cost of drinks and meal that will be enough for a hundred guests.”

The voice from the other end of the telephone reacted fast. “What are you talking about?”

“Please do as I said.”

“You’ve just made an expense of at least four thousand Euros. Hey, did you win the ONCE or what?” – the four-days-a-week Spanish lottery

A short pause. John ignored the question again and continued to insist. “I want you to get the whole arrangement concluded between now and tomorrow afternoon. As soon as I am through with work tomorrow, I will be in your house. From there we’ll proceed to make the payment.”

Before the voice of his friend could sound again, John started dismissing him.

“I expect to meet you by six o’clock tomorrow evening. Right now I have a lot of things to take care of.” John cut the line.

He’d got it. To safeguard it well, taking the substance home would be the best thing. Tomorrow, he would bring it back with him.

21

On the other side of the city, Mark stood in his room staring out the window. His friend's sudden "rich man's" ordering him about had surprised him.

The window's curtain was drawn to one side. Mark enjoyed drawing the curtain at this time of the day. It allowed in the flow of sunrays, which helped to warm the room. His heater wasn't functioning now, and there was no money to buy a new one. So the sun's afternoon position towards his window helped him a lot.

Again, drawing the curtain gave Mark the joy of taking a view of the car showroom on the ground floor of one of the buildings a distance away from his room. The sight of new models of BMW cars displayed in the showroom made his heart jolt with enthusiasm towards playing La Quiniela lottery. The more he looked at the cars inside there, the more he got motivated towards increasing his stakes.

Earlier, when Mark ran down to place a call to his friend from the phone booth a stone's throw from the showroom, he had taken another long look at the displayed cars, before stepping inside the booth. He was convinced that once again soon, very soon, one of those moving machines would become his own property, one way or another.

Right now he stood gazing out, but not at the cars. His mind was racing up and down, trying to dig a meaning out of his friend's commanding officer's behavior towards him. Had the boy not mentioned a project involving such huge amount of money, Mark might have thought he was becoming rude

because of the little ten Euros he brought weekly to support his lottery venture.

"Right now I have a lot of things to take care of." His friend's words.

"Could this boy have possibly won a lottery?" Marked said aloud, picking at the eyelids of his right eye with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

Mark didn't think so. "I can't play the game myself," the boy had told Mark the first time they discussed it. "I don't have the luck for winning lotteries."

Mark had met the boy for the first time one Sunday night, in the bar owned by an African, not far from where he lived.

The young man was seated at a corner of the bar, quiet, as if just watching the activities going on. One look at him when his eyes went in that direction told Mark that the boy was new to the city. Mark was a kind of person who was good at giving attention to people he felt had not yet been absorbed by their immediate environment. One way or the other.

Mark saw no drinks on the young man's table, only an empty bottle of coca cola, so he approached the boy with a bottle of beer, doubting that a guy with such a stomach, despite his broad shoulders, had ever drunk a beer.

"You are very quiet," Mark said to him. "Your face is new here. Are you alone?"

"Yes new, but I came with a relative." He pointed at someone talking to another man, who Mark seemed to recognize.

"And you aren't drinking?" Mark offered him the beer.

The boy first looked him up before he accepted the drink. "Thanks. Just that I wanted to avoid drinking tonight. Tomorrow is a new week and I don't want to feel hung over while looking for a job."

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So he liked to work! Mark thought, feeling happy inside. He couldn't imagine the luck of meeting people with either steady jobs or ones that showed an interest in working. This guy happened to be another one.

Mark's financial resources were running out. The more he hooked up to friends with working backgrounds, the better. They helped a lot, especially with smaller amounts that kept the La Quiniela project alive.

"How long have you been in Spain?" Mark said, wanting to find out more. They were now seated at the table together. The boy looked familiar to Mark.

"Not long. Months. Why?"

"I mean, I can help you with papers," Mark emphasized. A pause. "Oh, I forgot you must have one by now," he apologized.

"The one I have doesn't fit in well. I would appreciate another."

Two days later, Mark provided his newest friend with his apartment owner's. Surprise struck him when, within only two weeks from that day, the boy got a job.

The boy and Mark became friends. They went to the bar most weekends to drink beer together. Their relationship grew more mutual than Mark had expected. He observed that they shared a particular mentality together – both hated and vowed against committing any crime to make the money. He also found out that the young man was straight and better informed than he had earlier thought. Mark noticed that the boy didn't make lots of friends, rather preferring keeping to one or two close relationships.

Mark's thought suddenly halted when his attention was caught by the sight of a new dark blue-colored BMW, a 2008 restyled 7 Series, being driven out from the showroom. He thought he had seen the man go inside the shop a few minutes earlier. Now the man had paid for the car and was driving out.

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Mark's eyes followed the tail of the car as it disappeared. One day, his mind said to him again, just as it had been telling him all the time. Very soon, he would buy a moving machine like that one and ship it to Nigeria. Such cars belonged only to the high-class boys in society.

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Many important things occupied John's mind as he unlocked the apartment's main door. He hurried through the short corridor that led to the door to the living room and the one connecting the bedrooms. His food bag was not strapped to his back, but in his hand. Both doors were shut. He opened the one to the sitting room and went in.

A bad smell greeted his nose. The windows were shut airtight and the curtains closed. It looked like there was nobody in the house. He reached the window and drew the curtain aside. Though in a hurry, he needed to ventilate the house. He opened the window a little to allow the inflow of the cold fresher air. As he did that, he wondered if any of the other boys who lived with him would ever think of cleaning the window if he, John didn't.

With the ventilation he needed now introduced, he left the sitting room and headed to his bedroom, thankful he didn't meet anybody in the house. He didn't want to engage in talk and discussions with any of his flatmates, as it would disrupt him from where he wanted to go. The decision to keep the secret of his would-be affluence from them still held firm, until the deal was concluded. Then he would give them a surprise one-week treat and parties. After that he would find a way to smuggle all his wealth out of Valencia – out of Spain.

John unlocked his bedroom door and dropped the bag he carried in a corner near the wardrobe. Today, if he had been as observant as he used to be in the past, he would have detected the alterations in his room from the way things had been before he left for work. But he wasn't any more of his old self. His hand rushed for his bath towel. Within twenty seconds, he had

untied the lace of his work boots, and then stripped off his clothes.

“Nichy!” John heard his own voice in a muffled shout, dancing, “You see, Rhino is now the biggest boy.”

Two minutes later he was in the bathroom showering, not forgetting to lock his door and take his key along, the twenty thousand Euros there inside his wallet must be protected. It usually took John eight to ten minutes to take care of himself in the bathroom. Today, three minutes lasted too long. Within another five minutes, he had applied lotion, and changed into new clothes.

John headed outside.

He began to press the elevator's button, but stopped. No time to wait for the machine. With a run, he went to the step and started descending from the third floor through the stairs.

John darted into the lobby on the ground floor, moving to the metal door that led outside the building, when someone behind him asked in Spanish, “Is everything OK?”

Completely taken by surprise, he twisted round towards the direction of the voice, quickening to regain himself so as not give away his absent-mindedness. Oh, the building's porter, John's good friend here. He had forgotten the man existed.

Was he here earlier when I came through?

The African considered this. John didn't think so. He recalled that while running up the stairs earlier, he hadn't seen the man when he had looked in the direction he always sat, and that he'd also been thankful the elderly man wasn't there to engage him in his routine conversation and enquiries about his job.

“Si señor,” John managed a weak smile. “Yes, sir, everything is OK. I am rushing to make an important telephone call.”

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The man fixed the African an intelligent look. "To Nigeria I guess," he said.

"To Nigeria," John nodded.

"Good, I have worked here for some time to be able to say that I've never seen you in such a hurry as you were today." The man looked at the direction of the room where the electricity and water utility meters were housed and nodded his head towards there. John's eyes followed his gesture as he continued talking. "I was in there looking at that equipment when I heard that metal door open and slam back, like two heavy weight wrestlers were fighting to see who would get through the door first. Had I not seen your tail, I would have found it difficult to believe it was my friend who passed through. You are sure the matter isn't bad?"

"No...no," John stammered. "Nothing is wrong. It's just a little family matter."

"Well," the man gestured, "you may like to see this interesting news in the magazine here—"

John liked the man so much. In fact he had developed a kind of mutual relationship with him such that each day John came back from work, he stopped to have a little chat about national and global current affairs. The elderly man's brain was stuffed: he knew history, he knew music, he knew much about the poverty in Africa due to the corruption and bad governance of its rulers. He knew about things currently happening that John didn't even have the slightest idea about. And not only that, the man knew how to treat people who seemed depressed. A little time with him and one forgot many things that bothered you.

The man wasn't Spanish. He had told John before, but right now, the African couldn't focus to recollect from which part of Europe he came. John thought that the man had told him something about serving in the military too. This skill helped

him in the way he did his work. Engaging in long discussions and talks was one of his intelligence strategies.

“No, no,” John responded to the invitation. “I will be back in ten minutes. Then we will have enough time to look into the news together.”

The man raised both hands up, giving up on his suggestion. John was sure the man detected his lying, though it didn't matter so much. Nothing mattered. He knew that before he would come back, the porter would have finished his job for the day.

23

In the apartment, Afonna waited seven minutes after the door had banged. He needed to be sure the owner of the room was far away before he began his operation.

Today was the worst day of the famine and Afonna couldn't bear it any longer. His body shook as if he'd been on a hunger strike for two weeks. He really respected the people who deliberately made their body systems suffer, engaging in hunger strikes for long periods of time, he thought.

Earlier, when he announced his failure to locate where John kept his food stuff, his brother had risen from the chair, got dressed and left the house – in the rain. Where his elder brother had gone, Afonna didn't know.

What Afonna did was to go back to bed, trying to sleep the trouble off. But the disaster had continued to strike him, in even sleep. And in fact had woken him in time to know when John came in. The way the boy had rushed in and banged the door surprised Afonna; it was unlike John. Afonna had decided to lie still, monitor and found out more about what was going on.

Then he'd suddenly heard John's hushed shout. It wasn't so audible for him to understand clearly. But it was an expression of happiness. May be the boy had been promoted in his place of work or something?

The next thing Afonna heard was a sound of running water, indicating that John was taking a shower, a very fast one. Again, all unlike John. Interesting.

And now he was gone.

Afonna yanked out his own key, for he must go take a look. He moved with caution like a house rat, and a second later, he was unlocking John's door, and stepping in.

So easy? Afonna stood at the door for a long moment, surprised that John hadn't taken time to hide his bag and its contents. Of course, he knew the boy wasn't going to. He'd been so much in a hurry to leave the apartment.

Afonna rushed to the bag and unzipped it. The sight of cubes of chocolate inside excited him right away. He smiled with happiness. There were plenty of them.

Afonna stooped down and began to make his selection. He stopped for a moment, dropped everything, left the bag open and rushed back to his bedroom. He took something from inside their room, came back and continued the theft.

24

John emerged outside the building and strode to the far end of the Calle Manuel Candela, the street where he lived. He turned right into the major road, the Avenida Del Puerto, and headed to the beginning of the Avenue, in search of something of great importance.

Along his way, he halted in front of a seven-storey building. On the ground floor, was the sign of an internet café. The African wandered into the office. He approached the attendant. "Quiero internet," he said, above a normal voice. "I want access to the internet." No, *por favor – please*. No, *hola – hello*.

The attendant, a Latin American young woman, was seated in a chair behind the counter and going through job itineraries. She looked up and eyed him coldly. "Are you talking to me?"

"Internet," John said.

The woman hesitated a while, considering. "Whenever you are here again Mr..., learn how to approach me with manners. I will remember your face the next time I see it." She looked down into the control system, did a short typing and said, "Number five is free."

She wouldn't understand that I could open up a café in the next twenty-four hours and make her my employee.

He looked at her with a dead expression, turned and scurried towards the computer.

He sat down, facing the computer. He clicked on the "internet explorer" icon which brought out the Google homepage. He felt grateful that he had the basics of using computers and the internet before coming out to Europe. Plenty

of fellow Africans he saw in this city hardly understood the importance of computers and internet usage. And because of that, many didn't care about sourcing information through the internet. Apart from a very few who made the internet their source of income.

John placed the cursor on the Google search bar and typed in; *“used cars for sale in USA.”* He hit the enter button. The computer hummed and produced numerous auto search pages from the U.S. He clicked on the first, www.autotrader.com. The page came into view. He introduced the type of car he wanted, “Toyota – Land cruiser – 2008 – from \$40,000 – airbag – factory A.C – automatic gears – leather interior... The list of features became endless.

When he finished his search, thirty minutes had passed. The cars he saw online wheeled in John's mind, and he began to consider that he might have to buy the car he wanted from the U.S. He rose up and went back to the counter.

“Do you have Lebara line?” John asked.

The South American woman did not reply, and instead pretended to be busy. Then John pointed at one of the new mobile phones on display. “I want to buy that phone.”

The woman looked up. “It's a hundred Euros.”

John said yes he would pay, and when he did, the woman smiled at him for the first time, then offered to activate the sim card for him. The African agreed, although he didn't want to use the new line today, nor tomorrow. After making his purchase, he hurried out of the café, with “Thanks, thanks, thanks, and come again,” from the woman.

Outside, the spring darkness had finally come, though much more slowly than during the winter season, when by five o'clock in the evening, daylight visibility had gone, giving way to street lights. But now, at a few minutes to seven, the Las

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Fallas lamps were flickering on, the immense beauty of Valencia, mother of the famous city of art and science, in view.

The African moved on in his money-driven long journey. He reached the intersection between the Avenida del Puerto and the Avenida Cardenal Benlloch and stopped for the red traffic light. While he waited, John looked to his right. His eyes caught the sight of a big and beautiful black-brown colored dog whose owner had chained it to a road side post. Instantly, his mind raced into thinking. He thought about his would-be gigantic duplex, which will be situated in a three-plot-of-land space.

When I finish building it, I will employ eight Rottweilers to guard me.

Due to the frequent insecurity in Nigeria today, dogs were most trusted than men. Many rich men in the country had died at the hands of their trusted guards. John wouldn't fall into such a trap. His mouth twisted into a broad smile.

-Watch your steps! Treasures of wickedness profit nothing. But poverty and shame are for him who refuseth to listen.

Now, John shot out his right hand and cautioned the friendly voice away. It had nothing to offer.

The land for his housing project? John thought. How could he acquire such a piece of land? He laughed. As long as one had the cash, in Nigeria, anything happened. Someone would come running and begging John to purchase his landed property. In a country where the government officials could wake up one morning, seize the people's lands and instead of utilizing it in the interest of the state and the people, shared it among themselves for their own selfish interests, the people were always eager to sell off their own and use the dividend for other important things before the seizure got to their turn.

John's mind came to how he had generated the capital that funded his journey to Europe. Convincing his parents to sell their second (and the last) piece of land, which they used for

gardening, was quite a difficult task. At the initial time, his mother had been blunt in the refusal of his request. His father had no option. A sick man showed no resistance. So John made further efforts to convince his mother.

“Come to realities mama,” John pointed out to his mother. “Take a look at our family background, compare our family status with others whose children are abroad, in Europe. Families doing financially well here all have somebody overseas.”

John had experienced sorrow. “We can't continue in this present situation.” Then he brought on the tears. “We have nobody in the government to help elevate this family. I must travel to Europe. I promise you, I will not fail this second time. For Christ's sake. Mama, I want you and Papa to become the owners of a car, bought for you by your own son.”

John discerned his mother was scared of losing the only remaining family landed inheritance they had. After selling the other piece for his failed first trial through the sea, failure in the second, for sure, would plunge the family into wretchedness.

John looked up at the sky now.

Thank God I succeeded.

Now, he was a rich man, and very soon his parents would be riding with him in a big car. John's family status would climb up in their community. That's how it was in a society where money ruled, where morals had plunged into a ditch. Anybody in the Diaspora who wanted to go back home to live, without first enriching himself overseas, would be better off remaining in the foreign land permanently. Else, he would become an object of social ridicule.

Situations in Nigeria had worsened so much that if one had the whole brain and ability to lead the people on the right track, but did not have the monetary strength to buy the people over,

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nobody listened. It's why young people did anything, the extremes, both home and abroad, to hit the money, and belong.

The traffic light indicated green. With the other pedestrians, John crossed to the other side of the avenue and quickened his movement. Five minutes later, he was closer to his destination.

The beginning of Avenida del Puerto housed a big car showroom. Facing the Plaza Saragossa roundabout, Allen's American Cars Partnership was one of the few car showrooms in the heart of Valencia that featured assorted types of cars and Jeeps. Anyone who wanted the American specification of a car got it here. The commercial sign stated that the company had been established in Spain for the past twenty years.

"Sappy bought a Jaguar X-Type 2007 model, Nichy!" the African suddenly said. Twice, he tapped his right hand on his chest as he pushed his way into the shop. "Rhino is going to pick up a cool American Jeep. Model 2008."

A sales attendant approached John when he stepped in the showroom. The man was well dressed in his official corporate attire. The black suit uniform, the white cotton shirt he wore inside and the red knotted tie, impressed John. It must be a way the company attracted esteemed customers – like him. From his looks, the man appeared to be in his forties, and lanky.

"Good evening, gentleman,.." the attendant said, "may we be of assistance to you?"

The African looked at the man who greeted him. He appreciated the fact that he had often spent most of not only his lunch-hour, but also other little time he had with some of the young Spanish ladies and gentlemen who worked in the Ivory Hotel. He always felt happy in their company. The saying went that the best way of learning the culture of a people is by approaching and interacting with them. Through them, John had come to understand deeply the rich and tremendous diversity of

cultures within Spain, region to region, their food, dance, and their traditions.

Lorena Ruiz, one of the staff of the hotel who worked in the spa, took the time, whenever she had some, to keep him updated with the history of the country. And John thought the young woman had studied history in high school. Though he had never asked her. One day, when he came down to the back exit of the hotel to wash the waste dumping room, Lorena was seated somewhere, smoking.

“Hey, John, what is the official language of Spain?”

“Español,” John said instantly, surprised at such a question.

“Well, you are correct. And you are wrong. Half score,” she said with a smile.

‘Correct and wrong?’

“Castellano or Español, or ‘Spanish’“, she began the lecture, “is the official language of our kingdom, Spain. However, there are other official regional languages that make up the rich linguistic heritage in this country. Hence, the official languages depend on the region where you are. Summed up, these include Castellano, Andaluz, Catalan, Valenciano, Galician, Basque and Asturian.”

“Why is it so?” John asked.

“Because each of these different regions has their own regional powers and are offended when their own official language is relegated for español. ‘Español’ was chosen by the military dictator, General Francisco Franco during the forty years of his regime.”

Lorena lectured on: “The man's government banned the use of regional languages since, according to Franco, this insinuated that Basque, Catalan and Galician are not languages of Spain. OK, I will teach you how to differentiate accents from region to region.” And she had taken her time to teach him.

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Now, hearing the attendant speak, John felt happy to detect that the man had the accent of someone from Cataluña – the Barcelona region. He corrected the attendant within his mind.

Good evening sir, may we be of assistance to you?

People should learn how to address wealthy customers. *We?* John looked beyond the man, searching for the others. He wanted protocols, not one man standing here to welcome a wealthy African who wanted to buy an expensive car. He saw the other one seated in a corner of the showroom.

“Yes,” John said. “I want to check which of these cars to pick up.”

“I beg your pardon?” the man stared at him, incredulous. “I thought you came to submit a curriculum vitae or something –”

“I want to buy up one of these cars,” John repeated, cutting the man from saying what he wanted to say. His eyes were fixed on a black Jeep Wrangler one space behind a Cadillac CTC automatic sports car. He didn't see any Toyota Land Cruisers on display, but the Wrangler could do for the moment. It was a matter of urgency.

“We do not sell used cars here Mr...” the attendant wasn't going to be stopped. “And the cheapest new car we have here costs thirty five thousand Euros. Do you think you are on the right track?”

“I knew you didn't sell used cars here. And I knew about the prices of your cars. That's why I came for one of them.” John's eyes continued to level on the Wrangler. The attendant followed his gaze as the audacious looking African nodded toward it and asked, “How much is that black Jeep?”

“That vehicle you are looking at is an American Specification of a Jeep Wrangler Rubicon CRD automatic. You're talking about forty five thousand Euros.”

John hesitated a little, then moved closer, examining the Jeep. “Can it come down to forty thousand?”

"I am sorry, gentleman, the prices of our cars are fixed," the attendant chipped in, glancing at his watch at frequent intervals now, trying to hide his irritation and anger. *The black boy was out of his mind*, he thought.

"I will take it at the price. Forty-five thousand Euros."

"You will what?" the man went dumb for moment. "Excuse me Mr... Did you win a lottery?"

John looked at him and smiled. "More than a lottery," he said. And as if not satisfied with convincing the sales attendant, he reached his trousers pocket and produced the bulging wallet. He hauled out the five hundred Euro bills and started counting. He stopped at the twentieth piece, as something in him struck back senses. The African withdrew the money and placed it back into his wallet. "I will be here this time tomorrow with a complete payment."

The man stared at the young man, stricken numb in disbelief, his twisted face revealing his surprise. He had thought that the black boy was daydreaming when he came in. But the bulk amount of five hundred Euro bills brought out here meant that he was serious about the purchase he wanted to make.

The attendant suddenly went to work, all friendly and business-like. "Sir...We are very glad you came to us. We will be happy to welcome you tomorrow. "

John made a sheepish grin at the man, happier that the attendant had finally used the "sir" he desired. When he came back tomorrow, he decided, it wouldn't be bad to drop the two attendants nice tips. About a thousand Euros. Or more.

In the past, John had never entertained the Nigerian mentality, the one that said that money was everything and alone commanded respect. And people had been telling him it was because he had yet never had the chance to have money. Now he knew better. He was no different. And it seemed nobody ever would be. That's why everyone in Nigeria

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scrambled for riches with inexplicable viciousness, especially those in the government. In sub-Saharan Africa, the taxpayer's money – government money so-called – was national property. Anybody who had fought his or her way up there began to steal as much as he or she wanted, dropping all moral principles and not looking back. That's why development remained halted in the region. Some narrow-viewed politician in Nigeria once said that clinching a public office is like climbing up to a mountain peak. That one has to take whatever one wants, because when the person comes down he or she may not be able to climb up to that mountain peak again.

It was as if John had now understood why everyone wanted to obtain the material richness. He was ignorant that the money virus that caused that kind of shortsightedness, leading to underdevelopment in Sub-Saharan Africa in this era of mankind, the germ that kept Nigeria without electricity, without infrastructures, and without education, had also caught up with him.

When the African had left the shop, the attendant sprinted over to his colleague waiting in the background. During the conversation, his fellow worker had quietly drawn closer to them, following a finger signal made by the other man. He had heard it all. And he saw it all.

Now they knew what to do about it. The man lifted the telephone and started dialing as the other took a seat beside him. "Tomorrow, first he explains to the police if he really won a lottery to pile up that amount of money," said the attendant making the call.

25

March 13, 2009

In the Ivory Hotel's Room 717, the occupant lay wide-awake, engrossed in thought. His eyes were staring at the roof, through the darkness.

“Hell!” the man cursed under his breath. Yesterday had been a bad day that he found difficult to erase from his mind. It had taken him five hours of a rough sleep throughout the afternoon to revive himself from the alcohol he had consumed shortly after the failure of the operation. And thirty minutes after he had woken up, he couldn't control the burning rage within him due to that failed attempt. He had dashed out of bed, staggered towards the small table, lifted the Hennessy bottle, and drained the remaining half of the liquid in another swift gulp: Not that it gave him a particular happiness. That heavier drinking was the only remedy for his illness during this frustration – sheer anger.

The man cupped his forehead with his right palm, the hangover unbearable. The headache was splitting. He felt very sick, finding it difficult to rise from the bed, in the partial darkness within the space.

What was the time? He needed to know, a lot of work still lay ahead. He would have to go down to the hotel's car park. He felt the presence of his watch on his wrist; he hadn't remembered to take it off his wrist before he fell asleep, so the object still stuck to his body.

The man stretched out his left hand and fumbled in search of the overhead light switch. It came on, and the brightness of the

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light blinded him for a moment. He closed his sleepy eyes for a while; then managed to open them. He checked the time. It was 6.00 A.M. The man gave out a low whistle, not believing he had slept for eleven hours since yesterday evening, during which he had forgotten where he was and what was happening around him.

The stranger yawned, then remembered his employee and smiled with effort. The African had done well so far. No doubts, the boy possessed a natural inward drive that he, the stranger, had managed to resurrect with the huge sum of money he had paid out to the young man. And as far as the situation stood, the man was certain the boy would find a way of doing the dirty job and come back for the remaining payment.

The man thought that surely the African would be at work by eight o'clock this morning to fulfill his obligation. But he had another thing he was determined to execute: the alternative plan. He was a man who made sure of a plan B in whatever business he did. He had been hesitant to execute plan B earlier, so as not to be spotted by his enemy. But now that plan A was becoming tentative, he would take the risk of carrying out plan B himself. All he needed was to be careful. The stranger blinked his eyes several times, then went off, to sleep, still thinking about plan B.

Forty-five minutes later, he was awakened. The man struggled up from the bed and went into the toilet. He sat on the water closet and urinated, making sure he drained off all the urine inside his aching bladder. Then he went to the washbasin, bent over it and washed off his eyes with hot water from the running tap. The man dried his face, left the toilet and dashed back to the wardrobe.

He opened the wardrobe, brought out a thick dark blue woolen winter long sleeve T-shirt and wore it over the black

jeans he had slept in. He picked up a white, flat Adidas canvas cap he had placed near the bed and put it on.

Set to move, he strolled to the door of the room, opened it and peeped both ways of the hallway. Not that he expected any activities: at seven o'clock in the morning, almost all of a hotel's clients were asleep from the previous night's activities, until around 10.00 A.M. So the hallway was empty as he expected. Yet, nothing was as good as taking precautions in whatever one did.

The man shut the room's door without a sound and took a not-so-quick and a not-so-slow stride towards the clients' elevator. He passed by Room 714, holding his breath. He drew closer and went into the elevator, delighted that the machine already stood by. The elevator dropped him at the Reception floor, from where he continued his journey to the door that led downstairs to the hotel's underground parking lot.

The stranger waved back to a young male receptionist who greeted him, sitting behind the counter, his facial expression showing signs of tireless work during the night, tiredness and sleepiness now, and a wait for a colleague to arrive and take over from him.

The man opened the door to the stairs and descended the step without hurrying. As he did so, he thought over the fact that the management of the hotel didn't consider mounting security surveillance cameras in the parking area and wondered why. Well, what did it matter, now that it was advantageous to him?

Walking faster now, he went straight to the side of the parking lot where his own car stood; a rented small dark blue colored 2007 model of Ford Mondeo saloon. He opened its boot, then brought out a small metal container of what looked like the hydraulic fluid of a car. He picked up a small-sized tool bag and shut the boot again.

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The man looked across the parking lot from where he stood and spotted the rented red Toyota Corolla parked about twenty feet from where he positioned his own rented car. The man scanned the entire parking lot again. No one was around here for sure. With caution, the stranger began to walk towards the Corolla. Within seconds he got to the car.

The man moved fast to the front tires and bent down, one after the other. He worked on them. It took him two minutes and the job was done in perfect order. He stood up, scanned the environment again. Then he walked back to his own car.

26

As John arrived at the Ivory this morning, he stared at the list handed to him by his boss and panicked. A load of morning jobs were to be done, which included the hardest: cleaning the outside window glass panels surrounding the hotel's ground floor. He had never expected it, and it made him curse inwardly, believing he wasn't going to be through with the work before his own appointed time. And he was convinced that today was his last, as soon as he had succeeded in the deal.

Now, what he had to do was to employ more energy than he had ever done before. He picked up his materials, left the department's office and immediately went to work.

Three hours and fifty minutes later, fifteen minutes before eleven o'clock, the African finished the job. He picked up his materials again and was now rushing to take up position on the seventh floor.

Minutes later, John shuddered in his hiding place, time to time cocking his head on one side like a dog, in order to hear the sound of any intrusion. If the operation he almost executed yesterday was difficult, he knew the one about to be carried out now was near impossible. He knew if a repeat of yesterday's incident happened today, with the same waiter, the waiter would become suspicious and would report him to the management, at least for the waiter's own security.

But he must do the job. He nodded his head in determination: and must succeed this time. He could not let that money slip away, just because he failed to execute the job. The effect of what he would do with such an amount of money still

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drove him like the sight of a bunch of caged bananas drove a monkey.

Yesterday, when the waiter had almost caught him, John had explained to the boy that he bumped into the tray and wondered why it was dropped that way; that he was deciding to lift it up before the waiter arrived. The waiter had hesitated a little, then accepted the explanation, and before the door to 714 could open, he and John were on their way out of the scene.

John looked around, considering going first to his employer's room to inform him about the new move. He shook his head. It wasn't unnecessary. The stranger had his way of monitoring John's progress.

His forehead already covered with sweat, how he would carry out the act bothered John greatly. His hiding position was far from the door to 714. It meant he had just two minutes to effect the switching. Two minutes! John's eyes squinted. A suicidal mission.

On each floor of the Ivory Hotel, closer to the position of the hotel staff's elevator, was a door connecting the staircase for emergency exits. That's where John was now, hiding at the back of the door, his cleaning materials dropped closer to the staircase window.

In two ways, it was risky to be here. First, the house maids often used the stairway when going to a nearby floor. Any of them could spot him. Second, he may be pictured by the camera covering the exit door if he emerged through it in a hurry.

John breathed a sigh. He would take the risk. There were no other options. He moved both feet, feeling the lightness of the flat canvas shoes he wore today, in place of the working boot he usually put on. The canvas shoes would aid his movement. He smiled over the little intelligence, digging into his trouser pocket and yanking out his phone to check the time. Ten minutes to eleven o'clock. God, there was no time. His hand

went for the substance concealed in his jacket's breast pocket. He pulled it out, held it in his hand and waited.

Time crawled by.

After about four minutes, John heard the faint whining of the elevator as it stopped on the seventh floor. The noise of trolley-dragged plates told him the waiter had arrived. He heard the waiter open the door connecting to the client zone – to the hallway. Seconds later, he heard the waiter's noise fading away.

The stopwatch on the African's mobile phone already swung into action, he felt the downward movement of his heart as the organ's blood pumping rate surged faster than the stopwatch. Feeling a shortening breath, he opened his mouth and drew in a lungful of air.

Calm down! You're going to succeed.

John rushed to the elevator with the one minute of his wasted time. He called and retained it to standby on the floor for the waiter, to minimize further delay.

It took another two minutes before he heard the waiter coming. He rushed back to his position. The waiter opened the door to the elevator and got in.

Three minutes. Now!

In an energized motion, John pulled the wedged emergency exit door backwards. He moved toward the client zone door, then stopped. With a gentle working pace, the African opened the door and was in the hallway. He steadied himself, strolled calmly out of the camera's focal area.

Now!

John ran with a long acrobatic stride he couldn't remember having exhibited in his life before. He was almost closer to door 714 now, closer to the coffee tray, the substance in his hand, ready. He moved. One minute and forty seconds. It became eternity. But he got there.

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John bent down, his left hand pulling the other container on the tray, his right hand replacing it with the one containing the sedative substance.

Done!

John was hurrying away in the opposite direction, the operation a success. Sure he was now out of the sight of the client who would come out from Room 714 in the next few seconds, John slowed his movement, minding the surveillance camera covering his escape door. He moved in a gentle manner toward the door to the staff office on the floor. He opened the door. He moved inside.

Thank God! John had made it. The money belonged to him now. The world was his now.

The deal was done.

27

Afonna rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and lifted his head from the bed, waking up earlier today than he usually did, and before the people he lived with. He knew, though, that left to himself, he would have continued his sleep until sometime later. But the thing in him wouldn't allow further sleep. It always drove him out of bed whenever he knew he had a breakfast already reserved for the morning, making him hungrier than he had ever felt.

The boy sighed, not knowing whether he did so out of annoyance or out of relief. Whatever it was, a spirit or something else, he had submitted himself to it without any form of defense – like the spirit that drove the “Hamburger” kid in the United States of America – the boy who submitted himself to the Mac...something hamburger.

Afonna could not remember the name of the company that made the junk food, but remembering the story of the sixteen-year-old boy always made him smile to himself as he did now. The kid's parents came from Afonna's hometown. They lived in the States and had given birth to the boy there. When the boy was growing up, his parents often bought him that hamburger. And over time, the fast food became part of him, driving him like a spirit. He began demanding the snack every day. Then, it became a three-times-a-day meal.

The effect? The boy began to expand in weight. When the parents wanted to stop him from having the meal, he reported them to the authorities, and won the case, allowing him continue with the choice of meal that gave him happiness. As chocolate gave Afonna happiness, at thirty years.

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Unfortunately, when the boy and his parents visited Nigeria, the young man weighed about a hundred and ten kilogram's. Highly overweight. Afonna saw the boy. He knew that if he, Afonna, didn't control his own stomach, soon he would become as overweight as the "hamburger" kid.

Still seated in the bed, he yawned, stretched out his hand and drew the thick curtain aside. He looked out the window. His eyes revealed his surprise – the sky was cloudy today, cloudier than any other day Afonna had seen in the past years since he came to Spain. The sun had refused to rise as normal as usual. As it was now eleven o'clock in the morning, Afonna didn't like this weather and he felt bad about it.

He was so famished yesterday that it looked like he hadn't eaten anything in four days. In fact he lay awake now because he had heard the sound of the door bang when John left earlier in the morning, many hours ago. So he needed not to worry that the boy may come back to catch him eating his stolen food and his chocolates.

He eased himself out of the bed, quietly, making sure he didn't disturb his elder brother who was still fast asleep in the outer corner of the large bed they shared. He opened the door that led outside the room, without any sound, closed it behind him, and then tiptoed into the kitchen.

The cooker inside the kitchen had an oven, but because all of them living in the apartment were men, the oven was never in use, and nobody's attention ever went there, save Afonna's.

Inside this oven, in a plastic bag, he hid his loot. The long loaf of bread he had bought from Mercadona yesterday night and had decided not to eat because of the presence of the others, was also stashed in there. He opened the oven, brought out his food and dropped it on top of the tall fridge.

Afonna began heating some water with the gas cooker – not with the microwave – to lessen the noise. He hurried himself in

making the breakfast, rapidly filling his mouth and devouring the many cubes of his stolen chocolate. He hid the foils inside his pocket; none of his mates, including his elder brother, was going to share his precious meal with him.

It took five minutes for the preparation of the meal. Then he rushed into the sitting room, alone. A bowl of hot water, a packet of liquid milk and other things were set aside. Afonna sank himself down into the chair and began enjoying his breakfast with ferocious rapidity.

It didn't last as long as he had expected. His brother was at the door, peeping. "Boy! What are you doing?" Before Afonna replied, he crossed over to the kitchen. He dashed back into the sitting room, a tea cup at hand. He went and took position.

Afonna's eyes suddenly turned red. "You're still supposed to be asleep!" His voice registered his vexation.

"Hunger woke me up. The moment you got up, I knew you were up to something. So I decided—"

"Gentlemen," someone broke in, interrupting the brothers. "What's going on here?"

The two men turned to look at their other flatmate standing by the door. He rubbed his stomach gently, then yawned. Hunger bit him too. Before Afonna could say a thing, he was on to the meal.

"Afonna!" the boy called.

"Just what's that?" Afonna shot back. "Please back out. You are not part of this food!" His unfriendly stare was leveling at the boy. But the other man didn't mind the scolding.

"Thanks for providing the breakfast," the boy said to Afonna, "God bless you, my brother. Tomorrow, by His grace, I will do the same for you!"

"Look, just save that nonsense about tomorrow which may not even come!" Afonna said out of a mounting anger, as if he

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was aware his statement would have a real grave significance on their lives.

Four minutes after devouring their meal, the three were lying down, fast asleep. The effect of the substance they'd eaten began to take its dangerous and devastating effect on their bodies.

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To his boss and the others, John was still inside one of the rooms, cleaning up. He still had one task to carry out – collecting the balance of his payment. In the next twenty minutes, he would go back the other way and give the man the access card he demanded.

First, he needed to celebrate his success. The African grinned to himself, filled with big relief. He was still standing inside the seventh floor office.

Time to go. John called the elevator. It came, and he went in, then descended to the first floor. Nobody was there. He went straight to the mobile mini bar and extracted three cans of Heineken beer.

John ran into the toilet, bolted its door and leaned against it. He uncorked each of the can beers rapidly, congratulating himself on his success. At milliseconds interval, he drained them one after the other.

He left the toilet, then the office. Calmly, he joined the client zone, strode to the hotel staff elevator and called it. When it came, he went in and took the lift it to the seventh floor. John was now at 717's door. He tapped, inserted the universal card, opened and went in.

"Congratulations my friend," the man was standing in the middle of the room. "You have done well."

John handed him the key. "My money."

"Now I want you to find an excuse and exit the hotel," the man paused a moment, then continued. "The payment of your balance will be made outside, away from here."

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“What?” John stood shocked, looking askance at the stranger. His eyes flashed anger. “I want my money here, right now!”

The man paused for a long time before giving out a response. “The money is in ten and five Euros denominations, arranged in a big portfolio. Carrying a thing like that out of this hotel is as good as handing yourself over to the police.”

The African relaxed, seeing sense in this. “Where is the meeting location?”

“Angel Guimera. There is a public garage at the junction. Go in there and walk to the extreme left of the hall. You will see a white Seat Leon car parked closer to the wall. I will be waiting. But if you get there before me and don’t want to wait, use this key.” The man extended a silver colored single car key, accompanied by a parking pass. “Open the boot of the car. Your money will be there for you. Drop the key inside and jam the boot when you're leaving. I have the spare.”

John gave the man another stare. “So, you want me to believe this?”

“My dear friend,” the man paused and cleared his throat. “Out of my own benevolence, I paid you twenty thousand Euros for a job as easy as this. The remaining wouldn't be a problem for me, would it? You see, as we waste the time over this, I won't be able to go in there and take my photographs. Be there in one and half hours.”

The African considered this for a little while. It was true. If this man had paid him twenty thousand Euros for an assignment he hadn't yet executed, giving out the remainder would not be much of a problem.

“OK.” John accepted.

The man waited another minute. “But be careful the way you carry the money. There are police everywhere.”

*

The cold outside the hotel struck John on both ears as he emerged from the Ivory through its main door, turned left, and quickened his pace, walking away from the premises. But he didn't care much about the cold as he moved in excitement with quick strides. He knew that he was a rich man now – one of the richest Africans in the city of Valencia at this moment.

He staggered a little, then suddenly laughed. In the past, he had vowed never to allow money to rule him. Not anymore. Everything had changed. The resistance had vanished as soon as this proposal was thrown to him. The huge amount of money in question was an irresistible road to his family's and his freedom.

"God is great," John said to himself, still moving staggeringly away, with both hands now dipped into the side pockets of the faded brown Chinese-made leather winter jacket. "I have made it!"

-God is great? You have just committed a serious crime!

As John did frequently now, he shook his head in disagreement with his inner mind. He got to a point twenty meters away from the hotel, paused, and glanced back in the direction he had come, to make sure his movement hadn't aroused any suspicion that could cause him to be watched.

True, I've just committed a crime. But I know it isn't that a heinous one.

From where he stood, John looked at the other side of the road, at a stationary taxi whose driver had just dropped off a cigarette stump through the window and was about to move on. The African darted across the road, to take a taxi.

He reached the taxi, opened the back door and unsteadily hopped in, shutting the door behind him. Then he leaned forward, handed the driver a piece of paper bearing the address of where he was headed, and leaned back again in total relaxation.

The taxi geared into the road.

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“¡Rapido!” the African said to the man in gruff Spanish “Fast! Move it out of here.”

The taxi driver's hand was reaching for the car's radio's turner button. The hands stopped on the way, the man miffed by that order. He stared at his client through the car's rear-view mirror, wondering why a black boy, probably working in a cleaning services company somewhere within this neighborhood, would be giving him orders in an unmannerly way. “¿Que me has dicho joven?” the man asked him. “What did you say to me young man?”

“I am in a hurry.” John said, indolently.

The elderly taxi driver nodded his head. He turned his head sharply and glanced at the African, turned again to mind the way. “Because you're drunk?”

John frowned. “What—?” he started, then stopped.

May be he has perceived the smell of my breath.

But what does it matter? “You know, I will be buying a car newer than this in the next two hours,” he muttered in English, not minding whether the driver understood or not.

Seated in the back of the well-equipped Mercedes E-class saloon car, John relaxed his head backwards against the seat's headrest, in thought, as the taxi took him home. He had decided to make the journey back to the apartment triumphantly, so that if they saw him come down from the taxi, his flatmates would understand he wasn't an ordinary man anymore.

Everything went his way now, John thought. Even the Mercedes car was stationed in position, waiting for him before he had come out of the hotel.

How fast money could change a man and his principles, John thought. Since he had arrived in Spain and started helping out in solving the problems back home, he couldn't imagine taking a taxi with a hard-earned five Euros. And having seen many of his countrymen do it, he always wondered why they

chose to waste their resources while there were buses and metro trains that cost cheaper. Now he knew: big boys don't have the time to waste joining buses and metros.

Today, the sky has changed from its everyday sunny and bright appearance to a dull condition. Why?

John became troubled. All his life, due to his Christian religious belief, superstition was one thing he had battled never to accept. But it kept having that negative effect on him. As he went back to his apartment in this taxi, this sudden change of the sky made him uneasy. Something in him told him he was marked for death. He had left the hotel managing to trust the stranger a little. Now as he peered through the car's window, looking up at the sky, he frowned, uncomfortable. The meeting fixed outside the hotel bothered him.

Yet, considering his whole money, John shook his head, resisting the odd thinking. He raised his right hand up above his head from where he rested it on the hand rest of the car's door and waved the negative thought aside for the positive. His imagination wheeled to how he would be handling the portfolio the man talked about. How heavy would it be as he dragged it out of the boot of the car, and then transferred the money into his own bag?

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The driver pulled out of the Calle Menorca, circled round and turned into the Calle Islas Canarias. John's interest was caught by the sight of a group of kids circling around in a park, throwing out firecrackers with earlobe-cracking sounds, as they marked Las Fallas festival. He wondered what would be happening at the Plaza del Ayuntamiento de Valencia over the next one hour and few minutes, in the everyday-during-the-Falla noisy event called La Mascletá. The fireworks that would rip through the plaza in the two o'clock afternoon popular gunpowder concert were much more deafening than the ones he had just heard now: He was there last year.

John shifted his thoughts from Las Fallas and again considered his wealth. So far he had hidden the secret of the operation away from his housemates. But today he was going to give them the great surprise package. He knew that at first they would be unhappy he hadn't informed them about his fortune hunt since its inception. Well, he sighed, that's one of the best things in life – taking people by surprise.

Things should always be allowed to mature before one opened one's mouth wide and talked about it, no matter to whom. If he had let somebody know about this deal, John thought, who knew? Someone jealous because John would become rich soon might go as far as phoning the hotel or even alerting the police before time. Not because that someone was trying to be a law-abiding citizen. No. Rather because that someone wanted to make sure John didn't become richer than whoever it was. That was the way people operated, so John wouldn't take chances with confiding in anybody.

He had even made up his mind not to let on to his mates the exact amount he had made in the deal. Allowing them to ponder over it was the best security he could afford himself.

John decided that he would spend ten thousand Euros on his housemates; two thousand would go to each of them and he would make a three-month advance payment for house rent. Then he'd take care of the utilities. Later, they would join him in the party he had already began organizing. But before the party, tonight, they were going to move around Valencia in a taxi, to witness the activities going on in Las Fallas festival.

"Aquí estamos," the taxi driver announced. "Here we are. Number 12." The African didn't hear the man.

The driver stirred painfully from his position, then turned around in his seat. His face bore a mask of irritation and unfriendliness. "You get down here, young man. This is number 12!"

The hard voice brought John back to his mind and he suddenly realized where he was. Quickly, he searched and brought out some money from his bulky wallet, paid the driver off and dropped down, looking to see if anyone would notice him. No one did.

He looked at the time on his phone. Ten minutes past one o'clock. Time was racing faster than he expected and he seemed behind schedule now.

The building's lobby door stood open. The house porter sat behind the counter. The African greeted the man with haste, excused himself from their usual chit-chat and ran on his way up, clambering the stairs two at a time. He couldn't wait to celebrate with the people closest to him. He knew that at this time of the day they would all be in the house, just idling about.

John got to the third floor and sprinted towards the apartment's main door, energized and ready to create the stunt.

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He inserted his own key, unlocked the entrance door and dashed into the house.

“Hey...hey...hey,” John sang out on top of his voice, “my people, I’m back!”

There was silence.

“And guess what?”

Silence.

‘I am now, hmm, Lucky big boy!’

Silence loomed in the air like a place that had been deserted by people on the run.

No! There had to be someone in the house. John had expected the sound of music from the big, old Panasonic home cinema in the sitting room, or at least, a sound from the television. But none came. Only silence welcomed him.

Instinct told him that all was not well here. His breathing slowed, his legs were suddenly weighty on the ground as he became enveloped in fear, instead of his normal jubilant mood.

The young man struggled to keep himself steady and calm. He took the short walk through the narrow passage between the main entrance and the door leading into the living room. Something dragged his feet backwards as if in another dream, moving but static.

He finally reached the door to the sitting room. His right hand felt heavy as he extended it and opened the door.

John's whole body turned to jelly. He went rigid and stood frozen, his face stricken with horror over what he saw.

30

Bodies!

Bodies were littered in every corner of the living room. Yet he recognized the faces of the three he lived with. The lower part of John's jaw dropped as he stood there, wide-eyed, staring in disbelief at a small Ivory Hotel-branded container of saccharin which stood on the centre of the table, surrounded by other breakfast materials.

The African wrestled to liberate himself from his stiffness. He rushed to the small container, lifted it as if it were hefty metal, examining it with care. Then he knew. There had been a mix-up somewhere.

My God! How could this be?

That question, John couldn't bring himself to answer at the moment. All his impulses wanted him to find a way of resuscitating his mates, who, at a first glance, he thought had just been sedated. All were seated in the chairs as if in a relaxed mood.

John listened now for breath, taking a closer look at each of his people. No sound came from anybody's breathing, from any direction. His eyes widening further, he rushed to one of the bodies, squatted down on the floor, and using the back of his right palm, felt through the neck for the body's temperature.

Cold!

It was Afonna's body. John caught the same body's wrist and felt for the regular pumping of blood.

Nothing!

Horror filled John's eyes, sending his pulse racing violently. It dawned on him that he was squatting in the midst of dead

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bodies. And as he looked at them more and more closely, he also realized that the bodies of his flatmates were a little bloated.

A wave of nausea swept over the African, and his eyes bulged as he still squatted there, rigid, semi-conscious, staring at the three corpses lying in front of him, the corpses of his own relatives and flatmates.

A knot formed inside John's stomach, generating an impulse to vomit. He began to struggle to smother the vomiting. But he was unable to control it.

Standing up with great difficulty, John turned and began hauling himself towards the toilet. The puke was almost out, but he hadn't reached the toilet. John covered his mouth with both hands, suffocating as the content of his stomach surged up to his mouth with fierceness.

He forced the door open in time for the throw up to burst its way through his mouth and splutter on the toilet's floor before he could drop his mouth over the toilet. John matched on the thrown up, surging towards the toilet. He caught the toilet bowl and held it with both hands, bending over it for some time, to steady himself. He opened his mouth at intervals for the remains of the contents of his stomach to spew out.

Minutes later, John sagged backwards and collapsed on the floor, in a pool of his own vomit.

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He opened his eyes, unaware of how long he had been passed out. Total confusion blanketed him as he reeled from the shock of what had happened. He sat up erect and then struggled to his feet.

I have committed murder!

John could not bring himself to be associated with the word, “murder”. As he raised himself up and stood erect, dizziness struck him. He spun round and started falling. He caught hold of the toilet's hand washbasin so as to stabilize himself. It was too late for him. His forehead hit the wall supporting the hand washbasin.

With the impact, the African temporarily lost his bearing again, dropping on top of the thrown up with his buttocks. Lots of strength lost, his clothes completely soaked, John sat on the sticky semi-liquid, pondering over what had happened.

He had been cunningly deceived! It was a deceit all along. He had been meant to murder and not to sedate the man and woman inside Room 714.

The sound of the cry couldn't come out, but it weighed him down. The African remained sodden on the floor of the toilet. He suddenly coiled himself and began to sob. Seconds later, it transcended into a cry and a handful of tears were trickling from his eyes.

Ten minutes past before he consoled himself and stood up. John stripped his wet clothes off and looked at his image in the mirror on the wall. A man in his mid-twenties had turned forty within minutes. His eyes were now swollen and reddened like blood; his nose ran like water, his chin sunken in.

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Something had to be done right away, John thought.

-The police. Call the police.

John considered it. He dropped his dirty, wet clothes on the wet floor and rushed out of the toilet, naked, dashing back into the sitting room. He couldn't bring himself to look at the corpses any more as he started opening the drawers of the room divider in search of the Yellow Pages for Valencia. The three-digit Valencia police emergency number wouldn't register in John's memories any longer. He knelt on the floor, rummaging through the bookshelf. But then, something happened again.

-You need to find that man.

John stopped short in his search and stared at the roof, considering the second option. Yes, the best thing was to get out of here first. He had to find the murderer as soon as possible. John must revenge the deaths of his flatmates – his relatives. He would alert the police later, as soon as he was outside this building. For the removal of the corpses. He would make the call through a public phone booth. An anonymous caller.

John left the sitting room and ran to his bedroom. He unlocked the door and dove in. His whole body was still unsteady, his hands quivered as he pulled out a towel and dried out his sticky body, and then began to change into new clothing.

Within minutes, still trembling, John began packing his things. He just needed a few of them. He picked up the small knapsack with which he went to work. With this he stuffed in a red T-shirt and a thick blue winter sweater which he had recently bought. He took another cheap blue jean to add to the one he already wore. He needed nothing more.

No, John thought, he must go with the one thing he cherished most here: his laptop computer. It might keep him a little company in the journey. He coiled up the computer's power source cable and stuffed it into the knapsack, together with the computer.

John stood in the room a little and scrutinized it. He needed nothing more. Hoisting the knapsack with its two handles and hanging it on his shoulders, he strapped the sack to his back.

John dashed out of his room and closed the door behind. He went into the sitting room once again – to say goodbye to the people whose early departure from this earth he couldn't admit to himself he had aided. As he took a last look at the people who, a few hours ago were alive with him, his eyes began getting watery again. But he didn't need that now. Revenge was all John wanted. He must revenge their deaths.

John took a last minute look at the bodies, involuntarily waved goodbye and turned toward the exit door. He reached it, opened it and went out.

He walked to the head of the staircase and descended the steps with swiftness, two at a time until he got to the first floor. Then he remembered.

The house porter!

John would have to take care of the porter of the building. He wanted no prying eyes as he made his exit out of the house. The decision made, he ascended back upstairs to the apartment and went straight into his room, refusing to go take another look at his flatmates whose body swelling seemed to be increasing rapidly moment by moment.

John went to his wardrobe and opened it. He lifted a pile of well folded cloths he kept on the floor of the wardrobe. There, well hidden away was a bottle of an expensive Spanish champagne the African had brought from the hotel and decided to reserve it in case of any day of celebration, which today should have been. The weight would provide the impact he wanted. But John needed to calm his unsteady self down to be able to carry out the action. God, he needed alcohol.

From where he brought out the champagne, the African extended his hand further and extracted half a dozen of the

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large-sized Heineken beer cans. He opened three of the cans in sequence and drained them in a rapid succession, dropping the empty cans on the floor. Now, he felt tranquil and steadier.

John dashed out of the apartment and headed back to the first floor. At the first floor, he went to the elevator and called it. It was the single lift the building had, so with patience, he waited for it to come to him, looking up and down the floor's long hallway as he did so.

The building was still quiet, but very soon it would be two o'clock and its occupants would be arriving back from their workplaces for their three-hour lunch breaks. Hence John needed to hurry up in what he wanted to do.

The elevator arrived. He opened it, then pressed the ground-floor button and held the elevator's door with his left hand. With his right hand, he lifted the champagne high up, as if it would get closer to the deck above. He aimed at the other end of the hallway and released it.

The explosion rocked both the first and the ground floors, creating a noise which shattered the quiet of the entire building.

As he expected, within seconds, John heard footsteps running up the stairs. He darted into the elevator and the door closed. The lift started descending to the ground floor. It would be a surprise to the porter and before he could think to puzzle out what had really gone wrong, John had made his way out of the building.

It happened the way he had wanted. Now, John had already run out of the building and was headed left. It didn't take him many seconds before reaching where the street intersected another smaller one. He turned left and disappeared from the sight of the house porter.

The African thought only of one place to go at this particular moment.

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The public garage was dimly lit. Most of the light bulbs were dead and required changing. But the hall had a space that comfortably accommodated more than fifty cars.

At this time there wasn't much activity inside the place; many cars were parked there. Most hadn't seen the sun for up to two months. Their owners were either abroad or had decided to drop their cars for some time, preferring the public transportation system to save costs as the crisis loomed. And the man from Room 717 of the Ivory Hotel had carefully chosen this rendezvous because he obviously had this information to hand.

Earlier before checking into the Ivory Hotel, the stranger had hired two different cars from two different car hire services: one for Mr Tricas and the other for Mrs Tricas. Payment was made in cash for each for a five-day hire.

He had then driven the cars, a white Seat Leon and a grey-colored Peugeot 407, both saloon cars, to this garage, one after the other, and parked them, paying through the automatic machine which he knew that the old garage had just installed.

He registered Mrs. Tricas for the Seat Leon and Mr Tricas for the Peugeot 407. He made sure that the Peugeot was positioned directly behind the Seat. The 407 had faintly tinted glass windows so that anybody who came into the garage only noticed someone inside the car when their eyes had adjusted to the dimness of the hall. The garage had no surveillance system.

Pablo Hernandez Tricas had been inside the Peugeot for an hour, waiting for the African. The young man, no doubt, was

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intelligent, Pablo's mind thought, to have gone on to execute the task, despite the first futile attempt.

Pablo smiled over his own excellent judgment. He knew the boy would succeed after all. Twenty thousand Euros would motivate him to cooperate at any time. Pablo knew that money had a power that invoked a kind of spirit different from the normal moral compass that guided a human being. He knew that human behavior towards a kind of money that the person had never seen before could become as addictive as a drug.

Pablo smiled more, knowing that John was unaware of how the effect of the money he promised him had triggered him into the sudden wealth syndrome. He had lured the young man into suffering under the law guiding the nature of human beings when they come into money unexpectedly.

Even winners of lotteries and legal inheritors of wealth, Pablo knew, suffer the kind of trouble the African faced. But fortunately for these other people, they are somehow always prepared in advance before their wealth is granted to them: financial experts are employed for the inheritor of wealth before time; the lottery organization may delay payment while getting in financial advisers to counsel the fortunate winner.

The stranger was laughing. He had made sure John never got the chance for any such counseling. He had noticed the explosive psychological change the sight of the money gave the black boy back in the hotel – like a hungry lion in a desperate quest for its prey.

In his present state, John needed a psychologist to cool him off, Pablo thought. Just that now the psychologist the African needed wasn't going to be a human being. Rather, a man-made psychologist would give him a permanent counseling. For the fifth time since he got into the car, the man's right hand left the car's steering it gripped and went to open the glove

compartment. The Russian-made Baikal IJ-70 Makarov pistol, fitted with a silencer, lay there.

As Pablo fingered his favorite killer weapon, he adjusted the car seat's backrest backwards to a relaxing position, and imagined how the killing would be: the African, engrossed in thoughts about his money, walking in here, searching for the car as directed. John would see the car, but not Pablo. The African would not need to wait, so he would walk around to open the boot of the car that backed on to the Peugeot in which Pablo was sitting. Pablo would slip out as John, having caught sight of the money inside the boot, began to give it all his attention. Then, Pablo would shoot him in the head and drop his body inside the boot, shutting it. It would be an easy job.

The African's question on how he would gain access to the room when his targets were sedated had caught him unawares. He never intended to go anywhere near that room and so he hadn't thought of covering any question that came from that angle. Had the boy been a little more observant, he would have detected the shock this single question gave Pablo. But he hadn't been. He was more moved by the money already in his pocket and the prospect of the one he would get later.

Pablo noticed sweat beginning to form on his palms. It suddenly seemed as if he would be suffocated, having been inside the car for one-and-a-half hours now. The window glasses were all rolled tight, except the one on the passenger's side, which was slightly open, though not allowing him to get enough air. But he dare not try making himself more comfortable than this, he thought. It may be when his prey surfaced.

He continued the patient waiting as minutes passed. Pablo drifted into an unwitting sleep. He woke up, surveyed the parking lot. No John. He drifted off again.

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The stranger woke up with a start and frowned in surprise. The African hadn't arrived. Pablo had asked the boy to be here by two o'clock so as to keep himself one hour ahead of his schedule. As soon as the African had left the hotel, the man had allowed another twenty minutes to be sure. Then he had driven down here to position himself before time. But one-and-a-half hours had gone past the time he had agreed with the young man.

The African must come for his money, Pablo decided. May be something trivial was holding him back. Pablo hoped the fool, like his fellows, hadn't started celebrating his fortune already, with some woman who wouldn't let him leave his house.

Minutes went by. The man glanced at his golden Rolex watch in frustration. He leaned forward from his relaxed position, peered both ways through the side windows of the car. Nothing.

The man felt a stir of anger. He raised his right hand up to the level of the roof of the car, then slammed his palm on the car's dash board. The African had failed to show up. Why?

Something had gone wrong. Pablo felt it. What was it? That he couldn't tell.

The stranger became tense. It was time to get out of the garage, he decided. Before coming out here, he made sure he left none of his belongings at the hotel. He knew his fingerprints would not be found on the small container he had given the African. Neither would they be found inside the room. He had checked out of the room, claiming that an emergency needing his attention had just occurred.

He had sealed all the possible traces of the murder at the hotel to him. It was now time to disappear from the authorities and from the African. Yet, he needed to silence the African to make sure there would never be any possibility of being exposed. But how?

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March 15, 2009

Police Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez sat behind the desk, his mind engaged in the consumption of a twenty-page investigation progress report on a cocaine trafficking cartel operating between North Africa and Valencia. He had worked hard to crack this over the past six months.

A trusted police informer had given them a tip recently. The cartel had smuggled in four hundred kilograms of the substance into Valencia, and now the inspector was under pressure from a superintendent to produce the progress report on the investigation. This was because the superintendent was in turn under pressure from the Chief Superintendent at the Valencia Division of National Police, in Gran Vía de Ramón y Cajal Headquarters. And this owed to the fact that the President of the Generalitat of Valencia – the regional government of Valencia – wanted a fast break on the matter. A mask of anxiety covered the inspector's face as he tried to finish the last page of the report.

It was two o'clock of the afternoon, but Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez wouldn't be going home for lunch with his young family, as he had promised. Instead, he went through the report while enjoying Spanish Chorizo and Manchego Pizza, a favorite meal he bought from a Pizzeria nearby the station.

The police station was located in the Calle Barraca, close to the Valencia seaport. It oversaw the security of the port and the

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areas within the Avenida del Puerto, extending to the Avenida Blasco Ibañex. This station, though formerly a regional police office building, now housed a national police unit, known as the DAO, the Department of African Operations, instituted in the third quarter of 2005. Investigations of all cases involving African immigrants – murder, drug trafficking, money laundering, internet fraud, and other related crimes – were coordinated through this office.

Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez headed the unit, a man whose facial appearance made someone seeing him the first time refer to him as a boy in his late teens, despite his thirty years of age. Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez did his job with rare dedication.

He had inherited his father's height and broad shoulders. But while his father was a bit rounded and heavy, Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez was a man of the slim type who maintained a constant physical fitness, coupled with the fact that he never drank alcohol, and watched whatever he ate. His eyes were so gentle that one mistook him for a civilian, even when he was in police uniform. When it came to intelligence, Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez was outstanding. His innate memory had no limits. Statements, facial features or map descriptions never eluded his memory when he had them committed.

These natural qualities had helped him rise fast in his career as a police intelligence officer; although he still remained grateful to his father, who had brought about the ingenious initiative that helped the inspector to understand the ways Africans lived and behaved. His father's idea later became a major factor elevating the inspector to the present position he held. It happened many years back, during the early 2000s.

The inspector's mind delved deep and he recollected the battle his mother had to engage his father when the man was

making all efforts to convince his family on the importance of building a good career for his son.

In 1997, Juan Rodriguez, Antonio's father, was sent to the Spanish Embassy in Lagos Nigeria as an intelligence attaché. He was thirty-eight years old then, and his first child, just fifteen. Antonio's two younger sisters were twelve and nine respectively.

Juan had been working with the Embassy in Belgium before the transfer. The posting got him infuriated. How would he cope with leaving his lovely wife and three children and travel to the jungle of sub-Saharan Africa? Why couldn't they transfer him to a country nearer home; on the eastern side of Europe, or even in the Northern part of Africa, which had a better atmosphere? The fury did not extend beyond his family circuit, though. The commitment to serve his nation had to be undertaken.

But to Juan Rodriguez's greatest surprise, he got to the country known to be Africa's most populous nation, and was awed by the beauty of its natural features. Lakes and rivers of all types were present in every part of the country. He marveled at the extent of the forest resources with which nature had blessed this big entity. The country's richly diverse culture also intrigued him.

From time to time, when Juan Rodriguez came home to visit his family, he told them interesting stories of places in Nigeria he had visited. "The country is richly blessed by nature," he would tell them, "but corruption has eaten deep into the system, and this results in hunger and insecurity." He was being sincere with his family, but never knew that what he said would scare his wife terribly at a point in the future.

In 2000, during the summer, when Juan Rodriguez wanted to come home and spend his annual leave with his family, he informed them that he had good news for Antonio. His son was at university then. He didn't want to discuss it over the phone,

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Juan had said. So the family members waited with enthusiasm to find out what their father's good news could be.

When Juan Rodriguez finally got home, he took his time to let out the news to the ears that were now desperate to hear his wonderful news. He knew for sure he wasn't going to find it easy to buy his way with them. So first he took them out for a dinner at one of the most beautiful restaurants in Valencia, just to make the day.

It was in the middle of the dinner and a conversation about the latest happenings in Nigeria – about the new transition to civil rule – that he had finally opened up.

“As a matter of fact,” Juan Rodriguez said to his family, watching for reactions, “I am making arrangements for Antonio to spend a year in Nigeria as an exchange student at the University of Lagos.”

He had expected reactions, but he got beyond what he anticipated. The noise coming from the jangling of spoons and forks all stopped simultaneously, as if the hands were electronically controlled. His wife shot him a look from across the table where she was seated, shocked. Her eyes were blazing.

“¿Qué has dicho, Juan? The woman asked. “What did you say, Juan?”

“I know you aren't going to like this,” Juan said, “but it will help him through his career as—”

“Impossible!” his wife raged. “That would happen over my dead body.”

Juan Rodriguez looked at his wife as if to ask why not.

“How on earth could you even harbor such an obnoxious thought?” she asked at the top of her voice. “I have been sitting here all day thinking about your welfare in that dark, cruel world. And here you're, asking Antonio to join you. I can't imagine that, never!”

Juan Rodriguez sat watching as his gorgeous wife lashed out anger against him. He knew better than to argue during such situations.

"I think we're done with this dinner," Mrs. Rodriguez said, dropping the utensils she held at hand. "Let's go home now." She drew her chair backwards and stood up. The dinner they were enjoying came to an end. At their mother's gesture, the family rose to go home. Juan couldn't help but signal to the waiter and settle their bills.

Inspector Antonio Rodriguez dropped a piece of pizza into his mouth, marveling at how over-protective mothers could be most times.

At home the situation turned worse. Mrs. Rodriguez became more hostile to her husband than young Antonio had ever seen in the past. But Juan Rodriguez wasn't to be cowed. He wished well for his son in the intelligence job in which Antonio had indicated an interest joining after college.

Juan Rodriguez knew what to do. By the night of the next evening, as Antonio was preparing to go to bed, his father knocked on his door. All he needed was just to convince his son.

"Antonio, are you awake?" he asked as he opened the door and stepped into his son's room. Antonio lay in his bed, in pants, due to the intensity of the heat of the month of August. His father sat at the edge of the bed where Antonio's legs were rested.

"Listen to me, son. I mean well for you in your future career as an intelligence officer."

Antonio frowned. He couldn't understand why his father drove this issue with keen determination. Or where he drove it to.

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"Papa, what has spending a year in Nigeria got to do with my future career in the police?"

"A lot, my dear, a lot," Juan Rodriguez assured his beloved boy. "I am sure you've taken a careful look round Valencia, and you must also have seen it on the television. Africans are immigrating into our country en masse, like swallows running away from the winter."

Antonio acknowledged his agreement with a slight nod; his father's statement was true. He had even discussed it with his friends in school sometime in the past. Still, he didn't understand where his father was going.

The man continued, "Very soon, son, with the rate of influx of these people, most of our cities will be flooded with them. Our cities will look like the streets of New York. Immigration has lots of advantages and lots of disadvantages, my dear."

Juan looked in the eyes of Antonio, now in a sitting position. The boy seemed to understand where his father was heading. "But very soon, too, the various autonomous governments will not be looking at the advantages of the presence of these foreigners. The utmost interest will be in the associated problems: crimes, drug trafficking, fraud and murder cases, et cetera, et cetera. And these problems must come, son, they must certainly come. It's part of the laws and challenges of migration. But the greatest task for us will be finding ways of checking the full extent of these problems."

"We use our intelligence network here to check on them."

Juan nodded once, twice, and thrice, admiring his son's statement so as to encourage him. "Well said, Antonio, well said. We can, as a matter of fact. But what makes a man more intelligent in this job is when he sees things his colleagues don't see and when he reasons the way they don't reason. And I am doing that for you now."

Juan Rodriguez went on explaining. Antonio listened. “The best way to deal with a people is to reason the way they do, know what they know. And you have understood the way to live with them.”

Antonio nodded. He had now understood what his father wanted him to understand. Save one thing. And he wanted to know. “But why the particular interest in Nigeria?”

“A good question.” His father smiled at him this time. “It’s nothing more than the fact that Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world, boy, and its people are about the most migrated on the African continent. With what I’ve seen from the country, the people are intelligent and resourceful too, both in positive and negative ways. And I have intelligence gathered on what is happening in the Sahara Desert, how brutally Nigerians treat fellow Nigerians en route to our country. Human beings are somehow hardening the minds of their fellow beings.

“Remember,” the father went on, “we’re looking at the negative now, so spending a year in this great country will certainly help you know them very well and understand the kind of things they could do. When the behavioral patterns of Nigerian immigrants, and possibly, other Sub-Saharan African immigrants, are well-documented, this will help us to go a long way in curbing their crimes while living with them.”

Antonio smiled at his father. “Now, I understand everything well,” he said with conviction. “But you told us there are lots of robbery incidences there and that one could easily get harmed. Is it not too risky for me?”

“I am your father, my dear, and can’t put you into a risky position if I thought it would be. Yes there are robberies there, just like there are all over the world. But if one is careful about the way you move, you will spend one year there and come back unharmed. Remember, this is my third year now.”

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With this, Juan convinced Antonio. And the boy slept that night thinking what the prospects of his father's plans for him on his future career would be.

The next morning Antonio went to his mother and took time to explain to her the importance of his father's effort. She gave in, though against her will. Eight months later, Antonio was on an Iberia flight heading for his exchange program.

Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez turned the last page of the investigation report, closed the file and dropped it on top of a sequence of other files.

Young Antonio's short stay in Nigeria became more enjoyable, contrary to how he had thought it would be. The moment he arrived in Lagos and saw the mega city and its natural harbors, he sensed the natural wealth of the nation. Although the city's planning looked quite different from that of the western world, its open drainage system producing unfriendly atmospheric conditions, the uncontrolled noise pollution and the unchecked gaseous emissions from unroadworthy vehicles, Antonio found it easy to adapt to his new environment.

During the one-year stay, the first six months he underwent an intensive course in English language organized by the British Council, Lagos. And during the following six months he studied the history and culture of Nigeria at the University of Lagos. He also took some time out of Lagos with his new friends, a few of them, the children of some of the country's top political office holders studying at the University of Lagos.

During one of the trips, they went for a weekend holiday at the Obudu Cattle Ranch, in Cross River State in the south-eastern part of the country. Antonio had sat down on one of the nicely cut lawns, stretching out his legs, and appreciating the

wonderful work of nature. And beside him, there was the young beautiful model-like looking girl, his new girlfriend, to whom his friends had introduced him. She was the daughter of the country's Minister of Information. Although the young Antonio didn't do anything sexual with her then, Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez wished now to have continued the relationship after he returned back to Spain.

"She likes you Toni," one of his male friends had whispered to him. "Why don't you catch as much fun with her as you want?" They all preferred to call him Toni. But Antonio respected the girl's manners. She had a good family training, wanting to spend a long friendly time with him before thinking about the sexual part of it. In all his life, Antonio hadn't seen such a beauty again: tall, slim, smooth-skinned, a perfect brown color, brown probing eyes.

Then Antonio went to Abuja, the nation's capital city, and marveled at what he saw. The city was modern, well-planned, and not densely populated, unlike Lagos where he lived. Jos was nice too; its cool weather could be likened to that of Valencia.

By the time young Antonio was through with the program and due to leave Nigeria, he had become enriched with the Nigerian experience. He now had many friends from high-class Nigerian society. Those kids were really spoilt, in any case, Inspector Rodriguez thought. They had plenty of cash. Antonio had wondered how they gained access to the kind of money they carried about in their pockets. And it wasn't just Naira, their own currency. The kids carried as many Dollars as possible. Now young Antonio understood why there was a high level of corruption in the country.

"Come back and visit us any time, Toni," they said to him as he boarded his flight. "We will give you a better time than we did during your first trip."

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As the flight took him back to Spain, young Antonio began to understand why the Nigerian masses were under pressure to move. Bad leadership was forcing people out of the country. He pondered over the possible reasons why the people of Nigeria, a country whose landmass, he now understood, was bigger than France, Europe's biggest country, had been unable to push corruption and the leadership tussle aside and organize their society. He was convinced that if they had done, Nigeria would become one of the greatest nations in the world, with its wealth of resources, both natural and human.

Antonio could not bring himself to think that the British system of governing the country during the colonial days had kept it in its present condition, as most of his middle-and low-class friends in the University of Lagos had argued. He believed that during that era the colonial masters had governed their colonies in the only way they knew at that time. To him, it behove these former colonies – especially those in the sub-Saharan region – to restructure their systems of governance, that is, if they could set religious and ethnic differences aside, and build peace and models of development which would represent the interests of the distinctive ethnic and religious entities in their countries. Not until that had been achieved did Antonio see an entity like Nigeria progressing to developmental levels.

To Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez, human beings were all the same, irrespective of color or ethnic differences. And it took only understanding, guided by a constitution of solid foundation, to transcend these differences. England, Wales and Scotland, all came together to form a constitution that respected and protected their distinctive entities. Wasn't the United States of America formed by different entities that had come together for a well-planned union? Spain, his country, had done so too. Had different provinces not come together to form a well-represented central government? To the inspector, the problem

with Africa was such an easy one to be taken care of, but only if the people really wanted to solve their problems.

Since it was one of the important reasons for his trip to Nigeria, young Antonio also made many friends among the children of the middle- and low-income society in Nigeria. Through his association with them, he learned more about the country from the grassroots than he had from the upper-class boys. And as he landed at Valencia Airport, in his mind he kept thanking his father for such a real-life experience.

Two years after the stay, Antonio joined the Valencia police. A year later, the experience he gained from the exchange program began yielding results. His first major breakthrough came in 2004, while working as a night duty traffic control police officer.

Police Patrol Officer Antonio Jose Rodriguez, in the company of another policeman, was on night duty, monitoring traffic worthiness and other crimes on the road. They were stationed around the Avenida del Dr. Peset Alexandre. The time was one o'clock in the morning. The traffic had subsided, and they were about to relocate to another point towards the Avenida de la Constitución, when a car suddenly bumped out from the Camino de Moncada, into the Avenida del Dr. Peset Alexandre.

Officer Antonio watched the vehicle carefully as it approached them. It was a recent model of an Audi, but the headlight on the driver's side of the car malfunctioned. He signaled to the driver to stop.

The man did as the officer instructed. When Antonio drew closer to the car through the driver's side, he noticed that the driver was a black man.

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Antonio gave him a friendly smile, but took a fast scan of the interior of the car, then said. “¡Buenos días! Sus datos por favor.” – “Good morning, your particulars, please.”

The man produced his identification and his car’s particulars and handed them to the policeman.

Officer Antonio absorbed his identity – a Nigerian. Wondering what the man did to own such expensive car, he asked, “Is this your car, sir?”

“It’s mine, sir.”

“One of the headlights isn’t working. Have you noticed that?”

“Yes, sir. I was going to repair it tomorrow.”

Officer Antonio hesitated. “What do you do for a living, sir?” The officer’s gentle but probing eyes remained friendly while trying out an experiment on what he had learnt from his trip to Nigeria. And if the experiment was going to work, the policeman knew what was coming. If it went the opposite way, he would hand the papers back to the driver and ask him to repair his light.

The driver did not flare up, but instead remained quiet. The officer had expected something like, “Officer, why should you ask me such a question?” in a voice hard and loud; or something like: “Officer, what has my owning a car got to do with what I do for a living?” But the man was too quiet and un-Nigerian, to the officer’s great surprise.

Suspicion overtook the officer’s mind. The experiment had worked. From his one-year stay in Nigeria, Antonio had come to understand that the country’s extremely bad system of governance had made most Nigerians grow wild. When they know they are within the law, clean and not hiding something, they could become boastful during questioning and resort to confront you with questions, not the answers you want. And secondly, the majority resort to immediate violence and

intimidation. If they are not clean, they will exercise a lot of patience and respect, be calm to see what happens to them.

“Please get out of the vehicle sir,” the policeman said, taking charge. “I’d like to take a look at this car.”

The man didn’t object. But he reluctantly opened the door and got out of his car. Officer Antonio was stunned, but more encouraged by this man’s calmness. He took his time through the search. He checked the vehicle thoroughly. While he did that, out of the periphery of his eyes, he noticed that the African’s face had gone flushed. The man had become restive.

Something was not right here, Antonio decided, and within moments, the officer heard the man speaking into the mobile phone he was holding. He had found his voice and was conversing in broken English – also called the Nigerian English.

An ordinary Spanish police officer, even if he understood English, wouldn’t have had any inkling about what was being said. But Officer Antonio understood it all, for he had taken pains also to learn *that* kind of English – one of the good reasons for associating with the kids from the low-income families. “There is also a Nigerian type of English,” his father told him in the early days in Nigeria. “Learn to understand it well,”

What the young man said into his mobile phone sounded like: “Guy, him get one big wahala wey dey now. I dey for two policemen them hand and one of them be stupid monkey who no want let me go. Boy, the way wey the fool dey go about am, I dey plan leave everything waka oh. Wetin you think? Interpreted into Standard English, the saying meant: “Guy, there is a big problem here right now. I’m in the custody of two policemen and one of them is a stupid monkey who doesn’t want to let go of me. Boy, they way the fool is going about it, I’m planning to abandon everything and take a run. What do you think?”

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Inside the car, Officer Antonio smiled. His suspicion had proven to be correct. The man was hiding something here. With a cold expression on his face, the policeman battled to control his rage over what the African had just called him, a stupid monkey. His mind urged him to walk up to the young man and smack him across the face. But such action would give him away. He called out to his fellow officer in a coded signal, asking him to wedge the man from running away.

The officer concentrated more on the search, delving into the car's interior. After a quick five minutes, Antonio found it. The driver had hidden it in an ingeniously created opening under his own seat. Antonio couldn't understand what it was. He extended his whole hand and yanked the object out. A black polythene bag was wrapped around it. Antonio untied it as he got out of the car.

The officer froze over what he saw. Tightly bundled with elastic bands, were a number of driver's licenses issued in Nigeria: about a hundred of them, bearing faces and names of different individuals. He turned and stared at the man.

The Nigerian, seeing what the officer held at hand, plunged into a panic. He understood he was in big trouble now.

Following Officer Antonio's discovery, the use of driver's licenses issued in Nigeria, by Nigerians resident in Spain, was immediately banned.

This was one of the cases that helped Officer Antonio to be transferred from the Valencia local police to the National Police's Department of African Operations, and then later promoted to a higher level after attending more courses.

Still at his desk, for several moments the inspector's memories recalled another little theft puzzle he had solved for his friends and colleagues in the office. One morning he was in the office, shortly after his promotion to his current position of

inspector, when his friend in the force, a Detective Adrian Gomez, had blustered in.

One look at the detective's face told him Adrian was angry. "Someone has just crossed my path, breaking into my car and making away with the car's music system!" He was fuming, his voice harsh as he spoke. "I must track down the bastard. That set cost me a whooping sum of nine hundred Euros."

Antonio Rodriguez looked at Adrian Gomez and felt some pity. He understood how much the man had turned to playing music, following his wife's divorce.

"Do you have any suspects in mind?"

"I do," Adrian Gomez said quickly as if waiting for the question. "Some neighbor said he saw a black man hovering around the car at about five o'clock of this morning. And a group of Africans live close by. Nigerians."

Antonio shook his head. "It's a non-Nigerian business."

Adrian looked at him. "How do you mean?"

"Are there other Africans around there?"

Adrian hesitated. "Yes, I think there are some other West Africans living a short distance away."

"Then if you must go hunting, go for the other Africans."

"Why should I do that?"

"Let me give you some advice about the Nigerians here."

The detective drew closer and listened.

The inspector began: "The majority of Nigerians here are good. This has to be said. They earn their living in legitimate ways, working and earning salaries. Only a few of them are into fast games. That kind of extremity does exist among them."

The inspector looked at his colleague. Adrian was listening. Antonio went on.

"Those few into deals don't steal in the streets. There is no money in that. But if they would want to do that, your beautiful

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coupé would be preferable. It would yield enough money than what they would call cheap musical equipment.”

Armed with this information, the inspector's colleague obtained a search warrant and, to Adrian's astonishment, the set was discovered at the other African boys' apartment.

The telephone on his desk began to ring, interrupting his thoughts. He quickly remembered: it was one of the detectives whom the inspector had dispatched to respond to an emergency call which had come in twenty minutes beforehand. He picked up the phone. “Antonio here.”

“Three bodies discovered,” the detective on the line said. “We had to break into the apartment. They are dead and swollen. Terrible odor from rapid putrefaction.”

“Any physical evidence visible?”

“None at the moment, save for some breakfast utensils on the table, which suggests they went after taking their morning meals. No signs of violence. But there is an interesting object here that needs your immediate attention.”

There was a minute of silence. “I will be with you in ten minutes,” Inspector Rodriguez said.

The man on the phone started to remind the inspector of the address.

“I’ve got it,” Antonio said.

Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez cut the connection. He shook his head: Another African crime. He lifted the phone again and began dialing the police emergency ambulance and the crime scene investigation units.

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The inspector arrived at the entrance lobby of the building nine minutes later, in the company of the police crime scene investigation team. The photographer was a short and rounded man in his early forties, dressed in ordinary clothes.

The forensic scientist was a tall, nicely shaped woman in her mid-thirties, who could easily be mistaken for a model. She wore ordinary clothes. They shook hands with the porter. Inspector Rodriguez observed the man's military poise.

"Thank you for the alert," the inspector said to the man. "We appreciate your assistance."

The porter nodded, but remained silent. He turned towards the steps and began leading them up the stairs to the third floor, the elevator having been delayed. Antonio followed behind him, then came the photographer and the forensic scientist.

"You must be a good observer to notice that something went wrong in there," Antonio said.

"It's a little anomaly any retired soldier can easily notice, especially when I didn't see the boy who went to work every day."

The inspector nodded, but in confirmation of his own earlier observation that the man had a military poise. They were on the second floor now, passing along it and climbing to the third. Antonio wanted to hear more from the porter. And the man read the inspector's mind.

"The boy was a good one," the porter said. "He always stopped by at the lobby when returning from work, and chatted with me for a few minutes before going up. But for three days I didn't see him. And I didn't see any of his flatmates. I got a bit

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worried and decided to check on their apartment. I tried the bell several times. Nobody answered the door. Suddenly, I caught a faint bad odor. We know how the dead smell, you know.”

“You know where he worked?”

“Unfortunately,” the man shook his head as if in a sign of regret, “I never got to ask him the name of the hotel.”

They got to the third floor and strolled towards the door of the apartment. The two other detectives were standing side by side, both wearing gloves. Immediately, they began to brief the inspector. The porter retreated and descended downstairs. Inspector Antonio's nose reacted to the bad acrid odor oozing from inside as he listened.

*

The crime scene investigation lasted two hours. The photographer documented the state of the apartment with shots from every angle. The forensic scientist checked the bodies for wounds, then collected physical evidence: the container of saccharin, crumbs of bread, the remains of liquid milk, and as many finger prints as she could find. She estimated the time of death of the bodies and declared the preliminary cause of death. Food poisoning.

The ambulance team arrived later, and placed each of the bodies in brand new body bags, to be transported to Valencia's Instituto de Medicina Legal, the Institute Of Legal Medicine, for detailed medical examination.

Inspector Rodriguez and his team cordoned off the apartment and descended to the ground floor. The Inspector excused himself from the others and went to the porter once again.

“I have to thank you once more, sir, for this assistance. Because of the way the bodies were decomposing, further

delays might have caused a nightmare to the occupants of this building.”

“There's one thing that baffles me, really. The kind of odor I perceived today should take at least five to six days to come out from a dead body.”

“That's true,” Inspector Rodriguez agreed, inclining his head. “The boy you talked about isn't among the dead, is he?”

The porter shook his head. “I would have pointed him out.”

“When may have been the last time you saw him then?”

“Two days ago.”

“On his way back, I guess?”

“On his way back from work, yes.”

“Did you notice anything kind of strange about him that day; say, in his behavior to you?”

The man nodded. “He told me he had a stomach upset, and was running upstairs to empty his bowels. At the time I didn't see it as abnormal, though.”

Inspector Antonio paused for a moment and noted this down. He considered the man's last statement, then asked, “Do you think it was him?”

“Yes. I think so. Something strange happened shortly after he went up.”

The inspected waited. The man went on.

“Twenty minutes after he went upstairs, I heard a loud explosion on the first floor. I ran over to discover that somebody had broken a bottle of champagne there. I asked the people living on the floor about this. Nobody claimed responsibility for it. So I cleaned the place up, assuming it was some kid trying to mess around.”

“A decoy,” the inspector said. “He invented the ploy to distract you.”

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"That's it," the porter's face was moody with annoyance. "He knew I would sense something was wrong when he came down."

"Then, he is smart," Antonio pointed out. "And afraid of you."

"Yes, I guess so. That's why he caused the distraction on the first floor, not on the third."

It was simple.

"He needed to get you off this ground floor, but figured out that from the second floor, the sound would not yield the effect he needed. He probably held the elevator ready, waiting for you to run up the stairs."

"I underrated his abilities all the time I knew him," the man said, nodding continuously, in complete agreement with the inspector.

The inspector lowered himself and rested both hands on the porter's desk. "When you chatted with him in the past, did he ever say negative things about his roommates?"

"None that I remember."

"No quarrels of any sort that you know of?"

"I've never observed anything like that. I think they all lived in peace."

"Well, we will soon find out what went wrong up there. Thank you for your time once again." Inspector Antonio Rodriguez shot out his hand and shook hands with the man. He stood erect, then began to make his way to join his colleagues waiting outside.

"One more thing, Inspector."

He turned to look at the porter.

"He came back from work that day, I remember now, at an unusual time, compared to the other times he had. One o'clock in the afternoon, instead of the usual six o'clock. I think that could be helpful to you."

CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU

The Inspector said yes, the information was crucial, promising to come back again if needs be. Antonio went outside the building.

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March 16, 2009

“Inspector Rodriguez?” the director of the Ivory Hotel greeted the policeman, standing by the door to his office. He shook hands with Antonio. His eyes probed the police identification the inspector held out to him. He nodded to detective Ricardo and also shook hands. “You’re welcome gentlemen. Come in and sit down.”

Antonio and Ricardo walked into the office and sat across the director’s desk.

“I will arrange for coffee while we discuss. OK, gentlemen?”

“That would be fine, sir,” both policemen said.

The man wheeled his swivel chair clockwise, picked up his office intercom and ordered coffee for the three of them. He wheeled back, turned and faced the police officers. “From our phone conversation, you said you’re investigating the death of some African.”

“Yes, we are,” the inspector said. “Three Africans.”

“Appalling and unfortunate,” The director closed his left eye, shaking his head. “But how does this concern us, and where do we come in to help you?”

“We understand that a young African works in this hotel,” Antonio said.

“Yes,” the director answered instantly. “His name is John.” The man paused to think a little. “John Adi,” he completed. “We have not seen him for a couple of days now. Is he among these dead men?”

“No, he isn't,” the inspector said. “But if I might have your attention for a moment. I wish to explain the situation we have.” The inspector leaned forward and placed his right forearm on the director's desk. “An autopsy has been carried out on each of the three Africans.” He paused for a moment, looking at the man who headed up the Ivory Hotel. “The cause of their death was shown to be the same source. Artificial food poisoning.”

The Ivory Hotel boss brushed a strand of hair off his forehead in reaction to the statement. But he remained quiet and attentive.

Antonio's hand went for the medium-sized envelope being handed to him by Detective Ricardo. He took the copy of the autopsy report released from the office of the medical examiner and gave it to the director.

The man took up the smaller envelope the inspector offered as if it weighed his hands down. He brought out the report and began consuming it.

Inspector Rodriguez went on, trying to explain things as the Deputy Medical Examiner at the Instituto de Medicina Legal, a forensic pathologist, Dr. Angelica Perelló, had explained to him. Inspector Rodriguez so admired the woman's expertise that he always took the time to be attentive whenever she displayed her renown in her profession by presenting her findings in any case involving the death of the victim, or deaths of victims as this particular case may be. The inspector's colleagues were never patient with the woman, and called her a blusterer. But Antonio had come to know that beneath her bluff exterior, there was a sensitive and good person. The two had developed a relationship to the extent that the inspector now knew many more details about the functioning and mechanism of the human body than any of his mates in the police force.

“The substance that killed the Africans,” Inspector Rodriguez resumed, “contained a poisonous matter called

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lectins, also known as toxalbumins, phytotoxins, or phytohemagglutinins. Lectins are deadly to humans, and are specific in agglutinating the blood. They are composed of amino acids – proteins which bind to sugar molecules of glycoprotein attached to the outside of blood cells.”

The inspector paused a few seconds and asked if the Ivory Hotel's director understood what was being explained.

“I do,” the man said. “Please go on.”

The inspector proceeded: “Victims of lectin blood poisoning can die from anaphylactic shock, as if the blood has been injected with a foreign protein. And when taken into the body as food, lectin binds to the intestinal wall, thereby weakening it and allowing infectious bacteria to enter the body through the gut.” The inspector paused again.

The director of the Ivory Hotel sat in his swivel chair nodding his head, rigid and grim faced. He understood well the policeman's explanations.

There was a tap on the door. A waitress brought in the ordered coffee on a tray and placed it on the director's desk. Then she served each man and quickly retreated from the office.

“Finding the lectins in large concentration in the substance, we discovered in the boys' apartment led us into the suspicion that someone had deliberately manufactured the content for one purpose – to poison someone else with it.” The inspector stopped, lifted his cup, sipped at his coffee, as the other two did. He dropped the cup back on the desk.

“What's more,” Inspector Rodriguez continued, “the inclusion of diphenhydramine, an antihistamine sleep-causing substance used for the relief of symptoms of allergy, hay fever and common cold, led to our conclusion that the stuff was a murder weapon meant for somebody. We are yet to find out if the intended victims were the Africans or someone else.”

“How awful...” the director said, frowning deeply. “How awful the whole thing sounds!”

The inspector nodded. “As soon as a victim takes in this thing, the person finds himself or herself fast asleep, and seven minutes later, he or she is headed to a painful death.” The inspector shook his head, dismayed. “One thing bothers us seriously. The bodies, found just two days after death, were already decaying with a rapidity that struck us dumb.”

“¡Madre mía!” the director said, tense. “Christ! And the cause?”

“The manufacturer of the poison added a catalytic chemical which could trigger the enzymes in the pancreas of the human body into reacting in a matter of hours rather than in days, causing a process called rigor mortis – the stiffening of a dead body's muscles, and another process called algor mortis – the loss of all the internal heat in the dead body, to occur much quicker than normal. This process creates an excellent environment for the bacteria within the dead body to begin breaking down the dead cells, causing decay in a matter of just twenty four hours.”

“This is difficult to believe,” the director said, his eyes filled with horror. “Why would anyone think of carrying out such a heinous crime?”

“Sir, we're talking about a chemical substance manufactured with great expertise,” Detective Ricardo came in, breaking his long silence. “By a professional.”

“Yes, I understand...I really do. But the question is if and how we may help to bring whoever committed this crime to justice? And since the African, John, isn't among the dead, could he possibly have fabricated the poison against his friends?”

Inspector Rodriguez smiled. “It's preposterous to think that way, Mr. Director. But you're in line with where we're headed.”

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He turned to his colleague. Detective Ricardo brought out the small container and placed it on the director's desk.

Antonio returned his attention to the director. "We believe you know what this is, sir?"

The director's eyes widened at what the detective dropped on his desk. He couldn't hide his fear as he leaned toward the desk, taking a look at the small container standing on his desk, in a transparent polythene bag. "What's this?" The man gasped for a lungful of air, which he didn't find immediately. "Inspector, what's happening here? This is our hotel's branded saccharin for our clients."

"We understand that, sir," Antonio replied coolly. "But evidence shows that this container bears the poison which killed the Africans. And it must have been brought to the apartment by the African who worked for you. John."

The director of Ivory Hotel went silent for several moments, gazing at the small container, then at the policemen. "Then something went wrong somewhere," he said, abruptly getting to his feet, no longer able to remain seated. "We have to do something, gentlemen, as fast as possible. We have to prevent this hotel's reputation from going to ruins."

The policemen watched the suddenly unstable man in silence. "Gentlemen what do we do?" the director asked.

"Calm down, sir. That's why we are here," Detective Ricardo said, "to fish out the culprits."

"How can we help you find them?" the man asked further, nervously.

"We'll first begin—" the inspector was saying.

"Tell me...Where...how do we begin?" The director yanked his suit jacket off and dropped it on his chair, now only in a white glittering long sleeve shirt and a red colored tie. The man wiped out some sweat on his forehead with the back of his left hand.

Detective Ricardo cleared his throat, as if it had become blocked for a moment. "Excuse me," he said. "The first thing we'd like to do is to take a look at the records of the video surveillance system in this hotel. Shall we begin with the activities occurring between the eleventh and the thirteenth of this month?"

"Sure, gentlemen. Sure." The director breathed in. "We'll go down to the communication and surveillance room. It's on the ground floor." The policemen stood up. The three men hurried out of the director's office, and went on down.

The three men were back into the director's office thirty minutes later, seated in their former positions.

"Nothing unusual about the movements," Antonio said, looking across the desk at the man. "The African's working pace seemed normal for his activities. You indicated his duty took him to each of the floors in the hotel?" the inspector asked.

"Yes, that's true," the director said, unable to figure out if he was disappointed or excited.

There was a long pause as each of the three men sat considering things.

"OK, Sir, we have to leave you to concentrate on your job," the inspector said. "But we would like to borrow the surveillance data from you for a few hours. A more detailed coverage analysis might lead us somewhere."

"It's OK, gentlemen, whatever way we can help." The director stood up as the police officers did.

"One more thing, director," Inspector Rodriguez said. "We'd like to have a compiled list of the clients who asked for saccharin for their coffee and or tea during the two-day period."

"Why do you want that, Inspector?" the director looked stunned.

"It will narrow down our hunt."

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"I am afraid that wouldn't help."

"Why not?" Antonio asked, a little bewildered.

"In this hotel, we place both saccharin and sugar in the tray for our clients who asked for coffee or tea, irrespective of their choices."

"I see." The inspector saw nothing. His eyes remained friendly, managing to hide his disappointment. "Then, I believe it would be easier to have the list of the clients who ordered coffee and or tea during those two days."

"Ninety nine percent of our clients, Inspector. I am sorry, gentlemen."

The inspector looked at the man. "We may be back soon."

Detective Ricardo was thinking; I hope my judgment would become wrong, but he seems to know something.

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The director of the Ivory Hotel watched the two policemen leave. The man closed the door to his office behind him and dashed to his telephone. He had a very important report to make.

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Next day, 10:00 A.M., Inspector Rodriguez was back at the Ivory, seated facing the director in his office.

“We think the African made a first attempt to plant that substance but failed,” the inspector said to the director. “This explains why he must have taken the substance home.”

“Well, Inspector, I can't question your judgment in your profession,” the director said. He folded and rested both hands on his desk. “We will do anything we can to help you get to the end of this matter.”

“Thanks,” Antonio nodded in satisfaction. “I wish to have a few words with the waiter or waitress who served on that floor on the thirteenth of March.”

The director hesitated a little. “Give me a minute.” He swiveled the chair and picked up the intercom on a smaller side desk. He spoke into it a few seconds, then returned to his normal position. “He will be here presently.”

The two men relaxed in silence and waited for the hotel staff. Moments later, they heard a knock and a young man came in.

“Hello Manuel. Take a seat,” the director said, addressing the young Spaniard, twenty-one years old, who hailed from Madrid. “The Inspector here would like to ask you a few questions.” The director nodded to Antonio after the waiter had sat down beside the policeman.

The inspector took his time, and then began.

“Hello Manuel My name is Antonio Jose Rodriguez. I am investigating a crime which involves the death of three Africans.”

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The young man shook his head in horror. Yet he wondered why he was being questioned about the death of three Africans he knew he had nothing to do with. Oh, it might be because of the African, John, he thought. Yes, it might be.

"It's unfortunate," the young man said.

"On the thirteenth of March you served breakfasts to the clients on the seventh floor?"

"Yes."

"During your time on that floor, did you happen to run into John anywhere?"

"Yes I did. He always moves about on all the floors, working. We run into each other from time to time."

"But on this particular day at what spot did you see him?"

"He was at the door of Room 714."

"At the door? What could he have been doing by the door?"

The Madrileño frowned. "I asked him the same question, because the boy was bent over a tray of coffee I had placed by the door a few minutes earlier."

The inspector noted this down. "You placed a tray of coffee by the door?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do that?"

"It's because the clients gave the instruction to us. Whenever they ordered, it's dropped by the door and they would pick it up later."

The inspector noted this down, then asked, "When and why did you come back there?"

"I came back a few seconds after I left the tray there. I forgot..." the young man hesitated about saying the rest in the director's presence.

"Go on, Manuel," the director encouraged him. "You forgot what?"

“Well, a client in another room had asked for extra sugar earlier. I didn't remember to deliver, so I went back.”

“What reasons did the African give you for bending over the tray?” the inspector asked.

“At the time, his answer made enough sense for me to see no reason for reporting the incident.”

“What was his reason?”

“He said that while passing by the door, he saw the tray. So he thought the occupants of the room had placed it there for removal. Many clients do that from time to time. He wanted to help take it away, as he always did on other floors.”

The inspector went silent for a short while, considering this statement. Then he asked the waiter, “If you look back at the time you returned to the scene, could his presence there have been inappropriate or pre-planned?”

“I don't know,” the waiter said. “John had access to all the rooms in this hotel, and could come out of any of them at any time.”

The inspector nodded, noting the piece of information down. “Did you notice any facial change or other changes in the boy's reaction while he explained his reason for being there?”

The waiter thought the question over and shook his head. “I didn't notice anything of such.”

The inspector seemed disappointed. With much effort, he concealed it. “Thank you for your time, Manuel. But please keep on thinking about this. Should anything occur to you later, tell the director, and I will be notified.”

The young man nodded and stood up. He began to leave while Antonio began turning his attention back to the director of the hotel.

“But, Inspector!” the young man called out.

“Yes?” the inspector asked, turning from the chair to look at the boy now standing by the door to the office.

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“He began sweating!”

“Sweating?”

The waiter's voice sounded excited. “Yes, I remember now that the African suddenly began sweating on the face as soon as he started to explain the reason for his presence there.”

Both men looked at the waiter, who continued.

“I had earlier thought the sweat to be there because he was working. But, with what you told me, I don't think so any more. I now believe that the sweat was because he was afraid.”

“OK. Manuel, thank you very much,” Antonio said. “This piece of information will be valuable to our investigation. But one more thing, did you serve coffee to the same room the next day?”

“Yes I did.”

“Did you encounter John again?”

“No, I didn't.”

“OK, Manuel. Thank you for your time.”

Both men watched the waiter leave.

“Can you help me with the identities of the occupants of Room 714 between the tenth and thirteenth of March?” the inspector asked the director when the waiter had left. “I also need the surveillance record for the fourteenth.”

“Certainly,” the director said. Wheeling the swivel chair, he picked up the intercom once again and issued an instruction. Still holding on to the phone, he tapped on his computer and commanded a print out.

“Mr. and Mrs. Carlos Pico Sanchez. Their address is in Zaragoza.” The director passed the information across the table to the policeman.

Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez thanked the Ivory Hotel's boss and left the premises.

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The director watched the inspector leave. Then he began another important report.

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Inspector Rodriguez left the Ivory and drove to the police station. He fed the information into the police central information data network.

He was disappointed.

The information supplied to him by the hotel did not exist. The couple who stayed in the hotel had used false names and false credit card numbers. The rented car they had used had been involved in a fatal accident on that very day, the fourteenth, and the identities of the dead occupants were still being determined in the medical laboratory.

This revelation left the policeman in a troubled state. The investigation had become a complicated case, more difficult than he had anticipated earlier.

The inspector knew that the fastest option now was to intensify the hunt for the African. The young man was the only person who would give them a lead to follow in finding out facts on what happened in the Ivory Hotel during the period in question.

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The hands of the clock inside the police video room were edging away from 6.00 P.M. Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez sat erect behind the desk, watching as the computer reran the activities recorded by the Ivory Hotel's video surveillance camera. The inspector was alone, feeling troubled, his face white. He watched with care.

From the African's calm movements within the focal range of the camera, the young man was good. Anybody would have thought them to be those of a normal worker, had the African not been involved now. But the inspector saw that on the

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morning of the fourteenth, the young man had again emerged seconds after the waiter had left the place. A second time, it would be an unusual coincidence.

A tap on the door. The inspector looked up and saluted as a superintendent came in.

"How's it going?" the man asked, taking a seat beside him. He was visiting from National Police headquarters in Gran Vía de Ramón y Cajal.

"He's the only one who could help move the investigation forward."

"So?" the man asked. "How do you intend to go about him? He could be anywhere out of the comunidad by now."

"No, I doubt it. He is still in the city now. Probably hiding in a relative's or a friend's house. I am sure of that."

There was a short pause. Then Inspector Antonio said to the superintendent, "Like I suggested, if we spell out a handsome reward, we'll have the suspect in our hands very swiftly. His own people will come running to us with information."

The superintendent still seemed unconvinced about the idea. "I learnt, Inspector, that these people show good solidarity with their fellow nationals."

Inspector Rodriguez considered the statement. "That's a fact," he replied, aware that the superintendent was feeding him back his own words. "But not in this current economic hardship. Many are unemployed."

"Then, let's get it done," the superintendent said after seconds of silence. "The proprietor of the Ivory is on our neck. He is ready to make sacrifices to fish the African out. And save his hotel's good image."

Antonio's determination to track down the African now weighed on him. The inspector's doubled efforts were based mainly on the good name the proprietor of the Ivory Hotel

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carried. The man had been calling in every hour to know how fast the investigation could be concluded.

When the superintendent left the room, the inspector stopped the running the video, then began preparing for the manhunt.

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For the past four days since he had walked in, Mark had been worried and sympathetic. But now, he was no longer comfortable with his friend's presence. The two were inside Mark's room, a laptop on John's thighs.

"Man, are you sure you're OK?" Mark looked at him, asking in their native African.

"Yes I'm OK. Just a little personal problem. That's all."

"Does it have anything to do with where you work?" Mark asked emphatically. "Have they found out?"

John looked at Mark. "Partly, it has to do with where I work, but nothing to do with what you're talking about."

"And you don't think I can give you some help, do you?"

"Better you didn't, Mark," John said. "For your own sake. In the next two days I'll have to go to somewhere. When I come back, I'll explain things to you."

The coolness that came with the last statement made Mark shiver a little. But he went on asking questions..

"We've got to cancel the arrangement for the party, then?"

"Yes," John nodded, "obviously."

"Your job...is it gone?"

"No, no, I don't think it's gone."

You're lying to me, Mark thought. But I will find out soon.

"How about the money you made?" Mark watched his friend closely for a reaction.

"What money?" John's eyes remained calm, betraying nothing. Mark was disappointed.

"I was just joking," Mark smiled at him. But he meant his question. "Come on, guy, cheer yourself up. Whatever your

problem is, there must be a solution to it. Put on some better clothes and let's go drink a beer."

The boy hesitated and shook his head. "My heading is aching, seriously. I think it's better to take a little sleep than to have a drink right now."

"OK, if that's what you want to do." Mark got dressed up, left him to sleep and went for a drink alone.

When Mark left, John returned to his laptop and began to search for a free wireless network as he had been doing since the past four days. No luck. None showed. He cursed, dropped the computer in one corner, and decided to get some more sleep. Tomorrow, he would find another way of tracking the man.

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The time was three o'clock in the evening when Mark came into the bar. But it was unusually filled with people, and this was not a weekend. Then he understood: someone was celebrating his birthday.

Mark sat on one of the high stools at the bar. Minutes later, someone handed him a beer and he began nursing it. To Mark, the Estrella Damn he drank was the best beer in Spain. And since he had nowhere to go, had nothing to do, he thought, nothing was better than to soothe his predicament consuming plenty of alcohol. Mark enjoyed his talents on how to get himself enough beer to drink, especially when he had no money in his pocket.

Mark thought about his friend. If the guy had joined him, the two of them would be enjoying this drink together now, swallowing as much liquid as they could lay their hands on. At least if he had seen what was happening now, the boy, no matter what bothered him, would have still been pushed to throw the party which Mark had already talked to the owner of this bar about for the coming weekend. And at the end of the party,

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following the little deal Mark had struck with the bar owner, he would have had about three hundred Euros inside his pocket, which would have helped him pay some money to the owner of the apartment where he lived.

As things stood now, that angle had blocked. Mark looked at the time; it was approaching four thirty in the evening, which meant he'd been inside the bar for more than an hour. He'd his fourth beer. His back was now turned to the glass of beer at the bar, and his eyes emptily focused on what was happening on the Punto 2 TV: Still the American movie. The 52" plasma screen television hung on the wall opposite from where Mark sat. The snooker board stood in between, with enough space that allowed the players enjoy their game. Mark lost interest in the movie and made a circular turning, returning to his drink. He lifted the glass and had a long sip at it.

Suddenly, from a corner inside the bar, someone shouted to the bar man. "Hey, turn up the television! That news broadcast must be an important one."

Mark turned his head, first following the direction of the shout, then looking in the direction of the television. He froze and sat transfixed, what he saw on the TV completely horrifying him for several moments.

Staring back at Mark, in a passport photograph, which must have been magnified several times to make the image bolder, was the face of his friend, who must still be asleep in his bed by now.

As the bar owner lifted the remote control of the TV, Mark turned in the man's direction, extended his hand and snatched the gadget from him. Within milliseconds he had raised the volume of the television so high that people began to stare and shout at him.

"Hey, hey, hey, what's your problem?" someone shouted at Mark.

“Is that guy your brother or something?” someone asked.

“Did you lose your goods, brother?” another followed, goods signifying drug for sale.

Mark ignored the shouts, strained his ears to understand what the splash was all about, while gluing his eyes to the television to read out what was displayed on the screen. He would later get the verbal information from some other person, though. Mark hardly understood even a short sentence in Spanish, and had never been eager to learn the language.

“That guy must have committed a brutal offence,” the bar owner from Equatorial Guinea, who volunteered to translate the news, began in a broken English. “The police are asking for an assistance to help them locate him for questioning. And ten thousand Euros is the reward for the help.”

“Jesus Christ!” a young, neatly dressed man seated in a corner closer to the television said aloud, his eyes glued to the screen. “What easy money, man! I wish I could set my eyes on this boy. No time wasting. I would throw him into the hands of the uniformed wolves and collect that pay.”

“Me too!” The shout originated from somebody's girlfriend's voice. “My body longs for that kind of cash right now. With it I'd ship a powerful car to Equatorial Guinea tomorrow and visit Malabor next day.” The young woman had been drinking hard, and it seemed now she was in a stupefied state as she uttered out incomprehensible broken English. The people in her company laughed over her statement.

People were scrambling, some using paper to copy the contact telephone number the police displayed, others punching it into their phone.

So everybody wished to get hold of the boy? Mark thought. The responses he got from the bar immediately made him recover from the shock. And as he sat there, a thought hit him.

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Mark quickly memorized the nine-digit number too. He would type it into his phone as soon as he went outside the bar. He smiled within himself. None of the people inside the bar recognized the face on the TV screen, which meant that nobody here indeed knew the young man well. Mark's blood became warm as excitement ran through his body. But he sat calmly, waiting for the news to fade into oblivion.

One more thing. Mark had no money now, and he needed some coin. He beckoned to the bar owner, and asked him for five Euro coins, convincing the man that their party hosting business still held.

Ten minutes went by. The Africans in the bar resumed their discussions and merriment. A few minutes later, Mark drained the last drop of beer from his glass, stood up from his seat, brought out his mobile phone as if trying to make a call. He typed in the number and saved it. Nobody looked his way as he walked towards the exit of the bar. With absolute quietness, he opened the door and rushed outside.

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A gust of light wind hit Mark's face as he dashed outside the bar. He quickened his pace and moved, hurrying back to his house. He walked a little distance from the bar and glanced back, knowing the possibility existed that someone had watched his reaction to the news splash and decided to monitor his movements. Everybody's eyes were hot for fast money these days.

Sure now that nobody followed him, Mark began to run at full pelt. More rain seemed to be going to fall later in the evening and the cold would become intense again; at least for Mark.

“That son of a whore turned me down, deciding not to share his problems with me, so I'm going to hand him over to the police,” Mark said to himself, about a friend he had known for the past one year. He was walking again after covering a good distance.

Mark had been surprised four days back when the guy walked into his house, unannounced, carrying a small knapsack. And because of his demeanor, instinct had told Mark that something was wrong; but he had decided to keep calm until the following day. Maybe then his friend would be able to tell him what the problem was. But the next day things remained the same; the boy continued to hunker down inside the house, not wanting to go back to where he lived, and refusing to go to the job that had totally absorbed him in the past. He also refused to leave the house and come outside. And he chose not to tell Mark about what worried him. But thank God, Mark thought, that he didn't follow him to the bar, really! Some bad boys

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inside that bar would have fastened their arms around the boy and called the police.

Mark hurried further, his face contracting in pain with the thought that his innocent-looking friend had committed an offence so grave that the police would want to make it public. No wonder! Now he knew why the boy had ordered him about like a slave the other day. The police didn't mention what the offence was, though. Yet for them to have offered a mouth-watering reward of that magnitude to anybody who helped them locate the boy, Mark knew, the wrongdoing was a very grave one.

Mark gave a wicked smile as he jumped the traffic light at a major junction in the direction he was headed. The driver of an oncoming car blared his horn in warning.

Not that he was going to help the police as part of his patriotism to a country that had permitted him residence, Mark thought. It was far from that: Nobody ignored an amount as big as ten thousand Euros. And Mark's happiness was that the money would come to him. What a good luck for him! How God worked, at this time when he had lost all hopes, facing ejection from where he lived; where he enjoyed living! Mark looked up at the sky in happiness. God had done it for a man in great need. Mark had stumbled into an opportunity that would elevate his status once again.

Mark now drew closer to his apartment's building; to nail his friend. He felt no remorse for what he was about to do.

He passed the Avenida del Aragon, where stood the Mestalla Stadium, striding as if being pushed. He rounded the Mestalla and charged out from the rear into the Avenida Suecia. He walked a short distance and turned right, joining the Calle Micer Masco. He finally got to the first intersection before that of the small street where he lived.

Mark spotted the telephone booth that he often used near his house. He stopped. He raced towards it, suddenly deciding to place the call first; at least he was monitoring the building now, he thought.

He got into the phone booth, picked up the receiver and inserted a two Euro coin. He produced the number from his mobile phone and dialed it. It rang twice before a voice echoed into his ear.

“Policia Nacional Valencia.”

Mark went silent for a moment, as if feeling sorry for the wrong he was about to do to his friend.

“Hello,” the male voice inquired further, “please may we help you?”

Mark gathered courage. “Inglés, por favor?” Mark's pronunciation of Spanish words was incomprehensible. “English, please.”

“Yes, I speak English. May we help you please?”

“The African,” Mark said. His eyes blinked as he focused them across the distance, surprised that the window of his room was now covered with its blind. May be the boy was preventing the sun from disturbing his sleep.

“I am listening to you. Yes, tell me about the African please. Have you spotted him?”

“I have the Nigerian in my house. He is sleeping right now, and if you come fast you will have him.”

“What's the address sir?”

“Calle Naturalistica Arévalo, number two, first floor, door number three.”

There was a little silence on the other end of the phone. Mark hazarded a guess that the man was jotting down the address. Mark then made up his mind and asked the man the question that gave away the motive for his betrayal of his good friend. “Am I going to have my money right away?”

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“Yes of course, you will have your reward immediately.”

“Please hurry up.”

“We will be there in ten minutes. What is your name, sir?”

“Mark!”

“OK. Mark. Surname?”

“Just, Mark.”

“OK. Identification number sir?”

Mark was silent for a while. I hope you will hand over the ten thousand Euros to me straight away, he wanted to ask again, but decided against it. He would make that demand later, the moment his friend had gone into custody.

Mark, ignoring the last question, hung up the telephone. He regretted making the phone call; not for the sake of his friend, though, but because he had never had anything to do with the police in Spain before. This panicked him, making him realize that people from his country of origin were scared of calling the police because if one tried to help the police, one usually ended up bringing more trouble on oneself.

He left the phone booth, and making sure the road was clear of traffic, he raced across the street toward his house. He got to the building, opened the entrance security door and went up the stairs, three at a time.

Mark drew closer the door to the apartment and walked as softly as he could. At the door, he brought his right ear close to the panel and listened. No sound. He had decided to go out with the house key since his friend was going to be indoors. Producing the key now, he inserted it and unlocked the door with as little noise as possible. As Mark closed the door behind him, he took one precaution.

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Half-past three in the evening. Tarla still lay in the bed, having come back late from the pub, then having slept until 2:00 P.M., when she woke up. She had been lying in bed for the past one and half hours.

The two-bedroom apartment she lived in was on the second floor of the building. She shared her home with no one. The second room, a very large space, had its purpose. When a client who had been good to her in the past was in a bad situation and didn't have the money to book hotel accommodation for a time with her, she invited him into her house as an honor.

Time to get out of bed. Tarla rolled herself from one end of the large bed to the other, then sat up. She threw aside the thick winter blanket covering her up and stood up.

Exhausted from the previous night's activities, she left the bedroom and walked lazily into the sitting room. Last night had been grand and she did enjoy it. The pub was filled with the faces of new men. Of which, one had ended up inside her net.

She liked the luxurious manner in which her African brothers in Spain enjoyed their lives. Partying and other types of socializing went on all weekend, during which important connections were made for the money that everybody had come to hunt for. She knew that anyone new in a Spanish city – in all European cities – who hadn't made a multiple number of friends within the shortest time, hadn't really begun living in that city. In particular, the males.

She knew why new faces kept streaming into the pub. The common belief that one's telephone needed to ring at all times must be an aim. And to achieve this, one had to have the

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strength to night-crawl as much as possible, especially from one African joint to another.

Guys who spent much of their time during the night were believed to be the people who knew what was happening in town. And of course, she believed this point of view to be true. One had to have a lot of money to spend around in order to be a mover in the night. Or, on very rare occasions, at the early stage of his stay, one must have a friend or two capable of doing the spending for him until he picked up.

Tarla smiled to herself as she went and stood in front of a large wall mirror she had hung in a corner of her living room. She stared at her sleep-dulled face in the mirror while concentrating. She contemplated the provocative beauty she possessed. She understood how the delicate, soft brown skin and her curvaceous body made her irresistible to any man at the first sight of her. She knew she stood tall even amongst men, and that her face looked so feminine and innocent, it seemed she couldn't hurt a fly.

She stood for another while, examining the features that won her the job as a waitress in the pub located in the Avenida del Cid, called The Flame. Africans considered The Flame as the best African socializing and networking joint in Valencia. Its proprietor, a handsome, randy-looking gentleman in his early forties, came from Senegal.

The gentleman had called her one day and said that he wanted to make The Flame the hub of things in the city and that he had hand-picked a few of the most beautiful African girls in Valencia to work as his waitresses. He had chosen her as one of them. One day he had hosted about ten of them, and then at the end they made a deal. "You hang around and serve my clients, make them comfortable, and you find your fortune from them, with an additional stipend of two hundred Euros per month."

The brilliant deal worked perfectly, creating a sales boom in the comforts of the gentleman and the girls. Each of the girls had a way of making money from the clients; they had their different types of expertise with the men they seduced. For example, there were those who only specialized in the married men. Others, when they got a particular happening man captured, be he black or white, never let go of him until he had been sucked dry of all his money.

The young woman knew her own area of specialization was different from the others': new men. She knew how to hook up with new men in town. Her skills knew no limits, and once she'd succeeded on her first time with a man, the man became hers until the day she said "no more."

As Tarla stared at her image in the mirror, she thanked her dazzling beauty. With all her features, any man who got trapped in her web never would be aware of what was happening to him till it was too late. And one remarkable thing she did to survive was to make sure she held as many clients as possible who had steady salaried jobs. Though she didn't generate fat revenue from them, for her, those were the people who could haul one out of a dry financial situation during the bad times; their salaries came every month. The fast-lane men made bigger cash, for sure, but they could suddenly plunge into penury for as long as six months, unable to take good care of themselves, let alone thinking of taking care of a woman. In her view, the fast-lane guys could most often create a wealth of fun and good times, but they remained the most unreliable.

Still watching herself in the mirror, the young woman grimaced as a bout of realism came over her: at twenty-six years, and considering how long she'd been in the kind of job she did, the time had come when she would need to stop and become more responsible. She needed to get married to a man

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and have a family. Pressures had been coming from Africa – from her mother – to bear her a grandchild.

Tarla stared continuously at her body. Though she still looked charming in the sight of many men, she realized her beauty was gradually fading away. It was her body and she knew it. Sooner or later, if she continued doing what she did, a time would come when no man would ask her to marry him as they'd been doing all this while.

The young woman turned away and left the mirror. She quickly pushed her embittered side away, smiled to herself as she walked back and sank into the well-designed dark red upholstered chair in her sitting room. She picked up the TV remote control as she reminisced about the past. Whenever she sat idly like this during the day, it always brought her memories about the stupidity of men.

Right inside this living room, countless men had knelt down before her begging her to marry them – blacks, and sometimes whites. One had taken it upon himself to refurnish the room in its present high taste. That was a year and few months ago, when the man had just moved into the city from Germany in search of a Spanish residence permit. He had seen her at the pub one evening and had instantaneously fallen in love with her.

After that the man had tried to impress her by showering her with all the money he laid his hands on and buying her gifts and properties. But this well-loaded fast-lane man later realized he was up against a brick wall and withdrew.

In any case many others had done worse, and she treated them all as fools. She wanted none of them; none was the kind of man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. They were all only after her beauty and her body.

Not for a single day, did Tarla consider what she practiced with these men as a form of prostitution. Her smile broadened as abundant memories of the past occurred to her. She looked at

the 46” flat screen television which sat on a table opposite her – a birthday gift bought for her by one Cameroonian young man who later wept when she rejected his marriage proposal. She really knew how to deal with men, she told herself.

She touched the power button of the remote control, and the TV flickered to life. Punto 2 TV channel came into view. An American movie was showing.

After a few moments a frown of deep concentration came to her face as something on the television caught her attention: A news splash. She stared at the screen. She couldn't believe the coincidence. The only guy she had longed for in this whole city, since she had started this trade, had later surfaced. Not in person, but instead on TV. The only one who met her but hadn't been all that carried away by her appearance. It was unbelievable. And what bothered her was that the guy had been new in the city – her area of expertise.

“Could this be for real?” the young woman said.

Since the night they met at the toilet, the details of his facial features had never left her memory, as she'd always thought about the boy. From the remotest depth of her memory, the image of the round lips reflected back at her as she glared at the photograph being displayed. His eyes, his medium ears, all came into view, and momentarily, her mind left the television and went back, remembering how it all happened.

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That night, Tarla had been in a most attractive rig-out: a short violet-colored gown covering her body up to half of her thighs, brilliantly reflecting under the mercury light. Not that the gown covered her body as such, because it was transparent. The color and contour of her underwear were in full view. Under the light, the white bra covering her moderate sized, rounded breasts glittered for the men who cared to see: She was out for business.

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The old guys in town crowded around her like bees around their queen, whispering sweet, head-swelling deceptive words into her ears:

“Baby you're extraordinarily hot for the eyes tonight...”

“My night to take you home, girl. You're killing my nerves...”

Comments were thrown at her, but she wasn't listening to any of them. Neither did she want to go home with any of them. Her gaze was directed at a particular new-to-town young man who was happily getting himself drunk in the midst of the two other guys he'd earlier come in with.

From where Tarla sat on the high stool at the bar, she steadied a fixed look at the young man. She looked at his handsome face, then at his seemingly bulged stomach. *Too much alcohol*, she thought. It struck her as surprising that for the past two hours since the guy and the others walked into the pub and she had served them drinks, he had only taken a cursory glance at her direction once, then turned his head, never looking her way again. For a young African who drank well, it was unbelievable.

But as the young man got himself drunk – more vulnerable for her attack – the woman felt happy, waiting for an opportunity to spring up. It would come. She knew for sure.

After what seemed to her like hours, it did. The sound of music was hitting up the space with DJ Arafat's “Jonathan” when the guy stood up and wandered up the narrow staircase in search of the toilet. Tarla saw the movement, watched him run up the steps. She stood up and went up the stairs.

The doors to the female and male toilets stood at almost ninety degrees angle to each other. Here it was nothing new that a drunken man and a woman bumped into each other when coming out from the toilets.

Tarla pushed her way into the female toilet and closed the door half-way. Using her hand as a wedge, she waited. A few seconds later, she heard the sound she wanted. And she was in a hurry. The collision occurred rapidly as she burst out of the toilet.

“Oh, my God!” she said, tilting forward, losing control and brushing the young man with her chest. He was drunk, but his reaction was swift. He stretched out both hands and caught hold of the young woman, steadying her. Then he was gaping in awe.

Tarla looked into his eyes, and noticed a temporary clearance of the effect of alcohol from them because for moments, he stood as if paralyzed, his eyes on her upper body.

“I beg oh, me for don knock you for ground,” Tarla broke the moment of silence with hardly comprehensible broken English. “I’m so sorry, I almost knocked you down.”

“No. Never mind,” he said in the same broken English. “It’s OK. God I’ve never seen such a beauty one since I came into this city,” he said matter-of-factly, looking into her eyes. “Have you been inside this pub since?”

She nodded. “Why are you asking?”

“I have to take some strokes of cane for not seeing you before now.”

Tarla’s body warmed with delight. She extended her soft palms and rubbed his torso as if that part of his body had been hit by a metal bar.

“Did I hurt you?” Her eyes showed concern.

“The contrary, my dear, I’ve just been softened.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t?”

Tarla shook her head.

“I wish you knew how warmly colliding with you just made me feel.” He lifted the sleeve of his left hand up to the elbow

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level and showed her. "Goose pimples. I haven't had such an emotion for a long time. You just gave it me."

Inwardly Tarla raced with happiness by his words; she knew he would surely submerge in her magic sea.

"Are you new to the city?" She knew better, but wanted the conversation to go on.

"Just one year old here, dear." Though, it was six months older. "Have you lived here long?"

"Five years," she showed the five fingers of her right palm. "You're a Nigerian."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Your eyes. From our continent, Nigerians are good in looking boldly into the eyes of a woman."

"Really?" he shrugged, "May be it's Nigerian culture. You seem to know much about us."

"I spent a few years in Calabar."

"Oh, I see, from the way you speak our broken English. And you're from?"

"Cameroun."

"Nice to meet you." The young man staggered a bit backwards. "Are you in someone's company now?"

"No," Tarla shook her head. "I work here as a waitress."

"Oh. That means I can't ask you to join me for a drink."

"I could spare a little time if I wanted to."

"Then, please, spare a little of your time with me."

"My pleasure."

"Thanks. Can we go down now and have a good time?"

The sound of the music increased as they descended the stairs to join his friends. The next two hours, the two drank and chatted till four o'clock in the morning. Tarla was happy with her new catch. Within a short time she would be taking him to a nearby hotel. And the siphoning would begin. The more alcohol the fool consumed, the more delighted she felt.

But things changed when the young man glanced at the time on his mobile phone and pulled a face. He looked at the woman by his side. "My dear, I am going home," he said as he produced his wallet. He brought out two twenty-Euro bills. "Please buy more drinks for yourself. I will see you tomorrow evening." Meaning, later in the day as it was already morning.

Tarla looked at him, struggling to conceal the disappointment on her face. "Honey, don't tell me you're leaving now." At the same time, she looked at the money, surprised and grateful. She had been given a whole of forty Euros by a man who didn't ask to be slept with immediately. No other man she had met in the past gave her a drink without asking for her body. This guy was different from all the others, she thought. It enthralled her.

"Thanks for the drink, and this," Tarla waved the money. "I am glad to meet you."

They rose up from their seats and she escorted him towards the door of the pub. His friends were already outside in the street, waiting. She couldn't hold back her astonishment at the way she had begun taking a liking to him. In the past she never treated any of her clients so formally like she did now.

"I will have to tell you that your presence has created happiness in me tonight," the young man said

"Really?"

"Yes," he said, truthfully. "I went into my happiest mood as soon as I encountered you. And I hope to see you later in the day, OK?"

She was sad. "OK."

"Can I give you a call?"

Tarla gave him her phone number. The young man kissed her on both cheeks. *I know you will come back and spend more money on me*, she thought, not daring to say it out loud as she had in the past. "I will expect your call."

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Now, he took her hands and kissed them. "Bye."

"Bye."

She hadn't seen anything like it before. The other men never treated her with reserve, because they knew what she did here. This guy, too, knew what she did. Yet he treated her with some reverence.

*

Tarla slept well during that morning, expecting the best the evening would bring with the expected call. The call never came. It wouldn't come until after a long time. She became disappointed. The man she had decided to give her hand in marriage to if he asked for it, didn't show up. Three months later, in her bed resting one Saturday evening, her mobile phone rang. She grimaced at the hidden number as she pressed the answer button.

"Yes?"

"Hi dear, long time. How are you?"

"Animal!" she said, the rage in her voice. "Who do you think you are?"

"Calm down." The owner the voice seemed caught off-guard. "Why not allow me to explain things to you. I've been a little busy since then That's why—"

"You've been busy for three months? Come on! That's trash you tell someone else! You had my phone number! You knew where to find me!"

"That's what I was coming to tell you. I—"

"Three months, you never phoned! Now you came back to taunt me!" Tarla lowered her voice, trying to suppress its rising, her hand terribly agitated as she held the phone, revealing how emotional she had become towards him.

It occurred to her that she genuinely wanted him, a situation she could swear not to have found herself in with any other man in her life. In fact, she had developed the emotion the first night

she met him, though she had struggled all this while to banish the thought from her mind. She felt a twitch in her right eye; a reflex of her emotional nervousness. This surprised her too. It had been ages since she had a twitch.

"I can explain things to you. Please, let's meet." His calmness and gentility quickened her breath. "Are you in the house today? I want to come and see you."

"Don't ask for my address!" She flared up. "What do you want to see me for?"

"Just to see you, my dear. Your house address, please."

"You're ordering me?"

"Of course I'm not."

"Then what?"

"I need your house address."

Tarla hesitated, then spelled it out for him. What could be wrong with her after all? She asked herself. Not that he was her boyfriend or anything. She had just met him one night and, she couldn't believe it, she now felt the whole of her wanting to be for this stranger.

She waited twenty minutes – the time he said he would be there. Then hours, and then days. No show. It hit her hard. The young man was playing games with her. Maybe right from the first time they had met, he knew how she felt for him and was taking advantage for a play, she thought. But no, she doubted it. Her infuriation was more to do with the fact that she'd fallen for the boy than that he was playing games with her. She had been to the extent of grieving during the past three months, because she'd done everything possible to find out where he lived. It had proven impossible. And now, obviously, her respect and love for the young man had died away, transforming instead into hatred. If she ever saw him again...

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Today, the second three months had passed. He never showed up, and he never called. But as Tarla sat inside her living room, she read out what was written on the television screen.

“Have you seen this man?”

According to the announcement, the police were seeking help from the public in locating the whereabouts of the man possessing that image. He was wanted for questioning over an important case. And the police were offering a handsome reward to anybody who could be of assistance.

She stood up and hurried into her bedroom. She dashed back into the living room, armed with a pen and a piece of paper. She began copying the displayed telephone contact number.

“If I lay my hands on the bastard,” she said openly, “I won’t blink an eye as I hand him over to those people...” The young woman remembered she wasn’t in Africa and frowned at the way in which she had referred to the police as “those people.” She fought back, resisting the thought that tried to convince her that the police were the same all over the world. The woman shook her head, disagreeing. Had she not left Africa and come abroad, had she not lived in Europe long enough to witness how friendly the police were, it would have been so easy for this thought to win her over. Yet, in her life the police in her country had perpetrated brutalities so indelible that most times she found it difficult to accept the police as her friends.

Tarla tightened her lips and wheeled her thoughts back to the young man on the screen. “After all,” she said, “the idiot has caused me so much pain. And...” she held the words back, not completing her statement. Rather, she returned to biting her lips. Ideas invaded her brain. The first half of ten thousand Euros would be a fortune at this period when dreadful economic recession hounded the country. The second half of the ten

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thousand Euros would solve for her the untold number of family troubles back in Africa.

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A noise battered at John and roused him from sleep. He turned in the bed in reaction to the loud sound of a gunshot spewing out from a movie on the television. He remembered. The television had been on, but he hadn't been interested in it while he was still mulling over how next to make a move towards hunting down the strange man before falling into a heavy sleep.

John cursed himself for not shutting down the TV before drifting off. Yet he stretched out his body, grateful that he felt better now. His eyes went to the small clock placed on the table, near the television. The time was four thirty. He had been asleep for one hour and twenty minutes, having fallen asleep after Mark went out.

May be he should have followed his friend to the bar after all, John thought. No, the sleep had done him better than going to fire up his already restive nerves with alcohol.

Although John felt better than before, he nevertheless wanted more sleep. One more hour, at least. Still in bed, his eyes searched around for the TV's remote control. He needed to shut the damned thing down to be able to go back to sleep again. But the remote lay on the table with the television.

He hissed furiously, then sat up, dropped his legs on the floor, stood up and started towards the television.

John stopped, petrified in terror. For one long moment, he became unconscious, unable to move a foot, staring at the machine, trying to figure out the source of that photograph as his face gazed back at him out of the screen.

He dazed back like someone under the effect of a drug, and managed to prevent himself from falling. He remembered. From his room. They had searched his room and got the picture there. It was the photograph he'd used to apply for American Diversity Visa Lottery last year.

"Have you seen this man?" the bulletin was asking.

"A hotel is offering a €10,000 reward for information that leads to his arrest for questioning. If you have information regarding the whereabouts of the man on this photograph, please contact the Policia Nacional Valencia Inspector, Antonio Jose Rodriguez at Line: 963310101."

The African slouched suddenly, his shoulders drooping, his eyes damp.

"So soon?" he said to himself, confused. So they had found out already. "I am now in a really big trouble."

Tears began to drop from John's eyes. He felt alone.

"Where is Mark?" he asked, sulking. He realized he needed the company of his only known friend. "Why didn't I tell him what has happened?"

John cupped his forehead tightly with his right hand, trying to figure out what to do.

"Mark would have found me a solution to this dilemma," he muttered aloud. "I still need him. I'm going to tell him the whole truth about everything. He will help me out," he paused, wondering. "God, I've made a lot of mistakes."

Seconds went by and his eyes were still stuck to the television as he stood there, unable to think through anything clearly, unable to move a step. Then John thought he heard the wail of a police siren and began struggling and moving away from where he stood. He remembered that four days had passed since he had run away to this place.

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Oh, my God! My God, my God! I forgot to tell the police about the bodies. What a mess I've created for myself. How will I explain things to my parents and the families at home?

John rushed to the window, with the hope of seeing a police car. He had earlier covered the blind to enable him sleep. Now he was reaching out with his right hand, trying to draw the blind aside. But something stopped him. He could look out the street through it, so why expose himself?

As he stood there, his mind couldn't bring itself to a particular decision. For ages, he stood perplexed and stared emptily across the street. Out at a distance, he noticed a movement. Someone was racing along the street. He focused more of his attention. The blind was opaque from the outside and transparent from inside the room, so he could see through it clearly. He saw Mark as he drew closer. Thank God his friend had come back at the right time.

"Mark!" John called. But his scream disappeared into the air, due to Mark's distance. He watched his friend rush into the phone booth and began dialing into the phone.

John relaxed. Mark had heard the news and was trying to wake him up from sleep. He stretched out his hand and began to draw the curtain aside to wave to Mark and let him know he had already woken up. The hand hung in mid-air.

John pulled his hand, turned and stared in the direction of his mobile phone. He rushed to the bed and picked it up. He rushed back to the window. He hadn't picked any calls since the incident because he didn't want anybody calling him and asking his whereabouts or anything like that, until he had had his revenge.

Now, no call came. John looked as Mark spoke.

Nothing!

Mark wasn't calling him.

Think!

John became more alert.

“The Police!” he cried out, wide-eyed, remembering the number displayed on the television. Mark was calling the police.

Get out of here!

“My God!” John rushed to the knapsack lying closer to the bed and yanked it up. He reached for his laptop, which was still running, pulled the cable from the power source and shut down the computer. He stuffed it into the knapsack and zipped it up.

John had been in jeans since he came to the house and needed no other outfit. Quickly, he touched the jeans pocket, feeling the bulk of the wallet he'd slept with all the time. Within seconds, he put on his shoes and his top clothes.

He was ready to go. But he hurriedly looked around the room. Nothing had been left behind. He went back to the window to see if his friend was still inside the phone booth. No. Mark had moved out of the booth and was darting across the road with lightning speed, drawing closer to the house.

Now, Mark was opening the entrance door to the building.

John withdrew from the window and ran into the living room, closing the door to Mark's room. He sprinted towards the door to the tiny room where the washing machine stood. A number of unwashed clothes filled the space. He opened it, moved in, closed the door a little and hid behind its back. He waited, unnerved.

In less than two minutes, John heard the apartment's main door open. From the small opening he had left, he saw Mark tiptoe towards his room and open the door. The little time Mark wasted rushing into his room gave John an advantage. He opened the door he held and dashed back into the sitting room, moving towards the entrance door.

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John reached for the door's handle and pulled it. The door stuck, and wouldn't open. He tried again, pulling harder. It didn't yield.

Mark had barricaded the exit door.

Two large hands seized John by both shoulders from behind, pulling him backwards and propelling him back into the centre of the living room.

"Where do you think you're going? Stinking liar!"

John was struggling to free himself. "Mark please...let me go...please—"

"No way, you're a wanted man," Mark clutched harder, throttling John as the collar of the leather jacket he wore tightened.

"Mark...", John coughed and swallowed hard as Mark dragged him towards the chair. "Please don't do this to me...I will explain."

They were closer to the three-seater cushioned chair now, everything happening within seconds. Mark struggled over John's weight, turned John with all his effort and sank him into the chair. "I don't need any of your explanations. You'll give them to the authorities!"

For some seconds, John remained in the seat, wordless, grateful he hadn't been choked to death. The jacket he wore was torn to pieces. The inner sweater had become rags. But thank God he didn't let go of his knapsack, else his laptop would have dropped on the floor and broken.

John gaped at Mark, who stood in front of him, blocking the way. He didn't believe his friend could suddenly change the way he had, without any regrets. Then he understood – Mark was buying time.

"Please...don't sell me to the police."

"I'm doing the right thing as a loyal immigrant of this nation," Mark said quickly. "You broke your principles and committed a crime. So you must pay for it."

John realized how hopeless arguing further would be. He needed to get out before the police came in within the next few minutes. Mark was unrepentant about his actions.

"Please...Can I explain to you?"

"I'm afraid. It's too late for me to—"

That's was as much as Mark could say. John had been positioning the knapsack in his hands. Suddenly, he threw the heavy bag at Mark. He sprang up at the same time. Mark, puzzled by the action, didn't know what to do, was seizing the bag with both hands to avoid it hitting his head.

John didn't give a breathing space as he closed in on Mark. He hammered a clenched right fist towards him. At the same time, he grasped the hand of the knapsack to prevent it from falling to the floor. The attack yielded an effective result as it landed on Mark's left jaw. *Mark lost balance and sagged down on the hard floor.*

He was already still.

After the impact, John stood motionless for some time, his mouth open, staring at Mark's body. He trembled. Had he murdered a fourth man? God, please no! Let this not be. He breathed heavily. He didn't know what to do.

John had to leave, he decided, praying that his friend would become fine later. He looked at his clothes; they were in rags. Not thinking, he turned and he darted into the tiny washing room. He needed something better to wear before making another escape.

He was out one minute later. He went to the key that Mark had dropped on the floor, picked it up and headed to the apartment's entrance door.

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John closed Mark's door properly, looked around with caution, and then ran down the stairs. He got to the ground floor, opened the entrance security door to the building and went out. He turned left and fled away, making sure he didn't attract the attention of curious passersby. He walked a short distance, where the street intersected the Calle Micer Masco. He turned left, joined the Calle Micer Masco and began walking.

John shifted his head sideways, and out of the corner of his eyes, saw the police car approaching along the Calle Micer Masco, but from his back, from the direction of the Mestalla Stadium, and about to join the street he just moved out of.

The siren blared, the Ford Focus saloon car speeding closer. John breathed in deeply, and was grateful to be closer to a stationary Peugeot Boxer parked along the corner of the street, he stepped to it. Luck. They almost spotted him. He bent down beside the bus, adjusting the laces of his shoes. The police car negotiated left, joined the street and sped away.

John stood up and began walking. He quickened his pace, got to the Calle Doctor Moliner and turned right toward the Facultats metro station. He prayed he would be fortunate to catch a metro quickly. With the festival on, many of the people inside the filled underground train would be busy with the activities, so that not much attention would be paid to a black man working in a factory.

Mark's body lay sprawled out on the cold floor, unmoving. The body breathed heavily as Mark struggled out of unconsciousness. Then Mark's eyes flickered open at the sound

of the apartment's buzzer, like a light bulb had just been turned on. His breath pounded as he stared at the roof, which was turning like a wheel.

He clutched the chair, steadied himself, trying to figure out what had happened earlier as the sounding of the doorbell prevented him from focusing. Mark recollected, and then heaved himself up from the floor, looking for John.

His friend – enemy now – was nowhere in sight.

Mark's memory came back fully. He had been holding John down and waiting for the police to arrive. He remembered too that the boy had later thrust and threw his bag at him, followed by a heavy fist. That was the last he remembered.

Mark frowned, furious. John evaded him. He twisted his mouth in outrage, before another sound of the buzzer brought him to realities. He stood up and rushed to open the door for the policemen.

It took John five minutes. Now he was in the underground train, speeding away in the direction of the Aeropuerto de Valencia – the Valencia airport, lucky to have found and occupied a seat, and concealed his face from people's view with a crumpled daily “Metro” newspaper he had picked from one of the waste baskets inside the station, pretending to be engrossed in the news. The thick head warmer he stole from Mark's washing room covered his head up to the eyebrows, giving him the complete disguise he needed.

When the train stopped at the Avenida Del Cid station, John looked up and his eyes followed the two English-speaking passengers as they left the train. Their conversation had occupied him since they joined the train at the Colón station. The New Zealand couple was admiring the architectural design of the Valencia oceanographic museum they had visited earlier in the day.

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John's eyes left the disappearing couple, then went back into concealment behind the newspaper. But he stopped on the way and lost his breath. A young South American man standing up was glaring at him. John became alarmed. His pulse quickened as the man continued the piercing look. The train had not yet begun to move, and the headquarters of the *Policia Local de Valencia* was in the Avenida Del Cid – just somewhere across the metro station.

“Africano.”

John's heart pumping stood still. From the way the name had been called out, he knew the man was aware of the news on TV.

“Africano,” the South American called out again.

John ignored the man, concentrating on the newspaper he held. The man maintained his gaze at him. Many people around Valencia had the news in their brains by now, the telephone number at hand, wanting to be the first to get the big reward, the African thought.

John gathered his thoughts, suddenly considering the option of taking a fast jump out of the still stationary train. That would be foolhardy, and would only end up confirming the man's suspicion. John decided to hold firm and not shiver.

The train started moving; the South American reluctantly turned his head another way. John buried his face in the newspaper. At Nou d'Octubre, he disembarked from the train and took the steps out of the station. Outside, he looked up at the slowly growing darkness, and bearing in mind it would be a long and exposed walk before he reached his destination, he felt unhappy that the Spring daylight had not totally receded. However it was, he wouldn't take a taxi, he decided.

As he walked, John thought of just one place to go. Someone he could...not really trust..., but buy off. He touched the bulk of his wallet and felt reassured. At this critical time,

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money could do almost everything for him – in order to get to the man he wanted. He quickened his pace as he made his way to Xirivella.

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Inspector Rodriguez held back his anger as he stood inside Mark's room. “¿Qué demonios pasaba?” he asked. The inspector came rushing down in the company of Detective Ricardo, who was now searching the apartment. “What on earth happened?”

Mark stood in a corner, speechless, confused, his eyes filled with fear.

The inspector was convinced Mark had genuine information when he had called. And the inspector felt happy: All had gone the way he planned it, and at last, trapping the suspect came as easy as he had earlier assured the superintendent. But before they had got here, the young man had slipped away.

The inspector looked at Mark and asked, “How do you think he got away?” In English.

“I don't understand, sir,” Mark searched for words. He mustn't tell them that John struck him and made him unconscious. “He didn't know I called the police.”

“Did you two hear the news together before you made the call?”

“No, I got the news in a bar far away from here. And he was going to have some sleep when I left the house.”

The inspector left where he stood and went to the window. He peered through the blind into the street, surveyed the outside environment. He noticed something immediately. Coincidence! Unhappy, the inspector turned like a robot and said to Mark, “Come here.”

Mark did so.

“Did you first check to be sure he was in here before calling us?”

“No,” Mark shook his head.

“Why not?”

“He didn't have anywhere to go,” Mark said with certainty. “He never went out of this house since the day he came here. So I decided to inform you as quick as possible.” Mark wanted to ask the policeman what really was wrong, what offence his friend had committed, but decided against it. The intense fear within him had not yet subsided.

No, it's because you wanted to secure your money as quickly as possible, the inspector said to himself. He brought Mark to the window and pointed downwards across the street. “You placed the call from that booth there.”

Mark hesitated. “Yes,” he replied, stunned by the policeman's knowledge of what he had done.

“You alerted him.” *Stupid!* Inspector Rodriguez thought. “He must have spotted you walk into that booth while standing here. And he had the information of the splash already at hand.”

Mark gaped at the man, then at the window. Now he understood where his mistake had arisen, which explained why John had already hid himself when he came in.

“What color clothes is he in?”

Mark gathered his thought. “A brown leather jacket...and... black jeans.”

Inspector Rodriguez crackled the police radio he was holding into life, then alerted the police search teams around the city to be on a look out for an African in a brown leather jacket and black jeans.

Had Mark added that John carried a black knapsack, the uniformed policeman in a patrol car passing by the Facultad metro station, and listening to the inspector's alert, would have taken the position from where the inspector was calling into

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consideration, and become suspicious of an African descending quickly into the metro station.

Time to leave, the inspector called out to the detective with him. "Mark here will join us at the station for an official statement. I think he'll be of more assistance."

Mark lost color and composure. His eyes flickered open. Now, he remembered the part of the world he came from. There, falling into the hands of police was like falling into the trap of a hungry python.

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John crossed the long bridge linking the main part of Valencia to Xirivella, drawing a little closer to his journey's end. As if unsure, he stopped for a moment to reconsider the decision he had taken in coming out here. He knew the action stood as an extreme risk. But he couldn't do a thing about it. He just had no other alternative, and time was fast running out on him. The more he hanged about on the street, the more he exposed himself to the risk of capture.

John knew that only luck prevented him from being caught so far. Soon, the long arm of the police would surely catch up with him. The net was closing in on him, he was sure of it. It was just a matter of little time. He realized he knew nothing on how to evade police surveillance. The only thing protecting him right now was the willpower to get to the dubious man before the hands of the law clutched at him. Although, tracking the man with the help of the police, John thought, would not give him satisfaction for the personal revenge he wanted.

Thankful that daylight was finally disappearing, the darkness taking control, John reduced his stride and took the journey slowly. He knew, through the stories he had overheard from some of Mark's friends, that because immigration policemen crowded into the Xirivella area due to the concentration of African and other immigrants around there, he needed to move with great caution. He had to avoid walking into the police or police vehicles.

He went along the streets fully crowded with people observing Las Fallas activities, but avoided wherever he saw other blacks around to prevent bumping into a fellow Nigerian

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who might by chance know him. Right now, the events of Las Fallas festival was absorbing many people's attention. But as soon as it came to an end on the nineteenth of March – *two days away* – John knew he would be out in the open. The police would clamp him with its jaws. For now, every move he made depended on God's help. And as for where he was going, everything depended on how convincing his explanations would be. Based on what Mark had tried to do, John decided as he moved on, that where he headed was better than approaching another fellow countryman. And though he hadn't been there before, he felt almost there now.

He first needed to make a phone call. He remembered the new mobile phone he had purchased recently. He stepped into a secluded point on the street, unstrapped his knapsack from his back, searched it and brought out the mobile phone. He had bought this package because his friend Mark told him that the new mobile company was the best to make international calls to Nigeria. At thirteen cents per minute to a Nigerian mobile phone, there was nothing like it, Mark had advised. But now John would first try it out with a local call. He frowned and became pensive for a moment, felt stupid and empty, remembering all the money-driven actions he pulled days ago. How he had allowed his normal senses and the reputable principles he had built all these years be eaten away by such vanity was a thing he still couldn't comprehend. The whole imprudent actions were difficult for him to believe now. What had driven him, he queried inwards, he never knew. Maybe it was the nature of the black man towards money? Was this why in Nigeria, John considered, a political office holder suddenly changed when he got in there – the money-controlled spirit? If it was, it meant there was a big problem in black Africa.

From his old phone, he scrolled down to the number he wanted to call. By coincidence, his old mobile vibrated at the same time. He looked at the number. 963334217. He ignored the call and allowed the vibration to continue, then die down. He touched the power-off button, and dropped it inside his pocket, not wanting to talk to nobody at this time. He dialed the number. The telephone began to ring. At the third ring, it was answered.

“¿Hola?” a woman said on the line. “Hello?”

“Hi, dear, it’s me.”

A moment of silence.

“Hello honey, how are you?” the woman asked excitedly. “I’ve not seen you in a long time.”

Honey?

John's mind made an instantaneous wondering.

“Where are you? the woman continued without stopping. “I’m in the house aching to be loved. Please come see me.”

John's hand gripped the phone. His jaw dropped in disappointment. *She had been too friendly*, he thought. All he had expected was an initial fob-off; an initial coldness. Rather, he was being cared for. *Not good.*

She had been watching television too, and she had found out about him. His nervousness manifested itself through the unstable hand holding the phone. He observed now that he hadn't considered this big error earlier. A thought ran through his mind, warning him that he could be cornered by this girl in her house, and that once he was, she would alert the police. But he waved it away as fast as it came.

Another sixty seconds of awkward silence passed between the ends of the telephone. Then things changed abruptly.

“Hey, wait a minute, wait here!” the woman said, “Who’s this? Who is speaking?”

“My dear –”

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“You again?” her voice became hostile. “Idiot. What do you want from me?”

John relaxed, and his edginess came to a rapid stop.

The voice continued with an angered tone: “Just get out of my life and don’t try calling my number again. Or I will call the police and charge you for molestation.”

The connection died. The African redialed.

Now, John smiled as he waited for the woman to come on the line again. It surprised him that he still had the strength to smile, in spite of the brutality of the hunger stabbing his stomach. The woman's later reaction to the call didn't surprise him at all. It was how he had expected her to act – initial rage.

She hasn't heard the news after all. Thank God! Earlier she had mistaken me for another man, John convinced himself. He couldn't blame her for that; six months had passed since the first day they met.

John thought about the night he met her. She had looked extraordinary, then provocative. He reflected over her attractive facial features; the high cheekbones and long neck, her slender physique. And..., her heart-taking..., the African tried to keep his mind away from her bust.

That day, within him, he had battled with the inner warning that he was falling into a problem he had avoided since he came abroad – going into a relationship with an African woman. In this part of Europe, such relationships costed a lot of monetary commitment. Many of the unmarried young women here had no jobs. Most didn't care to find ways of becoming self-reliant. So once you had gone into her, the woman's whole economic problems inevitably became yours.

He understood that coming to Europe was like being sent into a petty business. If anyone decided to squander the profits he made in the small trade, it's like sending the family one came from light years backwards. He knew the young woman was in

that non-self-reliant category, and that reason made him hide himself away from her all this while.

John decided that since she knew nothing about the hunt for him, it was easy to take control of her for a couple of days while the search for him cooled off, before he embarked on the journey to the city he would surely locate and apprehend the man who had scammed him.

"My dear, please calm down and listen to me. It's urgent," John said in broken English as soon as the line connected again. "I am just meters away from your house. I want to see you."

"You are out of your senses to believe that I will allow you to see me at such short notice. I can't accept that from you."

"I understand your reasons well," John pushed, "but there is something important I'd want to share with you. Please!"

There was another long, bitter silence.

"Something important, you say?"

"Yes, very important." John paused a while. "And money is involved."

"Money, you say?" The tone softened. "Where are you?"

"Just a short distance from your house."

"Can you find your way up here, then?"

"Yes. I just wanted to inform you before coming in."

"Find your way here, then."

Inside the bathtub, standing, water from her hair dripping down her face, Tarla stared at her own mobile phone in awe. She couldn't believe she'd received the call that ended seconds ago. Could God have given her this kind of luck so easily?

She dropped the phone back on top of the covered WC and began drying her body. She would wait until she saw this miracle with her eyes. Only one thought came into her mind:

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her mother's house. It was time to finish the bungalow she had been building for her mother for a long time.

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It took him five minutes. John climbed the stairs to the second floor of the building. The door to the apartment stood a little ajar, waiting for him when he got there. Tarla stood farther inside the corridor of the apartment. Her expression showed a form of sadness, a signal that she wanted no nonsense from John.

John looked her in the face. She was still delightful. The full lips and the charming black eyes he had admired that night were intact. And she seemed to have grown taller than he remembered from the night they met. He remembered it was Mark who led him to the joint where he met this young, beautiful woman. That day, John had earned his salary for the fifth month since working, and Mark had asked him to carve out a hundred Euros with which to have fun.

“You are now in Europe and must enjoy yourself, while thinking about the people at home,” Mark had said to him. “Don't allow yourself become susceptible to the pressures from our continent; else you will be in a social blindness throughout the period you're going to be in this land.”

John had followed Mark and his other friend out that night, then met the young woman. Now looking at the heart-warming girl, he felt grateful to Mark for that advice.

“Yes?” the woman said. “What's this important thing you've got that you suddenly wanted to share with me?” She remained unsmiling.

Just like that? No “How're you?” No “Why did you treat me badly all these months?” “Nothing.”

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This meant her affection for John had waned. The African realized the fatal mistake he made, coming out here. And as he stood there, he considered retreating from the apartment and running away to some other place. He still had the chance to do that. Before coming out here, John had argued within himself that the girl's affection for him stood firm. But now he saw it didn't work that way, due mostly to the long time he had been out of reach. He weighed his options: No other close friends to trust, and therefore no better place to go.

He closed the door behind and stood two feet away from the young woman, deciding to tackle things from another angle – an alternative plan: the reason why he had mentioned money earlier.

“I have a problem and I need your help, please,” John said to her. “I wronged you with my behavior, but I believe we can make it up in the future.” While he spoke, his right hand went into his trouser pocket and he brought out a five hundred Euro note. “Please take this money to buy yourself a precious gift, courtesy of me. I have a lot of other things to placate you for my attitude toward you.”

Tarla shot her left hand out and took the money, feigning reluctance and managing to conceal her surprise and excitement.

Five hundred Euros!

She knew it! Yes she did. The Nigerian had stumbled into a fortune, for the police to be hunting for him with that huge reward. The guy had more of this with him. She needed to find out how much more was in his possession, both here and wherever else he hid the loot.

She was still going to call in the police later, Tarla decided. But she had to think of a better way of handling the issue. Already, she knew what he wanted, but she decided to play along, her face still unfriendly.

"What are you asking of me now?"

"Just to stay here for two days, maximum of three, while I make a plan for a place I want to reach."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" she looked beyond him, at the knapsack sticking at his back.

"Yes, I've a little problem."

"How bad?"

"Grave. But its better you didn't know much about it, for your own safety."

She ignored his statement. "And plenty money involved?"

He hesitated a moment. "Yes, a lot is involved."

"How big?"

"Believe it, it's very big," he said, again deliberately. "When I'm through with this whole problem, I will overwhelm you with a deeper love."

She managed a smile at him. She knew what best to do, she thought. This guy had joked about with her earlier. It was now her turn to fool him around. *I'm going to play the two sides*, she thought. *First, I'm going to siphon you dry during the days you want to be here, and then, when you've got nothing more to offer, I will call those people in.*

"Come in and drop your things," Tarla said as she turned and started walking toward the sitting room. "And please change your appearance. It makes me sick." John followed at her back through the narrow entrance. "Not that I'm happy about your being here for the first time in a troubled state," she added.

John didn't reply. As he stepped into the living room, he stood in a corner, shaking out of fatigue. A noise from his stomach reminded him of how hungry he was. But his eyes were examining the new environment and what he saw impressed and surprised him at the same time. He scanned around the spacious sitting room, well furnished with unique

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things. The white color of the tiled floor glittered as if it had recently been polished. He knew the 46" flat screen Sony television which stood on a portable glass divider wasn't an easy-to-acquire gadget.

The home cinema whose sound filtered in a low volume was also a Sony set, of the same metallic silver color as the television. The four upholstered chairs must have been pricey too, designed with flowered dark red leather covering. The white coloration of the walls of the living room, the white color of the tiles and the dark red color of the seats enhanced the charming appearance of the space. John concluded: The girl made much profit from her trade.

His eyes were beginning to turn due to a lack of strength. He went to one of the seats, dropped his knapsack on the floor and sat down. Despite his famished state, his attention was caught by a portrait of the woman hanging on the wall, above the television. She looked royal on the photograph, dressed in black suit with a black skirt, with a beautiful white hat that matched her shoes.

"That room is vacant," Tarla said to John, nodding her head in the direction of the door to the room. "You go in and drop your bag there." She was still standing, looking at him, and not moving an inch from the middle of the room. *And be prepared for your desired punishment*, she said inwardly. She turned and moved away into her bedroom.

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March 19, 2009

John sighed with relief. His laptop computer had finally hooked up with an unsecured internet wireless network connection. The computer rested on top of his thighs as he sat on the downward side of the bed, in the unusually large sized room the young woman offered him.

He checked the time on the computer. Eight-thirty in the morning, meaning he'd spent up to thirty minutes shifting positions from one corner of the room to the other, refreshing the computer's wireless network list time and time again in order to get hold of a stable network. He always felt grateful for the ubiquitous and unwavering nature of the connection of the network called Motorola.

His eyes, swollen from lack of sleep, looked blood-red. He had gone to bed at one o'clock in the morning, slept only two hours before being hit and woken up by the severe cold hanging in the room. The blanket on the bed wasn't thick enough to protect him from the chill. And in addition, the loud noise in the street coming from the fireworks drove him crackers.

What John did was to stay awake and battle the cold, while drawing up plans on the journey he wanted to make soon. But he sat for another three hours before sleep defeated him again. Then, at eight o'clock, the fire crackers dropped outside by the locals as a wake-up call hauled him up from sleep with a start – from another bad dream in which he was now communing with his dead flatmates. John had been panicked; bad dreams were always a bad sign.

He rubbed both eyes with his hand to smother the sleep, then sat erect, preparing for the internet journey like a hacker wanting to dive into a bank's records. Mark had told John before that a friend of Mark's said the boys in the US, Canada and the UK were really hitting money through internet hacking, transferring money online from one Asian bank account to another. John knew it took expertise in computer usage to carry out such crimes.

The African double-clicked the “internet explorer” icon on the desktop folder, and a window popped up, displaying 'http://google.es/,' programmed as the computer's internet homepage.

Next, he typed in the Google search bar – “**private detectives in castellon**”. He selected the “páginas en Español” search option and hit the ENTER button for the results to be displayed in Spanish. Since he saw the neon sign displaying the website of a private detective, it had never left his memory.

The search produced a list of web addresses. John scanned through the list and rested the cursor on the one he thought to be the best.

'http://directorios.justfirms.com/eng/detectivesinSpain/Valencia/'.

He clicked and opened the page. The site gave him a long list of private detectives operating “en la Comunidad Valenciana”. Their websites, office addresses, and their contact telephones were listed on the page. He went to addresses from Castellon.

John rested his cursor on an address that indicated, “Live Chat – Start a free online consultation with us,” Spanish language. Again, this was the best for him. He clicked and opened the website. The online chat began at ten past nine on every working day. He looked at the time on the computer, ten minutes more before he could connect with the firm.

John left the room and went into the toilet to spend the ten minutes. He rinsed his mouth and washed his face, then went back and sat down. He clicked on the chat icon on the web that indicated, “client –type a message.” He typed.

Client: Do you speak English?

Host: Yes. We work with Spanish and English.

Client: My Spanish is not that good, can we go in English?

Host: Yes, go on.

Client: Is your firm registered?

Host: Yes we are registered. Please look up here, “<http://directorios.investigacionesprivados.es/autorizados>,” you’ll find us in a list of authorized practicing private detectives in Spain and our registration ref. no. **Our company’s name is** Puzzle Detectives.

John thought this sounded credible. He quickly clicked on the forwarded site. The site popped up. He went through the displayed list, saw the name on the tenth number, then continued:

Client: I want to find a businessman who lives in Castellon. Can you help me?

Host: Our job is to help our clients. But we follow operational procedures.

Client: Like?

Host: A client pays the total investigation fee before we commence a job. And though we don't practice “Know Our Customer” rule, be warned that we avoid anything that would earn the public reputation of helping a stalker. Our firm has certain civil and moral liabilities with regard to the public.

Client: I'm ready for the fee. Please explain “helping a stalker.”

Host: It means, we might not be concerned about your intentions toward the subject, yet we don't accept flipping over

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the newspapers tomorrow to find out that the person we located has been murdered.

Client: No, it has nothing to do with that. The man is a business associate with whom I lost contact for a long time.

Host: We have to believe our client. Now, if you chose to withhold the subject's actual relationship with you, the consultation fee is higher. If you decide to confide in us, the fee is reduced.

Client: I like the first.

Host: Identity. If our client prefers online information to paper information, it means you want to be referred to as an anonymous client. The service will cost a higher fee.

Client: I want to be anonymous.

Host: Locating somebody who lives in Castellon, under your chosen options attracts an initial fee of six hundred Euros, subject to change if the investigation turns complicated.

Client: Complicated?

Host: Naturally, the kind of options you've chosen, we assume that there is a tendency for the life of our investigators becoming endangered.

Client: OK. I want to make the payment now. Please, how soon can I have results?

There was a little delay from the other side of the line. Then the message came.

Host: 3000-5554-0203-1166-7125. Please pay into our Bancaja account. The earlier the payment, the earlier we start your case. We'll employ a two-person team, so we have a maximum of five hours to provide you with results, from the time of payment receipt.

Client: I will be on the way to make the payment. I need the information before the end of today. Will you try?

Host: We will. Please, after the payment, send us the reference number online ASAP.

Client: How will I know if my order was carried out?

Host: No guarantee, but we have an obligation to give our clients the highest quality of investigation resources.

Client: I will be back online in about thirty minutes.

The last answer was not encouraging, John thought, as he dropped the computer on the bed and dashed out of the room. But he needed the services. He wouldn't risk going outside during the daytime, not having prepared for this. Once again, he needed the woman.

With difficulty, he wandered over to the door of her room and tapped a little on the panel. It was twenty-five minutes after nine; by now the young woman shouldn't still be deeply asleep. She hadn't gone to the pub yesterday. John knew the money he gave her had worked that magic. And tonight she would be going for the closing ceremony of Las Fallas festival.

After a long delay, the door swung open. "Why are you disturbing me at this time of the morning?" Tarla's sleepy eyes were cold as they glared at him.

"My dear, I need a little help." John tensed. He flashed a five hundred Euros bill in her face. "Please!"

The young woman smiled, then softened, unable to resist such a nice gift. "What do you want me to do for you?"

The power of money, John thought. "There is a Bancaja nearby." He produced six hundred Euros, with the piece of paper on which he had written down the account information. "Please, could you help me pay this money into this account? It's very urgent."

"Is this implicating?"

"Hey, no," John saw the fear in her eyes. "It's not going to implicate you in any way." He yawned and scratched his head,

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hunger tormenting his intestines. “You don't have to include the sender's name.” The biscuits he had been eating since three days back were rarely sustaining. And the young woman never seemed to care if he needed food or not.

Tarla grabbed the note and the money and returned into her room. Five minutes later, she went out of the house.

Twenty minutes later, Tarla walked into the room where John sat, browsing through the internet, the payment slip in her hand.

John smiled at her. “Sweet heart, thank you.” He collected the slip. “I owe you so much for all your assistance.” He looked at the girl's face and thought he saw a worried expression on it, but waved it away, turned and began keying in the payment reference number into the chat web.

Tarla started moving out of the room, then stopped at the door and turned, facing John. “I want one thousand Euros!”

John raised his head up, stunned by her words.

My God! She is money psycho. If I waste more time here, this money will be eaten away.

“What did you say?”

“You well heard me,” she shot back.

“My dear, I don't have more money to give out to you right now. I am—”

“Oh yes you do, don't 'dear' me. I am in urgent need of that amount, and I must get it from you. Or you pack your things and get out of my house, now!” She gestured at the door with her right thumb, the threat evident in her statement and her voice.

John sat motionless like a scared dog, looking at the young woman and considering his options. He couldn't afford to go into a war on two fronts, as he referred to it. Leaving the house at this time of the day would mean running into the hands of the

police. Moreover, where was he to go? Did the girl know she had him where she wanted?

He succumbed. "OK. Please give me up to twenty minutes to get the one thousand for you."

"As fast as possible. Before my patience runs out." She banged the door.

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Host: Payment confirmed. Please forward the identity of the subject.

John sat erect in the bed, staring blankly at the screen of the laptop sitting on his thighs, but not seeing the message being relayed to him. Calculations were running inside his mind. He had already wasted plenty of the money and was feeling sick about it. Inside this hideout, two thousand six hundred Euros had already gone out of his pocket. That amount, added to the three hundred Euros miscellaneous expenses he made the day he came home with the twenty thousand Euros, he'd parted with a total of two thousand nine hundred Euros.

The young woman alone, John thought, had drained two thousand Euros out of his pocket in less than fifteen hours. He found it difficult to believe. Realizing the awful mistake of coming out here made him even more troubled. He had anticipated spending money, but not the woman demanding ransom from him. Thank God he had even brought the money along with him. If not, it would have been a disastrous situation by now.

The whole game had suddenly turned against John; the girl's attitude toward him was unimaginable. Well, he thought, she had promised not to worry him about money again until he had gotten through with his problems. And though he was skeptical, this gave him a little hope of relief, enabling him to concentrate on what he did now that he was alone in the apartment. As soon as he had handed the money to the young woman, she jumped into her room, put on a perfume, dressed smartly, then came back to him.

“Here is the spare key to this apartment, in case you need to walk around the neighborhood,” she said to him.

John didn't want to take the key, as he had nowhere to go. But reluctantly he'd accepted it. Then she hurried out of the house.

The single action convinced him that the young woman knew nothing about the search for him. He left this thought and leveled his eyes back on the screen. He read the message and went back to the chat page of the private investigation firm. He keyed in the information his host requested.

Client: Pablo Hernandez Tricas

Host: Name is common here. We need more descriptions. Physical appearance? His date of birth. Any ideas about his last known house address? Name of a known relative?

Client: Short, thickset, thick eyebrows and large ears. Bearded. These are the features I know. Like I said, we did a business together many years ago and I've lost his contact details.

Host: Information not sufficient, but we'll manage it. You'll have to get back to us in six hours.

Client: Around five o'clock, you mean?

Host: Yes. 5:00. P.M.

Client: One more thing, please.

Host: Yes?

Client: He is a rich man.

Host: Noted. We'll have results by 5:00. P.M..

John disconnected from the chat page. He looked at the time on both his computer and the clock on the wall: A few minutes after eleven o'clock: a long time to wait before he got results. And nowhere to go. Before, when things were normal for him, he was used to being alone in his room most of the time,

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sometimes engaging in prayers to God. But now, with the kind of trouble he had got into, the loneliness in this apartment made him uncomfortable. He needed someone to talk to. The girl was nowhere to be seen. Even the voices: The voices battling within him had all deserted him. And he couldn't bring himself to pray anymore.

He stretched out on the bed, and reflected on how long he would wait till the damned result came. He felt exhausted, and suddenly aware of the life-taking hunger panging him. He rolled to the edge of the bed and lifted his knapsack from where he kept it. He wondered how it would have been if he hadn't brought along those biscuits he got from the hotel and kept in stock quite a time.

John ate the biscuits and drank some water. Moments later, he went back to sleep.

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He slept through the remaining five and something hours, woke up and typed into the chat page of the detective firm. As if they already waited for him, he got an instant reply.

Host: Subject matches the description of a man – rich, heavysset and short, who died four years ago while cruising in a high-speed Ferrari sports car he had bought a few days before the accident.

This can't be possible! John gazed into the computer, filled with anger about everything now.

Client: No. he's still alive. Someone was with him five days ago. I am not in agreement with your result

Host: Which means we're incompetent in our job.

Yes. John was furious. I can't take nonsense as the result of an investigation I've just paid a lot of money, hoping to get a positive result. He struggled to hold back the irritation.

Client: No, you're not. But please, couldn't there be a way of going about the search again?

Host: I'm sorry. Your request is not possible. Your payment for our services has run out.

Client: Your services are damned.

Host: Rude words.

“I don't care,” John said to himself.

Host: You are disappointed about the result. But be reminded that the urgency. You emphasized made us deploy a two man investigation team into the field for a rapid result.

John refused to make remarks on the message.

Client: I am not satisfied.

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Host: To render you more help, we'd like you to oblige us with answers to a number of questions we want to ask you to get the picture clear.

The African hesitated a little, but then keyed in.

Client: OK.

Host: How long have you known the subject and how well acquainted were you with him during this business together?

John searched for an immediate answer to the question put to him but couldn't get one. It was true, he realized. He didn't even know anything about the man he tracked, other than that his name was Pablo Hernandez Tricas and that he came from Castellon.

Client: I can't say I knew him very well. It was a short business together and we haven't seen each other again...

"Oh my God!" John cooed. It dawned on him that he might be making a chase in a manner carefully designed for him to follow. He became more tensed up.

A dead end! I am heading nowhere.

The African twitched his lips in frustration, all of a sudden worn out. He tried to think, his breath quickening for the umpteenth time since he started receiving the results he'd waited for all afternoon. No, it couldn't be true; there must be another opening somewhere. He brought his mind back to the report being displayed on his computer's screen. He looked around the room, wishing for another beer to calm his nerves down.

Host: There is one puzzle here. Your description of subject – thick eyebrows – is in line. The accident victim had thick eyebrows but ears – normal. Please crosscheck the physical identity once again.

Client: His ears are large.

Host: Then there is a little problem. We are –

John stared vacantly at the screen of the laptop, his face ashen. He was no more paying attention to the message. Rather, he was thinking harder. Something was missing somewhere. The stranger may have taken all reasonable precautions to cover himself up from possible traces to him, in case of unforeseen event, such as the one happening now.

"There is one puzzle here..."Think!

John brought his mind together, concentrated in thought as it directed him, but couldn't think up anything in any way. He bowed his head in grief, tears streamed down his cheeks, but he never refused to think. May be he had lost the battle.

"No!" he said, aggravated. He can't fail to avenge those deaths. As he shouted, something happened suddenly.

"The card!" John groaned. Oh! Jesus, Jesus...the business card. He abruptly keyed into the computer.

Client: Please hold a second.

John jumped up and out of the bed. Where was it? Where had he kept it? The power cable of the laptop, coiled round his left foot, was dragging the computer to the edge of the bed and the machine was about to hit the hard tiled floor as he darted off the bed, but he extended his right hand and caught hold of it, then repositioned it on the bed.

He figured out where he kept the thing and charged like a bull. He rushed to grab the wallet he dropped on the small table in the room, as there was no money in it again. He had carefully hidden his money in a corner where no ordinary eye could reach it with ease. He picked up the wallet and emptied its content, going through every piece of paper he saw.

The card wasn't there. None of the business cards he'd been collecting from the hotel and piling up inside his wallet was there anymore. He always made sure that those things never left his wallet. What then had happened to them?

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Oh, yes! John figured out. It was inside his knapsack. He turned and dashed towards the sack. The business cards were all inside his bag. He remembered now, at the hotel he'd emptied the contents of his wallet into his sack because of the weight of the first payment the stranger made.

He opened the zipper of the small side pocket of the bag, dropped his right hand and tugged out the bulk of business cards and other pieces of paper with which he hand-wrote certain business telephone numbers and email addresses he found in the hotel.

Thoroughly, the African started going through them one after the other, unable to remember the exact one he wanted. It seemed too long and frustrating before he got to what he wanted. Now he had the business card which he was convinced would have a link to the identity of the man he wanted to get at, by any means.

John's face brightened a little.

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John typed in the full names he saw on the card and sent them across the line. But the detective would not do more for him. John pleaded and complained of lack of immediate access to funds before the detective accepted to help him with more information.

Host: Please hold.

John waited impatiently, pounding his thumb and forefinger of his right hand on the panel of his laptop. Then, a message came on the screen. He looked at the time on his computer. Ten minutes gone. Too long.

Host: Francisco Riera Martinez is the best living auto mechanic in the Valencia region today.

Client: He lives in Castellón?

On the business card John held, the address of the establishment wasn't written; there was only the name and a single telephone number. That's why he asked.

Host: No.

Client: I need to know where the office is.

Host: What do you want with this man? You seem not to know much about him. And you seem to be playing with fire.

The last statement made the African quake.

Client: On the basis of our business relation, I know about him.

Host: Hold on.

The detective took some minutes out, typed and sent the address over to John.

Host: What more do you want to know about him?

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Client: Is he married, with kids?

Host: Married – yes. Kids – no.

Client: About the marriage?

Host: The relationship is currently on the rocks. One more question only.

Client: Please tell me a little about it.

The private detective typed out the details the African wanted.

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John stood by the bed and gaped into the space within the room, both hands tucked inside the pocket of his jeans, taken aback by what the detective told him about the secret life of the man he wanted to confront soon.

Alicante!

His face was pallid with fear at the thought of that. God! The man was an arrant deceiver. John would have headed to Castellón, chasing the wind, had he not found the business card by chance. And the private detective knew John was lying all along, so warned him not to approach the man if he knew he had no genuine business with him.

The detective won't understand. This man misled me and I will fight with my last blood to make sure he faced the consequences.

There was no going back about heading to Alicante, John decided. But one thing bothered him terribly. Knowing how dangerous the man he dealt with could be, he couldn't go there empty-handed. He had to have a weapon.

A gun!

His body quaked further at the thought of a gun. Dread filled his eyes. He left where he stood and began walking about inside the spacious room, his hands still inside his trouser pockets. This chase was getting more complicated and deadlier than he ever thought it would. He stopped at a corner of the wall and looked up at the deck of the upper floor of the building. For a long moment he brooded more deeply.

Maybe I should go to the police now and tell them what I know?

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The African considered this for a long while, then shook his head.

No police. I will fight the man at all costs, John considered weakly. He'd have to look for a gun.

And how would he even get hold of a gun in a place like Xirivella within the shortest time frame? If he had been in the fast lane, maybe one connection or another would have done it for him. But he wasn't. His mind warned him once more that many people had the details of his facial description committed to their memories now, as the TV, and even the newspapers continued to flash his photos. He remained thankful to God the young woman who housed him said her own television wasn't in a good state –which explained why she had unplugged its power cable from the source.

For the first time since he got into this big mess, the African's memories took him back to his active childhood days, in secondary school. That nickname, The Rhinoceros, had been given to him by his mates during the school days because then, he knew how to and had the strength to get things when he needed them urgently. He had tried out some juvenile gangster activities before and succeeded. Without a gun, though.

Somehow, John thought, convinced, he had to recall that juvenile strength now and employ it to look for the gun he needed. And somehow he would get hold of one. The money was there to spend. All he needed to do was to move fast. He only had today – the last day of the Falla festival – to stay here. Tomorrow morning he must be moving.

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At seven o'clock, darkness had taken over the day, so John decided it was time to stroll around the place in search of the weapon he wanted. To the African, as he walked along the secluded street, the first thing to do, he decided, was to make a confirmatory contact with the ruthless stranger before proceeding with the next step of action. But he was going to use a pay phone, rather than his mobile, as his mind told him that the man had ways of monitoring people.

He looked around, searching for a telephone booth, but saw none visible along the street where he was walking. He moved further down and diverted right, joining a bigger street. He strolled up to the middle of the street, spotted a booth and crossed the road towards the telephone.

John got to the open phone booth, lifted the receiver and waited for the dialing tone. He inserted the coins he held in his hand and began keying in the numbers on the business card. He waited for the connection with impatience. After the fourth ring he heard a click and the phone connected.

"Taller Mecánico de Francisco Riera Martinez," a voice said in Spanish. "Francisco Riera Martinez Auto Mechanic Workshop."

John's heart sank as he heard a voice totally strange from the one he expected to hear. The voice seemed to be youthful. The African removed the receiver from his ear and looked at the number on the business card carefully in case he had made a mistake in dialing. He put the phone back to his ear, deciding to go a bit further with his enquiry.

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"Hand the phone to Francisco Riera Martinez," John said. "I want to talk to him."

"Who's on the line, sir?"

"Not important. Just ask him to take the phone. It's in his own interest."

"I'm sorry. Please call back in an hour's time. Mr. Martinez is busy at work and won't take any unscheduled phone calls."

A short silence.

Is that it? John paused for a moment, fast developing tactics on how to create an impact. "Now tell Mr. Martinez that it's a foreign business associate. I happened to be in Valencia in transit, staying in the Ivory. I looked him up on the telephone directory, saw his number and decided to say hello."

A longer silence came on the line. John's last statement had stirred reactions. "Please hold for him." A moment passed before another voice came on the line.

"Hello?"

John recognized the voice. "I am coming after you." the African said, in English. "You blackmailer."

A cold momentary silence echoed between the ends of the line.

"Oh, John," the voice from the other end broke the stillness. "You found me. I'm surprised at that."

"You thought you can run away from me? You thought you could run from the sins of deceiving me with your coined blackmail story and giving me what you called your sedative substance? No way. You can't hide from me."

"Run away? Hide? I didn't run, John. I waited for you at the garage like we planned. You didn't show—"

"Shut your dirty mouth about the garage! You poisoned my flatmates, you bastard!" the African sulked, enraged, managing not to scream into the phone.

"Your *what*? But how could that be?"

"I'm coming after you," John said again,. "And don't ever address me by name again. I'm your enemy now, and I'm coming for you, to revenge the death of the people closest to me in this city, in this country. You wasted their lives, and the best honor I'd give them is to make sure, through every means I can, to kill you with my own hands."

The next silence lasted longer.

"Before you kill me, John, you must return my money to me!" The man's voice suddenly became harder. "You failed, out of your carelessness, to fulfill your end of our well planned business—"

"I will tell you that though I'm an African," John cut across him, "I'm not as stupid as you took me to be."

"It's true. That I found out during our brief business transaction. You're one bit of a smart fellow, John." The man paused over the line a little while, then continued. "But your ability to find out about me within a very short period of time is intriguing. How did you do it?"

The African knew he was dealing with a crafty man. Therefore he wouldn't allow himself to become absorbed by any friendly ploy used by the stranger who had come and ruined his happy life. John seemed to be winning the first round of his battle, frightening his foe.

"Listen to me," John cautioned further. "I'm coming after you, and I'm going to make sure that you're a dead man. You understand now that you made a slip, meaning that you were not as intelligent as you considered yourself to be."

The African did not allow a reply.

"I know exactly where to locate your workshop in Alicante, so be ready. I am coming for revenge to honor my friends you murdered. And I will accomplish this with the last drop of my blood."

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“Why don't you take things easy, John? Let's discuss and settle this case peacefully.

John cut the line. He left the phone booth and began walking. So the man was truly based in Alicante! His hands trembled with excitement over how easy it was to locate the man he wanted; his legs trembled with fear because he knew the man he wanted was more than dangerous. Threatening him wasn't as easy as fulfilling the threat itself.

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Francisco Riera Martinez dropped his office telephone and quickly pulled out his mobile phone. He scrolled and selected a number, then dialed. A second later, a male voice came on the line.

“You're disturbing a loyal member of the police force on duty. What may I do for you?”

“Straight to the point. A call came to my office line a few minutes ago. I want to know its place of origin.”

“And what is the reward for such an intelligence job?”

“Five thousand will reflect on the account by midnight.”

“Make it ten.”

Francisco hesitated, but understood he would lose the bargaining battle. “OK. Ten.”

“I will call back.” The line went dead.

Francisco Riera Martinez sat in his office and waited for the information with a sense of urgency. He was both content and discontented. Content, because the man he wanted to get at and eliminate had finally surfaced. Discontented, because it was the man he wanted who had found him, not the reverse. And the man he wanted was threatening him, that's why he was unhappy.

The mechanic was in a dirty dark-blue colored working overall made of a thick twill. His head now inclined downward, his arms were folded, and his elbows rested on top of his desk, perspiration formed on his ears. The phone call he had received generated an increasing sense of panic. Since he was ten years old, no threat had created in him such fear as the African's had done moments ago. Neither had anybody given him the kind of

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surprise he had had within the past few weeks of knowing the young man.

The man looked around the big space, not admiring the mechanic's workshop in the biggest automobile service and repair centre in Alicante, but instead worrying and wondering how the African had found out about the dead Pablo Hernandez Tricas. He had purposely disguised himself in the man's image so that any possible trace would head to the graveyard.

After six minutes, his mobile phone rang. Francisco picked it up.

"Xirivella," the voice said.

Francisco inhaled deeply, then whistled. "Thank you." He cut the line and dropped the mobile phone on his desk, for now more preoccupied by the current burden than interested in chatting with a corrupt policeman.

Francisco Riera Martinez was known as one of the richest citizens of the city, but he knew no satisfaction in the quest for money. Besides the auto mechanic workshop, he owned other business conglomerations which generated huge proceeds for him. But amongst all the ventures, he preferred staying here and handling things himself. And at present, there were more than ten cars, the likes of Ferraris and Lamborghinis, waiting for his attention.

The office space was the only room in the large warehouse-kind-of-hall he used for the automobile repair centre. The office, expansive and well arranged, carried the scent of wealth, with a simply designed desk and a chair in one corner, both made of well-polished, Native American mahogany wood. At the right end of the office, from where Francisco sat, four nicely designed upholstered one-space chairs were dispersed around a small round table, all made of mahogany wood. A giant refrigerator stood slightly to one side behind one of the seats. Here he entertained his clients, visitors and business associates.

Car repair was Mr. Martinez's best talent, and he believed the intelligence associated with the talent came from his mother's blood in his veins. Francisco was born of a Spanish father and a Colombian mother. His father, during his mid-twenties, had gone to Bogotá to work as a staff of the mechanical department of Seat Motors, Colombia. After working with the company for five years, he met and married the beautiful twenty-year-old Colombian girl. Two years later, Francisco's father quit his job with Seat and established his own small private auto repairs centre, his decision being, he wanted to be less busy, and take care of his pregnant wife.

Francisco's father's private job flourished. And ten years after Francisco Riera was born, his father always took him to the workshop. To the man's astonishment, his son took so much interest in the car repairs business that, due to the kind of brainpower the young kid possessed, at the age of twelve, Francisco tore the engine of a car apart and put it back with high precision.

The boy's acumen was a marvel to his father that he wanted his son to take up a degree in automobile engineering in the future. But after high school, Francisco refused to study up to university level, choosing instead to undergo some technical courses, while sticking with his father in the practical job.

Francisco's refusal to go to university wasn't the cause of his parents' uneasiness. Their big concern was that at seventeen, their son's eyes were on how to amass quick wealth overnight. They worried about the kind of friends he kept, and his mother worried more, believing that her son had begun to deal in drugs.

With all this unfolding, Francisco's parents took the quick decision of sending him to Spain. His father gathered the profit he made over the years and established an auto maintenance centre in Alicante, and handed its control to Francisco. By now he was eighteen. Francisco moved to Spain, happy to engage in

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the job he loved doing. But it wasn't that he'd given up his ambition of attaining what he wanted to become in life. He decided to leave all that on one side for the time being, while maintaining steady contact with one or two of his bad friends back in Colombia.

How did he find me with such a great speed? Francisco asked himself as he brought his mind back to the African. His eyes flickered with some admiration for the young man. After all, in the hotel, the African once threw him off balance when he had asked how Mr. Martinez wanted to gain access to the room and take the needed photograph of the people he wanted sedated. Had Mr. Martinez not been smart enough to cover up the unforeseen loophole as fast as he did, maybe the boy would have even become suspicious from then.

And much as that question had hit Francisco hard, from that moment he should have become much more wary of the African's intelligence. It was too late now. The boy had somehow stumbled upon his true identity and was after him. To destroy him!

How did he manage to discover his identity? Francisco wondered, deeply tense. *"You understand now that you made a slip,"* The African's words *"meaning that you were are not as intelligent as you considered yourself to be."*

The statement was a sting to Francisco. And the more Mr. Martinez tried to figure out the error, or errors he had made, the more confused and jumpy he became. Now all these things explained why the African had failed to appear at the garage to pick up his remaining money. Francisco asked himself, Why would the boy come to the garage again since he had already discovered that the substance was a poison? And if John said the substance killed his friends, it meant the fool had taken it home after the foiled first attempt. This meant again that the

fool had been careless enough to keep it somewhere within the reach of his friends.

“¡Maldita Sea!” the mechanic said furiously. “Damn it!” The man who called himself Pablo Hernandez Tricas felt a genuine pity for the African's dead friends because he knew how badly the lethal substance would react on them. *It's one of those things in life*, Francisco decided. Not that he felt any kind of compunction about the actions he carried out on the other two. The plan B had worked to perfection. The work he did on the car was so superb that the car skidded off the road the exact way he wanted it to. And as he later heard over the news, both of the two were mangled by the dozens of repeated tumbles of the car, followed, to his luck, by a fire eruption, so that none of the victims had the chance to survive. At this moment, the burning still made the bodies difficult to recognize, but once identified, the police would come flooding into Francisco's home. He was prepared to welcome them, though.

Even now, as Francisco thought about the African's approach, he felt grateful that all his effort all these days towards eliminating his enemy had been successful. To Francisco's relief, the operation was a success without a trace to him. Unless, of course, now that a major disaster had been brought about by this black-skinned young man.

“I am coming for revenge to honor my friends you murdered.” Francisco Riera Martinez was a man with the intelligence to understand real threats when he heard one. He wasn't going to fool around over this particular one. Absolute riddance! That would be the ultimate solution. Francisco knew it was now more urgent to kill the young African than it had been before, with a ferocious, but very slow method. Killing didn't trouble him. It meant nothing to him. He had performed the act many times. That's what happened when there were unforeseen circumstances in any dealings; and the more he

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thought that due to some unforeseen errors, the African who was threatening his life now had escaped his grip by whiskers, the more his usual paranoia rushed back into his life, totally taking him over.

Mr. Martinez brought his head up and made a paranoid frown that came only when he made plans to harm someone. He stared out of the long transparent glass frame protecting his soundproof office, his attention directed to his only employee, a hardworking boy from the same city as he, whose intelligence in the auto mechanic field Francisco admired. The boy was a wonder at his twenty years of age, Francisco thought. And though Francisco bluntly refused to acknowledge the fact that, considering that age, the boy may be a better professional than him, he accepted the fact that the boy housed a wealth of experience in his brain for his age.

The African had revealed too much about him to the boy, and this worried the wizard mechanic, in as much as he remained grateful for the sound-proof condition of his immediate office, which he had purposely constructed to prevent conversations there filtering into unwanted ears.

The boy had been inside the office when the phone rang, and as customary, had picked up the call. Only Francisco's clients and a few other legitimate associates were allowed access to this phone, so the mechanic allowed his employee to pick up calls whenever Francisco wasn't immediately reachable.

But the wizard mechanic was taken aback when his employee came up to him and relayed the message as he'd been told. And Francisco Riera Martinez had dashed into the office, banging the door behind him, struggling not to let his facial expression give away his emotions as he put the phone to his left ear and said hello. Then, he had heard the African's voice.

Still seated behind the desk, Francisco realized, with some pain, that after the death of the African, only one more thing

would make his worries go away: his employee – a very good boy, a talented young man – must die. The mention of the Ivory by the young man clinched it all. He knew too much now, and like a bomb, might be waiting to explode. But unlike the African's, his employee's death would be fast and painless. To the young man, it would be like going to sleep and not coming back to life again. And to the world, it would be like a disappearance from the surface of the earth.

The man frowned deeply and stood up. It was time he went back to work.

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Between the two Colombian brothers there was a conflict. Again, they were inside their favorite bar, occupying their permanent seats, engaged in an intense argument on how to make the moves for their self-sustenance.

“The weapons are oiled and set for the job,” the younger one said. “So, we will do the hit tonight. It's decided!” As always, the younger of the brothers assumed the power to himself to pilot their business affairs.

The younger man brought the wrap of marijuana burning between two fingers of his right hand from the table to his mouth. He positioned it between his lips and drew thoughtfully on it, looking at the drug as if it were a Paella Valenciana – a delicious Valencia-prepared rice meal. His left hand was cupping a half-empty bottle of San Miguel beer. He locked his reddened eyes with his elder brother's for a long moment, puffed out black smoke, then averted his stare.

“It's easy,” the younger man continued. “ABC. We'll strike at twelve midnight, while Valencia is ablaze.” He turned round and looked in the direction of the entrance of the bar, to which he had his back, and his eyes caught sight of a young tanned South American girl strolling into the bar, heading towards the cigarette vending machine. The Colombian smiled, suddenly forgetting his discussion.

The older one was watching, knowing that what raced through his younger brother's mind was to do with the girl when he had lured her into their apartment.

When the young girl bought cigarettes and disappeared from the bar, the younger Colombian returned to his position, with

the angry look back on his face as quickly as it had disappeared. He looked down at his watch. "It's twenty past seven. We still have at least four hours to rest before we strike. We cannot back out now, we have debts piled up. Or soon," he paused for a moment, "we'll be sleeping in the streets."

The elder brother did not respond right away. Instead, he lifted his own beer bottle and took some time for a sip. He dropped the bottle back on the table, then looked at his brother. "I'm not in support of using killer weapons on innocent people. It's too dangerous, more dangerous than drug peddling itself." Unlike his younger brother, he enjoyed drinking alcohol on a social basis. No smoking of cigarettes, no smoking of marijuana. "I would still prefer that we went around in search of small-time dealers to pal up with."

"It's time you stopped talking about those small-time dealers of yours!" The younger man rolled marijuana in between his fingers and drew another lungful, blowing out smoke. "What's matter with you? It's almost one month since you set yourself the task of finding your minor dealer friends. How far have you got? Nowhere! No more shitting, we're striking tonight!"

"I'm against that." The older brother said bluntly.

The younger shot him a harsh look. "Weeks ago, in this same spot, you said the economic crisis was hitting hard on the drug dealers too, didn't you?"

"It doesn't matter what I said. I need more time to think about what you're suggesting. Please!"

"We do it tonight or never. The bills are four thousand Euros. Put that into your damned head!"

The brothers sat in silence a long time, staring at each other.

The senior of the two finally resumed, pointing towards the direction of the bar owner. "I had a little talk with him. He has agreed to bear with us till the middle of next month."

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"I believe you've spoken with Iberdrola and Emivasa," referring to Spain's energy and water utility companies respectively. The younger man paused to drop accumulated ash into the ashtray. "¡Y el dueño del nuestro piso también! And the landlord of our apartment too."

The older brother ignored him, and instead said, "I also sent him an email yesterday, explaining our present situation."

"What email?" the younger eyed him like a foe. "How do you expect a ghost to reply your emails?" The effect of the drug was beginning to manifest itself. He stood up, facing his brother, ready to leave. He was blocking his brother's view of the entrance to the bar. "A man who doesn't want you to see his face, whose voice you barely recognize, could decide to do away with your email until the day he wants your services. Be reasonable." He tapped a forefinger of his right hand on his skull.

"My mind tells me he'll come to us soon," the elder brother assured him. "Por favor tomarte las cosas con calma. Please take things easy."

"¡No me importa!" He dragged in another lungful of his drug. "I don't care about a ghost!" Then he dropped the remains into the ashtray. "And I don't give a damn whether you're in or not. Tonight I'm going to execute the plan all alone."

The elder of the brothers smiled to himself. He knew the last threat was an empty one. No matter how hard his brother tried to prove he was strong, he could never do things without his elder brother's backing. Already unhappy that the younger man wanted to finish the marijuana they'd bought for sale, he decided to make that fact clear.

"I know you can't engage in that operation without me." The elder brother looked up at his younger sibling, his voice a bit harder now. "So, stop making empty threats."

“Escuchame,” the younger man was still standing. “Listen to me. If you think that without you I can't do things alone, tonight's going to be different.”

“Shut up please, and sit down.” The elder brother's attention was all of a sudden no longer concentrated on the younger man's nasty words. His eyes had caught the shadow of someone who had drawn closer to them, standing at the back of his brother. For a short moment, his eyes went wide with surprise and shock.

The younger of the Colombians stopped short, noticing his elder brother's fear-filled eyes. “What are you—” he began but didn't finish. The younger man spun round, shocked too like his brother. For a long moment, both brothers remained frozen with worry on their faces. They had failed to notice the movement of the intruder who had suddenly appeared. Could the foreigner have heard out about their would-be operation?

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“¿Qué quieres?” the younger of the Colombians asked. “What do you want? So, you took a bold step up here uninvited.” He clenched his right fist for a punch. “Meaning, you want some trouble with me?” His reddened, hostile eyes were fixed on the stranger standing face to face with him. He considered it odd and unimaginable for an interloper dressed in a dirty working overall covered with multicolor of drops of paint – that overall had been used for some painting job – to walk up to them in the heat of an important conversation, and stand there looking at them, not uttering a word.

John stood firm, not cowed by the words and actions of the man whose height made him a short man by an inch. His gaze was locked with the serious eyes of his interrogator.

In the past, while John was still in secondary school, a student in the senior level, a taekwondo fighter, who came to like him because of his academic brilliance, taught him how to react to the senior bullies who always acted strong and violent. *“Stand strong. Fix your eyes on them as they do to you. Be calm with any of their actions of violence, and they, like a dog, will think first before biting. If they ever would again.”*

After moment, the interrogator went calm. No further action. Instead, both men remained in their standing positions, staring at each other, none of their eyes wavering.

“What do you want from us?” the Colombian asked. His tone became softer than before. He released his clenched fist. He glanced back at his seat, lowered himself and sat down.

The strategy had worked, John thought, triumphant within. He remained standing in silence moments after the Colombian

sat down, his eyes boring into the man's. But sure now that his action had had the effect he wanted, he went to the third and unoccupied seat and sat down. *"When they've soft-pedaled, introduce yourself in a hard way. This way, they believe you're not ordinary, and when they accept it, they're your friends."* The only problem now was, he considered, this had nothing to do with juvenile school days. This was reality. If he made any mistakes in the way he approached these two, he would be in for trouble.

As John watched the two men, he noticed that when he had come up to them the bewilderment reflected more on the one sitting down, whose mouth stood agape as he tried to figure out what he wanted. He observed that he seemed calmer than his companion did. The African looked around the entire bar, checking if the little game they played had caught anybody's attention. It didn't. He relaxed.

"I want some marijuana, urgently!" he told the two men, striving to keep his command of the Spanish language better than ever. Earlier, he had seen the man who interrogated him draw in something he swore wasn't a cigarette.

The two brothers shot quick glances at each other, surprised by the request

"What do you mean?" the calmer man said.

"Cannabis, you heard me, hemp. I am in desperate want for something to puff. Now."

"So, what makes you think you can get something like that from us?"

John leveled a gaze at the one he now knew to be the hard man. "I recognize my kind of people when I see them."

The two men stared at him once more, in long silence, both engaged in a thought but unable to come up with a way of warding off the man who just appeared. Would they start

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learning to do business with everybody that came their way from today?

“Marijuana is scarce now,” the hard man finally broke the silence, deciding to take a try. “You know that.” He contorted his face with a little more hardness. “Are you prepared for double the normal cost price?”

“If I wasn’t ready, I wouldn’t be searching for it with this desperation,” the African lied, despite not knowing anything about the stuff he was asking for.

“Which means you’ve got the money?”

“The money is not my problem. Deliver and have your money.”

“Quantity?” the hard man asked.

“Twenty,” John mentioned without reasoning.

“What?” the hard man queried, not hiding his surprise. “Twenty? In Kg or g?”

John’s mind skipped. “In g of course,” he said quickly.

“That’s too much for someone only desperate for a smoke, because it will cost plenty.”

John brought both arms forward and rested them on the table. “I don’t care what it costs. This I said earlier. Let’s be fast about this.”

The request stunned the hard man. He considered things. This boy must be a junkie. “Wait a few minutes,” he said to the African. He looked at his brother for some time, then stood up and moved away from them towards the bar’s toilet area.

Two minutes later, the younger Colombian returned to the table, holding a substance wrapped in a transparent waterproof material.

“Three hundred Euros.”

“Not a problem, I will pay,” John said after the young man had sat back in his seat. He extended his right hand and

collected the marijuana from the Colombian. He stuffed enough money inside his pocket with the key the girl gave him before she left the house in the morning.

The African fixed a good look at the two men sitting with him, wanting to guess their country of origin. He couldn't, rather just assumed. Colombians. While walking along the street in anxious search for someone who would provide him with the weapon he wanted, John had come across a bar, and it caught his attention because, besides the name given to the establishment by whoever owned it, in the background of the signboard were written the three words, "Tierra de Colombia – Land Of Colombia."

The phrase had attracted John and he had wandered into the bar, deciding to go and have a drink and survey the inside, believing that the dirty overall he wore, covered with paint drops, would once more help him attract less attention from people while he walked in the street: An African returning home from work didn't draw people's attention or suspicion, even that of the Spanish police. By circumstance, it was the same outfit that helped him escape from Mark's house. He never thought anything about using a disguise, until Mark had torn his clothes. The unwashed overall was packed with other dirty clothes inside the washing room. Mark never worked, so John sensed that it belonged to the man who rented the apartment where his friend lived. He changed into it, and then hid his own clothes under the other dirty clothes.

The moment he landed in the young woman's apartment he had even thought she might chase him away because of the way he was dressed. To his surprise, she'd simply asked him to go and do something about his unsightly appearance.

When he had walked into this bar earlier, there had been a few customers inside. The locale had space the way John liked a good drinking joint to be. Though he never would have had the

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idea that the place had been built to serve as a pub before it was converted.

Inside, John had taken his time and looked around, acting like a professional detective. A middle-aged man and his mistress sat at the bar, engrossed in a romantic discussion while taking their drinks. The woman was smoking. Two old couples occupied the table in the middle of the bar, drinking and discussing something about the economic situation of the country. There was also a group of four South American men seated at another corner, drinking alcohol, and chatting and laughing. A few spaces away from them, two young black men were seated together, and in a discussion. Their presence encouraged John, due to their color. At the same time, he had to be cautious; their color was a threat. Both men attracted his attention. From where he first stood at the bar, he strained his ears but could not hear what they were saying.

The African ordered four bottles of Heineken beer. He dropped three uncorked ones into his sack. He took the other bottle and moved quietly, went to a table a little bit away from the two and took a seat. He began to drink the beer from the bottle while pinning his ear to the ground and listening with rapt attention.

John made sure he didn't look the boys' direction as he waited for an opportunity to make a move. The first thing he observed as he sat down was that they were not Africans. Their voices were inaudible, but John caught their rapid use of Spanish language. That was some luck.

His inner mind congratulated him on the efforts he had put in to study the Spanish language to his present of mastery. Were it not for his ability to communicate as he did, he knew there would have been setbacks. He remained patient, eavesdropping with great intent.

The opportunity he waited for materialized when he heard the calmer of the boys say something like, "*I know you can't engage in that operation without me.*" John was confused at first, not knowing what he heard could mean.

Operation?

The African decided to try his luck. His decision coincided with the action of one of the boys, who stood up. He took the half-taken bottle of beer and approached the black boys. The standing man made John's presence temporarily unnoticed as he drew closer to both men.

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John collected the product he requested. He opened the knapsack placed under the seat where he sat and dropped the marijuana inside it, then brought out six fifty Euro notes in return and handed the money to the seller.

“One more thing,” the African said, inspecting the immediate environment to be sure no one was paying attention to them. John had considered that if these two dealt in drugs, it meant they were street men, which also meant the possibility of their helping to direct him to where he could purchase a weapon.

“What's that?” the two brothers answered simultaneously.

“I want a gun,” John said. “To buy.”

The two brothers shot a longer glance at each other, and then at John, both aghast by what they had heard. John felt the silence to be eternal.

The calmer of the boys broke the silence. “Did you say a gun?”

“A gun.” John gathered more courage, hardening his face. “You heard me correctly.” His eyes gawked back at the other eyes gazing hard on him.

“¡Por el amor de Dios!” the hard man said with a croaked voice. “For God's sake! What is this man talking about?” He left his erect sitting position, surged forward from his seat and rested the elbow of his right hand on the table. He pointed the forefinger at the African. “We are not in America, where gun ownership has legitimacy. The name of this country is Spain. You hear that? Spain!”

John disregarded the warning as if he had heard nothing. “I have an urgent task to carry out, and I can pay any amount to lay my hands on a gun.”

The hard man studied John with suspicion. “The police recruit African informants these days. I think you're one.” He watched out the African's face for signs of deception.

“Look, my friends, you could see I'm in a hurry. Are you willing to do me the favor, or should I look somewhere else? I am not out for too much talking here.”

“A painter working for a company is a marijuana addict. That's understandable,” the older of the boys chipped in. “This painter suddenly has got something to do with a gun. How does this fit in?”

“I will explain to you.” John sighed. “I have a consignment, drugs, coming in two days, but I am not comfortable the way the deal is going. The stuff is scarce these days.” He stirred a little on his seat and brought both arms back on the table. “I need some protection for myself. Have you got me?”

John was coining a statement made by Sappy nine months back. Before their little face-off, Sappy mentioned the fact that drugs were becoming scarce in the European Union countries because of the new maximum security checks introduced within the Union, and that that was why it attracted lots of profit these days.

“Hombre, are you really into it?” the younger asked, a bit friendlier than he'd been earlier.

“That's my job. Forget what I'm putting on now. In this business, one needs to hide from the authorities.”

The two brothers looked at each other, convinced. As he watched the boys, John sensed that what he said had generated a sudden interest from them. They were attentive now, each weighing at what they heard: The opportunity they wanted had finally arrived.

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“Speciality?”

“Speciality?” John repeated, his heart jolting a little, not understanding the question.

“Which do you deal in?” the hard man demanded, drawn to asking many questions.

Which?

The question struck the African. He opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. But before he could reveal his confusion, the younger Colombian helped him out, not knowing that he had done so.

“I mean white or brown?”

“I deal in white,” John covered quickly. He recalled the white powder Sappy showed him. He nearly had thrown Sappy out of the apartment then, because of the fear that overcame him.

“Hey, this means we can do business with you,” the calmer of the brothers said with excitement.

John couldn't believe his luck. The boys were complete street men. “There is no problem with that.”

“What I mean is,” the elder of the Colombians drew a circle in the air with the forefinger of his right hand, “we can help you in the distribution.”

“I'd be glad to do business with you,” John looked hard at both men as if reconsidering the partnership proposal. “That is, if you both have the guts.”

The look he got in return from the two boys told him they didn't appreciate the insult. John covered his tracks. “OK, I didn't mean any insults, but I'd like to be partners with you if you want it with me.”

“Look Mister, that's our job too,” the older made his statement emphatic. “Just that we've been out of supply for some time. We are searching for a way to sustain. You get what I mean?”

"I get it. So, you guys are friends then, from Colombia?"

"Brothers," the hard man corrected. "From Colombia. He's my elder."

John nodded. "OK." *No wonder*, he thought. This guy had been taking over the conversation since it began. Younger brothers always thought they were more knowledgeable than their seniors.

"The item you want will cost five thousand Euros. It's ready if you have the money."

John was almost choked, as his body jerked forward a little over what the hard man said. His eyes narrowed and his head spun a moment. Things were happening faster than he had thought. The two men here had a solution to what he wanted. The stabbing in the African's intestine went into oblivion. He checked the bar once more, as he had been doing from time to time since he had been sitting there. He looked at the younger Colombian, wanting to ask if he really meant what he just said. But instead he announced, "I will pay four thousand Euros, cash, right now, as long as it's in good order."

"Do you know about guns, my friend?" the hard man asked.

"I well do," John said.

The hard man nodded, "Good. Then what we're talking about here, that you want to buy at your four thousand, is a brand new American Customs Engraved Smith & Wesson Model 40 Centennial pistol. You know how much that costs in the market?" He didn't wait for a reply. "Six thousand, five hundred Euros!"

"The price is irrelevant. Mind you, soon you and I will be using it for the trade together. My success tonight determines to how far I will go with you!"

There was a long silence as both brothers considered the African's last statement.

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“Let him have it at that price, Álvaro,” the elder of the brothers finally suggested to his younger. He cleared his throat. “I think we’ve found a partner for a would-be lasting business relationship.” He looked at John for approval of what he said.

John understood what was wanted of him. He nodded his head, “Seguro. Sure.”

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Álvaro shot a hard contemptuous look at his brother. He wondered when the big fool would start thinking smartly. Álvaro knew for sure that this African sitting right here and talking big understood nothing about guns and hadn't touched one before. Álvaro knew that if they insisted on the price he gave the African, the boy would pay. Whatever he wanted to do with it was important to him. And that five thousand Euros would have helped them offset all the debt they owed. Damn his brother!

The younger Colombian stood up once again and wandered off, back to the small packing store bordering the toilet he had visited earlier to get the weed for the African. Somehow he felt relieved, though, that some money had come into their purse. This would go a long way to solving their problems. It also meant that his planned extortion this night would be postponed for a while. It was clearly a miracle that had brought the African.

The two guns were already assembled for tonight, hence it didn't take Álvaro much time to pull one of the weapons out from where he hid them, and after two minutes, he left the store and crossed over to the toilet. Sure nobody was inside, he bolted the door and surveyed the gun. Then he unbolted the toilet's door and opened it. He gestured to the other two constantly looking at his direction waiting for a signal. The two rose and moved to join him in the small toilet.

"It's loaded. Six bullet rounds," Álvaro told the African, leaning against the toilet's already bolted door. As the other two

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watched, he emptied the bullets loaded in the gun. That done, Álvaro secured the bullets inside a small holdall he held in his hand. He handed the empty gun to John. "Hand in the money and the bullets become yours."

John stared at the gun as if death had been handed over to him. He felt the weight of the object in his hand, terrified by the sight of the weapon. And though, he struggled to conceal it from the brothers, his hand quavered as he opened his knapsack and dropped the weighty metal inside it. John selected eight notes of five hundred Euros and handed them to the younger Colombian. Álvaro counted the money to be sure the payment was complete.

"The deal is done," Álvaro said. "I leave first, you come after me. My brother leaves last." The hard man was making sure the African understood that the money was with him and not with his brother, in case John had something shady at the back of his mind. He handed the holdall of the six bullets to his elder brother.

"I trust you will exchange phone numbers with my brother before leaving?" Álvaro asked as he unbolted the door and hurried out.

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John emerged from the bar, in time to see a mammoth group of Valencia Las Fallas parade members in a ceremonious procession along the street, all dressed in their gorgeous traditional parade costumes. Many little girls and young women were in the front row of the group, carrying flowers in their hands, followed by a full marching band at their back. The crowd was pushing towards the direction of the bar from his left.

The African turned right, moving gently ahead of the crowd along the pedestrian pavement. He saw the single police motor bike in front ahead. He knew there would be another group of policemen around monitoring the activity, but it didn't worry him. As long as he didn't stir up any trouble tonight, a hardworking African in his dirty working overall wouldn't be a threat to the security of the festivities.

Well ahead of the crowd, John turned left into a shorter street, walked down to its end and turned left, making a U-turn. Sure he was in the clear, the African added pace to his step, hurrying back to his hiding place.

The good voice came back without warning and hammered within him, reminding him that the object he carried in his sack was a weapon that, when its trigger was pulled back, could easily take somebody's life. John slowed down his pace and felt awkward and sober. He had never been as horrified as he had been minutes ago when the older of the Colombian brothers handed him the half-dozen small, pointed end sharp objects. As he took the bullets and dropped them inside his knapsack, he

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wished that all happening to him was a simple nightmare that would come to an end when he woke up in the morning.

The African reduced his pace, walked slowly, while struggling to reassess the situation and the act he wanted to carry out. If the police caught him now while in transit, there was no offence bigger than discovering a murder weapon on him. But, “no.” John grumbled to himself and shook his head. He had to do what he wanted to do, for the sake of the three dead. He owed them one thing – to take care of the man who made him murder them. He got to the entrance of the building and inserted the key. Tomorrow he would go hunting for the man and do to him what he did to his friends.

*

The hard man's eyes tracked the African as he emerged. Álvaro's action of leaving the bar before his elder brother and the African had been planned. When he left the joint, he had darted into where he stood now, a bar opposite the one they'd been in. Álvaro stood near a cigarette vending machine located beside the window. Good for watching out along the street.

He feigned searching his trouser pockets for the coins while he watched the African turn. Álvaro extended his long neck, focusing past the window into the street. The African's pace was slow. He probed and finally brought out the coins, inserted them into the machine and ordered cigarettes. Seconds later, he bent down and picked up the cigarette packet.

Álvaro headed towards the exit of the bar. He stopped by the door, lighting a cigarette. The Las Fallas procession group had blocked the way. To his advantage. The Colombian gave himself a hundred seconds, then gently joined the crowd and began to push his way ahead, using the advantage of his height to keep track of the African.

Álvaro frowned as the African turned left and disappeared into a smaller street. He waited a few seconds, then followed,

giving a little distance to the crowd. He reached the edge of the street and peeped out. The African was already at the end of the short street.

Álvaro followed.

Now in the open, with no crowd to shield him, the Colombian maintained a good distance behind, ducking well out of sight so as not to alert the African. The African got to the end of the street and turned left again to join another longer street. It was a U-turn, Álvaro observed. A minute later, the Colombian reached the end of the street and cautiously turned left. The African seemed to be making the kind of journey Álvaro was used to.

The Colombian frowned again and followed. He saw the African quicken his pace, walk a distance and slow as if stopping. Álvaro walked up to a bottle waste disposal silo nearby and bent slightly, brought out a cigarette and lit it. But the African kept walking, never stopping. The Colombian left his hideout and followed.

The African got to a building, stopped and inserted a key. What was he doing? The Colombian asked himself, suddenly furious, his eyebrows down and together. He watched as the African opened the door and went in.

“No. You bastard,” Álvaro murmured, “I thought you would continue the journey.” Even more infuriated, the Colombian turned and began walking back to the bar.

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Hours had passed and the proprietor of the Francisco Riera Martinez Auto Mechanic Workshop was back, seated in his office, behind his desk, his mind occupied with memories of his past. His left hand went to the edge of the desk, to a small sized metallic silver spanner. He scooped the object up from the desk and brought it up to his eyes' level. Francisco stared at the metal without focus, his upper eyelid drooping with sadness. After several moments, he dropped the object back to its position, then looked at the watch on his wrist. 8.01 P.M.

Francisco extended his right hand to a signal button fixed on the desk while looking at the direction where his employee was engaged, fixing a car. He thumped the button and when the young man looked up to his direction, Francisco beckoned him over with a wave.

"Rafael," the mechanic called as soon as the young man came in and closed the door, "you go home now. I will take care of the other things."

The young man was surprised. "Pero señor, queda una hora más hasta las nueve. But sir, it's still one hour before nine o'clock." He looked at his employer. "And we still have plenty things to take care of."

"I know, Rafael," Francisco stood up from his seat, went to the young man and cuddled him on the shoulder. "I know. But don't worry about it. Just take the remaining hour, go home and relax yourself. You can go to Valencia and enjoy the last day of the Falla festival. We'll continue the day after tomorrow."

"Gracias, señor," the boy said happily, "Thank you, sir." He turned and left the office.

Ten minutes later, Francisco was in the big office alone. Not that he had any urgency to attend to, any damaged vehicle needing attention. But there also was no cause to hurry home either. He had no family to return to. The family he cherished from childhood had long been gone, and his wife was dead now.

The man's lips narrowed and he grunted in pain. The more his memories pictured his lost family – his parents and his little sister – the more his insanity intensified.

They had vanished when he was twenty-two years old. Then, Francisco had been thriving in the auto centre he managed here in Alicante, and his parents were proud of his achievements. They often visited him during the summer period and spent a little time with him, and encouraged him in his career.

One summer, something bad happened. His mother became ill and unable to embark on a flight. So she couldn't make the journey. His father brought his younger sister on the plane to Spain for a one-week holiday visit to Francisco. But their flight went down three minutes after takeoff from Bogotá airport. All the crew members and passengers on board were killed.

The news devastated both Francisco and his mother. Mother never came back from the shock. Two months later, she died of heart failure, leaving young Francisco a solitary man. And from that day, Francisco had gone mad and thought nothing much about the world in which he lived. His treasure had been taken away from him. The world had turned against him.

For another fifteen years, Francisco rejected getting married, sticking only to his ever-expanding business and the profit it fetched him. It took six years after the death of his family before he decided to go back in pursuit of an ambition which had lingered within his mind for years – drug trafficking.

First, Francisco resolved to revitalize his father's auto mechanic office in Bogotá, having left it closed since the man's

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death. Then he appointed his close childhood friend, who happened to share the same ambition with him, as the manager of the centre. His friend knew nothing about the auto mechanic profession though, but he was a well-trained welder with good welding precision skills.

When the Bogotá auto centre began functioning, Francisco decided to make a deadly adventure he had already had planned ages before. One day, while in Colombia on a visit, he put on a pair of boots, took a pair of powerful binoculars, and disappeared into the mountains of south-eastern Colombia in search of birds. Francisco went bird watching in the territories of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

He was abducted right away and held hostage by the members of FARC. And contrary to how he planned it, they tortured him to near death before he could even deliver the message of support he carried.

Now, Francisco Riera Martinez's heart began to hammer as he dwelt back on how he almost killed himself while in the quest for wealth.

The good news. After suffering at the hands of FARC, Francisco succeeded in setting out his solidarity and the lucrative business proposal. FARC bought it, though it would be years before Francisco discovered that FARC later assigned someone aware of his ambition since childhood, now a leading figure in the organization, to rerun a thorough background check on him before they went into business.

Two days after Francisco's release, he went back to Spain, sick but triumphant.

Mr. Martinez turned his head left and looked out beyond the thick transparent glass panel that formed part of his office's partition wall. In a corner of the well illuminated main hall was parked a black convertible Bentley Continental GTC speed car,

a gift shipped to him from Colombia by one of his wealthy clients, as an expression of gratitude for the excellent services Francisco Riera Martinez, Auto Mechanic, had rendered the client over his fleet of cars. Francisco smiled to himself. He knew better.

Shortly after the encounter with FARC, luxurious cars began arriving at the branch of the now Francisco Riera Martinez Auto Mechanic in Bogotá for maintenance. And during an interval of a month, recommendations would be made for three of the cars, owned by different clients, to be shipped to the headquarters in Spain for appropriate attention to be given to them by Mr. Martinez, the wizard mechanic himself.

“The time for your real job has come,” Francisco told the head of the Bogotá office as soon as the cars started piling in.

They shipped the cars to Spain for maintenance, but only a handful of men knew the real motive for the shipments. Within the cars' exhaust systems, intelligent alterations were made, multiple linings introduced into the hollow chambers, which, in lieu of housing the catalytic converter, now held a huge number of carefully packed sacks of cocaine weighing between thirty-five and forty kilos for each car. They did the packaging with an expertise that evaded the drug control authorities of Alicante port and their sniffer dogs. The job was done by the man who headed the Francisco Riera Martinez Auto Mechanic Workshop in Bogotá, a genius in his own line of work.

When the cars were released by the authorities, Francisco hauled them to his office. He worked alone on Saturdays, ensuring that his employee would be away as he extracted the imported goods from the exhaust system. He later transported the drug to the remote countryside of Valencia Comunidad. From there, the distribution to the final consumers began. This way, the business flourished for more than four years without

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any external threat, accumulating millions of Euros for the cartel.

Until an unexpected hazard had suddenly erupted: A snitch from within the organization. Somebody, unhappy with the cartel, started giving out secrets of the operation to the authorities. And though it didn't cause Francisco Riera Martinez and his partners problems to get rid of the informant, they had to abandon the project.

Francisco smiled ruefully as he gazed at the convertible Bentley coupé. He didn't show remorse of any kind when he took care of the obstacle when the kind of money that could buy him the world was streaming into his coffers.

Thereafter, it took Francisco just another six months to present the group with an even better option for the shipment of the cocaine than the cars. This time the cartel established a small company that refined and packaged coffee products for export to European countries. Colombia is the third biggest producer of coffee in the world after Brazil and Vietnam. Therefore, the production of coffee was in steady stream.

The group chose the Spanish city of Alicante as the company's European headquarters, so that the product was first shipped to Spain before onward movement to other parts of the continent. The port authorities didn't know that a number of the coffee tins, housed in a certain number of marked cartons, were all filled to the brim with the harmless-looking white powder. As the cartel had done when it transported the product with the cars, it applied certain deliquescent chemical over the well-sealed, marked containers, beating sniffer dogs.

Francisco smiled further over the ingenuity.

Sniffer dogs obtain a deal of detailed information about their surroundings from smells, of which their handler is unaware. They collect information by analyzing scents around the environment, and are able to analyze the slightest smells in the

air because they possess scent sensitivity of up to a million times greater than a human being's. Hence, to the human olfactory sensory neurons, the chemical Francisco and his partners applied over the containers produced a sweet smell like a perfume, whereas, to the olfactory sensory neurons of a sniffer dog, this chemical emitted a particular odor, not preventing the animal from perceiving the smell of the drug, but also giving out a specific scent which gently repelled the dogs, causing them to back out of the investigation. The repulsion would be so slight that the dogs didn't react differently enough for this to be detected by their guides.

The university professor from Colombia who invented the chemical was in the employ of the cartel, a constant two hundred thousand Dollars transfer wired into his secret account somewhere in the Caribbean islands each time a successful shipment was made. The corrupt university teacher had researched and developed his invention for more than ten years, using different dog species widely used by the police authorities as sniffer dogs, including the famous German shepherds, the Labrador retrievers and the Belgian Malinois.

The organization held a university female student sex-murder secret involving the professor which if divulged would earn him a life imprisonment. Then the man alone held the formula for producing what he referred to as "his" chemical, declining to divulge it to the cartel. This way, both parties were satisfied with the partnership.

Francisco thought with pride about the million dollar moneymaking venture his intelligence helped him put in place. This strategy had gone unsuspected to the present point, and as far as the society he lived in was concerned, it knew Francisco as a perfect man. He didn't think anybody had a case against him.

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His mind suddenly hit where it bothered him: If he didn't act fast, the good image he had in society might soon end. *This African is approaching me too quickly*, he told himself, *and I am scared about it. I need to do something before it gets too late.*

How? Francisco asked himself. What would he do and how would he go about doing it? The whole of his blood rushed to his brain over the question, and a feeling of panic overtook him. The wizard mechanic sat still, with no idea of how to begin a search for the African within the next couple of hours.

Francisco Riera Martinez stood up from his seat and walked down towards the upholstered chairs and the round table where he entertained his clients, and stood a long time, nervous and furious at the same time.

Something occurred to him. Damn! Before now, he had wanted to keep the secret from people as much as he could. But now Francisco knew he had to employ more hands. Yes, he really would have to. Although, the more he involved more hands, the less secret the whole operation became, it was obvious there was nothing he could do about this.

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Álvaro walked into the bar and went to meet his elder brother, who was still seated, smiling. “What are the smiles all about?” the hard-faced man asked as he drew back a seat and sat down.

The elder brother ignored him and asked, “Did you track him down?”

“Of course I did. What's funny about that?”

“I didn't say anything was funny.”

“What then!” Álvaro insisted. “Later in the night, we're going back for the gun.”

“You've got the apartment number?”

“Never mind. We'll trace him.”

“Well, yes, but forget about him for now. I just got a phone call. It's like we have something better to do now.”

“A phone call from who—?” the younger man began, then stopped, in time to understand who the other referred to.

“We have ten minutes to access a mail he sent to us,” his brother said, standing up.

Álvaro was on his feet too. The two brothers hurried out of their joint.

It took five minutes. They were in their house. The elder of the brothers booted the old computer to power up and moments later, they logged on to the phony business email address they had been running for years.

If the brothers expected to print out the address of the place to pick up the consignment and the list of addresses of the people to deliver the goods to, they were disappointed. What

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came out of the email attachment sent a wave of shock through both men.

The elder of the brothers blew a long shrill whistle in amazement. “Este es imposible,” he hummed out. “This is impossible.”

A scanned copy of a photograph showed the shot out image clearly reflecting the face of the African with whom they just concluded a gun and a partnership deal less than an hour ago. The message that came with the photograph chilled both men:

He has long been the biggest threat to our organization and to our business. He's hiding somewhere in Xirivella. Use all resources in place to locate and terminate him. Optimum accuracy required. You have until twelve midnight to carry out the duty. Twelve midnight. Name your prize.

There was a long silence as the two brothers looked at each other in awe.

“What do we do?” the elder brother asked. “I can't believe this!”

“We will carry out the order,” the hard man said, smiling, no longer looking at his brother, instead focusing his attention on the message carried by the email, as if he wanted to absorb the content word for word. His voice had turned chilling and domineering now, but it comforted the other man a little. “Though, the content of this email is not true.”

“This whole thing is crazy.”

“How do you mean?” Álvaro asked, still absorbing the email's message.

“How on earth can we go after a man with a loaded weapon?”

“He has the gun,” Álvaro's eyes left the computer and he turned to face his brother. “To shoot it... he can't handle that. He is a complete rookie.” He paused for a moment. “I noticed it

from the way he held the object when I handed it to him a while ago—”

“You can't be sure of that. That guy is armed.”

Álvaro waved the warning away, saying, “And his rising tummy makes him an easy prey for both of us if the hit comes to engaging in a fight with him.” He beamed at his brother. “Though, I don't ask you to get involved should it be hand-to-hand fights. You're too weak to engage in that kind of battle.”

The senior of the men squirmed but absorbed the insult.

“Send him a message,” Álvaro instructed. “Our price is two hundred thousand Euros, half transferred into our account within the next hour. Thanks to the era of online banking. The other half must be transferred as soon as the deal is done.”

“That's too much. Do you think he'll agree to it?”

“He has no options.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Why?” Álvaro repeated.

“Yeah.”

“He wants the job done as quickly as possible.” Álvaro moved to the window of the small computer room, looking out while lighting some wrapped marijuana. He drew in lungful. “Xirivella is a big place.” He turned, looking at his brother. “How does he think we're going to dig the African out within his given time limit without having that amount in our hands for mobility? This is our luck brother, and the beginning of our return to Colombia. Always think wisely.”

The senior of the brothers sent the information as instructed by his junior.

In the next twenty minutes, they would receive another stunning message. *Your demand is accepted. Check your account in half an hour for the transferred first installment. And please proceed to find him immediately. Alert me when it's time to terminate.*

59

It's time to find out all the secrets, Tarla thought. How much money did he have in his possession? Where did he hide the loot? The way things were going now, the boy seemed in a hurry to leave her house and move on, and she wasn't happy about that. She had to take control of everything now. Further delay might prove highly regrettable. And she knew she possessed her own weapon for achieving such an aim.

An hour before, when Tarla had come back to the apartment, the African wasn't in his room. And that had surprised her. At first she thought he had abandoned her house. But his belongings reassured her he was still around. She regretted giving him the spare key to the apartment. In the first instance, she had done it because she thought he couldn't step an inch out of the apartment in any way. After thirty minutes of waiting, her body warmed up and relaxed when she heard the sound of the door and her fellow African come in.

Now she was seated on the bed inside her bedroom, waiting for the young man to come out from the bathroom before she made the move. She heard the sound of the door, rushed to her door, and opened it slightly. The African was in a towel and coming out from the bathroom. The woman looked at him, and then rushed into her room. She jumped back out in few seconds, naked. She followed the young man into his room.

John stood by the bed, in boxer shorts, applying lotion to his body when she came in. He turned at the slight noise of the door. He froze in disbelief. His mouth hung wide open and his eyes blinked frequently as if he'd seen a ghost.

She smiled at him, knowing her irresistible nakedness struck any man's resistance down with no exception. "How do I look?" she said, triumphed by his paralyzed state.

She least expected it that way. He suddenly was coming for her. She noticed his excited state from the sudden increase in size of the boxer shorts. As he got inches closer, she shut both eyes closed and waited for him to extend his hands, reaching out, cuddling and showering kisses on her; carrying her whole body to the bed and doing things with her in a rough manners.

No. He was only calling out her name. She didn't hear it. She had gone into another world and waiting. He called again. She opened the eyes, disappointed. The young man wasn't stretching out his hands but just looking at her and saying something.

"You're the most attractive girl I've met in my life," she heard him say. "You know I mean what I'm saying. Look at you, everything a woman ought to have, you possess: a good shape, a soft body, a lovely face." The African paused and used his right palm to clear the sweat accumulating on his forehead. "But please... I'd prefer we leave this until things have cooled off. Then, believe me, you're going to enjoy a more peaceful and romantic life with me."

Tarla stood there a long time, traumatized by the rejection of her body, rigidly fixed to the ground and dumbfounded. And unable to react to his statement, her eyes suddenly became hateful. "Son of a bitch!" she turned and began dashing out of the room. "You're a son of a bitch!" She darted into her room and slammed the door shut. She dove into the bed, shut her eyes and covered her head with a pillow.

Her phone's ringing distracted her thoughts. She cursed. She pushed the pillow away, picked up the phone, saw the caller's identity and smelled trouble. She answered, "Yes?"

"I want you in my house in an hour," a thick voice said.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

“But I can't.”

“Tell me why.”

“I have a visitor in the house.”

“I see. But you must see me tonight. What's there? Tell your visitor about something urgent, for which you have got to get to Liria this night, and may or may not be coming back.”

Tarla obeyed.

60

At 9:00 P.M., Inspector Rodriguez had left the video room, and was now sitting in his office. With both his elbows on the desk, his palms cupping his cheeks, he tried to concentrate on another report on the computer while waiting for the results of the orders he had issued earlier.

He brought both palms together and squeezed them, one with the other, then paused to consider something. Mark told him that he was the only close friend of the young man, and that the boy had no other known relatives in Valencia besides the ones now dead. So, how could the African have gone underground for such a long time as this? It was a little surprising.

Antonio stood and walked to the medium fridge in the corner of the office. He opened it and brought out a can of natural mineral water, produced a glass and began pouring water into it. There was a tap on the door. Detective Ricardo walked in.

"No results, still," Ricardo said. The detective drew up a chair and sat in front of the inspector's desk. The inspector went back to his seat and sat down.

"It kind of surprises me really," the inspector dropped the glass of water on the desk. He inclined his head as if considering the effects of the report the detective brought in.

"It all seems that he consciously killed the mobile phone, believing a tracing could be tried on him."

"No. I don't think so," the inspector shook his head.

"Maybe he's much more informed than we think."

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

The inspector didn't respond. The two men went silent for a while, each pondering the situation, giving way to the tick-tock of the large clock on a wall.

"What do we do?" the detective finally asked.

Antonio raised his head and looked at the hands of the clock. "Ten o'clock. We call it off for the day."

"And?"

"I hope something comes tomorrow." The inspector paused a while. "But I am sure soon the young man will do something that brings him out in the open."

61

The way Tarla left her apartment showed that the African woman was tense as she hurried to another apartment somewhere within the neighborhood. She quickened her step, but struggled to contain the trembling of her body, extremely anxious to reach the building as fast as possible. She needed to find out the reason for being summoned at this short notice.

She would alert the police the following morning, the young woman decided. The time was now ripe for the monetary reward. She would tell them the Nigerian suddenly appeared in her home earlier this morning, asking for a short refuge. With the excuse, she would be able to claim the reward they had to offer. It had been more than three months since her mother began bothering her again about the need for the completion of the bungalow she began building for her two years back. This money would help her finish the construction.

The charming Cameroonian young woman thought deeply as she strode along. She would meet her mother's compulsory deadline for the completion of the house – December 2009 – before next July; and her mother's lifespan would be extended further because, as the woman said, it was the only condition that would help her achieve that.

She hissed over one mighty problem the people living in the mother continent had. They never cared to understand that Europe or elsewhere abroad didn't generate money the way they thought they did. It gave her much concern, knowing that the majority of the people in the sub-Saharan part of the continent lived in ignorance of this fact. Yet she didn't blame them. Before she saw her way to Europe, she had been swimming in

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

the same ignorance too. In a region considered as the poorest on earth, the flesh-eating poverty experienced there made everybody think of the western world Diaspora as the safe haven from poverty.

Her mind shifted from her home and came back to her present situation. The unexpected call she had just received, at 10.00 P.M., of the final night of Las Fallas festival, made her restive as she walked along the street. Somehow, she realized things were definitely not going to work the way she'd planned them. This made her agitated and worried.

Something in Tarla's mind argued that all was not OK. But just as quickly she rebuffed these doubts; and oblivious of the ninots being set ablaze on the streets, and fireworks being ignited, marking the end of Las Fallas festival for the children, she moved hastily towards her destination.

She had drawn closer to the building now. She didn't need to worry about the effort of climbing up to the top floor: the building was an old one-storey structure that seemed inserted in-between two modern eight-storey buildings. Its faded cream color painting made it inconspicuous, as many believed it was deserted – being a soon-to-be-demolished house. Only on Saturdays would terrible, deafening noise, resulting from the marijuana-instigated blasting of Latin American salsa music, come out of it. Apart from this, the occupants of the building maintained a respectable quietness in the neighborhood during weekdays.

As Tarla drew closer, she gazed at the building with fear and loathing. She hated the house now, and she hated going into it. But out of guilt, she recollected the events of the past, not up to a year ago, when she made the same place her home, refusing to leave, even when threatened with eviction by force. Then things were good, and too much money rolled in for the occupants in their business.

The entrance door stood slightly open for her. Tarla sighed, breathing intensely, as she opened it and pushed her way through towards the short stairs that led to the upper floor.

Not that then, or even now, she'd ever loved the guy who thought himself to be her boyfriend. Never! She shook her head. Then, she was only trying to protect the mega source of her income, which helped her to maintain the living standard she kept for herself and her family back home: The guy gave her anything she requested. And because of this, she'd managed to keep the relationship going, despite the animalistic sexual nature of the guy who was befriending her. Of course, she also liked to use his protective intimidation to get rid of any unwanted clients.

Then his business had begun to crumble, and frequent quarrels began to ensue between the two of them, due to his jealousy that someone might one day steal her from him. Later, she noticed that he had released his grip on her, so that she could fend for herself and maintain a status quo. Since she no longer gained anything from him, she was overjoyed by this.

The young woman took a quick step and went up stairs.. She avoided touching the rusty metallic railings on one side of the steps. Instead, she placed her left hand against the wall to support herself.

Tarla reached the apartment and pushed open its door. Her attempt failed. That startled her. On a good day, the main door to the house also stood open for her just like the door to the stairs. Today it was locked. This confirmed her feeling of dread that she would be facing a hard time inside this apartment. She began to tremble more in fear of what was coming. She began to reach out for the doorbell. But the door swung open.

“Move right inside: Bitch!”

62

Álvaro appeared from behind the door. He caught and fastened Tarla's left wrist with his hands, and shoved her harder into the apartment's living room. He banged the door aloud and locked it.

Tarla surged forward into the middle of the room, caught surprised by the new level of the violence, her lips stretched horizontally back to her ears in fear.

"What's the matter Álvaro?" was the only thing she could say as she stood panic-stricken, her legs wobbling.

"¿Dónde está?" the Colombian asked. No preamble. "Where is he?" Despite the chill within the apartment, he wore a clean white singlet and the blue-black bottom of a Nike sports tracksuit. The young woman understood that being dressed like this, the Colombian was showing off his intimidating masculine body structure.

"Who are you talking about?" That was all she could say.

Álvaro slapped her hard across the face, the hand too fast for her to dodge as it landed with a ferocity that propelled her to sit on the hard floor. Tarla lost her bearings for a moment, covering her eyes with her hand. She blinked but only saw darkness within the space. It seemed to her as if she had gone blind.

"Answer me." The Colombian had moved closer, was bent over her, ready to attack again. He pulled her up and dragged her into a chair.

"I...I don't know who you are talking about—"

“Liar! Of course you know what I'm talking about, bitch!” Álvaro stretched out his right hand and punched her on the left cheek.

The woman writhed in a deep pain and coiled herself up in the chair, moaning. With Álvaro, she knew better than to shout and attract attention.

“I'll lose my damned mind.” His hand went up for the third time. Álvaro began punching her body.

“Wait! Please wait, I will tell you where he is,” Tarla sobbed out, shrunken and having no stomach to take in any more blows from the hand she knew was ready to cause her more unbearable harm.

“Where is he?” the Colombian repeated the question, eyes ablaze.

“He's,” she cried out, “he's still hiding in my house.”

Of course I know. But just to be very sure. The Colombian smiled inwardly. *And roughen you up for such stupidity.* He dropped his hand and shifted an inch away from her. He turned his back to her, his mind racing about his next action.

“But how did you know about him?” Tarla cried out.

After minutes had gone by, the Colombian turned and faced the young woman, his nose wrinkling, the intimidating hardness in his eyes hanging. He shot a cold stare at her as he prepared to answer her question.

Intuition, girl! That's how I knew he was in your house. You're a whore, after all. The Colombian decided against saying that. It was better to cook up a story from a little bit of the true one. “I saw a fast and suspicious movement from a strange black boy in my neighborhood this evening.” He paused some seconds for it to sink in. “This is my territory. You know that. Nobody, even if he is a stranger, makes such a move here and gets away from my watch. I traced his footsteps to your door. It's as easy as that.”

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

The Colombian would never tell her that his brother and he had mistakenly sold a gun to a stranger and that when they concluded the business, following the instinct that always drove him, had traced the stranger to find out where he went with the weapon.

As he stood before the young woman, Álvaro decided to do things his way. "The man you're sheltering is dangerous."

Tarla suddenly directed her face at him, stunned, speechless, looking on.

"He is armed to the teeth and would take out anybody who stands his way. You in particular," Álvaro stressed the last phrase.

"What?" A deep revulsion hit the young woman from within as Álvaro's words made the hairs of her skin stand on end. "Oh, my God!" she steadied a look at the Colombian. "How are you so sure of what you're saying?"

"Listen to me, you idiot! I understand human reactions to things when I notice one. Only an armed man tries to protect a gun strapped to his waist as your boyfriend did while he hurried to your house. You know he's a man on the run, don't you?"

Tarla was stunned, saying nothing in reply, rather looking at the Colombian in terror.

It worked, the hard man thought. He didn't have any idea of the offence the African had committed, but only said things with reference to the information the man who contacted him and his elder brother had fed them.

The African woman was coiled up in the chair. Álvaro bent down and yanked her handbag out of her hand. He unzipped the bag and turned it upside-down, emptying out its contents. He left the other items in place on the table at the centre of the room and went straight to what he wanted – the keys to Tarla's apartment and her mobile telephone.

Álvaro looked at her, “I knew you were not going to leave this house tonight. That's why I asked you to tell your boyfriend that you are going to Liria tonight and may or may not come back.” He paused to point the thumb of his right hand down. “You’re sleeping here tonight.”

The young woman began to sob harder, tears rolling down her eyes. “Don’t do anything incriminating in my house,” she warned, sure now that the Colombian brothers had a plan against the African. “I won't like a man wanted by the police to be found dead or beaten unconsciousness in my apartment...please! Let's just hand him over and share the money between us. I beg you.”

Things were getting complicated here, the Colombian thought, flabbergasted by the revelation that came from the young African woman. So the police wanted the boy from Africa? Damn! What money did they have to share? Álvaro needed to know more. He pretended as if what the girl said wasn’t news to him. “Who gave you all this information?”

“You mean you're not doing all this for the money?” Some surprise ran through the face of the African woman. “It's all over the news. He’s wanted with a reward of ten thousand Euros from the police. What is really happening, Álvaro?”

The Colombian wasn't listening to her. The bastard, he thought. That's why he didn't hesitate to pay the huge price the brothers had billed him. Things would get out of hand if the African fell into the hands of the authorities. That’s the reason the man wanted him dead at all costs. Well, Álvaro thought, tensed up, as long as half of the money they demanded had hit their account a few hours ago, they were no longer working in the man's interest. They were doing the contrary, and after the deal, and the rest of their money had been transferred, it’d be good-bye to him and his damned business.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

The Colombian deviated from his thoughts and rushed to the woman, grabbed her hands roughly, pulling her up to a standing position. "Come on, bitch, I will double the ten thousand for you. Twenty will be better." He pointed towards a room. "You know you need more money to maintain yourself, and your damned family in Africa. But until then, I've a prepared room for you to sleep in tonight." He hustled her. The woman struggled in painful protest. Álvaro pushed her towards the well-sealed room he had prepared for her for tonight. The Colombian got to the door of the room, shoved the African woman inside, and followed her in.

As Álvaro followed her into the room, Tarla knew the worst was to come. He would tie her hands up with a rope and gag her mouth, to silence her from any noise.

But he didn't. Instead he stood and shot her a long and daunting look before he spoke. "On the bed, sit there."

Tarla obeyed.

"You know what, bitch?" he said. "Don't start anything to attract attention to this house or ruin my plans tonight. Consequently, you've been part of my business in the past." Álvaro rubbed his chin, gathering his thoughts. "You remember the drugs I kept in your house then, for days, weeks? You know what I did each time before I took them away?"

"No," the young woman reeled in shock, waiting for the bomb.

"I took good pictures of them with my camera, always making sure that the interior of your apartment was in view, should a situation like today's come up. So if anything happened to us tonight, there will be a need for the police to know that I had a nice vault at the residence of one lovely young African woman."

Five minutes later, Álvaro came out and began to lock the door.

“Take it easy, Álvaro,” a voice called from behind, “I think you've gotten all you wanted from her.”

Álvaro didn't need to turn to look at his foolish, cowardly elder brother, who had since distanced himself from the interrogation. “Send him another email. We have found him and will be moving in to terminate. Give the exact hour.”

The older man went to the computer and did as instructed.

The two men waited for an email instruction for a go-ahead. It didn't come. Instead, the telephone beside the computer began to ring.

The senior of the Colombians went for it. “Hello?”

“Congratulations.” It was a voice they least expected to hear now. “My boy's network is sophisticated. How did you do it?”

The older Colombian struggled to contain his excitement. And fear. “Thank you, sir,” he said. “It actually cost us the entire fund.” He placed the phone on speaker for his brother to hear. “But it's worth it due to the urgency.”

“I am quite surprised at how fast you boys were over such an emergency.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I am driving out now to join the party. I want to take care of the African myself.”

The two brothers went silent for a long moment. But Álvaro couldn't help but chip in. He protested. “Señor, I don't think there is any need for that. We can get rid of him in there and present the corpse to you.”

“Young man, don't counter my orders,” the man cautioned immediately. The two men felt the uncontrolled anger. “They're not negotiable! I will meet you boys near your house and we proceed from there.”

“Do you know where we live?”

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

“I do, and will be there in less than an hour.” The man cut the phone.

“We will do it his way,” the older man said as he replaced the phone.

Álvaro didn’t say a word. He was fuming.

63

Her detention room was moderate, and indelible memories lingered around it tonight. Tarla reflected over how she'd on several occasions satisfied the Colombian's hunger for sex here, especially during the summertime when he left the large window wide-open due to the extreme hot weather. Though, this night the room surprisingly had no windows.

Tarla inspected the hollow space of the place illuminated by the dim light of a colored bulb and understood what had happened: Alvaro had sealed the window up using a well-cut and well-polished piece of hard wood. She stood up from where she lay, rushed to the wooden panel covering the window and felt its smoothness with her hands. The animal had done the job with the aid of an electric powered screwdriver.

The African woman knew there was no need to try the door. But she went to it. Locked. *No way out.*

Outside, the sounds of firecrackers were creating a muffled noise. Tarla waited until the noise receded, then dropped her right ear to the door, listening. There was silence on the other side of the apartment, as she had expected. They must have left for her house a few minutes before when she had suddenly dozed off. How long ago could that have been? Not more than ten minutes.

She left the door and turned to survey the room once more. The Colombian had also taken the precaution of sweeping the room clean, leaving nothing behind apart from the big mattress and a large winter blanket. Why would the idiot even imagine she might try to take her own precious life? the woman wondered, surprised by the precaution.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

Tarla caught up with the reality. She would not escape from this well-secured prison this night. Tears streamed from her eyes as she sobbed, feeling hysterical and sad to realize she had lost being at the Plaza del Ayuntamiento de Valencia in the next few minutes to witness the closing ceremony of Las Fallas festival, which she never failed to attend since the past four years.

The young woman decided that she must find a way of rescuing the situation and prevent what could happen in her house this night. That was more important than the closing ceremony of Las Fallas festival. She had never trusted the Colombian brothers since she had got to know them.

Tarla opened her mouth, wanting to shout and draw some attention from the outside, but held back, remembering Álvaro's threat. She shivered at the thought of prison. She gasped. "I can't go to prison." No way. She knew Álvaro didn't joke about the existence of those pictures and she knew he meant what he said. If he found out she had alerted the police about him tonight, he'd make sure she went behind bars with him. Yet, it was more important to avoid the impending disaster likely to occur in her house tonight.

Tarla moved away from the door and went back to sit on the mattress, deep in thought. The young woman wondered why she was all of a sudden afraid for the life of the African hiding in her apartment. She shook her head in a furious disagreement with the thought that she might be in love with the young man, and that the love she had developed for him since almost seven months ago was an intense one. She knew the thinking didn't go far from fact. But she rejected it.

"I respect his reserved personality. That's all," the woman said into the air. The incident brought back memories.

How incredible! He called me Tarla, remembering my name. I didn't even know his name until the police flashed him on the TV.

In her prison bed, Tarla felt the weight of a bulky object on her waist. She held her breath in happiness. She cursed herself for forgetting about the object while she had been wondering what to do. Her second mobile phone! The one she used for the coordination of her clientele network, lay strapped to her waist with an elastic belt. She had acquired the phone when the money stopped coming from Álvaro's end. She had always made sure it remained on vibration and out of the Colombian's sight. It was even where she had stored the police contact telephone number.

When Álvaro summoned her to this house, she had fixed it the way it was now and covered it with her winter jacket – the way she hid it most of the time. And when the Colombian hadn't run his hands over her body, she had thanked God. Purchased on contract, the phone had unlimited call credits.

The African woman pulled the mobile phone from where she had buried it and checked the time on it. Five minutes before 12.00.A.M. Tarla hissed in panic. She guessed twelve minutes had passed since the Colombians left for her house. They must be close now.

With a trembling hand, Tarla started scrolling for the number she wanted. She was going to nail the Colombian brothers with just one call, before anything terrible happened in her apartment. One telephone call would do it. Tarla got to the number she wanted and began dialing.

64

John lay awake, his mind troubled, having been in and out of sleep as the hands of the time crawled toward midnight. He tried but couldn't concentrate on sleeping in a proper manner due to the increasing noise created of the firecrackers being thrown in the streets.

The woman, Tarla, came back to his room after the little incident which had occurred between them, announcing her departure to Liria. "I may or may not come back this night," She had said. He turned the lights off to see if he could sleep more soundly, John stretched out alone in the house, in the darkness of his room, his eyes looking up at the dark roof.

The way she'd left... something was wrong, John told himself. But what? He warned himself he might be being suspicious in an unnecessary way. Thinking the way he did could become a big problem.

Yet John sensed that as far as the woman was concerned, his problems were multiplying as each moment passed. He had wondered many times if the girl knew more about his situation than he had thought, but he never knew how to find out. Well, he could do nothing about the situation until tomorrow. Only a short time remained before he would leave the apartment. The following morning, his painting uniform would take him to Alicante, though how to make the journey a hundred percent successfully posed another dicey issue which required careful consideration.

The African engaged himself, thinking up what to tell his family members if they called him, complaining he had been out of service for the past few days; more so, if his relatives'

family had found out about the incident and told them. Though John had vowed that until he'd reached the man he wanted, he wasn't going to allow such an issue to be brought up over the phone.

John's mobile phone rang, startling him, and diverting his thoughts. His eyes widened in confusion at the sound; his phone never left its vibration status. How come? John relaxed, figuring out why: It was the new phone. But the knowledge of this too threw him into a more distressed situation. Who was calling him on a new phone number nobody knew about?

"My God! It was Tarla," John grimaced with the knowledge that she had stored the number. He thought quickly.

Why she's calling?

He pressed the phone's answer button. "Tarla, you are in Lli—?"

"Why didn't you pick your phone quickly?" she said in a rapid and low whisper, to John's astonishment.

"I...I thought—"

"Listen to me! You have a little time to survive." The voice was alarmed. "You must run out of the house right away, because they're coming after you. Please leave at once. Look for somewhere outside the building and hide yourself. Now!"

A sudden confusion ran through the African's brain. He hoisted himself up in the bed and sat erect in the darkness. "What's the matter?"

"Please do as I say without delay before you get hurt."

"I don't understand what you're talking about. Who are coming after me, the police?"

"No, not the police, It's the Colombian brothers. They could be inside the building now. They know it's where you're hiding. They have the key to my apartment and they are coming to kill you."

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

“But...” John swallowed hard, “how did they know that I am?”

Click.

“Hello, Tarla?”

The line was dead.

Terrified, the African jumped out of the bed and dashed towards the door with ferocious speed, despite the agony of his body wanting solid food to eat. Tarla’s last statement cut him to the quick. John had to run out of the house to survive, and concentrate later on finding out what brought the young woman and the Colombian brothers together.

In an instinctive movement, he sprinted back to the bed and placed his hand under it, searching for the gun – the instrument of death he had just purchased from the Colombian brothers. It could be why they were coming after him; to snatch back their weapon.

“They have the key to my apartment and are coming to kill you.”

Would that be why they wanted to kill John? Because of a gun they had sold to him? He didn't think so. Something must be more important for taking his life than just a gun.

John grabbed the weapon from the floor. But there was another problem; he hadn't loaded the gun earlier, because he hadn't wanted to use it for the next twelve hours. And he needed enough time to do that now since he had never handled a gun in his whole life. With quick, trembling hands, the African started searching for a way of uncoupling the weapon in order to load the bullets, as he started towards the door.

Too late for him to get away: from a distance, John heard faint sounds from inside the living room of the apartment.

*

“Get your damned self silent!” Álvaro whispered in a harsh tone, cautioning his elder brother who, crawling behind him in the darkness, had crashed into a table in the centre of the living room with his right foot, creating some noise. Álvaro hit the light of the electronic watch strapped to his left wrist from time to time as he waited with little patience for twelve midnight; when Valencia would erupt into fireballs. Then they would go for the kill.

65

John tensed himself in confusion, still struggling to load bullets into the weapon. After a few minutes, he began to hear a heavy rain of firecrackers pouring on to the street. The loud noise generated by the banging of explosives filled the room. It was twelve midnight. Las Fallas festival had come to its end. Firecrackers were blasting in all parts of the city, with ear-bursting noise.

John knew he had fallen into the hands of death. He knew the momentary upheaval Las Fallas created would now absorb the sound of the gunshots with which the Colombian brothers would kill him.

Helpless, John went back to the bed.

“Now,” Álvaro said, standing up and shoving forward. The older Colombian followed and they tiptoed across the sitting room towards the room where Álvaro convinced himself the African would be lying in bed. This apartment was sort of Álvaro's, and he had memorized the exact position of the bed.

They reached the door and stood side by side. In his right hand, Álvaro raised his weapon, identical to the one they'd sold to the African – except that *this* one had a silencer attached to it.

The hard man aimed the weapon at the door and waited furiously another sixty seconds. He wasn't going to give the African any chances; a man with a gun posed a serious danger, no matter how one viewed it.

Outside, the fireworks began to explode: twelve midnight. Valencia erupted in a haze of smoke.

The younger Colombian reached out for the handle of the door with his left hand, while his brother held out a small flashlight they'd brought with them.

"Keep that thing down," Álvaro barked. "Don't put it on yet!" His brother's eyes flickered wide in the darkness. He wondered. What was Álvaro trying to do?

In a swift movement, Álvaro threw the door open. The room was in darkness, the Colombian aimed his weapon in the precise direction where the African lay, emptying three rounds of bullets in succession, sure that the African wouldn't have any chance of surviving the impact. Sure, the sonic boom and muffled recoil sounds of the shooting wouldn't disturb the neighbors: it was all just part of the fireworks.

Both brothers rushed into the room, the senior one concerned by his younger brother's actions.

Álvaro didn't want any risks. Hence their employer's last minute instruction not to kill the African, but instead to keep him alive was all bullshit. He had killed the African at his own discretion, and would express regrets later. All he wanted now was to make an immediate request for their remaining pay.

"OK, show me the torchlight," the younger man ordered as he groped in the darkness for the room's light switch.

"Mierda! Álvaro went cold as he switched on the light. "Shit!" For the first time since the death of their father; since their pursuit by the FARC, he was terrified. It wasn't the African in the bed, rather the winter blanket hauled over the long pillow.

Álvaro started turning to counteract the deception, but, too late for the brothers as both were already inside the big room, closer to the bed, staring in bewilderment.

"Drop the gun down and raise your hands up," John said from behind them, voice menacing. "If not, I shoot both of you dead. Right now!"

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The brothers stood frozen some long moment. Then they did as were told.

“Turn around.”

The Colombians turned around as instructed, astonished to see the African pointing the weapon they had sold to him at them. The hard man blamed himself inwardly for having too much confidence, to have transferred the weapon he held to his left hand while searching for light switch. Otherwise, he could have risked trying to shoot the African.

John closed the door fully behind him and leaned against it. When he had stepped into this room many hours ago, the first thing he observed was that the door needed a carpenter’s attention. The panel had sagged slightly, creating a friction with the floor, thus making it unable to draw closer to the wall. So, as soon as he heard the sound earlier, he remembered that the door had an almost triangular space between it and the adjoining wall, which could accommodate him; though with a little difficulty. He had taken the chance to go back to the bed, arranged the blanket over the pillow as disguise, then raced over behind the door to hide there. If Álvaro and his brother hadn’t been that much in a hurry, they would have known that the door Álvaro threw open made a crushing sound on a human body.

“Use your right foot to push the gun towards me. No fooling around, or I shoot you two dead, no regrets. Don’t think I’d mind the sound the gun would create. The important thing is that both of you will be no more. And I will run away before the police arrive.”

“Álvaro, please, do what he says,” the elder of the brothers said in disorientation, legs and arms already unsteady.

With his right foot, mouth still open in surprise, Álvaro pushed the weapon to the African. The gun went forward and dropped a foot in front of John.

Not thinking first, the African went to grasp the gun, mind talking to him as he did.

This beast wanted to kill me so brutally. No mercy. My God! John dropped the empty gun and was picking up the loaded one in front. A fatal error. Álvaro, the hard man, instantaneously sensed the trick of submitting to a man with an empty threat.

“¡Idiota de los cojones! The younger Colombian charged forward like a bull. “You fucking idiot!” The animosity reflected in his eyes. His movement coincided with John's and they got to the gun at the same time. But it would be too late for the Colombian if he bent down and struggle for the weapon. In its place, he directed his fist at John, and punched the African on the face.

John dodged the punch but, not quite quickly enough. The blow caught his left eye with a blinding flash of stars. He cried out in pain.

At the same time, the Colombian stamped his right foot on John's hand in an effort to kick the weapon out of the reach of the African's hand. But John's hand already had some grip on the weapon, so the impact of the kick hit both his hand and the weapon. John writhed with another deep pain, yet not letting go of the gun until the Colombian kicked the second time. The silenced gun flew into the corner near the door of the room where John had hidden earlier.

The elder Colombian stood in awe, watching his brother in the kind of action he enjoyed doing alone. Everything was under control.

The African somehow managed to regain his stability. The strength to fight was nowhere near, but determination had taken over. John turned in the direction of the gun, but the Colombian lurched further, extended his long muscled hands, caught him by the right arm and seized it. “You bastard! I'm going to kill

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you with just my hands.” He twisted the arm he held, heading towards breaking it.

Pain ran through John's body and he cried aloud again. But then, he jammed his head into the Colombian's chest.

The effort generated an impact, as the Colombian quickly released John's arm. Yet, with another fast move, he went for John's neck, finally circling the African's throat. He began to squeeze. No mercy. “Your death will give me the fun I've wanted for a long time.”

The squeezing was intense, and the African felt the breath leaving him. The Colombian had blocked his windpipe and his lungs were beginning to contract, his strength was ebbing rapidly.

Outside, the riotous sounds of explosions of firecrackers continued to rock the city.

The older of the Colombians watched the drama, relaxed.

The African swallowed, trying to cough. He couldn't. He was dying. He knew it. He was beginning to lose his sight. John stared harder. The room was going black.

Fighting for his survival, John's strength suddenly came again. A little coaching he underwent in school in Nigeria flooded into a brain which was desperate for a supply of blood. The same taekwondo boy, who liked John, wanted him to become a taekwondo fighter. John never wanted anything to do with it, but had agreed to be taught some of the tactics. One of the skills he learnt then came back into him now.

John raised his right hand up above his head, using his last breath, muscling his palms as much as the little strength remaining in him allowed. When he brought it up, he projected the strong fingers, managing to aim at the hard man's face to the extent he could manage. The fingers struck. One went well, into Álvaro's left eye. Feeling blinded, the Colombian groaned in pain. He released his grip.

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John began to fall down, but he didn't give up before going to the ground. He turned in a rapid movement, in time to see the Colombian stoop, nursing the pains he inflicted. The African shot out his right fist and threw a fast punch. The blow caught the Colombian by his nose, and the strike created such an impact that its effect seem to have rendered the Colombian completely blind.

Both men went down crashing on the floor at the same time.

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Along the street where the African was being held captive, twenty meters from the building, a rented dark blue Volkswagen Audi A4 saloon stood in between two other vehicles, its windows rolled up tight, the engine humming, and the hot air conditioning system circulating. Behind the wheels sat one lone man waiting with patience for results of what he had come out to do.

Francisco Riera Martinez, back in his costume and identification as Pablo Hernandez Tricas, had driven down here from Alicante with reckless speed, to arrive on time for what would soon come into history as one of the most exciting exercises in his lifetime: the murder of the African.

Although wearing his unkempt grey-colored beard, the man was dressed in a smart guise tonight: an all-black outfit; his shoes; his well-cut trousers; the well-ironed long sleeve shirt, and his trilby hat, dropped onto the passenger's seat beside him. The black winter trench coat covering the pistol strapped to his waist completed his outfit like a member of a hit family.

In the past, Francisco thought, he had been proud of the boys due to the uncommon efficiency in the way they handled their missions. He had still been proud of them minutes ago when he met them outside the building where they lived. But when they brought him to this spot – a stone's throw from their house – the pride vanished. Now, it had transformed into hatred.

“Los hijos de puta!” Francisco said from inside the car. “They are sons of a bitch.” The Colombian brothers had just taken an undeserved advantage over him. How could they demand so much for a job as easy as this?

Enraged, Francisco gazed out the car's windscreen and watched without interest as people circled round a tall sculpted Falla monument mounted somewhere down the road. Since the boys left him here and went into the building, his mind had been plotting how to destroy them on the completion of this particular exercise. The secret connection with them was now dead as far as Francisco was concerned. The kids were like their father: Greed ran in their blood.

Francisco weighed his options while concluding the elimination of the ungrateful boys. Such revenge was the product of such ingratitude. And he knew how to carry out the killing.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of fireworks erupting in the distance, where the Falla monument stood. After a few seconds, Francisco watched the monument go into flames: Las quemadas de las Fallas – the burning of the monuments.

Francisco wheeled back to his thoughts, deciding, once the African was killed, he would offer the Colombian brothers an additional hundred thousand Euros for the disappearance of his young employee. They would take him to a long-deserted warehouse near the port of Alicante. There, Francisco would be waiting, ready to shoot down the three of them. He would take them by surprise, a bullet in each head. Later, he would bury their bodies at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. It would be a hard task, but not the first time he had done this.

The mechanic looked out the window of the car as an incandescent remnant of a firecracker dropped by the side of his car, followed by the sound of an explosion. How he would have loved to murder the African in the midst of this Las Fallas commotion! That kind of killing atmosphere gave him the most wonderful joy life offered.

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But his boys were still in there. Francisco stirred his head around, looking out into the street, wondering why they'd taken so long. He became more furious than uneasy.

Just as he still reeled in thought, a tap came on the window of the car. The mechanic reacted fast, reaching for his pistol, but then, recognizing the elder of the Colombian brothers, Francisco relaxed and rolled down the car's window screen in anticipation.

“We have the African now,” the Colombian told him.

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Francisco made an appraisal of his new environment and absorbed every detail as the Colombian shut the door to the entrance of the apartment and led him into the well-illuminated living room. He admired the arrangement of the apartment. The place was neat for its standard, but that wasn't what caught his interest as he stood for a short moment, inspecting the room once more. He was making sure that he wasn't walking into any potential danger.

"Where is he?" the mechanic asked, standing in the middle of the sitting room.

"The son of a bitch is tied up in there," the Colombian pointed to the direction of the bedroom and began to march towards its door.

The mechanic followed at the back, moving further in towards the bedroom. His blood warmed as he darted in, anxious to set eyes on a lowlife black boy who had caused him lots of problems over the past few days.

Francisco moved further inwards. He touched the pocket of his trench coat, reassured by the lightweight of the poison he made sure he brought. Then he smiled.

The Colombian approached the door and stepped into the room. He went in and stood beside the young man on the floor, creating a chance for his employer to see. Near the edge of the bed on the inner side of the room, the African lay curled up. His legs and hands were tied behind his back. The senior of the Colombians gazed at him, unable to hide his shock at the gagging of the young man's mouth, despite his unconscious state.

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Excitement rushed through Francisco. The adrenalin inside him surged forward, making his blood's flow faster. The anger in him against the African surged up with no bounds. He moved further in, wanting to dish out orders to his boys. But he suddenly stopped on the way and sharply eyed the man who led him into the room. "Where is Álvaro, my best man? Where is he?" Had the foolish emotion of wanting to see the African die in agony not befuddled Francisco, he would have taken the precaution of asking this question before coming into the living room.

Within a split second, Francisco thrust forward his neck like a bird, trying to scrutinize the image on the floor. At the same time, the man's hand went to his waist. The gun jumped out of its holster and he dashed forward to grab the Colombian. "This is Álvaro, not John," Francisco began. But the calculating mechanic did not fulfill his lethal choice. John had already appeared from the living room, and in an uncharacteristically fierce movement, lunged towards Francisco, crashing the butt of the gun into the man's shoulder.

In shock, Francisco cried out sharply and felt an excruciating pain sweep through the hand in which he held his weapon, as the gun fell and disappeared under the bed.

The African didn't stop. He went for the right hand wrist again and hammered the butt of the gun once more, crushing the carpal bones. The man wept in agony and dropped to the floor on both knees.

The African launched another assault, switching his gun to his left hand, lifting his well-folded palm and jabbing it into the man's ribs through the right side. The result was another instant rupture of a rib. Francisco's ribs began to throb.

"Move one inch, I blow your head off." John made sure he had incapacitated the killer. His gun back to a shooting position,

the African sprinted backward a little bit and covered both the mechanic and the awed Colombian.

Francisco held his right wrist with the left, battling in terrible pain, kneeling down on both knees. His forehead touched the floor, and his eyes contorted not only in anger, but also in fear. The man couldn't comprehend how the African had overcome his boys and lured them to bring him into the picture. And also defeated him.

The elder Colombian stood inside there, paralyzed and confused, surprised at the kind of sudden strength and skill shown by their captor. He tried to figure out where the African had come from.

Earlier, when John had fallen down with Álvaro, the elder Colombian had understood the danger, and rushed to pick up the gun with the silencer. But he didn't get far. In one quick, lethal movement, the African had dived down before him. John elbowed into his chest, knocking him backwards with a force that almost made the Colombian lose consciousness.

"Don't be stupid like your brother!" John said with a weak breath, grasping the weapon from the floor and pointing it at the Colombian's forehead. "Or I kill you first."

The Colombian's eyes narrowed as he lost balance and dropped to the floor. Minutes passed before both men gathered strength again.

"Why are you two suddenly after me?" John asked, still recovering on the floor from the fall. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"¡Qué cabrón eres!" The Colombian clutched his chest; he too was seated on the floor in pain. "You are a bastard!"

John sprang up in a moment. He reversed the weapon and rammed it between the Colombian's neck and the right shoulder, incapacitating him, but making sure he didn't pass out.

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He raised the gun again and hit the other side of the neck. The Colombian was flat on his back on the floor, moaning.

The sporadic sound of fireworks outside was absorbing the noise generated inside the apartment. John raised the gun a third time, now aiming to smash the Colombian's forehead.

"Don't, please!" the Colombian cried out. "His name's Pablo Hernandez Tricas."

John's reddened face became redder at the mention of the name, as if he had hit a brick wall. His adrenaline streamed up as he looked mutely at the older of the Colombians lying on the floor, unable to open his mouth and say anything.

How?

How come the man traced him so quickly to this point? John thought, not understanding the puzzle.

The private detective! John thought. *Yes, he may be the one who leaked the information of my whereabouts.*

No, unlikely. John discarded that angle.

"He asked you to find me here?" John asked, his eyes on the Colombian.

"No," the Colombian shook his head after a slight hesitation. "He paid well for a search with all the machinery within our disposal: You were somewhere in Valencia."

There was something John didn't understand. "How did you trace me to this house?"

The Colombian struggled to a sitting position. His eyes went to where his brother lay. "We were just lucky."

John sighed deeply, relieved, realizing the whole thing was coincidental. He bent down and helped the Colombian, aiming the gun at him. "Get up!"

The young man obeyed. Holding John's left hand, he exerted more effort and rose to his feet. More waves of pain hit him as he did. John grabbed him by the collar of the winter

jacket he wore and dug the weapon into the Colombian's stomach.

"The girl? How did you find out I was in her apartment?"

"She's..." The Colombian coughed out over his tightened neck, "my brother's girl."

John's eyes bulged. *Is that how?*

The African released his grip. He pushed the Colombian away, noticing the bulging in his trouser pocket. "What's that?"

"Ropes."

"To tie my corpse with," John shook his head in amazement. "Get it out!"

The green-colored ropes were in short pieces when the Colombian produced them.

"Tie him," John said, not believing he could act the way he did, "the legs and the hands."

The Colombian felt a chill ran through him. He stared at the African. "I can't tie my own brother up. Can't you see he is unconscious?"

John ran a hand through his throbbing, swollen left eye. Without the use of a mirror, he couldn't inspect the extent of the wound Álvaro's punch had created on his face., but he sensed that the injury was severe.

"Do it, now!" Else, you lose four pints of blood before a painful death." John pointed the gun at the Colombian's chest.

The Colombian knew how stupid it could be to argue with somebody in possession of a gun, no matter how brave or how strong one thought one was. Both sides of his shoulders were still throbbing like hell as he went to his younger brother and began to tie him up. It took him three minutes to complete the task.

"Give some space," John said.

The Colombian obeyed. John went to the unconscious man and inspected the bonds with caution. The boy had done it well.

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"He sent you to eliminate me," John said as he moved away from the unconscious man, watching the older Colombian. "I have the choice to reverse the case now. It'd only cost one bullet into each of your heads."

The Colombian gaped at him. "Please, don't kill us." He brought both palms together as if praying.

"But I will gain nothing by wasting your lives," John said, ignoring the plea, "if you'll obey me and do what I want"

"What do want me to do?" he asked, relieved.

John looked at him for a long time. "I want you to drag the man in here."

The Colombian's eyes widened. "How did you know he is here?"

"Because I once worked with him, and I know he likes witnessing the death of his enemies."

"You have killed for him?"

"I never said that."

"How then did you know this?"

"Never mind, do what I said."

"I can't stand this," the Colombian said. "I can't stand in front of that man and tell him you've been captured. He will notice the lies on my face."

"You have no choice!" John rubbed his eyes to soothe his pains. "You do it, or you and your brother die for him."

The Colombian remained speechless, looking at the African.

"It's the man I want, not you, not your brother, so behave yourself!" John said with little patience. "You have nothing to lose but can still enjoy the money he paid you."

"If it is going to save our lives, I will do it." The Colombian sweated.

There was a pause as the African looked askance at the Colombian for another long moment. "Your brother remains here with me. If you try any tricks against me, from behind this

door where I will be, there will be no chance for him to run. I will first bring him to consciousness, and then kill him before coming after you and your employer.”

When the Colombian left to go and fetch the wizard mechanic, John didn't hide behind the door. He ran into the kitchen and waited. And when the two eventually came in, John was watching and listening. When Francisco walked into the room, John had sprinted through the living room, ready to attack.

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"Tie him up," John threw two lengths of the short ropes to the senior Colombian.

The Colombian left where he stood agape and went up to the badly injured Francisco still on his knees, faced down. Distractedly, he brought the man's legs together and tied them with the rope. He assisted the man up to a sitting position, then brought his hands together and tied them.

The Colombian stepped back to his former position, aware that the African's gun had never wavered from him an inch. He stood in horror and looked again at his brother, and then at the man, their employer for many years. Helpless and not knowing what to do, he kept his eyes on the man.

"I am sorry, Mr. Tricas," the Colombian managed to say. "I couldn't ignore the threat to kill my own brother if you escaped from this room."

"Mr. Martinez," John corrected. "His name is Francisco Riera Martinez."

The Colombian stared at John for several moments. Suddenly, he clasped his stomach as if his heart would sink into it. "He is Mr. *What?*"

Francisco was still in pain, unable to utter a word. John pointed the gun at the man and went up to him. He reached out with his left hand and, with force, gripped the man's long beard and pulled it off his chin. Francisco let out a cry of pain. John didn't stop. He grasped the thick pair of eyebrows and tore them away, sending a wave of pain through Francisco's body. Satisfied with the new facial appearance, the African moved backwards, to his former position.

The Colombian stared at the new man, horrified at seeing a face he recognized now – from a picture his father showed them sometime before his death.

“You?” the Colombian shouted in disbelief. He retreated backwards as if he had walked on a snake. “My father worked for this man before he died!” He looked at the African with a paler face as if needing help.

“What are you saying?” John asked.

“This man,” the Colombian pointed continuously at Francisco, “had a hand in our father's death.”

A murmuring sound emanated from where the younger of the Colombians lay. He had regained consciousness, in time to hear his brother's complaint and then to see their employer seated on the floor three feet from him.

John and the older Colombian both looked at the awoken man.

Struggling on the floor, the hard man cried out through his gagged mouth at the revelation of their employer's real identity. Several times, he thrust his tied legs back and forth in a movement that signified his readiness to attack the man who had deceived them for ages, a man he now recognized as the killer of their father.

Francisco inclined his head for a moment. Then he raised it up, gawping at the African and the weapon in his hand.

John stared back at his captive. In those brutal killer's eyes, the African also noticed something different from the command of power he had seen back in the hotel days back. Fear. Intuition told him that now Francisco feared for what would happen to his life.

“Tell me about it,” John said to the elder of the Colombians, his eyes still on Francisco.

“Shortly before father disappeared, he told us he had a face-off with the owner of the workshop where he worked.”

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“He told you about the problem?”

“No.” The Colombian shook his head. “He said it wasn't necessary to go into the details at that particular time.” The Colombian was sobbing.

“And you never knew anything about this owner of the establishment?”

Again, the Colombian shook his head. “We never met him, but my father always addressed him as Francisco Martinez. He assured us we'd meet the man sometime in the future.”

“You didn't, till your father disappeared.”

“We didn't,” the Colombian said.

John was tensed up. “How then did Mr. Tricas come into your lives?”

The Colombian stared at the opposite wall a long moment, trying to recollect the details. He then looked down at the floor. “Word came to us soon after my father disappeared that he had been abducted by the FARC.” The Colombian paused and looked at John to be sure the African understood what he meant. From the look on John's face, the boy could see that he didn't, so he explained further. “FARC means, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary guerrilla organization.”

“OK,” John waved his hand at the boy, uninterested in the explanation.

“We were told our lives were also in danger because of the crime our father had committed. So we went into hiding. But this man tracked us down and helped us to this country—”

“To work for him!” John removed his eye from Francisco, looking at the Colombian.

The young man nodded. “Since then we've been working for him, grateful for the help.”

“The conman used you in his own interest too,” the African said. “Now it's his time to pay back for all his atrocities.”

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John began moving forward, but not in Francisco's direction. He brought out one of the ropes. "Stretch your hands out."

"What do you mean?" the Colombian reacted, stunned by what John said. "What are you doing?" He withdrew his hands, ready to resist.

John pointed the gun at the young man's groin, having comprehended his fear of guns. "Do as I say."

"But you promised you wouldn't do us any harm!"

John looked him in the eye. "I am sorry," he said in English, "We all happened to have run into a web of deception."

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John finished tying the senior Colombian's hands behind his back. "Kneel," he said to the boy. It had begun to rain outside,, the noise being made by the fireworks subsided as a result.

"Don't do this shit to me!" The blood in the Colombian's body had drained out of him through sweating. He came down on his knees as instructed.

John steeled himself against any of the fear-driven gibberish the young man was saying. He turned around, clamped the back of his head and pushed him hard. The boy landed on the floor with his chest.

John brought the two legs together and tied them up. He held the Colombian by his left arm and hauled him to a sitting position. Like he had done with the younger brother, the African tore a piece of cloth from the bedspread he had already used and gagged the senior Colombian's mouth. Then he dragged him from his sitting position with effort, repositioning him closer to his brother. He placed them in the left corner of the wall.

Then, John turned his attention to the mechanic and approached him. He dropped the gun on the floor, with effort, held Francisco and dragged the man like a log of wood, repositioning him in the right corner of the same wall where he had put the brothers.

Positions had been set for the three. John panted, weak, his mouth open. The aching on his left eye had returned, and the last of the strength in him was running out fast. He looked up at the clock hands on the wall. Three minutes before half-past

three in the morning. Exhaustion from the series of events weighed him down, showing themselves in his eyes.

John stepped back and stood away from the three, leaning against the bedroom door and watching. He gathered saliva from his dried mouth and swallowed hard to kill the thirst in his throat. It didn't work. He considered going into the kitchen in search of liquid to quench his thirst. He decided against it.

John looked at the clock hanging on the wall opposite the bed, like he now did every ten minutes, disappointed at the slow passage of time. He reconsidered what he wanted to do at dawn and sighed. It would be the only way to get rid of the enemy here; there was no other way. But before then, he had to while away the time, using it to find out more hidden truths about the man. He focused his gaze on the man.

The mechanic was seated upright, his back against the wall, giving him more strength to bear the throbbing of his smashed wrist. He moaned aloud, and broke the silence hanging in the room for the past moments.

"John," Francisco called.

John ignored him.

"John."

The African watched Francisco, with no attention to the mention of his name.

"What do you want to do with me?" Francisco asked, addressing the African in English. "My ribs hurt."

"I am going to kill you!" John waved the gun at him. "And from now onwards, you don't say a word here unless I ask you to, or I break the left wrist."

There was another long silence in the room. Francisco took in the African's threat and considered his options. But within a short moment, the mechanic's voice broke the silence again.

"John, I am sorry things went out of plan."

"You're—?" John asked as Francisco broke his thought.

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"I didn't mean to hurt you. And I didn't mean to hurt any of your flatmates, you know that."

John recoiled at the statement. "The best you'll do is to shut up. Just allow me to think of the most brutal way to end your life."

"Oh, my ribs, I can't breathe. John, please!"

The African charged forward, his mouth twisted in anger. He reached Francisco, bent down and dug the muzzle of the silencer into his right ear. The man stretched out both legs, and shivered.

"You contemptible liar," John drilled more into the ear, creating friction. "You ordered my death a few hours ago, didn't you? It's your turn to die now and the one thing you will do for me is to allow me think of how best to get rid of you."

Francisco whimpered aloud.

John's mind thanked God as he ranted at his detainee. Somehow he considered himself lucky. What might have been a long journey for an arduous task for revenge had been cut short. Instead of going in search of the trouble, the trouble had come searching for him. God certainly didn't want John to die in the man's hands. Instead, through John, God wanted to reveal the monster's ill-doings to society.

"Listen, you must tell me what I want to know."

"OK," Francisco whispered, then smiled with an effort. "I see it's the reverse of the hotel operation."

John withdrew the gun from the man's ear and stepped back to the door. Minutes went by before he asked the man, all discussion being in English.

"Is she Spanish?"

Francisco breathed with difficulty. "My wife?" he said, surprised. "Oh, you've found out about her."

"Please answer my question."

"Yes she was," the man said in a whisper.

“She was!” John repeated, eyes intent. “You still went on to kill her?”

“She’s dead John,” the mechanic’s face brightened. For a moment, he forgot the pain he suffered. “She died with her boyfriend.” He grinned at John. “My plan B worked on them; mangled to ashes when their car caught fire. You see, I never planned it so the car would catch fire. But since it did, that was better.”

John stared at Francisco, speechless.

“In all my operations there must be a plan B, my friend,” Francisco said with pride. “A fails, and B works. That’s the way it is.”

John’s face became ashen as he listened to the mechanic’s statements. He closed his eyes and opened them again. He smothered a cry but the tears ran down his cheek. “You are a heartless devil!”

John wiped tears away with his left forearm. And suddenly, in an unexpected speed, he reached Francisco, raised the gun high and clobbered the swollen wrist twice with the butt of the gun. “Feel your own pains, you heartless murderer.”

The mechanic’s wrist became limp and an explosion of pain rocked his body. Francisco screamed out like a baby, went down on the floor, struggling to hold his lifeless wrist – like a tortoise dropped into a boiling water would try to jump out of its shell.

John chased the man’s fall. “You wasted the life of an innocent woman, you animal!” He took Francisco by his hair and pulled his head upward. “You take people’s lives without a second thought!”

Holding Francisco by the hair, John pulled him away from the wall. He positioned the man’s head, ready to toss it backwards and crash it against the wall.

Don’t do it!

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John halted midway. He released the man's head and dragged him back to the wall. He stood there for minutes, then went back to lean against the door.

The mechanic's body became a lug and he fell into semi-consciousness. Twenty minutes passed before Francisco came back to a conscious state. With all efforts, he started to murmur again.

"John, I'm sorry I lied about the poison." Francisco coughed three times. "If I told you the truth, I wouldn't have been able to convince you to carry on with the job." He paused for ten seconds, then went on. "But if I knew you were taking the substance home, I would have prevented the unfortunate incident."

To explain to the African his own ordeal, the mechanic went on to explain further. "My life became nothing to me the moment I lost my family – within a short interval of time. He told John about the tragedy that had struck his family. He paused a little again, and continued.

"Many years after their death, nothing else mattered to me but my business and my personal life." The mechanic looked at the African for a response. John gazed at him, saying nothing.

"Then I met my wife. How we met wouldn't be of any interest to you, but let me tell you something." Francisco dropped his head sideways, stopping a long time like someone about losing his breath. When he brought his head to a normal position, he spat a quantity of saliva on his feet, and went back talking.

"The instant I set my eyes on her, my life came back to normalcy. I became whole again. I forgot about the tragedies that took my family away from me." Francisco paused for some reaction from the African. Again, he was disappointed. No response came from the young man. John stood where he was, listening but not hiding his hatred for the mechanic.

"She was a beautiful girl, John... physically. If you had any chance to see her in the hotel, you would understand what I mean. But she was a not good stuff as a wife."

"Why not?" John forced himself to ask.

"She denied me what would bring back my happiness."

"What was that?" John wanted to know.

"Issue my friend. Children."

"Don't call me your friend."

Francisco nodded, "OK. John." He waited a minute before resuming.

"She couldn't see herself waking up at 1.30 A.M, changing diapers. She couldn't accommodate children and their noise making, disturbing her quiet lifestyle. She was saving her flat belly. It was an inanity I couldn't accept," Francisco was suddenly shouting with difficulty. He bowed his head and began sobbing out.

The African kept looking at him. John allowed Francisco to continue pouring out his lunatic secrets.

"We lived happily during the first year of our marriage. I hoped that we'd soon have a baby. At the end of the second year, none came. I wanted children at all costs. I wanted a new family to make up for my lost one. But you see, my wife didn't want any such thing.

"When she started asking for too much money from me, I began to dig into her background in return. And it didn't take me long to discover some disturbing secrets about her."

Francisco sobbed.

"I found out that my wife had all the information about the success of my business before she had planted herself on me." The mechanic stopped sobbing, back in control of himself. He gathered the accumulated saliva he held in his mouth and spat it out on the floor in front of him. He stretched out his bound legs

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and began messing the spot up as he tried to rub off the fluid with the heel of his shoes.

Francisco avoided telling the African that the business his wife had uncovered was not the car repairs he did; neither was it the coffee production or other legitimate businesses.

The man went on speaking. "The marriage soon began to lose its savor. When she sued for divorce, without my consent, it registered: she was after my money. Her reasons for the divorce, John, were insecurity and moral integrity. You see, she was aware all along that I had a psychiatric condition shortly after my family perished."

"It has not left you," John said to himself.

"What?"

"Never mind, I am listening."

"Thank you for listening," Francisco said appreciatively. "I appealed five days after the judgment, because I couldn't let her leave me, dissolving our matrimonial bond like that, after I had invested a lot of money and time to please the woman I loved and cherished so much.

"The judge granted my request for legal separation instead of a divorce, allowing us the chance for a possible correction of our matrimonial imbalances." Francisco gritted his teeth and shuddered over the torment his swollen wrist gave him.

"But as time went on, things got worse than I had expected. She continued to push for the divorce: the only thing she wanted. And when she started having affairs and travelling around the country in the secret company of that young opportunist boyfriend of hers, I decided it was time I took her out of my way. I had to prevent her from laying her hands on my money. The young man was after my hard-earned money through her."

"Then you started trailing them from one hotel to another, hoping to have a chance to carry out their death sentence," John

said, his attention on the Colombians seated and watching. He noticed that the younger of the boys had shifted from his position a little. "That was my only option."

"And when you saw a stupid black African working in the hotel, it became the perfect luck you sought for the dirty job."

"I am sorry, John. I never had a person of a particular color in mind."

The African left the door and approached the man with smoldering eyes. His action threw Francisco into a panic for what would happen next and the mechanic recoiled in anticipation. John pointed the gun at the mechanic's forehead. The lesson Sappy had taught him years before on how to cock a gun flooded into his brain.

John raised the hammer of the silenced weapon, cocked it and brought it ready to fire away the bullets. He squatted down in front of his captive. "The truth," He waited for thirty seconds to tick away. "At the public garage, you were to silence me there," he said as a statement, not a question.

Francisco nodded in agreement. "I had no option."

John shook his head in complete amazement. "And eliminating me, you would have sealed off a well-planned deception from possible trace by the authorities."

John stood up, tears falling from his eyes. "God!" He wished again that all these things were just a nightmare.

The mechanic sat in silence, shaking and waiting for the dispatch of bullets into his head.

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Pointing at the Colombians, John asked Francisco, “Why did you kill their father?”

Francisco inhaled. “Greed, John. Can a man make too many demands in a business he didn’t really understand?”

“Just like that!”

“Well—” The mechanic didn’t go further. As his mind wandered back to how it happened many years before, the left side of Francisco’s lower lip pulled down, making him look like a lion with a sudden hunger for a kill.

The business relationship had been moving on smoothly. The Colombian kids’ father – Francisco’s childhood friend – managed the Colombia end of the shipment packaging in a systematic manner. But things changed when, within just two years of the start of the operation, the man placed a surprising phone call to Francisco in Spain.

“I want my monthly income tripled with immediate effect.”

The glib request dismayed Francisco. “Why don’t you take it easy, my friend? Things will gradually come to that. If it that’s what you want.”

“You understand I am doing much of the work down here, don’t you?”

“I do. And you earn eighty thousand U.S. dollars per month for your hard work. I think this is enough money to keep you going till your demand is looked into by the group.”

“I take maximum risk at this end of the business, and receive only a token for my hard work.”

Francisco managed to suppress his annoyance. “Don’t let this worry you. I will make sure we looked into your request.”

“Or I do something nasty, which will not be in favor of this venture.”

The assertion of Francisco's friend alarmed him. “Don’t make threats against the efforts of the group. It's dangerous,” he warned. “Now knowing how close we are, I will pretend your last statement wasn’t part of this discussion.”

“I see!” the man cut the line.

Francisco had stared at a notepad on top of his desk while he sat back and pondered over the threat. He waved what had happened away. The group really needed the welder's expertise. Francisco decided he would do something about the man's request.

The venture went into its third year, but the cartel did nothing about the expert welder's demands. This hit the group hard months later, as secrets of their operation began to leak out. Had they not had an important mole within each of the authorities both in Spain and in Colombia, things would have been in worst shape for them.

Afterwards, the organization began to issue fake information about the operation. They traced the betrayal to the welder. And finally, the FARC abducted the man for interrogation. Francisco was there to welcome him. Found guilty in the well-lit interrogation room, the mechanic made sure his friend's frightened eyes looked on while Francisco personally drove a long sharp knife into the man's heart through the lower part of his abdomen and watched him die in pain, coughing out blood. Francisco kissed his friend hard on the cheek before he released him to drop on the floor.

“After killing him, you hid your identity,” John said, “took possession of his kids and used them to manage your shady business,”

“That's the way things are, friend, I wanted to help the young men. Please listen to me—”

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“Listen to you for what?” John battled with fatigue and hunger.

“I have all the money in the world to pay you if you set me free and allow me to go home. Let's say, five hundred thousand Euros.”

John stared down at the man, his lips tightening and raising on the right side.

Francisco misunderstood the African's emotion. “Please, I will pay eight hundred thousand.”

“You idiot!” John fastened Francisco's hair and jabbed his fist between the man's armpit and his ribs. The impact created pain and Francisco went down sideways. Not satisfied, John went down to the mechanic's skull and pounded his fist five times on it. Francisco lay as still as dead.

No need to continue talking to an unrepentant man, John decided. And his mind made up, he aimed the gun on the Francisco's forehead and closed his eyes, his hand trembling, exhaustion weighing on him. John cocked the gun, gritting his teeth as images of his dead flatmates flooded back to him.

Now!

John opened his eyes. He hadn't the nerve to do it in a normal functioning mentality. He needed to consume plenty of alcohol to calm his nerves before he did what his mind told him to do. He released the pressure of the gun against the man's head and returned the weapon to safety. He stepped back, and said to the mechanic, “I will make sure you suffer because of all the people whose lives you wasted for no just cause.”

The African retreated and hurried away into the kitchen, leaving the door to the room wide open.

71

John dashed into the kitchen and stopped for a moment as if he had lost his bearings. Then he went to the giant fridge standing in the corner and opened it. The three bottles of Heineken beer he had bought from the bar were lying there – all chilled.

John pulled out two of them with his two hands and shut the fridge with his right knee. He scanned around for an opener. He saw none. John brought the first bottle to his mouth, clenched his teeth on the cap and it flew away. He dropped it on the kitchen's cooking platform. He did the same to the other one. Ready, the African gulped them one after the other on his empty stomach. A minute later, he had drained the liquid with voracity. He dropped the empty bottles in a wastebasket.

Not satisfied, John went to the fridge for the third bottle. He pulled it out and uncorked it. Taking it with him, he left the kitchen, crossed through the sitting room, heading back to the bedroom.

*

As soon as John left the room, Francisco struggled up with his last strength. There was no way out of his captivity, he knew. He looked at the Colombian brothers; no hope came from there.

Francisco decided, if John came back in the next few seconds, it wouldn't be possible for him to do what he wanted to do himself. The African would torture him in a brutal manner. It was something unacceptable to be dealt with by a little boy from Africa, or worst of all, to be handed over to the police. If

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he got to the authorities, everything about him would blow up in his face. Too bad. He wouldn't let that happen, he would end the pain here in his own way.

The mechanic began to struggle with his bundled, swollen wrist. He reached the side pocket of his trench coat, and with difficulty, took out the poison he had brought with him. He clamped his hands on the lid of the small container, turned it anticlockwise and opened it.

Francisco's eyes burned with frustration and fear, thinking about the painful death the lethal substance would give him. But last-minute courage knew no bounds. The man raised the container up and opened his mouth wide. The granules of the poison flowed in large quantities. Francisco clenched his teeth.

It happened very fast.

The mechanic's action coincided with John's return. The African stopped on the way, horrified by what was happening. "No!" John screamed, dropping the beer he carried. The bottle shattered, spilling its content on the floor. He sprinted to stop the man. He must prevent the man from committing suicide. But he got to the mechanic too late.

John reached Francisco, wide-eyed. He fastened both hands on the man's neck, preventing further downward movement of the substance into his abdomen. "No, you can't die now!" he cried out, shaking the mechanic in an effort to bring him to consciousness. But he realized how hopeless it was; the man had already fallen asleep due to the overdose. The poison was already acting fast on him.

John's mouth drooped in sorrow. He had wasted all the time here keeping the man alive because he wanted the day light to come, so that he did what he thought was the best to do under the present circumstances.

The African loosened his grip, and the man's body tilted sideways, his head about to hit the floor. John caught Francisco's head and dropped him gently onto the floor. Using both hands, John pressed both sides of the dying man's jaws hard and the mouth went open, allowing John the chance to dip his right fingers into the man's mouth. He ran the fingers through down to the esophagus, wanting to induce Francisco to throw up a large quantity of the poison. He got no response to his action; nothing would bring the man back.

"You coward!" John shouted furiously. As he squatted looking at the lifeless body, he blamed himself for what had happened. Earlier, while repositioning the bundled Francisco, he had frisked the man's cloths, searching for hidden weapons. But in lieu of metal weapons, he found the substance. The presence of the lethal matter delighted John and he had decided to leave the container there. Later, they would discover it on the mechanic. John believed finding the poison on the man would help him very much if brought to justice. Now that part of his plan would become his enemy.

John stood up, raised his head up and stared at the wall in front of him in confusion. Suddenly, he slammed his right palm three times on the wall in frustration. The palm burned, his swollen eye hurt. But he felt no pain.

John gazed at the wall clock. The time was 5.45 A.M. He still had about three hours before the last phone call he needed to make. As he stood upright and moved away from Francisco's body, the African's heart pounded in preparation for the last action he wanted to take.

John's eyes went back to the wall clock moments later, relieved. Time was flying. It was 7.50. A.M. His heartbeat seized for a second and he breathed hard, something coming into his mind.

My parents!

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John had forgotten everything about his parents and his family, because he had shut down his phone and cut himself off from the rest of the world.

Not anymore!

He went to the bed and fumbled for his old phone under the pillow. He brought it out, rummaged for the power button as if he had become a blind man, and brought the machine to life – a mistake.

John returned the phone to its former position. He needed close contact with his family now, before he carried out the act, else his mother could become worried if, for instance, she had been trying his line for these past few days. The fears might increase her burdens.

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MARCH 20, 2009

The rainfall stopped before dawn broke. But at 9.00 A.M the sky clouded over Valencia; the heavens would open again for another shower as the weather forecast had predicted.

Inspector Antonio Rodriguez powered his car, shooting it down towards the police station. The officer wished the weather conditions would change to a clearer and dryer morning. The taut expression on his gentle face reflected his strong aversion to so much rainfall as he peered through the car's windscreen in search of the sun. Especially when it disturbed his work in the field – outside the office. Though, the inspector knew the truth of his concern: rainfall had brought him psychological trauma during childhood, and now it was following him into his professional career. Inspector Antonio Rodriguez preferred dry weather..

He reached the office premises, found a parking space, positioned the vehicle in place and killed the engine. He opened the door and got out, drawing out a small attaché case.

He went inside the station, mind occupied by the progress he and his men had so far made towards tracking the African's place of hiding. Until now, the young man's telephone tracing hadn't yielded anything positive. Yesterday, they had worked into the late night, hoping for results. Nothing came.

A younger officer said good morning and saluted as Antonio drew closer to his office door. The inspector returned the salute with a nod, opening the door. He stepped into the office, in anticipation that something good came up this

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morning. To capture a lone African, Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez thought, needed to be a twenty-four hour job at most. Otherwise, this was becoming a threat to his expertise in the investigation of Africa-related crime.

The inspector sat behind his office desk, booted the computer and began going through filed-in investigation reports. After five minutes, a tap came on the door and Detective Ricardo walked in.

"Morning, Inspector," the detective saluted. "A call just came in from Central. Position tracked."

Antonio looked up at the detective, wanting more news.

"His line came on at seven-fifty five this morning," Detective Ricardo said. "The nearest base station contact, Xirivella."

"Good," the inspector breathed in, relieved. "Other base stations?"

"Still on it. Will be with us in a few minutes," the detective paused, and then added, "It's GPS enabled, so it won't take time to get accurate results."

The inspector stood up and followed the detective to the Police communications room.

"Any calls made?" the Inspector asked.

"No, he only injected life into the phone."

They went inside the room to a crackling complex network of communications radio, filled with sophisticated desktop computers. They waited a few minutes in silence for the expected information to come in, both staring at the source computer.

The detective pointed at the computer's screen moments later. "Base two is on now."

"Base three," the inspector said.

"We have him."

“Geographical location in Xirivella.” The inspector spelt out the address.

Detective Ricardo ordered a print-out of the address.

“Alert Xirivella,” the inspector said to the detective. “Let the building be surrounded before we arrive. We will be there within twenty minutes.” Antonio went back to his office. Detective Ricardo relayed the information.

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In the Xirivella apartment, inside the bedroom, John sat on the edge of the bed and considered his last option for his own life. His face looked grim, but he was happy that the daylight had finally come. His eyes were reddish from the alcohol he had consumed last night; the hunger bombarded the walls of his intestines, and he lacked sleep. His body and the left eye still throbbed.

He sobered up. He needed to think better than he had done since last night. After the mechanic terminated his own life, he had managed to smother the sleep that kept disturbing him by dashing in and out of the toilet, washing out his sticky liquid-covered eyelid with water from the tap.

Now he didn't want to take his eyes off the two Colombian brothers whom he watched. John shrugged. Neither did he want using the weapon he kept beside him on the bed to harm the boys, nor worst of all, take any of their lives, although he knew for certain, hacking him to death wouldn't mean anything to the young men. If they gained any chance of getting themselves untied, John had a few minutes to live, so the best thing was to prevent them from getting the chance.

John turned away from the Colombians. His eyes moved to Francisco's corpse lying there in the corner. The body was alarmingly swollen; the deterioration was faster than that of his flatmates. He quivered over the wickedness of someone who liked to take another man's life brutally. And the bad thing was, the more the young man realized that the man here would have forced the poison down his own gullet if he had succeeded in capturing him, the more he was repulsed.

John turned to the Colombians again. He admitted being sorry for them, but as things were, he could do nothing about it. It was just impossible to set these two free. They were going to face justice for what they did. Each of them would have to face the law. But he needed to know something from them now – a truth.

“Where is she?” He went to the older of the young men and removed the gag. “No lies.”

The Colombian told him, and then started to add something. John cut him short with a wave of his hand. “I will find out.” The African picked up his mobile phone from under the pillow. He searched for the number that called him last and dialed it. Her voice came up when the line connected.

“Are you OK?” John asked in broken English, concern in his voice.

“Yes...I am. Thank God...you're alive,” the woman said in stammered broken English. “Alvaro tried to kill you?”

John sensed the fear and concern in her voice too. “Yes. But he didn't succeed. Thanks to you.” John thought he heard a sob, but went on. “Hold on a little more. They'll come for you,” he told her. “I want to...take care of one more thing.”

“What is it?”

“Myself. And if we don't see each other again...goodbye.” John didn't give her the chance. He cut the line.

Moments later, the African pulled out another number from his trouser pocket. He had written it on a piece of paper when he had first seen his own image on the television.

John keyed the number into his phone and pressed the dial button. He placed the phone to his ear as it began to ring.

74

The two policemen were back in the inspector's office in preparation to move. This track down was a great relief, the inspector was saying to the detective.

"End of a nightmare," the detective nodded.

The inspector asked if the detective was ready for the move.

"Ready," Detective Ricardo replied.

"Let's go."

Both men started moving towards to the door, the detective leading the way.

The telephone began to ring.

Antonio stopped at the door, hesitated for a moment, then hurried back to his desk and picked the phone.

"Policía Nacional Valencia," Antonio said.

A voice said, "Sir, my name is John. I am the African you are searching for."

For a moment, silence crowded around the inspector and he stood there, the phone at his ear, not knowing if he had heard correctly. He frowned and turned, looking at Detective Ricardo. He decided to test the man calling.

"OK, John, thank you for calling. And we are grateful you did. Where can we locate you now?"

The African gave out an address. It matched what Inspector Rodriguez had on the notepad on his table. The African was telling the truth.

"The door number, John."

The African gave it him.

CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU

Antonio said, "We'll be with you within few minutes, please hold on for us." He replaced the telephone receiver on its cradle.

"A surprise package?" Ricardo said, still standing by the opened door.

The inspector looked at his colleague. "The young man is full of hidden surprises. Let's go."

The police officers went out of the station, to a waiting police vehicle.

75

In Xirivella, Inspector Antonio and Detective Ricardo were greeted by the two uniformed police officers guarding the entrance of the building, with short guns strapped to their waists.

“No movements so far,” one of the police officers said after he saluted the inspector and the detective.

“It's OK,” Antonio said, “the young man called to hand himself in.”

The two policemen exchanged glances.

“But don't bank on that,” the inspector warned. “He may be in a bad mental state by now.”

The policemen got themselves ready for the move in. The inspector checked his gun, then looked at each man and got positive nods of readiness.

Detective Ricardo reached the apartment's bell and thumbed it.

A few moments passed before the buzzer sounded.

“Police!” detective Ricardo said. “Open the door please.”

Immediately, the door clicked and gave way.

Their guns were drawn and positioned, and the inspector pounded the stairs, leading the team to the second floor of the building through the step. One of the police officers stayed behind to guard the building's entrance.

The front door of the apartment was half-open when they reached there. The African was nowhere in sight.

The inspector directed his weapon at the door, moved forward and pushed the door inwards. He scanned the narrow

entrance passage, and then gave a hand signal. The policemen followed him into the apartment.

“Gunpowder,” the inspector perceived, and became more combat ready: in any arrest policemen never ruled out the possibility of an assault. Antonio trained his gun towards the empty sitting room as he walked across it to another open door to a room inside. Detective Ricardo and the other man fanned out beside the inspector, building protection for him with their own weapons.

Inspector Rodriguez signaled to his men to search the other spaces, pointing to the kitchen, the bathroom and another closed door, his eyes fixed to the opened door in front of him.

Detective Ricardo went and did a quick check and came back. “All safe,” he said as the inspector reached the closed door.

Antonio pushed the door hard with his left hand; his weapon ready to take out any threat on his way. The door flew open.

The African was there, seated.

“OK gentlemen, he's—” The other bodies on the floor caught the inspector's attention. “They're here,” Antonio said to his men, going further inside the room, his gun pointing at John.

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“Lucky Epe, you're under arrest in connection with the murder of the three Africans who lived with you in...” Inspector Antonio Jose Rodriguez produced his police identification card and showed the young man as he relayed the address of the apartment.

The African continued to stare at the floor, unfazed by the mention of the names. His thoughts had been in turmoil all the while before he came to face the fact that sooner or later his bubble would burst, his real identity would be revealed, and the circumstances of his illegal status known. He knew his friend Mark would tell the police everything under a thorough interrogation. But nothing mattered any more. He had committed a crime, and now his conscience would follow him to his grave.

As he sat on the bed, John, known now to the police authorities as Lucky Epe, remained unmoved and reconsidered his fate, with both hands under his buttocks, trying to conceal the weapon he held in the hands.

The inspector continued, “Stretch out your hands, please, up in the air.” He gave a thumb signal to Detective Ricardo, who emerged from the inspector's back and went for the young man, a pair of handcuff in his hands.

“Wait a minute,” Antonio said to Ricardo, halting the detective's movement with his left arm. It occurred to the inspector there was no gun in sight. Having managed all this time to hide himself from the authorities, the young man may be worse than they thought. Though, till now, he had remained still and non-violent.

The African sat motionless, his head inclined to the floor, not talking, without any body movement, for several moments, not even minding three police guns pointing at his head and his chest. His eyes were cold and pained, his face whiter than before. An unhealthy tension seemed to mount as the African reconsidered his fate. Then he made up his mind about what he wanted to do.

-Now!

The African slowly began to withdraw his hands from under his buttocks. Then, he shot both hands out into a clear view and raised them up in the air.

"Cuff him up," the inspector said, not removing the gun from the African's tail.

Ricardo moved in, held the African's hands and locked the handcuffs.

"Here they are," the other police officer, searching around as soon as the African hands went up, called out from almost under the other side of the bed, producing two pistols. "One's silenced and one's not," he said, startled as he checked them out. "But none has been used."

Surprised by the information, Detective Ricardo took the young man by both hands and hoisted him like a heavy dummy to a standing position. The sight of another gun fitted with a silencer lying in the African's former sitting position caught the policemen off their guard.

Detective Ricardo picked up the weapon and examined it. "It's been used."

Antonio Rodriguez stared at the African who till now had remained speechless. "As the law stipulates," the inspector said, "you're advised to remain silent. Otherwise, anything you say here can and will be used against you in the court of law. You have the right to a lawyer, and if you can't afford a lawyer, one will be appointed for you if you wish."

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John – Lucky Epe – stood silent and more sober as the inspector informed him of the established legal procedures. The normal senses that had abandoned him when the business money had befuddled him now returned. His mind battled over the judicial consequences of an untold number of charges he was going to face.

A conspirator in a murder plot was one; being the cause of the death of three people was another; absconding from police net; possession of a lethal weapon ... Flooded by the pressure and burden of what raced through his mind, the African sagged down and dropped to his knees on the floor. He sank his cuffed hands in between his thighs, then began to weep.

Tears filled his eyes. The young man remembered the good words as they came rushing back to him; the words of wisdom spoken to dissuade him from taking the path to disaster. Words he had dismissed as meaningless. Now they came back:

-A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches...

-Success is patience...

-Manage your job very well and don't act faster than your pace...

The African remained kneeling, motionless, listening, sobbing. It rang again:

-Treasures of wickedness profit nothing. But poverty and shame are for him who refuseth to listen...

“If I had known!” he sobbed out in English, addressing nobody. His head was inclined to the floor, the pain in his voice evident. “If I had known...I would have listened. Now I will never see my family again. I will never see my father until he's gone. And my mother. My entire family.

“God! This is how I ended up in Europe.” An accumulation of spit poured out from his mouth, dropped on the floor in front of where he knelt. It took a long moment before the young man

began to control himself. The inspector and his men allowed him time to get hold of himself.

When the African looked up at the policemen, the inspector forced himself to ask the question. "Who are these men, Lucky?" he asked in English, pointing first at the hardly recognizable dead swollen body in the other corner of the room, and then at the other two young men who had recoiled in horror since they sighted the policemen. The inspector's eyes had since been arrested by the tiny container partially concealed in the hands of the dead man.

The two Colombian brothers were still dumb, not talking, after the police officer in uniform removed the gag the African placed on the hard man.

The African looked up at the inspector with blood-red eyes. He considered the inspector's question, not knowing whether to respond or not. He had committed this offence, he decided, so he needed no lawyer to back him up; they would surely convict him. With both cuffed hands, he pointed at the corpse. "Francisco Riera Martinez."

The inspector was stunned at the mention of the name of a well-known man, who they were going to reach within the next few hours, having finally discovered his wife was involved in a fatal accident. "Are you sure of this?"

The African nodded.

That was it, the inspector thought. The connection. He didn't need much effort to piece things together and come up with results.

"And these two?" the inspector asked.

The African pointed at the Colombian brothers. "They worked for him, and were instructed to kill me."

The three officers looked at one another. The inspector dropped the questioning. "Let's move it gentlemen. Get the C.I.

A TRAGIC COMPULSION

team and the ambulance for the corpse,” he said to the uniformed policeman.

“The owner of this apartment is a woman,” the African said.

The inspector looked at him, forgetting he hadn’t asked. “A woman?”

The young man nodded again.

“Where is she?” Antonio asked

The African pointed at the Colombians again. “They locked her up in their own house.”

“How come?”

The African explained how it all happened.

“OK. We’ll get to her immediately,” Detective Ricardo said. He went to the two brothers to pick up their residential address and get the house key from them.

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It took ten minutes before the exhausted African woman was rescued and brought back to her apartment. The crime scene documentation lasted another two hours.

Now, all in handcuffs, the African, the young woman and the two Colombians were being transported to the police station.

CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU

EPILOGUE

OCTOBER, 2009

Dear Sir,

I have committed the biggest taboo of my time: I have murdered my own relatives, because of the quest for wealth. I cannot use any words of excuse to justify my ugly behavior. I am guilty of the crime I committed and I deserve no defense. I only deserve the capital sentence appropriate for an inexcusable crime.

However, Sir, from the sincerity of my heart, I tell you one truth: I hate crime. And before this incident I had never committed one. What happened to me occurred because I was conquered by a threat from a stranger. And he succeeded because I was under pressure – the kind of pressure experienced by virtually every African in the Diaspora...

The specially chartered Air Europa aircraft marked EC-JHK, lifted off from Madrid Barajas Airport at 1.00 A.M., en route for the Lagos Murtala Mohammed International Airport: Expected time of arrival, 6.30.A.M Saturday morning.

On a good day, the seventy passengers: young men and women, embarked on the five-and-a-half-hour journey to the most populous black nation in the world, would have been overjoyed that they were bound on a visit to their loved ones whom they had missed for so long. They would have been happy to see their motherland again after some time outside a country rich in petroleum and other mineral resources.

But the look on their faces showed something different – sadness and depression – caused by a forceful repatriation to the country of their birth where they now dreaded to place their feet permanently.

The air within the airplane was hostile. Faces looked gloomy as every one of the deportees stuck to himself and herself, thinking. Some – the ones who refused to accept the forced journey back home – were chained both by the hands and the legs. Many hands were loose-cuffed. The majority were men, a few, women.

Lucky Epe – John – sank himself uncomfortably in Seat 27, staring out the small window, looking through the opaqueness of the cloud cover as the medium range, hundred and ten passenger capacity Boeing 737 aircraft jetted him home. His handcuffs were loose but his legs were free: Lucky didn't resist his deportation. Yet he tensed, wishing all he had gone through over the last ten months had been a nightmare. They weren't, but Lucky was thankful he'd been allowed to go home, contrary to what he thought would happen to him.

It was God, Lucky thought. God had done it for him. Only God touched the mind of the judge as he abated Lucky's sentence from what should have been many years' imprisonment to a deportation to Nigeria.

Lucky had refused to hire a lawyer or work with the government-assigned one. Instead, he decided to write to the judge presiding over his case. Lucky asked only for a translator to be assigned to him, then asked the woman to help him translate the letter into Spanish. That was all the translator did for him, though she genuinely advised that Lucky's letter would have no effect on the case. But the African didn't care. He just wanted to express what was in his mind.

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On the first day of the court sitting, Lucky had no legal personnel to defend the many charges brought against him: illegal residency status, conspiracy to murder, murder, absconding from police authorities, possession of firearms...

When the court asked Lucky to make declarations, he pleaded guilty to all charges. And out of sorrow, he had wiped tears from both eyes, and then presented the letter of apology.

Now inside the aircraft cruising at 800 km/hr, Lucky's mind brought him back to how the judge almost threw out the two-page letter as soon as he tendered it.

"What is this?" the man had asked, hastily examining the content of the sheets. "And who advised you that an apology would save you from a murder case?"

It did.

As the judge scanned the sheets, certain words caught his attention. Words Lucky had written with grief. The judge had grieved too. Lucky remembered the words now.

...I know I am going to jail for my offence. But much as there is nothing as precious as freedom, I am not asking you to let loose a man who caused the death of three people. I am writing to pour out my anguish and make it public, so that as I will be going to prison, my confession would become a salutary lesson for my fellow citizens and other Africans living in Europe, not to give in to the pressures of Africa – which generally urge for a fast acquisition of wealth – but rather, to follow the judgment of their good morals...

Lucky's letter went on to explain about the poor family he came out to lift out of poverty. He had failed his aged, ailing parents. He had failed the younger ones in the extended family who, though ignorant about the true prospects in coming abroad, looked to him as a god who would bring remedies to their plights.

... The god on whom the younger members of an extended family have been relying for assistance with their education with the dividends of Europe;the god who would in the future help them to become members of the Diaspora, has now failed them...

Lucky wrote about his encounter with the stranger. His letter told the judge how the man entrapped him and then threatened to make him lose his job. He admitted he had pity for the man at one stage; but then he described how he went out of his mind when he was paid an amount and promised more, and how he could not figure out how it had happened.

As Lucky's own words ran within his memory, he began to sob. He turned and looked at the young woman seated in his row, but on the other side of the plane. Since they had been airborne, she had sat uneasily, wrenching her heart as tears kept rolling down the cheeks of her pale face. She, like many other of the twenty young women on board the plane, was unable to control her anguish.

Lucky understood why. The women were all scared of going back to hardship, to a nation where they believed the leaders, devoid of any ideology, kept making it uninhabitable for its citizenry. Though the women were into prostitution, many of them through no choice on their part, they felt more comfortable with that than being forced back to a country that held no future for them or their yet-to-be-born children.

When the trial judge finished reading Lucky's letter, it was some time before he said anything. When he finally did, the hearing was adjourned until the following week.

One week later, the judge told Lucky he would be sending him back to Nigeria, to return the corpses of his dead relatives and the other man to their families.

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The judge's decision stunned Lucky, because he had never thought he would be released to go back to his parents.

"Based on the findings and evidence before me, I discovered that the young African was intimidated and improperly influenced by the man, who succeeded in throwing him into a wealth syndrome, knowing that due to his origins, the young man wouldn't be able to cope with or resist the offer of an amount he had never encountered in his life."

Unbelievable! Lucky had stood gaping at the judge as he read out his decision.

"I am sure many would criticize my decision and say I am being lenient with a man who sent three people to their untimely death. I am doing nothing less than putting myself in the shoes of the accused. He is charged with a serious crime, and if convicted, will spend the rest of his life in prison.

"From all investigations, the young man shows no criminal mindedness and had acted under duress."

The judge had looked at Lucky. "Nothing more would be added other than, Lucky Epe, you will be facing deportation to Nigeria, your country of citizenship."

It was a relief, but not something to be elated about. The guilt of what Lucky did still hung and would continue to hang in the air around him.

Lucky's overcrowded mind was interrupted when he became aware of the presence of one of the five Guardia Civil officers assigned to escort the deportees to their final destination. He had been so engrossed that he didn't notice the man walk up to him and stand near the row of the seats in which he was seated.

The massive, heavily built man with broad-shouldered features was the most remarkable among the plain-clothed officers on the plane who patrolled constantly, watching over the Africans. And his ubiquitous presence seemed to be on

purpose – the deportees were frightened whenever they saw him, to such an extent that anyone who had something bad in mind would reconsider their options.

Lucky turned and looked at the giant, startled by the probing eyes gazing at him, as if piercing through the African's mind, trying to find out what he was thinking. After an interminable interval, the man opened his mouth. What he said surprised Lucky even more.

The officer thrust his long right arm forward, revealing a large palm, in which there was a copy of “El País” Spain’s biggest-selling daily national newspaper. “Este periódico contiene algunas noticias con que te sentirás un poco mejor,” he told Lucky. “This newspaper contains some news which will make you feel a little better.”

The giant threw the paper at the African. “Es un regalo,” he said with a suppressed smile. “Página nueve,” he said, specifying where the news was. “It’s a gift. Page nine.” The man turned and walked away.

Lucky sat rigid, not understanding the officer's action. Nevertheless, he went to the ninth page of the newspaper and started reading. Not that he wanted to understand it all, but only tried to guess out the much he could. And minutes later, he sighed deeply, relieved with a particular caption: “*An outlaw exposed.*”

Lucky turned to the direction where the giant was supposed to be – to say thanks – but was surprised that the man had disappeared. Lucky returned to the page. He read about Francisco Martinez's exposure. Then he began to read about the verdict given to the Colombian brothers and the young woman from Cameroun.

Lucky never would find out that, just as the judge had read his letter of apology and had pity on him, many other Spanish citizens who read, and those who heard about it also felt

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compassion for him; the giant officer of the Guardia Civil was one of them. Moreover, the African wouldn't know that the officer kind of secretly thanked him, whatever the circumstances had been, for contributing to the exposure of a villain who had been operating under a guise the intelligence agency couldn't uncover for years.

Lucky devoured the page using his Spanish reading skills as best he could. His heart became gladdened to know the African woman had been set free, based on the fact that no evidence of conspiracy was found against her. He wouldn't know that the younger of the Colombian brothers had wanted to argue and rope her in for at least a three-year jail term, but had later thought about it and decided to let what he termed a "poor prostitute" go free. The police did not find any concrete evidence linking her to the criminal activities of the brothers.

For the Colombian brothers, Lucky saw in the paper that they were sentenced to an additional three years' imprisonment for drug trafficking and possession of illegal weapons. He already knew about the four years they had received for shooting and attempting to murder him.

That was it. Justice had been meted out. Lucky's face brightened for the woman from his continent. If what happened could become a lesson for her...Maybe they would meet again in future and...Lucky thought he liked her, despite the kind of trade she was involved in: it could be possible for her to change.

When the pilot announced the aircraft was about to make its landing, Lucky became nervous. He thought about the three coffins in the plane's hold. How were the families at the airport waiting impatiently for the bodies going to react? How were they going to react to Lucky?

And the press? Lots of captions began to bombard Lucky's mind: *A killer of three finally deported... A murderer back home with the three corpses...The triple murderer will face justice in Nigeria...*

Lucky didn't know how to face it all, but there was nothing he could do. And he knew, as soon as the plane touched down at the airport, he would be rounded up again by the Nigerian police authorities, being amongst the seven men deported on the grounds of criminal offences. They would detain them for further interrogation.

Lucky thought about the only possession he went home with now – the knapsack and its contents. One thing still baffled him. Why hadn't they taken the money, the remaining twelve thousand eight hundred Euros the stranger paid him? Why hadn't the court gone along to ask him to produce the money?

Lucky had to tear part of the double layer of the knapsack and hide the money there while in the woman's house, so that the Cameroonian wouldn't find it. But he knew that if they had searched methodically, the Spanish police would have discovered the money. Yet they seemed not to have done that.

May be he was just lucky..., Lucky thought.

Yet he knew he wouldn't have such good fortune when he landed in Nigeria. They police would scavenge his bag and find the money. And if they did, on an unofficial basis, Lucky would be dead within the next hour. But if by luck, the police didn't find the money, Lucky knew what he was going to do with it.

Lucky decided that somehow, following all his experience abroad, it meant, running away from Africa wasn't for him. Neither was it the best for any of his fellow youths. He was meant to live in his own homeland and battle against the soaring poverty. He would use the money to fight for his survival. Nigeria seemed to be where he belonged. It occurred to him now: the best thing to do with that money would be to establish

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a non-profit organization, which would not only join other organizations in airing programs to dissuade youths from running away from the homeland, but would also pressurize the leadership of the country to look into ways of creating better governance – a governance which would embrace the youth of Nigeria.

THE END

CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU