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## O N E

As Alexandra stepped out into the African night, a sense of the mystery of the great continent prickled up her spine. No, there weren't any cannibals jumping around a fire or leopards creeping through the jungle or sahibs riding by on elephants. In fact, compact European cars cruised paved streets that led to a distant skyline of glittering lights. It might have been New York—except for the palm trees rustling in the warm breeze, the fragrance of tropical blossoms, the Swahili cries of vendors hawking newspapers and roasted corn on the cob. And overhead . . .

Alexandra stared up in wonder at the multitude of stars, billions of twinkling crystals. Constellations she had never seen before lay across the velvet expanse like expensive, Tiffany-designed brooches and necklaces. The Milky Way carved a creamy path through the midst of the heavens. And all of it hung so close, just over the tips of the palm fronds.

“Better close your mouth or you'll start catching flies.” Grant took Alexandra's attaché case out of her hand before she could reply. He slung it into the back of a rusty Land Rover and slammed the door. “In Africa, those could be tsetse flies. First thing you know, you'll fall into a deep sleep—and it'll take more than the kiss of a handsome prince to wake you up.”

“Grant!” Hannah touched Alexandra’s hand. “He has always been a naughty boy, that one. I promise you will not find tsetse flies in Nairobi. They live in the bush country.”

“That’s a relief.” Of course, she would be heading out on a safari into the bush country in a matter of days. She was scheduled to tour game parks, visit the coast, and even climb Mount Kilimanjaro. But tsetse flies certainly hadn’t been in the brochure.

“Hop in the back, Miss Prescott,” Grant said, tilting the front seat forward. “Just push some of that stuff out of the way.”

Alexandra set one foot into the Land Rover and stared in disgust at the heaps and piles on the backseat—tattered books, reams of dog-eared papers, blackened banana peels, stray socks, tape recorders, and enough empty candy-bar wrappers to fill two trash cans. The smell made her gasp. Who was this guy? Some kind of international, roving garbage collector?

She cleared a space between a box of cassette tapes and a wadded-up coat. Then she sat down carefully, her knees tucked together and her toes aligned. She wouldn’t be the least surprised if something came crawling out to sit on her lap.

“Oh, Grant, my *toto*,” Hannah said as she climbed into the front seat. “You are worse than ever with your things. And what have you been eating? Kit Kat bars? Will you survive on those? No wonder the malaria attacked you so easily. You must become strong. Don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Lord?”

The man beside her leaned over and planted another kiss on the old woman’s leathery cheek. “I’m a bachelor, Mama

Hannah. I like it that way. Eat what I want, when I want. Sleep when I'm tired. Mind my own business. You know what I mean?"

As he started the Land Rover, the African woman shook her head. "I never mind only my own business."

"I've noticed that."

"Jesus Christ gave you and your three sisters into my hands long ago. How can I stand back and watch you live in this way?"

"Mama Hannah, I'm thirty-three years old."

"By now you should have a wife. Children." She looked over the back of her seat and studied Alexandra. "What do you think about this, Miss Prescott? Should this boy not find a good woman to marry?"

Alexandra cleared her throat. "Well, I—"

"Mama Hannah," Grant cut in, "you've been hanging around with my moon-eyed sisters too long. I'm happy for Tillie and Jess. I really am. But I don't want you doing any matchmaking for me, OK? I have a lot more important things to focus on. Did I tell you about the group of Ilmolelian clan members I've been talking with over near Mount Kilimanjaro? Ilkisongo area. Intriguing bunch. You'll be fascinated."

"He changes the subject," the old woman said to Alexandra. "Do you see how he does that? This boy is very smart. I cannot understand why a woman would not want to marry him."

Alexandra mustered a smile. *She* could understand perfectly. What woman in her right mind would hook up with this derelict? Sure, he had an obvious tenderness for the African woman. You could even say the man had a nice

pair of eyes and a disarming grin. But his clothes . . . and this car! She had heard enough sermons to know it was wrong to judge a person by outward appearance. But she had dated enough men to trust her intuition just a little. If this Grant fellow didn't care about his health and his appearance—what would he care about?

“Miss Prescott, you have come a long way from New York to Kenya,” Hannah said. “I wonder what you will do here.”

“Business,” Grant answered in Alexandra's place. “She's a fabric designer. Getting ideas from the wilds of Africa.”

“I am certain you will make beautiful designs,” Hannah said.

“I suggest you study the animals closely while you're here,” Grant continued. “Scrutinize the fauna. Really look. The lines of a zebra's hide. Fascinating. The babies are brown and white, you know. Please don't give them black stripes. African elephants have big ears, huge tattered appendages. Don't draw in the tiny little flappers that Asian elephants have. In fact, you ought to visit my sister Fiona. She lives with the elephants over in the Serengeti. She could show you a thing or two.”

“Your sister lives with elephants?” Alexandra asked. She was beginning to assemble a very odd portrait of this family. A derelict brother. A crackpot sister. And a mother—the sanest of the lot—who couldn't possibly be their mother.

Grant glanced back over his shoulder as he drove. “Elephants,” he repeated. “Of course, Fiona wouldn't let you near her campsite. Hates people as much as I like them. She's sort of the eccentric type.”

“Unlike you,” Alexandra said under her breath. Aloud she added, “What exactly do you do, Mr. . . . ?”

“Thornton. Grant Thornton.” He gave her that lopsided grin. “I wander around mostly. Talk to people.”

“Grant, tell her what you *really* do,” Hannah ordered. “We are here in the city now, and your guest must think very badly of you.”

“Yep, Nairobi. City of eternal springtime.” Ignoring the old woman, he steered the Land Rover around a large traffic circle. “Ten carjackings a day. That’s the downside of Nairobi, Miss Prescott. That and a few random murders, the occasional student riot, and a crumbling city infrastructure. Potholes in the roads, unreliable water and electrical systems, a political structure in the throes of government reorganization. That sort of thing.”

“Sounds like New York.”

“The urban jungle.”

“So what’s the upside?”

“Flowers—bougainvillea, frangipani, hibiscus. Food—African, Indian, Chinese, Italian. Weather—no sleet, hail, snow, tornadoes, or hurricanes. Even the earthquakes keep it down to the occasional tremor or two. Best of all, I guess, would be the people. Asians, Arabs, and Europeans are interesting. But it’s the Africans who turn my wheels. In one country you have four different ethnic units, more than forty indigenous groups, and just as many languages, customs, beliefs, and rituals. The place is a candy store for a guy like me. A real candy store.”

In spite of the odor of overripe bananas and the sticky substance on the soles of both of her shoes, Alexandra was

curious. “So, what do you really do here?” she repeated.

“I mean . . . to earn a living.”

“I just told you.” He pulled the Land Rover to a stop in front of a round tower that rose into the night sky. “Hilton International. Swimming pool. Shopping arcade. Communications center. Western civilization. Hang on, I’ll get your bags.”

Before Alexandra could climb over a pair of hiking boots and out the door, the African woman reached around and touched her arm. “May God bless you,” she said softly.

“May he bless you, too. Hannah, you mentioned Christ earlier. Are you a Christian?”

The brown eyes softened. “I am. And you?”

“Yes, I am.” Alexandra impulsively slipped her arms around the old woman’s neck. “I feel better knowing there’s someone in this country who shares my faith.”

“There are many believers in Kenya. But it is not we who must give you courage and strength. It is our Lord himself.”

Warmth flooding her heart, Alexandra looked into the woman’s dark eyes. “Pray for me,” she whispered.

“Hey, are you two going to gab all night?” Grant poked his head through the open door. “Come on, Miss Prescott. I’ve got things to do.”

“Wander around and talk to people?” Alexandra stepped out onto the sidewalk. “Thank you, Mr. Thornton. I’d offer to pay you, but—”

“But you haven’t exchanged your money yet. That’s OK. You’ve been an interesting specimen.”

“Specimen?” she repeated, bristling.

He laughed. “OK, I’ll stop analyzing you for a minute.

I'll look you up and down, man to woman. Yep, you're a beautiful blonde with legs that ought to be banned. If I weren't already committed, I'd ask you out to lunch."

"You said you were a bachelor."

"I'm not married—but I'm not available. My work, you know. Keeps me busy, challenges me. I'm happy. What else does a man need?"

"Let me think now. Why *do* people get together? Could it be . . . love?"

He let out a low whistle. "Don't try to trip me up, Miss Prescott. I'm a sucker for a clever woman."

"Flatter me all you want, Mr. Thornton. You'll be disappointed. I'm only in Kenya a couple of weeks. Besides, I prefer a man who woos me with flowers—not one who sticks me to the floor of his car with spilled Coke."

He was chuckling as she picked up her attaché case. A bellhop had already begun loading her bags onto a large, brass-trimmed cart. From the open glass door of the lobby she could smell the familiar scent of luxury hotel—clean floors, leather chairs, air-conditioning.

"Thanks for the ride," Alexandra said, extending her hand.

Grant took it and gave a firm squeeze. "My pleasure. Oh, and if you need another ride or anything, you can look me up in the town of Oloitokitok. It's near the Amboseli Game Park. The folks there will give you directions to my camp. It's the Maasai Oral Mythology Project. Ask for *Bwana* Hadithi, the story man."

As he spoke, he walked toward the Land Rover, his hair backlit to a burnished gold by a streetlamp. Alexandra lifted a hand. Her derelict angel. Odd how very strong and solid he looked just at this moment.



“The story man?”

“That’s me,” he called as he ducked into the Land Rover. “Grant Thornton.”

Before Alexandra could react, the vehicle had sped away, straddling a pothole in the street and then vanishing around a corner. She stood staring at the place it had been, wondering what sort of dream she’d been tossed into.

“Grant Thornton,” she repeated numbly.

“You are a friend of the Thornton family, madam?” the bellhop asked. He was a towering African with a smile that exuded courtesy. “They are well loved in Kenya.”

“I don’t know them. I just sort of ran into Mr. Thornton at the airport.”

“Oh yes, a fine family. They have lived in Kenya many years. The father is a professor at the university. The children are scientists, I believe. One studies elephants. She is helping to stop poachers. Another works to grow crops for dry lands. The other I do not know well. Dr. Thornton—the man who brought you here—he is a good person. The books he writes are in the city library. You can read them.”

“*Dr. Thornton?* He’s a scientist?”

“He listens to the stories of the tribes of Kenya. He writes them down so they will not fade from memory as people move into the city and the old ways begin to vanish.”

“He doesn’t seem very . . . organized. I mean his car. His clothes.”

The bellhop grinned. “It is not the look of Dr. Thornton that matters to the people of Kenya—his white skin or his old coat. It is his heart that we love.”

Alexandra clutched her case as the man wheeled his cart toward the hotel lobby. All her education, wealth, and busi-

ness acumen couldn't outweigh the sudden sense of loneliness that swept over her. She could claim fame as a designer. She could claim associates in the highest echelon of New York society. But she couldn't claim that anyone . . . even a single soul . . . loved her heart.



“Miss Prescott is a beautiful woman,” Mama Hannah said as she sat with Grant on the guest-house balcony that evening. “We should stay in Nairobi for a few more days. You could eat dinner with her tomorrow.”

Grant took a sip of tea and hooked his heels over the balcony railing. “Too much work to do back at my camp, Mama Hannah. There’s a big Maasai initiation ceremony coming up. Lots of storytelling.”

“You do not think she is pretty?”

He shrugged. “She’s tall.”

“Is that all you saw in her? She looks like you, Grant.”

“Like me? No way.” Crossing his legs at the ankle, he focused on the dark wedge of city skyline between his safari boots. Pale electric lights glimmered—nothing like the billions of bright stars that canopied his tent. He couldn’t wait to get back to the bush.

“Alexandra Prescott is New York City from her head to her toes,” he said. “Did you see those crazy shoes she was wearing? One misstep and she’ll snap an ankle. How can you say she’s anything like me?”

“Both are tall. Blue eyes.”

“Mine are gray.”

“Yellow hair.”

“Mine’s brown.” He gave her his best scowl. “A couple of years go by, and you forget what I look like.”

“Your hair is golden from the sun, Grant Thornton, and you cannot deny it. You are my *toto*, and I will never forget one thing about you. I know you are smart. You are handsome. You are kind. And you are lonely.”

As usual, Mama Hannah stated her opinions bluntly. Grant liked that. As a child, he’d always been able to count on her to tell him the truth. His mother’s untimely death and his father’s indifference toward him could have sent him into a nosedive. But Mama Hannah had always been there—the rudder in the storms that had beset the four Thornton children.

“You’re right,” he admitted finally. “Sometimes I get a little lonely out there in the boonies. That’s one reason I’m glad you’ve come.”

The old woman lifted her teacup to her lips. She shut her eyes for a moment as she drank. Then she smiled at Grant. “I will make tea for you, *toto*. I will see that your clothes are washed. Maybe I will even make a cake for you.”

“Can you fix a pot of that stew I always liked? The stuff with the beans and cauliflower?”

“Ehh. I will fill your stomach. But I will not be able to fill the lonely place inside your heart, Grant.”

“Uh-oh, I can feel a Sunday school lesson coming on.”

“What do you think I will say? You are grown now. You tell me the lesson.”

He leaned his head back and mentally sorted through the lists of Bible stories he had learned at Hannah’s knee. He had loved the tales—loved them so much he had made his life’s work collecting the mythological stories of African

peoples. Even as an adult, he could hardly get through a day without two or three of Mama Hannah's little biblical parables or Scripture verses drifting at him out of nowhere. Now that she was back in his life, he knew the lessons would resume—stories about a God so real to this woman that she couldn't exist without him . . . a God so impossible that Grant could never accept him.

"The lesson for the day," he said. He closed his eyes, imagining he was seated among a circle of Maasai tribespeople, their dark skin glowing in the light from the fire that crackled in their midst. The voice of the storyteller would emerge from the vacuum of night.

"Once, there was a good man named Daniel," Grant said, keeping his words low and hypnotic. "Daniel was a chief elder in the clan of the Medes, of which Darius was the powerful *laibon*. Some of the other elders were jealous of Daniel and his influence with Darius, so they plotted against him. They went to Darius and asked him to order everyone to pray only to the *laibon*, instead of to God, *Engai*. Later, these wicked elders went and found Daniel praying to *Engai* as he always did. So the *laibon* ordered Daniel taken to the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro and sealed into a cave where there lived a pride of hungry lions. Early the next morning, the *laibon* went to the cave and called to Daniel. Daniel answered that *Engai* had shut the lions' mouths, and therefore he was innocent of any wrongs. The *laibon* took Daniel out of the cave and threw Daniel's accusers among the lions, who tore them apart."

"You tell the story well," Hannah said softly. "Although I am sure Daniel's den of lions was not at the foot of Mount

Kilimanjaro, and King Darius was not a Maasai witch doctor.”

“Does it really matter, Mama Hannah? It’s a story. Fiction. The tale was handed down from generation to generation in order to illustrate a point to the Jewish people. If I alter the details a little, maybe the Maasai can learn something from it.”

The old woman sat in silence for a long time, and Grant knew he had offended her. To Mama Hannah, the Bible was not a collection of folktales. For her, it was truth—even the parables held such power they could change the lives of those who heard them.

It had always intrigued Grant that this African woman—thoroughly steeped in her own tribal culture as a child and young adult—had completely embraced the theology of a foreign race. What was it about Christianity that had won her over? Why did his words of callous indifference make her bristle? No, it wasn’t anger he saw in her brown eyes. . . . It was sorrow.

“I apologize, Mama Hannah,” he said. “I know the story of Daniel in the lions’ den is important to you.”

“You called it a lesson,” she responded. “You said it has a point. What shall we learn from this Scripture about Daniel?”

“The moral of the story relates to your statement about my empty heart: Man needs God.”

“Ehh.”

“Especially if he wants to avoid being ripped apart by a pride of hungry lions.”

“Now you make a joke. When you come too close to the truth, Grant, you run. Even with Miss Prescott, you cannot permit yourself to look for the good in her.”

“What is it with you and that woman?” he said, unhooking his feet from the balcony rail. “It’s so obvious we’re worlds apart in every way. She’s a New York fabric designer. I’m an anthropologist living with the Maasai. She fills her days with cappuccino and power lunches and cellular phones. I sit on the ground outside a dung-plastered hut, swapping stories with a man who has three wives and wears empty film canisters in the holes of his earlobes. Alexandra Prescott and I have nothing in common. Nothing.”

“Nothing in common . . . perhaps each of you has something the other lacks.”

“Except that I have everything I need.” Grant stood and started toward the door.

“I see you are preparing to run again. This tells me I have come close to the truth about you.”

Grant let out a hot breath and leaned against the aluminum door frame. “Look, Mama Hannah, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I have no time to discuss things that aren’t important. My work is time-consuming, and I’ve got to focus. Admitting a woman into my life—any woman, but especially one like Miss Prescott—would be a mistake.”

“You know her, *toto*?”

“I know the type. I dated plenty in college and grad school. And I found out I don’t relate to American women very well. Maybe it’s because I grew up in Kenya. Alexandra Prescott and I might as well be from different planets.”

“Ehh,” she said, “I understand.”

Grant stepped through the sliding glass door and walked across the room toward the shower as he mentally continued the argument. Foreign thoughts, ideologies, and

customs just weren't compatible. You couldn't mix cultures and end up with anything but a mess.

But as he set foot on the cool tile floor, it occurred to him that Mama Hannah was an African woman with four white children and a Christian God. Grant himself was the product of an American-British marriage—a white man who lived happily among the Maasai. And Miss Alexandra Prescott was a suave New Yorker who somehow had endeared herself to the woman he loved most in all the world.