



A Whisper of Danger



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PALMER



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A Whisper of Danger

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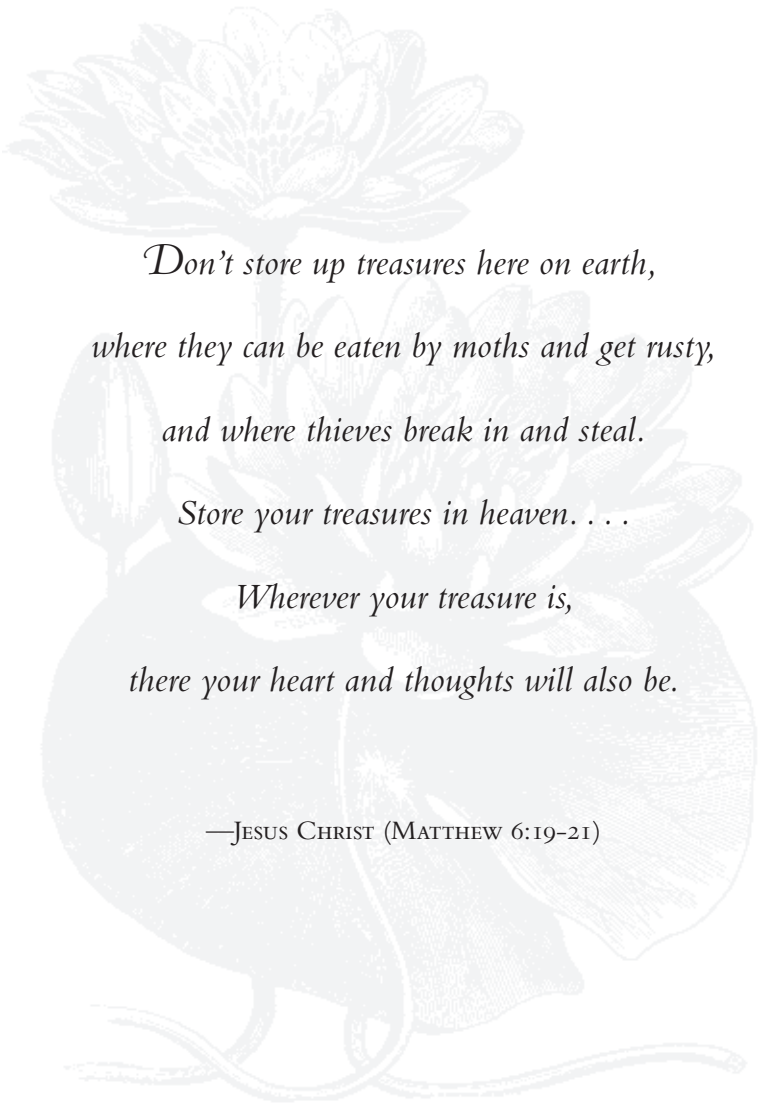
*This book is dedicated to Geoffrey Palmer,
my beloved son.*

*“I asked the Lord to give me this child,
and he has given me my request.*

*Now I am giving him to the Lord,
and he will belong to the Lord his whole life.”*

1 Samuel 1:27-28





*Don't store up treasures here on earth,
where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty,
and where thieves break in and steal.*

Store your treasures in heaven. . . .

*Wherever your treasure is,
there your heart and thoughts will also be.*

—JESUS CHRIST (MATTHEW 6:19-21)



Prologue

“Help, help! I’m drowning!” The reed-thin voice faltered.
“Somebody save me!”

Jessica Thornton planted her fists on her hips and cocked one eye at the attic door. “Spencer, are you up there?”

“A shark bit through my air hose! I can’t . . . can’t . . . breathe. Aaagh!”

Sounds of gurgling and choking mingled with the dull thuds of Spencer Thornton’s agonized death throes. Jess shook her head. *Drowning. What an awful fate.*

“If I can just . . . swim . . . up . . .” Spencer groaned, “up to my boat.”

Trailing a hand on the banister, Jess climbed the steep staircase. “Hey, Captain Splinter, this is your mother speaking. Grab a life buoy, and get yourself down here. I want to talk to you.”

She reached the attic door and leaned against it, listening. From the other side came a loud gasp, a weak moan, and the crash of a heavy object falling onto the attic floor.

“Spencer?” Jess threw open the door. Heart racing, she searched the dimly lit room, gloomy with spiderwebs and the massive, undefined shapes of shrouded furniture. “Splint? Are you all right?”

“The treasure chest!” The voice came from somewhere near the ceiling. “I dropped it back into the sea. That gold

is probably spread across leagues of ocean floor by now.” The voice paused, deepened. “Well, you’ll just have to go back for it, Captain Thornton. I’m not leaving the Bay of Bengal without my treasure.”

Jess stepped over a box of broken Christmas balls and squinted. In the faint light coming through a round window in the gable she could just make out the thin body of a boy dangling by his skinny arms from a horizontal collar beam. Legs flailing, he was attempting to haul himself onto the wooden rafter. One end of a vacuum-cleaner hose flopped around his head; the other end was attached with silver duct tape to a football tied to his back.

“I don’t think you realize what you’re asking, Blackbeard,” he growled at his imaginary companion. “It’s a nightmare down there. Sharks everywhere. One of them bit right through the air hose on my Aqua-Lung!” He grabbed the loose end of the vacuum-cleaner hose and shook it. “See this? Cut clean in two. If I weren’t as brave and powerful as I am, I would have died of the bends trying to get back to this boat.”

He threw one skinny leg over the collar beam and pulled himself up to a sitting position. “I don’t care if sharks tear you to pieces, Thornton,” he shouted, his voice now deep and gravelly, the quintessential pirate voice. “I want my treasure!”

“And I want you to get down from there before you fall, Splinter,” Jess cut in. Her son had given himself the nickname when he was too young to pronounce his real name. “I’ve been combing this house for you. How many times have I told you to let me know where you’re playing?”

“Avast!” the boy cried, spotting his mother walking

toward him. “A pirate vessel bearing down hard at starboard, Cap’n! She’s coming fast, mates. A good fifteen knots, I’d say. Man the cannons!”

“I need to talk to you about something, Splint.”

“Ahoy, there! Do you come in peace?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Then we’ll give you permission to board. Throw the gangplank from your ship to ours and climb across.”

Jess glanced at the wobbly chair her son had indicated. Then she looked up at the dusty, web-coated collar beam. *Ah, the joys of motherhood.* After kicking off her sandals, she climbed onto the chair and hiked up her jeans. She grabbed the beam, swung one leg over it, banged her knee, and nearly toppled over before righting herself.

“Welcome aboard the *Golden Crescent*,” Spencer said as his mother scooted toward him, her long legs dangling. “Speak your piece, matey. We’ve work to do here, and there’s no time for lollygagging.”

“I’m going to gag your lolly in a minute, Splint.”

Jess studied her son. His violet eyes were the mirror image of her own, but where her hair glistened with red fire, the gold of sunshine danced in his. All arms and legs, he had lost the soft curves that once had made him cuddly. Now he was rosy and thin, with broad shoulders, the hint of a man’s square jaw, and smooth skin stretching across high cheekbones.

Splinter had been gifted with near-genius intelligence, and creativity seemed to ooze from his every pore. Yet he was all boy. Anything dirty, hidden, explosive, or smelly held him in rapt fascination. He spent hours sketching treasure islands and building models of spaceships from paper clips

and empty toilet-tissue rolls. If something could be swum in, Splinter swam in it. If something could be climbed on, Splinter viewed it as a personal Everest. He wore holes through his socks, regularly stained the knees of his jeans green, and never had two matching gloves.

“My chest of rubies and emeralds is smashed on the sea floor,” he informed her. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, there are gold coins spread from here to Indonesia. If I don’t repair this Aqua-Lung and get back to work, Blackbeard may feed me to the sharks.”

Jess regarded the broken Christmas ornaments scattered across the attic floor. Rubies and emeralds? She quelled the urge to shout, “That is broken glass! And your feet are bare! And who knows what kind of spiders are up here, and if I have to take you to the emergency room one more time, young man . . .” Instead, she reached out and laid a hand on her son’s leg. “Splinter, we need to talk.”

“What, Mom?” His eyes grew serious. “Is something wrong?”

“I’ve had a letter from someone.” She searched the boy’s face, praying that she could carry out the careful plan she had made to tell her son gently the incredible things that had happened in the past two weeks. “Remember the stories I told you about growing up in Africa?” she began. “About how my father was a professor and my mother died when I was just a little girl? Remember the old African lady who took care of Uncle Grant, Aunt Tillie, Aunt Fiona, and me? Hannah Wambua?”

“Yeah, so?”

“You know I’ve always loved Africa, Splinter, even though we live in London now so I can be near my work.” She took

a deep breath. “Two weeks ago I got a letter about someone I used to know in Africa.”

“You found my father!”

Jessica’s mouth dropped open. “Oh, Splinter. Where did you get that idea?”

“You told me you met my father in Africa. He was the son of missionaries. You got married to him. You said he didn’t even know you were going to have a baby when he went away. Did my father write a letter to you? Have you told him about me yet?”

Jess stared into her son’s eyes, dismayed at the light of hope burning there. For ten years she had blocked her son’s father out of her mind. As Spencer had grown, she had painted for the child a vague picture of a faceless, ephemeral man who was neither good nor bad, a man who had vanished like the mist on a sunny morning.

It was clear that the boy had mentally connected Africa with his father. Jess would have to blot out that notion. She would do it carefully but firmly. Just as firmly as she always shut the door on her own bitter memories.

“Splinter, honey, the letter was from an attorney. It was about a man I knew after you were born. My old art teacher.”

“Did your art teacher know my dad?”

“This has nothing to do with your father!” Tentacles of anger reached up inside her at the memory of that man.

“This is about Ahmed Abdullah bin Yusuf, the professor who taught me how to sketch and paint a long time ago when I lived in Tanzania.”

“Oh.” Crestfallen, the boy started swinging the loose end of the vacuum-cleaner hose.

“So, anyway.” Jess tried to resume her gentle revelation of the news. “You were a baby when I started taking lessons from Dr. bin Yusuf in Dar es Salaam. Hannah moved in with us, and she took care of you during the day while I was getting my education. When you were four, we left Africa and moved here to London. After I worked for a couple of years painting greeting cards and calendars, I met James Perrott.”

“Why are you telling me all this stuff? I know James writes *Kima the Monkey* books, and you illustrate them, and you’re getting ready to start *Kima the Monkey and the Irritable Impala*, and you don’t know where you’re going to find an impala to sketch, and you hope they have one at Regent’s Park Zoo, and—”

“Splinter!” Jess gripped the beam. “I got a letter from a lawyer telling me that my old art teacher got very sick and died and left me his house on Zanzibar Island. I’ve decided to move there.”

The violet eyes blinked. “With me?”

“Of course with you. I wouldn’t leave you here alone. It’s a big, old house. There’s lots of room.”

“Why would your art teacher will you his house? Didn’t he have a wife? Didn’t he have kids?”

“Dr. bin Yusuf didn’t have a family. To tell you the truth, I’m not sure why he left his house to me, Splint. I know I’m his most commercially successful student, and I use a lot of his methods in my paintings. I always admired his work. He thought my technique was strong, too, and he was proud of what I’ve accomplished. But I think his decision to give me the house had something to do with the fact that we became very close when I was his student. In a way, he was

like a father to me. Maybe he felt I was the daughter he never had.”

“So what makes you think I want to live in some dead guy’s house in Africa?”

Jess forced down the urge to admonish her son for disrespecting the man she had revered. This wasn’t the time for a lecture. “We’ll have fun in Zanzibar,” she said. “Mama Hannah’s going to move in with us. She’ll keep an eye on you while I paint.”

“Mom, I’m ten years old. I don’t need a babysitter!”

“Mama Hannah’s not a babysitter. She’s like a grandma. You loved her when you were little.”

“A grandma! I don’t need some old lady looking out for me.”

“Hannah’s coming, and that’s settled. You’ll like her, I promise. I’m going to start illustrating the impala book as soon as we get there. James thinks we can work out the details by phone and fax. My editor’s not thrilled with the idea of my moving so far away, but I told her I can paint with more authenticity if I’m living in Africa. An old car comes with the house. I’ll be able to drive you into town to school.”

“School? You mean we’re going to live there forever? Like for the rest of our lives? What about Nick? What about my bed and all my stuff? I don’t want to move to Africa. I like it here.”

“We’ll live right beside the ocean.” She gave her voice the beckoning quality that sometimes worked on him. “White sand. Snorkeling. You’ll be able to swim every day. You can look for shells. You can climb coconut palms.”

“But I don’t want to leave Nick. He’s my best friend.”

“You and Nick can be pen pals.” She leaned over and whispered in his ear. “You can send him letters about your sunken ship.”

“Sunken ship!”

“Dr. bin Yusuf told me about it years ago. There’s supposed to be a wrecked ship near the reef. Sometimes gold coins wash ashore.”

“You mean I might find treasure on the beach?”

“You never know. The main thing is you’ll be breathing fresh air, and you won’t have to go away to boarding school next term like we’d thought. We’ll eat mangoes and bananas every day. We’ll even see real monkeys.”

“Whoa! I gotta tell Nick.” He jumped to the floor, leapt neatly over the ornament shards, and spun around in midair. “When are we going?”

“About a week.”

“Wahoo!” He pumped his fists toward the ceiling and threw back his head. “Zanzibar!”

Tearing off his Aqua-Lung, Splinter raced for the attic door. The football fell to the floor and bounced away with the vacuum-cleaner hose still attached. As she lowered herself to the chair, Jess heard her son’s bare feet pound down the stairs.

She stepped onto the floor and picked her way through the broken ornaments to the attic door. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out onto the landing and shut the door firmly. The past was far behind. The future beckoned.

Zanzibar.



ONE

Splinter chewed on the cap of his ballpoint pen, working the blue plastic around inside his mouth and flicking the clip in and out like a lizard's tongue. He had been in Zanzibar only five hours, and already amazing things were happening. He couldn't wait any longer to write to his buddy Nick back in London.

After smoothing a sheet of lined notebook paper on the café table, he began to write:

Dear Nick,

Africa is awesome. First, you ride for nine hours on an airplane. Every time you push the overhead button, the stewardess comes and brings you a blanket or a pillow or a magazine. You can push the button all you want until your mom makes you stop.

Then your plane lands in a city called Dar es Salaam. It's nothing like London. You could get lost there, believe me. After your mom calls the police and they find you, you get on a—

“Mom?” Splinter lifted his head. “How do you spell hydrofoil?”

“H-y-d . . . oh, honey, just guess.”

Splinter frowned. His mom's hand was shaking as she stirred her tea. He'd never seen her face so white. The rest

of her looked okay, though. She had on a blue blouse, a denim skirt, and a pair of sandals. After the hydrofoil ride, she had brushed her hair. It was bouncing around her chin as usual.

She had told him she had something called jet lag. She said as soon as Hannah came in on the afternoon hydrofoil from Dar es Salaam, they could all go out to the new house, and everything would be better. Splinter shrugged and went back to his letter.

—hydrofol. It's like a boat with huge metal fins under it that lift the hull when it goes fast. It travels on top of the water from Dar es Salaam to Zanzibar—twenty-two miles. Mom told me not to dangle over the side anymore unless I wanted to become dinner for a shark.

Zanzibar is a very old town with hundreds of winding streets. Africans, Arabs, Indians, and Europeans live here. Mom said the Arabs used to ship slaves, ivory, and gold out of Zanzibar. Now the island people grow cloves. In Zanzibar, you can get even more lost than in Dar es Salaam. Your mom can get lost, too.

After she figures out how to read the map, you might talk her into buying you a lamp just like Aladdin's, but without the genie. I also got a cool model of a boat called a dhow. You can see the sultan's palace and the house where David Livingstone used to stay before he went exploring. Mom said to stay close to her, and I know why. We passed a witch doctor's shop, and we walked down a lane called Suicide Alley. Then we ran into a group of people, and my mom used to know some of them. Right in front of them, she—

“Mom, how do you spell *barf*?” Splinter tapped his pen on the notebook. “You know—upchuck, Ralph, spew—”

“Splinter, what are you writing?”

“I’m telling Nick what happened when you got jet lag a few minutes ago.”

His mom blotted her forehead with her napkin. “Maybe it was the hydrofoil. Maybe I was seasick.”

“Lucky thing that guy helped you up off the street.” Splinter chewed on the pen cap for a moment. The man had been awfully nice, he thought, considering the circumstances. Not everybody would mop you up with his own handkerchief and then carry you to a table at an outdoor café where you could rest. Especially not after you tossed your cookies all over his shoes.

Splinter studied his mother as she took a sip of her tea. It wasn’t like her to whack somebody over the head with a camera bag. It seemed a particularly mean thing to do to a guy trying to help you. But that’s what she had done—hauled off and smacked him and then yelled at him to get his hands off her and leave her alone.

She told Splinter it was jet lag. He hoped it wasn’t contagious.

Splinter bent over his letter.

—barfed. Now we are having tea at an outdoor café. I can see a cockroach right by my mom’s foot. This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time. I’m going to like Zanzibar. Write soon.

He signed the letter with the practiced flourish of an artist. At the bottom of the letter he sketched a picture of the model *dhow* he had bought. It had triangular sails and a wooden hull. He couldn’t wait to put it into the ocean and see if it would float.

While his mother sorted through the piles of official papers documenting ownership of the old house, Splint penciled a cartoon of her losing her breakfast. Nick would get a kick out of that.

It turned out to be quite a good drawing. His mom was clutching her stomach and crying out, “Oh! Oh!” in a little balloon beside her head. The man who helped her was bent over, one arm supporting her shoulders. His balloon said, “It’s okay, Jessie. It’s okay.”

Splint frowned. How had the man known his mom’s name? He turned the memory of that moment over in his mind. Very strange. There was some kind of magic here in Zanzibar. He could feel it.

He tore off a clean page and began making a copy of the cartoon to hang in his new bedroom.



Jessica Thornton had never seen a more welcome sight than the small figure of Hannah Wambua waving from the bridge of the hydrofoil late that afternoon. The morning had been an earthly image of hell. She and Splinter had gotten hopelessly lost in the winding alleys of old Zanzibar town. Despite the fact that they were late to the lawyer’s office, Mr. Patel had kept them waiting an hour for the scheduled meeting. The house deed, though official, looked like it came from a Monopoly game. Mr. Patel had hinted at problems that might crop up. Something about the autopsy report and possible litigation from someone who was rumored to be considering contesting Dr. bin Yusuf’s will.

“Autopsy report?” Jess had queried. “I thought he died of cancer.”

“Not to worry, not to worry!” Mr. Patel had assured her. “Everything will be fine.”

But how could she not worry? As the morning slipped by, things had only gotten worse. Dr. bin Yusuf’s car had not been parked at the café as promised. The telephone-company supervisor had informed Jess that phone lines did not extend to the part of the island where her house was located. It was too isolated. At the post office, she had learned that her mail would have to go to a box in Zanzibar town. The house was too remote.

Even shopping for supplies had turned into a major endeavor. Groceries, she had discovered, could not be purchased at a single store. Meat came from one tiny shop; vegetables and fruit were stocked in a collection of market stalls. Sundries such as toilet paper, household cleaners, and brooms had to be purchased from a variety of little booths tucked here and there along the winding alleys. Comparison shopping was unheard of, and there was no such thing as a fixed price.

“Is that Mama Hannah?” Splinter asked as the hydrofoil drifted into port. “She’s not very big.”

Jess smiled. “She has a big heart.”

Bright yellow scarf tied around her hair and pale green dress fluttering on her thin frame, Hannah looked exactly like an angel to Jess. True, she was tiny and withered, and her raised hand looked like a small, dark bird’s claw. But Jess knew that those bent fingers could soothe troubles with a motherly touch. The frail body disguised the fortitude and determination of a lion. And that head, as round and brown as a coffee bean, contained the wisdom of Solomon. Joy swelled inside Jess at seeing the woman who had been a mother to her through so many difficult years.

When their birth mother suffered a violent death, the four Thornton children had been devastated. Jess wasn't sure her oldest sister, Fiona, had ever recovered from the trauma. These days Fiona lived out in the isolated African bush where she studied elephants and talked to as few human beings as possible. Grant, the family rebel, would not have survived his teenage years without Hannah's guiding hand. Now he was a successful anthropologist. And Tillie, the youngest of the four Thorntons, hardly remembered having a mother other than Hannah.

In fact, the old woman had recently arrived back in East Africa from Tillie's home in Mali. Jess could hardly wait to hear all the news of her sister. Evidently, Tillie had impulsively married some mysterious writer following a whirlwind romance. It sounded like a delicious adventure.

"Mama Hannah!" Jess shouted, jumping up and down on her toes as the hydrofoil engines shut down. "Hi, Mama Hannah!"

"Mom, you're acting like a little kid," Splint said. "It's embarrassing."

Jess rumbled her son's coarse brown-gold hair and gave him a quick hug. "She looks the same, doesn't she? She's beautiful."

"She's wrinkled."

"What did you expect? She's old."

"How old?"

"I don't know. She's always been old."

"She has great big holes in her earlobes."

"That's because she's a Kikuyu. The men and women of that tribe stretch their earlobes so they can hang lots of earrings in them."

“Barfola.”

“Aren’t you the fellow who was leading a cockroach down the street on a string a few minutes ago? *That’s* barfola.”

“She’s got a dent in the top of her forehead.”

“When she was young she used to carry huge loads of firewood on her back. The leather strap cut into her head and made it that way. Don’t you remember?”

“I don’t remember her at all. But I do know one thing: She won’t be able to keep up with me. Mom, I don’t want her tagging along when I’m trying to hunt treasure and explore the bay. I won’t have any fun with some weird, old, wrinkled lady—”

“That’s enough, young man.” Jess jerked her son’s arm and marched him down the dock to where the people were debarking the hydrofoil. Splinter had a knack for finding his mother’s Achilles’ heel in any situation and then homing in for the kill. He sensed how much Jess loved Hannah, so he had made up his mind to dislike her. Fortunately, Jess knew that in this situation Splinter had met his match. Hannah could be every bit as stubborn, willful, coercive, and cunning as any ten-year-old boy.

“Jessica!” The old woman stepped into the younger woman’s arms and gave her a hug. “How are you, my *toto*?”

“Fine. Great.” Jess blinked back tears as she held Hannah. Her *ayah* smelled as she always had—of thick black coffee and rich stew cooked over a charcoal fire. Her skin felt like an old flannel blanket—soft, warm, and comforting. “I’ve missed you, Mama Hannah.”

“A cheerful heart is good medicine,” Hannah whispered, repeating one of her favorite proverbs. “To see you this day fills my soul with happiness.”

Hannah turned from Jess and studied the lanky young boy standing beside his mother. “And who can this be?” When he didn’t answer, her sparkling brown eyes narrowed. She cocked her head. “I am Hannah Wambua. You may call me Mama Hannah, if you wish.”

Jess gave her son a nudge. “I’m Spencer Thornton,” he said. “I’m ten.”

“So you are. When I saw you last, you were four years old. You were small. You talked a lot. You also climbed on everything. At that time, I believed you would grow up to be clever and pretty to look at.” She shrugged. “But even I sometimes make mistakes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Splinter stuck out his jaw.

Hannah placed one crooked finger under the boy’s chin and tipped his face toward the afternoon sunlight. “Now I see that God has made you more than clever. He has given you the gift of a great mind. You will astonish us with your thinking.” She shook her head and gave a Kikuyu expression of dismay. “Ehh, *tsk tsk*. But you are not pretty. Not at all. Instead, your face is handsome. A handsome man’s face.”

Splinter beamed. “I’ve already got peach fuzz on my lip.”

Hannah appraised the silky brownish blond hair with a critical eye. Though there was nothing resembling a whisker in sight, she nodded sagely. “Mmm. So I see. In a few years, your mother will have to buy you a razor. And what about these fingers?” She held up the boy’s ink-stained hands and turned them this way and that. “I see you are an artist like your mother. A writer, too, perhaps. I think you like to build and climb and swim. But I don’t think you know how to make a bird from a palm leaf.”

Splint's eyes widened. "Huh? How can you do that?"

"Or open a coconut to drink the milk?"

"Well—"

"Or find living clams buried in the sand?"

"I could dig."

"Do you know the secret hiding places of the sand clams?" Hannah gave the boy a wink. "Can you turn a mango into a rocket?"

"A rocket!"

"Do you know how to roast an ear of white maize so its kernels will taste like nuts? Can you tell an elephant shrew from a lemur? Can you build a house from sand?"

"I can do that. I can make sand castles."

"Can you? Hmm. We shall see." She lifted her focus to his mother. "Come, Jessica, shall we go to your new home now? I see your car is waiting."

Jess turned to find a small white Renault parked in the lot near the harbor. A brawny African man stood beside it. Arms folded, ebony face set like stone, he stared at the approaching trio with unflickering black eyes.

"*Jambo, Bwana.*" Jess greeted the man in Swahili, pleased at how easily the language had come back to her in the few hours she'd been in Tanzania. "*Habari gani?*"

"*Njema, Memsahib* Thornton. This is your car." His mouth rigid, he opened the back door. "I shall drive."

"But I thought . . . it's my car. I'll drive."

"I shall drive."

She stared into the hard eyes. "What's your name?"

"Solomon Mazrui."

"Were you the driver for Dr. bin Yusuf?"

"I drive. I cut grass and grow flowers."

“You’re the gardener?”

“*Ndiyo.*” He nodded. “I fix the house also. I am a very good worker.”

“You were the man helping Dr. bin Yusuf restore the house. He was proud of what had been accomplished. But there’s a problem now, Solomon. I can’t afford to pay a driver and a gardener. And I can’t spend any money on the house. I have a son and—”

“Miriamu will be your cook.”

“No, I can’t afford a cook. Absolutely not. I’m very sorry. Look, I know you worked for Dr. bin Yusuf, but I’m not as well off as he was.”

“Miriamu cleans the house.”

“I’ll have to clean it myself. I’m used to that. In London we lived in a flat. We had no house help.”

Solomon’s eyes hardened. “*Ahadi ni deni.*”

Jess looked at Hannah for help. “A promise is a debt,” the older woman translated.

“But I didn’t make you a promise, Solomon,” Jess said. “You worked for Dr. bin Yusuf, but you don’t work for me. I have not hired you. You and I have no contract. No agreement.”

“*Baas. Twende.*” He beckoned them to climb in, as though he had comprehended nothing Jess was saying. “I shall drive.”

“Let him drive, Mom.” Splinter clambered into the front seat beside Solomon. “When he gets his first paycheck and it’s blank, he’ll figure it out.”

“And I’ll be accused of slavery and thrown in the Zanzibar jail.” She slipped into the back beside Hannah. The Renault chugged to life, sounding like it had lost its muffler,

a few pistons, and maybe a belt or two. A puff of dark gray smoke belched from the tailpipe as Solomon eased the car out of the parking lot.

“I will show you Zanzibar town,” he announced.

“We already saw it,” Splinter said. “We walked all over the place this morning. Mom got lost. She barfed in Suicide Alley.”

“Barf?”

“Spit up. You know, *blaaagh*.” Splinter pantomimed.

Solomon’s stony face didn’t crack a smile. “*Ndiyo*. In Kiswahili, we say *kutapika*. To vomit.”

“*Kutapika*,” Splint repeated carefully. “*Kutapika*.”

In the backseat, Jess groaned. “Great. My son has just learned his first Swahili word.”

“You are ill, *toto*?” Hannah asked.

“No, it was just . . . something upset me. Maybe I was seasick or had jet lag. It’s been a hard day.”

“Africa has brought you painful memories?”

Jess let out a breath and rubbed her eyes. Hannah had the annoying knack of seeing straight to the heart of things. And she never held in check what she was thinking. If she had a question, she asked it. If she had an opinion, she stated it. The characteristic could be endearing. It could also irritate beyond words.

“Painful memories?” Jess said. “Worse than that, Mama Hannah. I’m beginning to wonder why I ever came back.”

“This is the land which the Lord your God has given you.”

“The Promised Land?” She shook her head, thinking of a house with no phone, no mail, no supermarket, and a staff of cooks and gardeners she couldn’t afford to pay. “It’s not going to be flowing with milk and honey anytime soon.”

“What has made you ill with anger and worry? Bitterness fills your stomach, and you have no release from it but *kutapika*.”

“I didn’t think so until today. I thought I’d gotten over it.”

“Over *him*?”

Jess looked up, concerned that Splinter might hear. Her son was deep in conversation with Solomon about the possible presence of an octopus colony in the ocean near their new house. She could barely understand them over the roar of the Renault engine.

“I saw Rick today,” she told Hannah in a low voice.

“Here. In Zanzibar.”

Hannah’s eyes widened. “How can this be?”

“I don’t know. I thought he was in Kenya. If I’d had any idea he might be here, I never would have come.”

“Are you sure it was him, *toto*? It has been many years. I am sure he has changed, as you have. Perhaps you saw someone else.”

“Maybe. The alley was dark. A group of men walked around the corner. Europeans and Africans mixed. Maybe an Asian or two. I glanced into their faces. Then I saw those eyes . . . his eyes . . . and everything just swept over me. I felt like I was going to faint.”

“You did not see him again after you became ill?”

“He picked me up off the sidewalk!” Jess heard her voice rise in near hysteria at the memory. “He cleaned my shoes, and then he picked me up, Mama Hannah. He carried me to a chair at a café.”

“A kind thing to do.”

“Are you kidding? I didn’t want that man touching me!

When I realized what he was doing, I hit him with my camera bag.”

“Perhaps you were beating a Good Samaritan. A stranger.”

“I don’t know.” Jess covered her face with her hands, recalling the moment when she had been so sure she was staring into the blue eyes of Rick McTaggart. The man who had been her husband. Spencer’s father.

“Oh, God.”

Hannah nodded. “It is good to call upon the Lord in difficult times. God is wise. ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.’”

“Mama Hannah, please don’t quote Scripture to me, okay? You know I’m a Christian. I go to church when I have time; I’ve taught Splinter to sing ‘Jesus Loves Me’ and all that. But if you and I are going to live in the same house, I’m going to have to ask you not to turn every little thing that happens into a message from God.”

“What about the big things?” Hannah was staring straight ahead, her hands folded on her lap. “Perhaps God had his hand in your meeting this afternoon in Zanzibar town.”

“Oh, please! If anything, that was demon inspired. I can’t think what could make my life worse than having to face that man again. And if he saw Splint . . . If he found out . . .” Her voice grew tight as a lump of fear formed in her throat. “I won’t let him near my son. I swear it!”

“This is Kenyatta Road,” Solomon shouted over his shoulder. “Post office.”

“We already went there,” Jess enunciated the words slowly and clearly, lest he miss her point. “Take us to the house, Solomon.”

“Long ago, the post office was the sultan’s royal stables.” He gave her a dark look, as if to warn her not to interfere with his plan. “Across the street is Babla’s Expert Optical Service. Very old watches at that shop. Also sunglasses, cigarette lighters, cameras.”

Jess dropped her hands in exasperation. Did the man never listen to anyone but himself?

“Dhow Palace Hotel,” he announced next. “Ten rooms for tourists.”

Jess stared out at the maze of murky streets. Women wearing the long, black, veiled *bui-buis* that bespoke their Muslim faith glided down alleys too narrow for cars. Most of the two-story houses had been built of mottled gray coral or soft limestone. Some were freshly whitewashed; others hadn’t seen paint in two hundred years. Some boasted elaborately carved doors with brass studs; some had cheap wood doors; others had no doors. Jess could look into the open courtyards of multifamily dwellings where laundry hung on long lines and children chased puppies across open drains.

With the window rolled down, the smell was overpowering. Repellent odors of human refuse and rotting garbage formed a subtle undercurrent to the rich, alluring scents of curry, cinnamon, incense, charcoal smoke, fresh bread, and the island’s famous cloves. The fishy saltiness of the damp sea breeze seasoned the potpourri of aromas.

Jess dragged the humid air into her lungs as though it were a heady drug. It brought back her childhood. Her youth. Wonder, beauty, mystery. For so many years, she had ached to recapture that exotic past. Now she wondered if she’d made a mistake. What had led her back to Africa?

Had it been the same foolish romantic notion that once had driven her into the arms of Rick McTaggart? He had seemed perfect to her in the early days of their young love. He was handsome, full of fun, wild, and rugged. Their marriage was to have been the ideal picture of happiness. A treasure beyond her grandest imaginings.

“Nella’s Chatu,” Solomon barked as he drove past a small shop. “Nella will sew clothes for you, *memsahib*.”

Jess nodded absently at the shelves of *batik*, tie-dye, and *kanga* fabrics. Rick McTaggart had left her holding nothing more than the fragments of broken dreams. Ten years after he had walked out of her life, she could look back and see the truth. Her husband had been little more than a twenty-year-old child. Rebellious against his strict upbringing, he had embraced adventure. He loved to scuba dive, hang glide, and ride his motorcycle through the bush country. He had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and boated in Lake Victoria. He could dance every night until the sun came up. And he could drink. A lot.

“Creek Road,” Solomon announced. Like many native Swahili speakers, he made the pronunciation error of reversing *l* and *r* in English words. To his captive audience in the Renault, he labeled the street *Cleek Load*.

“Mnazi Mmoja National Museum,” he went on. “Many things inside. You will take this boy, your son, to see the things of old Zanzibar. Here is Emerson House. Long ago, it was a sultan’s palace. Now it is a hotel. Nine rooms.”

Solomon seemed to know the details of every shop and hotel on the island, Jess realized. Splinter was eating it up. Always fascinated with anything old or mysterious, he was falling in love with Zanzibar.

“How come every house has iron bars on the windows?” he asked Solomon.

“Pirates.” When Solomon said the word, it sounded like *pilots*. But Splinter seemed to have no trouble understanding. “Red Sea Men. Very bad. They came from America. Attacked ships and robbed houses in Zanzibar. In Kiswahili we say *maharamia wa bahari*, the bandits of the beach.”

While Splinter practiced this wonderful new expression, Jess fought memories she had once so carefully locked away. Rick McTaggart. She understood now that the man she had married had been an alcoholic. Though young when they met, he had already been drinking for several years. She hadn't recognized the warning signs. To an eighteen-year-old looking for her own freedom, he had been her dream come true.

Only after they had married against the will of their parents had she begun to understand. Her new husband was not interested in going to college, finding a job, buying a house, or building a future. The more she pushed him toward her goals, the more he drank.

One night the tension had erupted into a vicious fight. Rick had left and never come back. A week later, Jess had learned she was expecting his baby. She had taken back her maiden name and given it to her son. Spencer Thornton.

At least something good had come of her terrible mistake.

“Look at that bazaar, Mom!” Spencer hollered over his shoulder. “I bet you could find anything in there. Wow, this town is so cool! Can I come down here sometime? By myself? Solomon could bring me. He knows everything. Huh, Mom? Could I?”

“Not right away, Splint,” Jess said. If Rick McTaggart was

living in Zanzibar, she would never let her son out of her sight. For years she had prayed that she would never have to lay eyes on that man again. She hated him. Hated the thought of how he had looked and talked and acted. Hated the memory of the things they had done together. Hated herself for having been such a fool.

“We go now to Uchungu House,” Solomon announced as he steered the Renault onto a bumpy road that followed the seacoast. “The house of Ahmed Abdullah bin Yusuf is very old. Maybe one hundred years. That house does not know children. It does not know white people. It does not like new things. But I think Uchungu House will permit this boy to live in it.”

“The house does not have any say about who lives in it,” Jess snapped. She didn’t like Solomon scaring her son with the image of a resentful, temperamental old house. Anger at the thought of anyone harming her son—including a chauffeur who told frightening stories or a ne’er-do-well who might want to stake his claim as a father—hardened her voice. “I’m in charge here. I’ll do what’s right for my son and for myself, and neither you nor anyone else had better interfere with that. Do you understand me, Solomon?”

“Ndiyo, memsahib.”

Jess leaned against the seat back and let out a hot breath. She felt tight and achy inside, as though a thick vine had wound around her heart with tentacles determined to twist, squeeze, and choke her. Images of pirates, witch doctors, winding alleys, octopus colonies, dark bazaars, and a hundred-year-old house on a sea cliff curled inside her, latching on with suckers of fear. But they were not the vine

. . . not the source of what threatened her. That was Rick McTaggart.

She rested her head against the window frame and let the tropical air fan her face. Beside her in the car, Hannah was humming. Jess recognized the song, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Something out of the past. A hymn.

The humming stopped.

"Uchungu House," Hannah murmured, repeating the name Solomon had given the old seaside home. "Uchungu House. House of Bitterness."



About the Author

Catherine Palmer lives in Missouri with her husband, Tim, and sons, Geoffrey and Andrei. She is a graduate of Southwest Baptist University and holds a master's degree in English from Baylor University. Her first book was published in 1988. Since then she has published over forty novels and won numerous awards for her writing, including the Christy Award—the highest honor in Christian fiction—in 2001 for *A Touch of Betrayal*. In 2004, she was given the Career Achievement Award for Inspirational Romance by *Romantic Times BOOKreviews* magazine. More than 2 million copies of Catherine's novels are currently in print.