

CHAPTER ONE

Pamela and James sat quietly on the brittle grass, their backs rested on the thick mango tree. The tree cast a large and cool shadow over them. The faded yellow leaves rustled briskly from the light breeze. The sun blazed above as if threatening to set the ground on fire. James gazed at Pamela and smiled lightly. He was at peace. The heat did not bother him that much. He was with the only person that mattered; his one true love. Pamela caught James staring and chuckled, then rested her small head on his bony shoulders.

“Mama will kill me this time round,” said Pamela jokingly.

“She’ll have to kill me first!” James retorted firmly, reaching out for Pamela’s small hands. “I will never let anyone hurt you. Not when I’m still alive,” he added as he placed Pamela’s head on his lap.

Pamela lay on James’ lap quietly. Her fair skin shone under the bright sky. Her gently curved, small, round forehead created a harmonious and gentle appearance that was most welcoming at first sight. Her long hair stuck out wildly on James’ lap. Her hairline followed the natural roundness of her forehead, creating a soft and smooth transition to the rest of her face. Her eyebrows, well-defined and neatly shaped, arched gracefully above her eyes accentuating the roundness of her forehead. Her medium-sized expressive eyes, set at an appropriate distance apart, looked up at James lovingly. Her subtle cheeks gave her face a soft and youthful look as her well-proportioned pointed nose blended seamlessly with her other features.

Her moderately full lips pressed together in a slow, deliberate motion, creating a soft tension that accentuated their natural fullness. The subtle pressure brought out a hint of color, adding to the allure. The corners of her mouth lifted slightly, suggesting a tantalizing smile, while her eyes carried a glint of playful mystery, prompting James to plant a light kiss on them. Both of them chuckled as James brushed a stray

hair from her cheeks. Suddenly, Pamela yanked up, a sickly look on her face. She jerked up and ran behind the tree. She threw up violently on the dry grass. James followed her and held her hair back as he patted her back softly.

“There, there,” he said. “It’s ok. You are okay.” he added reassuringly.

Pamela wiped her mouth with the back of her hands. James held her delicate hands and led her back to their spot.

“Are you sure you are okay?” James asked. “You have been vomiting since yesterday”

“I am. I just ate some bad eggs in the morning.” Pamela reassured, smiling weakly at James. But she was not. She was far from okay. How could she? She had missed her periods the second time and was terrified of what could be the cause of her ‘sickness’.

She remembers the first time they had made love. Her mother had left for church. She had stayed home because she was ‘sick’. At around ten o’clock, she left to go fetch water. The sun blazed fiercely in the clear, cloudless sky. The air was thick with heat, creating shimmering waves that danced above the ground. The Yala river flowed languidly, its waters sparkling under the intense sunlight, offering a stark contrast to the dry, cracked earth that borders its edges. Tall, swaying reeds lined the riverbanks, their tips rustling gently in a rare, hot breeze. The surrounding landscape was a mix of vibrant green vegetation near the water and parched, yellowed grass further away.

In the distance, the acacia trees stand resiliently, their sparse canopies providing patches of shade where wildlife and cattle seek refuge from the blazing sun. She heard birds chirping intermittently, their calls seemingly slowed by the oppressive heat. She looked further down and saw James taking shade under one of the trees. She walked towards him, swaying happily as the scent of the river mixed with the earthy aroma of dry soil, creating a distinctive, warm fragrance filled her nose. The occasional splash of fish breaking the water's surface seemed to celebrate their union despite the still and heavy atmosphere. As

she hugged him, she was unwary of the local farmers and villagers moving slowly, conserving energy as they went about their daily tasks, their skin glistening with sweat. Some gathered near the river, dipping their feet into the cool water, while others collected it for their households, appreciating its refreshing contrast to the surrounding heat.

He chuckled as he grabbed her small waist. Her pointed breast poked at his chest teasingly. He felt his manhood rise. James reached out for her bucket. She squatted beside the river as James filled her bucket with water. He effortlessly lifted the twenty-liter bucket full of water and climbed back to the river banks to Pamela. As the two walked back to Pamela's home, each was engrossed in their own thoughts; nervous of what was to happen when they got home.

Pamela and James got to the kitchen, a small structure with thick and sturdy muddy walls, offering cool refuge from the searing heat. The roof is thatched with dry grass woven tightly together to form a natural, insulating cover that shields the interior from the sun's relentless rays. Its thatched roof is slightly raised, allowing smoke from the cooking fire to escape through gaps in the thatch. Inside, the kitchen is filled with the rich, comforting aroma of simmering githeri. The floor is packed dirt, swept clean and smooth, with a central hearth where a pot rests over a crackling fire. Wooden stools and clay pots are neatly arranged around the hearth, ready for use.

James sets the bucket at the doorstep as Pamela heads towards the main house to confirm if anyone was around. The main house, rectangular in shape, with a low, wide entrance shaded by a small overhang stands prominently in the compound. The walls are adorned with simple patterns painted in earthy tones, blending harmoniously with the surrounding landscape. The small windows, which are designed to keep the inside cool and dim, allow only slivers of sunlight to penetrate, creating a tranquil, shadowed interior. As she scurries towards the main house, chickens pecking at the ground on the space between the two

houses, a well-trodden path worn smooth by the daily comings and goings of the household, scatter away for safety from the oncoming human.

She peeps into the open door and calls out after her mother, “Maaa!”. No answer. She pulls the wooden door shut and skips back to the kitchen beaming with an eager smile. The two lovebirds get inside the kitchen and leave the door ajar. Pamela led James to her sleeping area smiling coquettishly. She sat down on her neatly spread beddings made of a thin mattress and a single bed sheet. The blanket was folded neatly and placed as the headrest at the top of the bed. She slowly pulled James towards her as she gazed at him. Her sexy eyes enchanted James, making him do her bidding. Filled with passion, he bent over and violently kissed her full lips. The thrust pushed Pamela’s already limp body making them topple over the mattress.

What followed was an encounter charged with youthful passion and longing, one that crossed the invisible boundary between innocence and desire. The hours slipped away unnoticed as they surrendered to each other, their laughter, whispers, and silences weaving into an intimacy that left no doubt of what had transpired. By the time the sun had begun its descent, both were spent yet filled, their hearts brimming with a heady mix of satisfaction, fear, and the unspoken knowledge that their lives would never be quite the same again.

James slipped quietly out of the kitchen, careful not to stir the stillness that lingered in the air. His steps quickened as he crossed the compound, every crunch of the earth beneath his feet sounding louder in his own ears. The mere thought of Grace catching him there sent a shiver down his spine. Her piercing eyes, her heavy silence, her judgment. Yet once he stepped beyond the compound’s edge, the tension began to ease. The golden sun spilled across his face, warm and dazzling, as though the heavens themselves bore witness to his triumph. A smile stretched slowly across his lips—broad, unrestrained, almost boyish. “At last”, he thought, he had conquered his love, claimed the one his heart had long desired. To James, the world suddenly felt brighter, lighter. In that moment of fleeting victory, nothing and no one could stand in his way.

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CHAPTER TWO

Grace winced as the midwife pressed on her lower abdomen. The midwife proceeded with her checkup unfazed and gently massaged Grace's belly with a series of skillful movements; a master of her art. Grace drifted deeper into her thoughts as the midwife's gentle hand moved in slow circles across her belly. Her mind wandered back to her maternal home, alive with the laughter and chaos of her seven brothers; four elder, protective and mischievous, and three younger, ever trailing after her with boundless energy.

She could almost see her mother, round and chubby, bustling about with warmth in every gesture, her laughter echoing through the compound like a song. Her father's tall, commanding figure stood firm in her memory, strong yet tender, the pillar around which their lively, successful home revolved. The air of cheerfulness, the smell of food simmering in the kitchen, and the sound of youthful banter painted a picture of belonging so vivid that Grace felt, for a fleeting moment, as though she were once again a child in that radiant, unshakable household.

A sudden fear clenched her heart as the memory of her firstborn brother's death cut through her thoughts like a blade. She winced, her whole body tightening as the midwife's hand pressed gently against her belly. Her fingers curled into the bed sheets, clutching them so hard her short nails nearly tore through the fabric.

She could still see it—the terrible season when a strange illness crept into the village, unseen but merciless. One by one, her brothers fell to it. First, the eldest, whose laughter had always been the loudest in the courtyard; then the others followed, each departure leaving the home quieter, emptier, unbearably hollow. She remembered their faces growing pale, the silence that replaced their once-boisterous voices, the grief that hung like a heavy shroud over their house. By the time the illness had claimed the youngest, the one who never let go of her hand, the house that had once overflowed with cheer had fallen into an aching, desolate stillness.

The once boisterous, radiant Grace was now hollowed into doubt and shame, her spirit weighed down by the cruel murmurs that slithered through the village. The people whispered that she had devoured her own brothers, branding her a selfish witch who sought to hoard her father's wealth for herself. Their words clung to her like smoke, seeping into every corner of her mind until she almost believed them.

What stung most was not the villagers' tongues, but her mother's silence. Her disconcerting distance, her refusal to defend or console. That quiet absence of love rang louder than any insult, confirming the suspicions in Grace's heart. It was as though her mother's gaze had withdrawn, her warmth replaced by a cold void, leaving Grace to fester alone in her shame.

Once full of laughter, she now recoiled from the world and from herself, shrinking into the shadows, her heart carrying both the grief of her losses and the unbearable weight of a name she could neither escape nor erase.

Now, as the midwife continued her rhythmic touch, for it was not only her brothers' loss that haunted her—it was her own. Two miscarriages. Two stillbirths. Her son, just an infant, died. Each memory was a scar carved deep into her soul, a relentless reminder of her body's betrayals. As the midwife's steady touch pressed against her, Grace felt as though all those ghosts—brothers and children alike—crowded around her bed, their absence pressing in with a weight so crushing she thought it might smother her.

A sudden, strong kick from the life within jolted Grace back to reality, pulling her out of the dark tide of memory. Her breath caught, and tears welled in her eyes, spilling silently down her cheeks. The midwife, steady and calm, smiled knowingly, her hands still working with practiced assurance. She understood the language of the body, and this—this flurry of movement—was a good sign. The child was not only alive but eager, restless, shifting into place.

"The baby is kicking again," the midwife murmured softly, her tone carrying both comfort and certainty. Grace laid her trembling hand over her belly, feeling the reassuring rhythm of life within. She had also

been massaged into position, aligned and ready, the midwife's wisdom guiding her body toward what was to come.

With only a few weeks left until delivery, Grace felt the weight of her longing and her fear coiled together inside her chest. She did not want to risk anything—not now, not when she had carried this far, not after the losses that had carved such deep hollows in her soul. For the first time in a long while, hope flickered, fragile but undeniable, and she clung to it as tightly as she had once clutched those bedsheets.

Pamela's birth was celebrated for an entire month, the homestead alive with joy and gratitude. To Grace, it mattered little that she was a girl. After so much loss, a surviving child was more than she had ever dared ask for. Songs were sung, meals were shared, and neighbors poured in with gifts and blessings, each day of her life a triumph against the shadows of the past.

Pamela was pampered and nurtured from the very beginning, never lacking in warmth, food, or affection. Grace poured her whole heart into her, guarding her with the ferocity of a lioness and the tenderness of a mother who had known sorrow too deeply. Every smile, every tiny milestone was cherished, recorded in Grace's heart as proof that miracles could indeed endure.

Little by little, the small bundle of swaddled cloth blossomed into a timid yet sharp-eyed girl, observant in her silence and quick in her understanding. She was chubby, soft-cheeked, and easy on the eyes, her beauty carrying both innocence and promise. To Grace, she was not just a daughter—she was redemption, hope made flesh, the living answer to years of grief.

One hot afternoon, after returning from the market with baskets heavy with groceries, Pamela suddenly collapsed at her mother's feet. Her small body shivered uncontrollably, limbs twitching in violent spasms, her eyes rolling back as though pulled into some unseen abyss. The sound of the groceries scattering across the ground seemed distant, drowned out by the pounding in Grace's ears.

For a moment, Grace could not move. Her breath caught, her heart seized, and the past came flooding back with merciless clarity. The haunting images of her brothers, each one felled by that strange, pitiless illness. Their deaths replayed in her mind like a cruel echo, each memory sharper than the last. Now it was Pamela—the child she had poured her whole soul into—convulsing violently at her feet.

Grace stood paralyzed, her body rooted to the ground, her hands trembling helplessly by her sides. Tears brimmed but would not fall, her throat tight with terror. She wanted to reach out, to scoop her child into her arms, but her legs refused to obey, her spirit caged in fear.

It was her husband who found them, Pamela shaking violently on the floor, and Grace above her, wide-eyed and dazed, staring as though trapped in a nightmare too familiar to bear. His voice cut through the stillness, urgent and desperate, as he rushed to their side, breaking the spell that bound Grace to her terror.

Her husband's quick action saved Pamela in the nick of time. With steady arms and a pounding heart, he lifted the convulsing child and rushed her to the native doctor. The old healer worked with urgency, muttering chants that seemed older than the earth itself, while administering a series of bitter potions and medicinal enchantments. Slowly, as the hours stretched into eternity, the violent trembling eased, and Pamela's breathing steadied. She was nursed carefully back to health, her frail body regaining its strength with each passing day.

Yet, though Pamela's life was spared, something within both mother and daughter had been quietly stolen. Grace moved like a shadow of herself—her laughter gone, her spirit dulled. Pamela too seemed changed, her eyes carrying a timidity beyond her years, as though she had glimpsed a darkness she could not name. The incident lingered like a ghost, a reminder of how fragile hope could be.

In that moment of near-loss, Grace made an unshakable vow. She would never conceive again. The pain of her miscarriages, stillbirths, and infant death had already hollowed her once, but this terror—the

thought of losing Pamela—had sealed her resolve. From that day forward, every drop of her energy, every beat of her heart, was dedicated to her sole surviving child. Pamela would lack nothing; she would grow into a woman strong, secure, and fully established. For in Grace’s eyes, Pamela was not just a daughter—she was the last flame of a family nearly extinguished, and Grace would guard that flame until her final breath.

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When Pamela returned from the river, her clothes damp and her hands still cool from the water, she found Grace seated quietly in the living room. Something in her daughter’s demeanor, a certain nervous fidget, the way she avoided her eyes, stirred Grace’s suspicions. She let her set her load aside, called her over over, and sat her down with a heavy sigh.

“What are you hiding?” she asked, her voice low but firm, her sharp eyes fixed intently on the girl.

Pamela shifted uncomfortably, her fingers tracing invisible lines across her lap. When her gaze finally flickered upward, it met her mother’s piercing eyes for only a second before lowering again, shy and unsettled.

“How far are you?” Grace pressed, her tone edged with both fear and authority.

Pamela’s heart pounded in her chest. *Did she already know? Was she merely toying with me?* The thought made her throat dry, and she hesitated, hoping for a miracle. Some way her silence could undo the truth. But Grace was unyielding, her expression demanding nothing less than honesty.

With trembling resolve, Pamela slowly lifted her head, her lips parting just enough to let the words escape. “I... I have missed my periods... for two consecutive months.”

The admission fell heavy into the air between them, confirming Grace’s worst fears.

The news of Pamela's pregnancy struck Grace like a thunderclap, shattering the quiet resolve she had built around her life's single promise. At first came anger—a raw, searing anger that burned behind her eyes. How could Pamela, the child for whom she had sacrificed everything, allow this? Then disappointment seeped in, heavier and colder, pooling in her chest until it became a weight she could barely hold.

And then came the doubt. That old, familiar voice from the past whispered again, cruel and relentless: *You will never amount to anything. You are a witch. A thief. Like mother, like daughter.* Grace tried to silence it, but the whispers clawed at her, drawing blood from old wounds she thought had healed.

Grace rose slowly from the couch, her body heavy with the weight of her daughter's words. For a moment, silence stretched between them, broken only by the faint rustle of leaves outside and Pamela's uneven breathing. With a steadiness that belied the storm within her, Grace stepped closer and gently placed her hand on Pamela's bowed head.

The touch was tender, yet it carried the sorrow of a mother who had endured too much loss and disappointment. Her fingers lingered, brushing softly through her daughter's hair, as if searching for the little girl she once held, the child she had sworn to protect. Grace's lips trembled, but no words came; only a long, weary sigh escaped her, carrying the weight of fear, shame, and reluctant acceptance.

Pamela, still staring at the ground, felt both comforted and condemned by the gesture, unsure if it was forgiveness, resignation, or simply her mother's silent way of saying she could not fight fate any longer.

Her voice trembled as she asked about the child's paternity, her heart already braced for disappointment. But when the name came, it was like a blow to her chest.

"James?" she gasped. "That pauper? Was there no one better?"

Her knees buckled beneath her, and she slumped onto the couch, her body weak from grief and years of silent strain. The name echoed in her mind, each repetition scraping against her pride, her sacrifice, her

hope. Since her husband's death—the man who had been her pillar, her anchor—her heart had been fragile, splintered by loss. Now, with this news, it weakened further, trembling under the weight of despair.

Grace pressed her palms to her face and let out an exasperated sigh that rose into a whisper, a prayer, a plea. She tilted her face upward, eyes stinging, and beseeched the heavens: “Just once... let me off. Please... just once.” It was the sound of a mother's hope crumbling, yet still clinging to the faintest edge of faith.

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James' hopes, so high after that last afternoon with Pamela, began to crumble beneath the weight of silence. He had expected her smile, her warmth, her presence. Yet, after she left the river that day, there was nothing. Every attempt he made to see her was blocked by excuses, each one colder than the last, until even a glimpse of her became impossible.

Confusion gnawed at him. Why the sudden change? Had he offended her somehow? Was she angry, or had her feelings been a fleeting whim? His mind circled endlessly, but always returned to the memory of their time together, so full, so satisfying, so alive. Surely, he thought, she had felt it too. The doubt sank deeper when whispers of her sickness reached him, and his heart ached with worry. Could it be something so grave it would rob him of his love entirely?

Days bled into weeks, and weeks stretched into months. Pamela's absence became unbearable. Then came the final blow: she left altogether, sent away to live with her aunt in a village beyond the hills, farther than his eyes could follow. To James, it felt like abandonment, a severing of the fragile bond they had woven.

What he did not know, what he was never meant to know, was that Pamela carried his child. Grace, ever watchful, had sworn her daughter to silence. “This truth is not to be spoken,” she warned, her voice hard

and final. And so, the secret was buried, hidden from James, left to fester in the quiet spaces of his longing heart, even as the life he had unknowingly sown grew in another's care.

Pamela's pregnancy unfolded like a quiet blessing, free of the hardships and fears that had haunted Grace's own past. Each month passed with ease, her body carrying the child as though it had been crafted for the task. She walked with a glow about her, nourished by her aunt's care and strengthened by the little life that thrived within her. It was a season of laughter, shared meals, and whispered dreams of the future. Moments enjoyed by both Pamela and the child she carried.

When the day of delivery came, it was unlike the stories of struggle and cries that Grace had known. Pamela's labor was swift and gentle, as though heaven itself had smoothed the path for her. With three strong huffs, her child entered the world, **Jamela**, radiant and alive, her cries filling the room with the promise of life.

Grace was overcome, her eyes brimming with tears that flowed freely down her cheeks. She wept, not from sorrow but from a joy so profound it seemed to wash away the shadows of years past. "Fate has smiled at me at last," she whispered, clutching her granddaughter close.

Pamela too was overwhelmed, her heart swelling with a happiness she had never known. Holding Jamela, she felt whole, complete—her body no longer just her own but the source of a miracle. Mother and daughter embraced, their laughter mingling with tears, united in the fragile, beautiful gift of new life.

Jamela grew into a bright, happy, and healthy child, her laughter filling the homestead with the kind of music Grace had long yearned to hear. She was the very image of innocence and promise, her chubby cheeks and curious eyes a reminder that life, despite its cruelties, could still blossom anew. Grace watched her grow with a fierce protectiveness, every milestone a victory, every smile a quiet reassurance that her sacrifices had not been in vain.

When Jamela came of age, Grace knew it was time to secure her granddaughter's future, one untouched by the shadows of the past. With careful planning and quiet resolve, she arranged for Pamela and her daughter to move abroad under the guardianship of Pamela's paternal uncle. It was not an easy decision, but Grace's heart was set—James could never be allowed to catch even a whisper of Jamela's existence.

The move was both an escape and a rebirth. For Jamela, it meant a life built on new stone, one far from the whispers of the village and the dangers of her hidden paternity. For Pamela, it was a chance to raise her daughter in an environment where opportunity was plenty and shadows fewer. And for Grace, it was the fulfillment of her vow—that her sole survivor and her bloodline would be preserved, nurtured, and given the chance at a life better than the one fate had handed her.

The loss of Pamela hollowed James out, leaving him a shadow of the man he once was. His friend, Manu, was concerned. Where his laughter had once lit up gatherings, now only silence lingered, and his once-wide smile had withered into a faint, fleeting curve. His eyes carried a sadness that no one could miss—a deep yearning for the woman who had slipped away without farewell, leaving behind questions that gnawed at him endlessly.

To numb the ache, James buried himself in the hustle and bustle of daily life. He worked with a restless vigor, taking on every task that came his way, the sweat of his brow a thin shield against the emptiness in his heart. Yet no matter how busy his days became, Pamela's absence filled his nights, her silence echoing louder than any sound.

Even long after news spread of her departure to a distant land, James could not let go. The thought of her in another place, raising her eyes to a sky he could not share, tormented him. His love for her, undimmed by time or distance, became the fuel for his relentless drive. Every coin he saved, every long hour he toiled, carried with it a secret purpose: to gather the means to search, to cross boundaries if need be, to find Pamela once more—no matter how impossible the dream seemed.

CHAPTER THREE

James glances at the mirror and a thin smile forms on his lips. The latter years have been kinder to him—softening the edges of grief, layering his wounds with the polish of survival. He adjusts his jacket, smooths down the fur lining on his shoulders, and smirks as if daring the world to try him once more. With a measured breath, he steps out of his dressing room and into the quiet elegance of his apartment.

Beyond the glass balcony doors, the city hums at a distance. The sharp honks of matatus rise faintly from the main road, muted by height and the estate's thick walls. Here, in this posh gated high-rise, the usual chatter of vendors never reaches him. Instead, polished cars slip silently through guarded gates, children's laughter occasionally drifts from the manicured courtyard, and the air feels curated; controlled.

For James, this life is its own kind of armor. The city may be restless and unforgiving, but inside these walls, he finds both distraction and drive. Each deal closed, each meeting run late into the night, each quiet victory fuels him, reminds him that survival has brought him here, and as long as the city pulses, so does he.

As James steps into his posh *Audi*, the leather seats embrace him with a comfort he once thought unreachable. He taps his phone's screen lightly, but his mind drifts far back to his first day in the city. The memory is sharp, alive with the chaos of the unfamiliar: the bustle of crowds, the confusing tangle of matatus weaving in every direction, the chorus of impatient horns. Instead of fear, it had filled him with a thrill that lit a fire in his chest. He will succeed, he told himself then. He must succeed.

Navigating the raw, restless streets of Kawangware had been no easy feat. Dust clung to his shoes, strange faces sized him up, and the weight of survival pressed hard. Yet compared to the bare and unforgiving life of the village he had left behind, the struggle felt like an opportunity. He smiled faintly at the memory of his first job; sleeves rolled up, sweat dripping, bent over car bonnets as a carwash assistant. It was

grueling, humbling, but it was a beginning. A spark. The first rung of a ladder he swore he would climb, no matter how high or how far.

Two years of washing other people's cars had built in James a faith so strong it could move Mount Kenya to the sandy beaches of Nyali. *One day*, he told himself, *I'll have mine washed the same way—or better.* The thought always made him smile, a private promise carved deep into his spirit.

At noon, as the scorching sun beat down, James wiped the final streaks off the polished sedan before him, sweat glistening on his forehead. Just then, a jeep rumbled into the carwash, its tires crunching over the gravel. James smiled to himself. *More money for me*, he thought.

Before he could step forward, Kamau—his wiry, restless colleague—darted in front of him, nearly knocking him off balance in his rush to grab the customer. James raised his arms in mock surrender, chuckling.

“Nimekuachia hio,” he said, his grin wide. “At least ushikishe mandondo lunch usitukufie hapa.”

Kamau snorted, already reaching for a bucket, but James' words hung in the air with a lightness that softened the day's grind. Even in the dust and heat, hope glimmered in the small jokes and shared hustles of their lives.

The owner of the jeep stepped out, her presence impossible to miss. She was heavily built, with soft, glowing skin that seemed untouched by the dust of the streets. Her serious face scanned the carwash like a general inspecting her troops, searching for some assurance of safety and quality.

James, leaning lightly against his rag, flashed her his easy smile. Their eyes met for a moment before she tossed him the keys with casual confidence and pointed at her Jeep.

“Hii itachukua dakika ngapi?” she asked, her tone clipped but curious.

James caught the keys mid-air and tilted his head toward Kamau, who was already circling the vehicle like a restless deer. “Kamau ni swara,” James joked, laughter bubbling in his voice. “One hour tops, na mali itakuwa mpya.”

The lady’s lips curved into the faintest smile, the kind reserved for those who managed to slip past her guard. “Nakuaminia,” she said simply.

With that, she turned and walked away, her steps steady and composed, until she disappeared into the small coffee shop set adjacent to the carwash. James watched her for a brief second, then rolled up his sleeves with renewed energy. This wasn’t just another wash—this was a chance to prove himself.

As Kamau’s swift hands danced across the Jeep’s body, James found his thoughts drifting. He couldn’t shake off the image of the lady. Her aura was immense, commanding yet strangely gentle. It drew him in, leaving him restless, wanting more. Despite the clear difference in their status, her faint smile lingered in his mind—it had called to him like cool water on a scorching day.

He glanced toward the small coffee shop where she had disappeared. For a moment, he stood still, thinking. Then, without another word, he picked up his bucket, splashed water on his face and arms, washing away the sweat and dust. After drying himself with a rag, he quickly changed out of his working attire.

“Nakam!” he shouted over his shoulder to Kamau as he hurried off, straightening his shirt as if preparing for an interview.

Kamau smirked, his voice dripping with mockery. “Man, hio si ligi yako. Wacha kuwa mbleina sana, utachomea tips zangu.”

James didn’t bother replying. He simply raised his arm in a dismissive wave, showing he couldn’t care less about Kamau’s warning.

“Basi mwambie anunue chai!” Kamau called after him, laughing, as James slipped into the shaded entrance of the coffee shop, his heart pounding with a strange mix of nerves and determination.

James pushes open the door to the coffee shop, the soft chime of the bell above announcing his entry. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee greets him, rich and calming, though his chest feels anything but calm. He spots her instantly—seated near the window, posture upright, phone in hand.

For a moment he hesitates, then walks past the counter and chooses a table close enough, yet not too close. He drops into the chair, exhales heavily, and lets the car keys jingle softly in his hand. The metallic sound fills the silence between them, deliberate but not forced, like an invitation without words.

The lady glances up briefly, her eyes flicking from his face to the keys, then back to her phone. Still, her gaze lingers just a moment too long before she lowers it again. James offers a half smile, subtle, careful. She responds almost instinctively with a slight nod, the corner of her lips betraying the beginnings of a smile.

Silence stretches, thick but charged. James leans back, sighs again, and runs a hand across his chin as though weighing whether to speak. The lady glances at him once more, then back at her screen, though her fingers no longer scroll with focus. Each stolen look, each small smile, each breath carries more weight than words ever could.

James beckoned the waiter and ordered an espresso to go. The lady, feigning disinterest, lifted her head at the mention. James faltered, then nodded quickly as the waiter retreated in measured steps.

The city hums outside, but here in this small coffee shop, the air feels tuned to their quiet exchange—two strangers, drawn into orbit, waiting for who will break the silence first.

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James sinks into the plush leather seat, pulling the belt across his chest until it clicks firmly in place. He nods once; an unspoken signal that everything is in order. The driver, calm and precise, starts the engine. Almost in the same breath, he flicks on the radio, as if the act were part of a well-rehearsed ritual.

From the speakers, the familiar sound of Omondi Tony's melody fills the cabin. The gentle instruments rise and weave into the air, a harmony that immediately loosens James' shoulders. He nods softly in time with the beat, his lips curling into the faintest smile.

His gaze drifts to the world outside. The manicured lawns of the estate, the distant skyline that promises both challenge and reward. The music blends with the rhythm of his thoughts, and he breathes deep, steady. In that moment, James assures himself: today will be a successful day. The city may test him, but he is ready to meet it head-on.

The car eases out of the estate gates and glides smoothly onto the main road. The city, still waking, hums faintly in the distance. James leans back, enjoying the brief calm before the rush of the day. After a few moments, he raises his hand.

"Lower the volume," he says quietly.

The driver nods and dials the radio down until Omondi Tony's melody fades into a soft murmur. James slips his earpods into place, taps twice on the right bud, and a familiar voice flows into his ears. It is the steady, grounding tone of his daily podcast host.

"Breathe in... hold... release. You are capable. You are worthy. Today you conquer what yesterday could not."

James closes his eyes for a moment, letting the affirmations sink in. His fingers drum lightly against his knee in rhythm with his breath. Each word feels like a spark, building a quiet fire inside him. The movement of the car, steady and sure, rocks him into a state of meditation.

Outside, the scenery shifts from gated order to the raw sprawl of the city: matatus painted with wild graffiti zip past, street vendors set up stalls with hurried hands, and pedestrians weave endlessly through traffic. James watches it all through the tinted glass, the affirmations wrapping around him like armor.

Today will be his day, he reminds himself. *It must be.*

After a long forty minutes on the road, the car glides through the gates of the office compound. The guard at the entrance straightens immediately, saluting with crisp respect. James beams, his face breaking into a wide smile, his eyes lighting up at the sight of the warm, familiar face.

Stepping out of the car, James clasps the guard's hand in a firm shake. The guard, already prepared, hands him his favorite morning newspaper—*The Standard*. James pats the man's shoulder knowingly, a gesture that carries both gratitude and camaraderie, before striding confidently toward the glass doors of his office building. Behind him, his driver steers the car back out, ready to run the day's errands.

Inside, James steps into the elevator, its polished chrome reflecting his image back at him. The podcast still hums softly in his ears: *"Focus on your purpose. Energy flows where attention goes. You are the architect of your day."* He lets the words carry him upward, his expression calm, meditative.

The familiar *ding* of the elevator jolts him gently from his trance. The doors slide open to reveal the office attendant stepping in, balancing a tray with breakfast in one hand and a thermos flask in the other. The aroma of fresh mandazis and strong Kenyan tea escapes into the air, mingling with the sleek scent of the elevator's polish.

James pulls out one earbud, half-smiling as he nods to the attendant, making space for him. The morning is unfolding exactly as it should.

James steps into his office, his executive assistant already on her feet. Alma is tall and slender, her light features carrying an air of precision, as if she had been built for the role she occupied. Her movements

were measured, efficient; every file placed, every call patched through, every word spoken seemed to flow with quiet confidence. She blended professionalism with an understated grace, the kind that made her presence both reliable and unobtrusive.

“Good morning, sir,” she says, handing him a folder.

“Morning,” James replies warmly, flipping through. “What’s first?”

“CFO in five. Vehicle imports schedule.”

He nods, places the folder on his desk, and loosens his cuffs as he settles in. Moments later, the CFO walks in, briskly, tablet in hand. James gestures toward the seat opposite his desk.

“Morning, James.”

“Morning. Let’s dive in,” James replies, leaning forward.

Hamza scrolls quickly. “The next shipment is ready, but with the congestion at the port, clearance will be delayed,” states Hamza.

“We need to decide how to schedule finances for the imports. Should we secure a loan, or rely on collections from debtors?” James drums his fingers lightly on the desk. “How are the collections shaping up?”

“Better than last quarter,” Hamza says, “but not enough to cover everything upfront.”

“So, a loan would keep things moving without stretching us thin?”

“Exactly. We’d have more breathing room.”

James nods thoughtfully, then leans back in his chair, eyes narrowing slightly. “And the port authorities? Do they need their palms greased to... ease the congestion?”

Hamza pauses, then chuckles softly, glancing up from his tablet. James smirks. A knowing silence passes between the two men before Hamza responds.

“Let’s just say, a small gesture might help them remember our containers before others.”

James nods, the corners of his mouth lifting into a knowing smile. “Good. Handle it.”

Hamza closes his tablet with a click, rising from his seat. “As always.”

“Keep me updated,” James adds firmly.

The two men exchange a final nod, one professional and one conspiratorial, before Hamza takes his leave.

The meeting wraps in under ten minutes. James walks back to his desk, sits alone, and unwraps his breakfast tray. Between sips of thick milk tea and bites of mandazi, he scrolls through his phone, and unfolds *The Standard*, its crisp pages carrying the morning’s weight of the world.

The bold headline caught his eye: “*Trump Pushes Forward with Mass Deportations of Undocumented Immigrants.*” He exhaled slowly, shaking his head. *The ripple effects will be felt everywhere*, he thought. *Markets shift when America sneezes.*

Turning a page, his eyes tightened at another headline: “*Treasury Announces Higher Import Duty and New Fuel Levy.*” He tapped his finger against the page, brows furrowing.

“Import duty rising...” he muttered under his breath. “And fuel levy on top of that. This will eat into margins.”

He leans back, staring at the ceiling for a long moment. *Every coin counts in this business. We’ll have to get creative—either shift costs or pass some to the buyers. But too much and we’ll lose our edge.*

He folds the paper neatly, sips his tea, and whispers to himself with quiet resolve, “Not my first storm. I’ll navigate this too.”

James sets the *Standard* aside and opens his laptop. At exactly nine, the familiar faces of his marketing team light up the screen.

“Good morning, James,” they greet almost in unison. The respect is clear, but so is the ease—they are comfortable addressing him by name.

“Good morning, team,” James replies with a warm nod. “Let’s dive in. With the new import duty and the added fuel levy, we need to rethink our pricing. What are your thoughts?”

One manager speaks up, “We could adjust upward slightly, but that risks losing customers. Maybe bundle servicing discounts to soften the blow?”

James leans back, considering. “That’s a fair point. What do others think?”

Another team member adds, “Digital campaigns and marketers are picking up momentum. If we push there, we might offset any customer resistance to price changes.”

James smiles faintly. “I like that. So instead of slashing prices, we give value—retention through service and smart engagement.”

A younger associate, hesitant at first, suggests reallocating the budget from billboards to influencer-driven outreach. The room falls quiet for a beat, then James nods.

“Bold, but I see potential. Let’s test it in Nairobi first, *small-scale*, and measure results. If it works, we roll it out.”

The conversation flows with suggestions, refinements, and quick problem-solving. James listens more than he speaks, guiding with questions instead of directives.

Finally, he closes the meeting. “Thank you, everyone. The times are shifting, but with your ideas and effort, I believe we’ll adapt even faster than the market expects.”

The team smiles, reassured not just by his confidence but by his willingness to share the weight of decisions. By ten o'clock, most of his scheduled tasks are cleared.

The office intercom then buzzes. Alma's voice comes through.

"Sir, there's a lady here asking to see you. Says it's important."

James pauses, then says, "Send her in."

The woman enters with purposeful steps, her aura heavy. James rises, offers a curt nod, then closes the door behind her.

From outside, Alma hears fragments: low murmurs, sharp whispers, and a phone call interrupted by a sudden fist banging against the desk. The muffled thud makes her glance up nervously, though she quickly looks away, pretending to focus on her screen.

Hours pass. The clock creeps past noon before the door finally opens. The woman strides out, face set, a flicker of anger in her eyes, though her composure remains intact. She doesn't look back.

James follows moments later, his jacket unbuttoned, his face unreadable. He approaches Alma, voice low but firm.

"Clear my schedule for the rest of the day."

She looks up, uncertain. "Everything, sir?"

"Yes. Everything. I'll be out."

Without waiting for her reply, he picks up his phone and confirms that his driver is around, strides past the glass doors, and disappears into the elevator on the eleventh floor.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The waiter returned swiftly, placing the tiny cup of espresso in front of James. The sharp aroma rose to his nose, and he almost winced. *An espresso... really?* he thought, smirking faintly. *Of all things. I don't even like coffee.* He tapped his fingers lightly on the table, debating his next move. Walking away now would be cowardly, especially after coming this far.

Across the room, the lady raised her head just as the order landed. Her eyes met his for a moment, and a shy smile touched her lips before she quickly lowered her gaze back to her phone. James' heart kicked in his chest. That smile—it wasn't much, but it was enough.

He picked up the cup, staring at the dark liquid, and chuckled inwardly. *This is no longer about the coffee. This is about her.* The silence between them felt charged, pulling him closer, daring him to step beyond his hesitation.

Slowly, James rose from his seat, espresso in hand. He walked toward her table, his steps measured, carrying a confidence that hid the battle raging inside.

As his shadow stretched across her table, she looked up again. Half-curious, half-guarded.

“Mind if I sit?” James asked softly, his tone calm but deliberate.

She didn't answer right away, only glanced at him, then at the empty chair. Finally, she gave the faintest nod.

James slid into the seat opposite her, set the untouched espresso between them, and smiled lightly. “Funny thing,” he said, leaning in slightly. “I don't even drink coffee. But today felt... different.”

Her lips curved again, shy yet intrigued. This time, she didn't look away. James cleared his throat, breaking the silence. "Hot day, isn't it?" he mumbled, glancing out the window. The lady half-smiled, gave a polite nod, and returned to her phone.

He shifted in his chair, trying again. "These politicians, though... always promising the moon and giving us dust." Another faint smile, another nod. Her eyes drifted elsewhere.

He chuckled nervously, scratching the back of his head. "Maybe I'm boring you. I talk too much when I'm nervous."

That drew a real smile from her. Encouraged, James leaned in, his voice softening. "Truth is, I wasn't supposed to be here. I started with nothing—washing cars, hustling through Kawangware, barely scraping by. But I promised myself I'd climb. No matter how steep."

This time she looked up fully, her gaze locking on him. The phone slipped forgotten to the table. She studied him, her eyes bright with quiet admiration as he rambled on, the weight of his determination filling the space between them.

James leaned back, a hint of confidence in his voice now that her eyes were on him. "You know, people think luck makes a man. But luck is just another word for hard work meeting the right day. I believe in sweat... in showing up, even when no one claps."

The lady tilted her head, her lips curling into a thoughtful smile. "But don't you think love plays a part too? Hard work is good, yes... but without love—for people, for what you do—doesn't it all become empty?"

James paused, surprised by the softness in her tone. He smiled, almost boyishly. "Love... you're right. Love is the oil that keeps the fire burning. Without it, you just grind yourself down." He leaned in slightly. "What about you? What do you value most?"

Her eyes softened. “Respect. It holds everything together—love, hard work, even wealth. Without respect, all of it can crumble.”

James nodded slowly, taking in her words as if they were scripture. The moments slipped away unnoticed; their laughter came easily now, and her once-guarded glances turned to steady admiration.

By the time Kamau’s call came through on his beaten Tecno which buzzed loudly in James’ pocket, cutting through their flow, two hours had passed. James glanced at the caller ID, sighed, and chuckled. “Looks like the world wants me back.”

She laughed lightly, shaking her head. “Maybe the world should wait a little longer.”

The words sank deep into James, confirming what he had only dared to hope: she felt it too. He excused himself politely and answered Kamau’s call.

“Wewe bwana, kwani umeoleka huko?” Kamau’s voice barked through the crackling line.

James smiled, keeping his tone calm. “Niambie. Umemaliza?”

“Nimemaliza, hata gari ishaanza kuparara tena. Sijui nioshe round two?”

James chuckled softly. “Sawa, nipee dakika tano, nakuja.”

He hung up, slipped his phone back into his pocket, and turned to the lady. “Your Jeep is ready. You can pick it up whenever you’re done here.”

Her eyes lingered on him for a moment, warm and unreadable. James gave a small nod, resisting the urge to say more, and rose from his chair. The weight of unspoken words lingered between them as he walked away, each step heavy with the thought that this wasn’t the end. James half-ran, half-jumped back to the carwash, his chest still warm from the coffee shop encounter. Kamau eyed him mockingly, shaking his head as if to say *I told you so*.

Moments later, the lady's Jeep pulled up gleaming in the sun. James stepped forward, handed her the keys, and their smiles met again—brief but telling. Kamau, pretending to be busy, scowled and muttered under his breath, though his eyes never left them.

As James turned to walk away, her voice called him back. He froze, then turned slowly. She reached into her bag, pulled out a sleek personal card, and handed it to him. “Call me,” she said softly, her eyes holding his. “We should finish our conversation. I need more insights on... ‘values.’” She smiled knowingly as she said the word.

James swallowed hard. Before slipping the card into his pocket, James toyed with it between his fingers, the glossy edges catching the afternoon light. His eyes traced the name printed in bold, elegant letters. Almost without realizing, his lips moved, mouthing the words softly—“Esq. Joy Salma.”

The name lingered on his tongue, strange yet sweet, like a song he wanted to learn by heart. For a moment, the bustle of the carwash faded, and all he could see was her smile, all he could hear was her voice saying *values*.

She paid for the service, then tipped Kamau so generously that he fumbled for words, nearly dropping the cash. “Kwani umempa nini, madam?” he blurted out, staring at James in disbelief.

James chuckled, patting Kamau hard on the back. “Leo, at least kula nyama, si sukuma kila siku kama mbuzi.”

Kamau burst out laughing, shaking his head, while James turned away, hiding the quiet triumph glimmering in his eyes.

Days after his encounter with Esq. Salma, her voice still lingered in James' mind. “*Values*,” he muttered to himself with a faint smile, as though the word carried a secret meaning only they shared.

That evening, in the dim quiet of his small but neat house, he dug through the pockets of shirts and trousers draped carelessly over a chair. The place was more shelter than home—he rarely cooked there, only came back to sleep after long days of hustling.

Finally, his fingers brushed the stiff edge of the card. He pulled it out carefully, the corners folded from weeks of neglect. Squinting under the weak bulb, he read aloud, voice soft but trembling:

“Esq... Joy Salma.”

The name filled the empty room like a melody. He let out a shaky laugh, then whispered, “Thank God I haven’t done laundry in three weeks.” The thought almost broke him—what if the card had been washed away, dissolved into nothing?

His chest tightened, and for a moment, James pressed the card against his heart. Tears prickled at the edges of his eyes. It wasn’t just a card anymore; it was proof that the moment had been real, that someone out there—this radiant, untouchable woman—had seen something in him worth remembering.

James sat on the edge of his bed, the card still in one hand as he picked up his battered phone with the other. His fingers trembled slightly as he punched in the number. He held his breath, waiting.

Then came the flat, cold voice: *“Sorry. You do not have sufficient airtime to make this call. Please recharge your account and try again.”*

His heart sank. For a moment, he simply stared at the screen, as if sheer willpower could force the call through. Then, with a frustrated sigh, he shoved the phone in his pocket and bolted out of the house.

At the corner kiosk, Babu, the shopkeeper, looked up from his stool, chewing slowly on roasted maize.

“Wewe Jemo, rada?”

James leaned on the counter, panting lightly. “Babu, niweke tu ya kumi. Haraka. Niko na simu ya maana, lazima nipige sasa hivi.”

Babu chuckled, tearing the scratch card from a bundle. “Kwani ni mheshimiwa anakungojea? Hii haraka yote?”

James grinned faintly, though his nerves were alive under the surface. “Sio hivyo, Babu. Ni... ni call ya maana. Utanielewa siku moja.”

Babu slid the recharge over. “Sawa basi. Tumia vizuri hiyo kumi.”

James loaded the airtime with shaky hands, his heart thumping as though every second wasted was a sin. James pressed the call button again, the number glowing on his small screen. He held the phone tight against his ear, his pulse quickening with every second of the ringing tone.

The trill stretched on, each pause an eternity. He clenched his jaw, whispering under his breath, “*Pick up... just pick up.*”

Then the automated voice returned, flat and merciless: “*The person you have called did not answer. Please leave a voicemail after the beep.*”

A sharp beep cut through the room, and James froze. His throat went dry. For a long second he said nothing, only listening to his breathing in the silence. Then, almost in a whisper, words slipped out:

“Uh... hello, Madam Salma. It’s James. From the carwash... I... I just wanted to say—”

He stopped, fumbling, the weight of the moment pressing down on him.

James quickly hung up before the words could stumble any further out of his mouth. He placed the phone down beside him, staring at it as if it had betrayed him.

“Maybe I raised my hopes for nothing,” he muttered, exhaling sharply. “Anyway... nothing is lost.”

With that, he reached for the switch. Darkness swallowed the small room, leaving only the faint glow of the streetlamps seeping through the thin curtains. He lay on his bed, the card still resting near his chest, its presence both comfort and torment.

Outside, the silence of Kawangware pressed in—a silence that wasn’t stillness at all. The streets pulsed faintly with life: distant chatter, the occasional bark of a dog, and the muted hum of a matatu engine fading into the night. Yet within the walls, the noise became a lullaby, rocking James slowly toward uneasy sleep.

Steam curled from the bathroom door as James hummed softly under his breath, lathering his arms. His battered phone, abandoned on the bed, buzzed once, then again, the faint vibration almost drowned by the splashing water.

He finally stepped out, towel draped over his shoulders, and the screen lit up with a single notification: **1 missed call – Esq. Joy Salma.**

His heart slammed against his ribs. “Haiya... kweli?” He scrambled for the phone, dialed back in haste, only to be greeted by another mocking voice: *“Your balance is insufficient to complete this call.”*

James stared at the phone in disbelief, then groaned loudly. “Aaai, si skiza tune tena!?” He scrolled quickly and saw it; the ten shillings he had loaded last night had been swallowed by his ever-hungry Skiza tune subscription. He cursed under his breath, running a frustrated hand through his damp hair.

Just as he was about to storm out for another recharge, the room filled with the sudden blare of his husky ringtone. The sound startled him so much he nearly dropped the phone.

He glanced at the partly broken screen, and there it was, glowing back at him: **Incoming Call – Esq. Joy Salma.**

His breath caught, fingers hovering, unsure whether to snatch the chance or freeze in disbelief.

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CHAPTER FIVE

James burst out of the office building, his face set but his pulse running faster than he wanted to admit. The heavy conversation with the woman still echoed in his mind, but he brushed it aside—there was no time.

“Follow that black Mercedes,” he ordered, his voice sharp as he slid into the back seat.

The driver didn’t hesitate. With a swift glance in the rearview mirror, he reversed into the narrow street, the engine humming low before roaring to life. The tires screeched softly against the tarmac as he engaged the chase, weaving smoothly between matatus and impatient boda-bodas.

James leaned forward, one hand gripping the headrest of the front seat, eyes locked on the sleek car ahead. The Mercedes glided effortlessly through traffic, its tinted windows giving away nothing.

“Don’t lose it,” James muttered.

The driver smirked, tilting the wheel with the ease of a man too used to tight corners and impossible gaps. “Relax, boss. This isn’t my first pursuit.”

James sat back, but his chest remained tight. The meeting had stirred questions, the Mercedes carried answers—and he wasn’t about to let them slip away into Nairobi’s chaos.

James’ eyes never left the black Mercedes ahead, yet his phone buzzed against his thigh—once, twice, then again. He glanced down. *Mjr. Bram.*

His jaw tightened. Not now.

The phone rang insistently, the name flashing with each vibration. James let it ring out, his thumb hovering over the screen before pressing *decline*. Within seconds, it lit up again.

“Damn it,” he hissed under his breath. His hand trembled slightly as he switched the device to flight mode and tossed it beside him on the leather seat.

The driver caught the sudden shift in his boss’s mood through the rearview mirror. Without a word, he pressed a button, and the tinted windows slid up with a soft mechanical hum, sealing them in. The noise of the city faded, replaced by the steady growl of the engine.

James sat back, face dark, fists clenched on his knees. The Mercedes cut through traffic like a shadow, and he forced himself to focus. Still, the silence inside the car felt heavy—almost suffocating—as unanswered questions buzzed louder than the phone he had silenced.

The two cars idle at the red light. James reaches for his phone, thumb hesitating before he powers it back on. As the screen wakes, a single notification flashes—sender: **Mine**.

He opens it. The message reads, “*Stop following me and handle this with your men. Do not dare drag me into this, or I’ll end you.*”

The words land like ice. For a second he just stares, the traffic noise and the Mercedes’ engine blending into a dull roar. He tosses the phone back onto the seat as if it burns him.

“Turn at the roundabout,” he tells the driver, voice low and steady. “Go to the usual—my favorite spot.”

The driver nods, sensing the shift, and eases the car into motion when the light turns green. As they peel away, James watches the black Mercedes slip ahead, then fade into the city. He presses his palms to his temples for a moment, forcing his breath steady. Outside, Nairobi rushes on, oblivious; inside, a cold knot tightens. The relaxing place is a small hilltop restaurant overlooking the city—a quiet, controlled refuge. Today, it feels less like an escape and more like a place to draw a line.

The ringtone cuts through the heavy silence of the car—**Mjr. Bram** again. James clenches his jaw, debating whether to let it ring out. But something inside him snaps. He snatches the phone and presses it to his ear.

“What!” he barks, his voice sharp enough to make the driver flinch.

On the other end, a stern, unwavering voice replies, “There is an issue. We need your presence.”

James exhales through his nose, pinching the bridge of his forehead. His silence stretches, but Bram doesn’t fill it—he just waits. Finally, James answers, his tone clipped, “Location?”

“Same place. We are waiting.”

The line goes dead. James lowers the phone slowly, his reflection in the tinted window catching his own tense stare. He slips the phone into his pocket, then leans forward.

“Change of plans,” he tells the driver. “Take me to the *Pier*.”

The driver simply nods, flicks the indicator, and steers into a new route, the city’s pulse quickening around them.

The car slows as it nears **The Pier**, a dimly lit establishment tucked behind the bustle of the waterfront. Its neon sign flickers faintly, casting pale blue streaks across the pavement. James steps out, his polished shoes crunching against gravel. The air here carries the salty tang of the lake mixed with the smoke of grilled fish from nearby kiosks.

At the entrance, Abraham stands with three towering men at his side. Their broad chests fill their suits, their faces cold, carved with scars and silence. As James approaches, two of them straighten instinctively, their eyes narrowing. One even shifts his stance, hand brushing against his jacket as though ready for what might come.

But James does not slow. His stride is calm, purposeful. His presence alone makes the three men stiffen. They shudder—not visibly, but enough that Bram notices.

Unlike them, Bram does not move. He does not flinch. He simply holds James' gaze, his lips curling into the faintest shadow of a nod. Respect or challenge—it's hard to tell.

Without a word, Bram turns toward the entrance. James follows. Together, they move through the dim corridor of The Pier, the muffled hum of late patrons in the distance. At the end of the hallway, a heavy wooden door awaits.

Bram pushes it open and gestures inside. James steps through.

The **private room** is sparse: a long polished table, two chairs, and thick curtains drawn to block the outside world. The lighting is low, a single bulb hanging overhead, swaying ever so slightly. Behind them, the door shuts with a soft thud as Bram's men remain stationed outside, silent sentinels.

Inside, only James and Bram remain.

Bram lowers himself into a chair, his posture steady, commanding. James stands a moment longer, then slowly takes his seat opposite. Neither man speaks at first. The silence hums like a third presence in the room.

Finally, Bram leans forward, his fingers lacing together. "You've been hard to reach."

James smirks faintly, his eyes narrowing. "Maybe you've been calling too much."

The air tightens. The Pier is holding its breath.

The bulb above sways lightly, casting sharp shadows across the room. Bram fixes his stare on James, his voice steady but edged.

“You chasing down that black Mercedes earlier—don’t bother denying it—I know who was inside.”

James leans back, smirking faintly, though his eyes tighten.

“Salma.”

Bram nods once. “She’s enraged. She says you’re dragging her into your mess. Clients are calling *her* now, not you. They want to know if the quality of business has dropped—or if you’ve gone reckless.”

James shifts in his chair, jaw tightening. “We’re moving products and money faster than ever. That should mean loyalty, not complaints.”

Bram slams his palm lightly on the table—not with anger, but enough to demand weight. “It means noise, James. The kind of noise that draws the wrong eyes. Regulators. Rivals. Even politicians. We’ve been clean for years, but this pace?” He shakes his head. “You’re pushing too hard.”

James exhales slowly, gazing at the ceiling. “Salma knows this game. She’s acting like she’s never danced in fire before.”

Bram leans forward, lowering his voice. “This isn’t about fire. It’s about smoke. And smoke attracts attention. She’s already told me if you don’t handle your business, she’ll walk. And if she walks, half our clean doors slam shut.”

Silence stretches for a moment. The only sound is the faint hum of traffic outside.

James opens his mouth to retort, but Bram lifts a finger.

“And that’s not the only problem.”

James raises a brow.

Bram pulls a folded newspaper clipping from his pocket and slides it across the table. The headline screams:

“Prominent Entrepreneur Found Dead in Apparent Suicide.”

James’ eyes flicker over the name, and he curses under his breath.

“He was one of ours?” James asked.

“He owed us seven figures. The media is already painting him as a victim of predatory lending. They’ll trace it, James. And when they do, the trail runs straight to our door.”

James slams a fist against the armrest of his chair but quickly steadies himself. “We covered our tracks.”

“Not enough. He was famous. People talk. The buzz is spreading—TV, blogs, social feeds. His family is crying foul, and politicians will want a scapegoat. A big one.”

The bulb sways again, creaking above them.

Bram locks eyes with James. “So tell me. Do we write off the debt... or do we make an example out of him, even in death?”

James rubs his chin, his mind racing. He feels the weight of both fires closing in: Salma’s rage over the laundering and the dead man’s shadow threatening to unravel their empire.

James pulls out his phone, thumb scrolling until Alma’s name glows on the screen. He types with his usual brevity:

Book my morning hours as busy. I won’t be available for any meetings with the staff. I’ll be working from home. Thanks.

Satisfied, he locks the screen and sets the phone face down on the polished wooden table. He reaches for his cup, steam curling gently above the rim. The earthy scent of strong green tea fills his senses. He takes a slow sip, his shoulders easing.

“Nothing stronger,” James murmurs, as if reminding himself. “A man should stay clean to maintain focus. Plenty of meditation and green tea.”

Bram, leaning lazily in his chair, lets out a low chuckle. He swirls the amber liquid in his glass before taking another heavy gulp.

“Clean,” Bram repeats with a smirk, the word thick with irony. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Meanwhile, you’re neck-deep in dirt, my friend.”

James doesn’t flinch. He keeps his gaze steady, calm, as though Bram’s words were just smoke dissipating in the air.

Bram tips his second glass of whisky and drains it in one shot, slamming it softly onto the table.

“Meditation won’t save you from what’s coming, James.”

James exhales, slow and steady, his hand tightening around the porcelain cup.

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CHAPTER SIX

Grace sat slouched on her old couch, the quiet hum of the village evening pressing in around her. In this new era of technology, fifteen years after her daughter's departure, her phone had become her sole companion. She scrolled idly, letting the glowing screen fill the silence.

A notification popped up at the top.

Mama.

Her face softened. Grace typed quickly in response, and soon she and Pamela were locked in their usual rhythm—updates about the week, little anecdotes, and the familiar comfort of daily chatter.

Then Grace froze mid-scroll, her back stiffening.

“What do you mean Jamela wants to come back?” she typed.

Pamela's reply came swiftly: *“She says she's woke. She needs to know her roots.”*

Grace turned off the phone abruptly, her reflection staring back from the blackened screen. “Not again...” she whispered, pressing her hands together as if in prayer. “Please, not again.”

The phone lit up once more: **Dotty calling.**

She sighed and answered.

“Mama, why didn't you respond?” Pamela's voice rushed through.

“Pamela, people will talk,” Grace muttered, her voice trembling.

“Are you still afraid of James? You told me he moved to the city and never came back.”

“But you know how Jamela looks—how much she resembles him.” Grace winced, her heart pounding.

“She insisted, Mama. What should I tell her?”

Grace closed her eyes. “I’ll let you know.”

The line clicked dead. Silence again. Grace groaned, burying her face in her hands.

The music from **Otenga Bar, Eagle**, boomed in the mid-afternoon sun, spilling out into the streets like a rallying call. Revelers streamed in and out, voices raised, laughter mixing with the thump of bass. Waiters and waitresses darted about, trays stacked with nyama choma, beer, and spirits, weaving through the throng like seasoned acrobats.

“**Manu!**” someone barked from behind the counter.

A small, wiry man hurried forward. Manu might not look the part, but he was the bar’s manager—a sharp operator whose easy smile disguised how well he kept the place together.

“**Stock iko chini, na depot hawashiki simu,**” the stock controller muttered, gesturing at the half-bare shelves.

Manu exhaled slowly, tapping the counter with his knuckles before responding. “Sawa, call Alma. Mwambie the situation. Achangamke na finance. Tutabalance account by Monday.”

Across town in her sleek apartment, Alma sat comfortably on her cream leather couch, the city skyline stretching behind her window. A romance drama flickered on her flatscreen, her brows furrowed as her favorite character stumbled into yet another frustrating twist. “Hii scriptwriter lazima ajue better,” she murmured, tossing a popcorn kernel into her mouth.

Her phone chimed on the table: **Ben—Otenga Bar.**

She sighed, already guessing the problem. Sure enough, the message spelled it out: stock issues, short cash, and Manu asking for help. Again.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. Manu had been dipping too often into emergency transfers, covering his gaps with borrowed time. And James—her boss—was ruthless when it came to money. If he knew, Otenga Bar would already be on the chopping block.

Alma typed back swiftly:

Tell Manu this is his last warning. If the books aren't balanced by Monday, James will hear of it directly.

A moment later, she flicked a message to the accountant:

Transfer 100k to Otenga Bar. Make sure it reflects immediately.

Setting the phone aside, Alma leaned back, eyes on the TV again. “If only people valued discipline as much as they do excuses,” she muttered, returning to her show, though her mind lingered on how close Manu was skating to disaster.

Manu returned to his table, the one he always claimed—a corner spot angled perfectly to command a view of the entire lounge. From there, he could monitor the waiters' rhythm, watch the tills, and even catch a glimpse of who was walking in or out. He set his soda gently on the table, the glass already wet with condensation, and leaned back into his chair with a practiced ease.

The chatter around him was loud but familiar. At his table sat a sharply dressed man in a navy blazer, his gold watch gleaming under the dim lights, his presence calm but commanding. Two ladies flanked them, giggling softly into their cocktails, their laughter punctuating the air like little sparks.

As Manu approached, the man flicked his phone screen off and slid it onto the table face down. His eyes lifted, steady and unreadable.

“**Kazi inaendelea shwari?**” he asked, his tone casual but laced with weight, gesturing toward Ben at the counter with a subtle nod of his chin.

Manu forced a small smile, pulling out his chair and sitting down. “**Shwari tu. Ben ako macho.**” He lifted his soda and took a long sip, though the fizz did little to calm the sudden dryness in his throat.

The man leaned back, crossing his arms slowly, as if weighing Manu’s words. The ladies kept chattering, but Manu knew the real conversation was about to begin.

The man swirled the ice in his glass before leaning slightly forward. His voice was calm but deliberate.

“**Unamjua Grace?**” he asked, his eyes never leaving Manu.

Manu’s frown deepened. He shifted in his chair, feeling the weight of the question. “**Amefanya nini?**” he replied cautiously.

The man took a measured sip, then set his glass down. “She wants a loan with us. I don’t know her well, but her referee vouched for her. Word is, her daughter is loaded.”

Manu cleared his throat, the sound catching halfway. His fingers drummed lightly on the table before he found his voice again. “**Sidhani boss mkuu atafurahia tukimkopesha.**” His tone was low, his words heavy. He knew better than to mention James’ history with the woman aloud, but the memory hovered dangerously close.

For a moment, the silence stretched, broken only by the distant bass spilling from the speakers and the laughter of the women beside them. Manu’s mind raced—between warning this man of the unspoken boundary and keeping his mouth shut. He chose silence.

“**Hii ni biashara,**” the man said finally, his lips curling around the words with authority. “**Hatufai kufanya na feelings.**” He leaned back, tapping the rim of his glass. “Besides, the woman seems in real

distress. She said the county government held some of her produce in pending bills. All she wants is to pay her suppliers, and also hire a plot and a tractor, pay her laborers, till and plant before the season ends. That's not much of a gamble."

Manu forced a stiff nod, but his gut tightened. Grace's name had no business mixing with James' empire. And yet, here it was—slipping through the cracks like smoke.

The man tapped his glass again, as if sealing the decision in his own mind. "1.5 million isn't much. And she's willing to stake her land? That's good business."

Manu stiffened. "Alisema nini?"

The man's eyes gleamed. "Her plot. Title deed as security. She doesn't want her daughter dragged into this. Wants to handle it quietly."

Manu exhaled slowly, glancing at the women at the table, then at Ben behind the counter. His stomach knotted. He knew exactly what this meant. Grace was desperate—so desperate she was walking straight into James' net without realizing it.

The man leaned closer, lowering his voice. "I'll process it. One and a half million against her land. Clean papers. Easy turnover." He flicked his phone back on, thumbs moving quickly over the screen. "No need to bother the boss with small details. He'll see it in the books later."

Manu's soda suddenly tasted bitter. He wanted to object, to caution, but the words lodged in his throat. He knew James' rules—never mix business with certain names. Yet this wasn't his call, and silence had kept him alive this long.

"Relax, Manu," the man said, smirking. "It's just another deal."

But Manu wasn't fooled. Grace might have thought she was protecting her daughter by keeping her away from these troubles, but by mortgaging her land for KES 1.5M, she had just walked into the lion's den. And lions, once they tasted blood, never let go.

Manu's fingers drummed lightly on the table as the man's phone glowed. He watched the partner type fast, his lips curving in satisfaction.

“Umeandika jina yake?” Manu asked cautiously.

The man shook his head, chuckling. “No need. Too many names in the system attract questions. I'll just mark it as *title security 70*—her age. Easier to track.”

Manu's brows knit. “But boss—”

The man raised a hand, silencing him. “Boss only wants the numbers clean. Assets in, cash out. He doesn't care whose land it is. By the time he notices, the money will have multiplied, and the papers will already be with us.”

He slid the phone back into his jacket pocket and lifted his glass again, smiling as though he'd just signed a harmless receipt.

Manu leaned back, uneasy. He knew the books James reviewed were meticulous. But this—burying Grace's name under a sterile label—meant she'd vanish in the ledgers, her loan faceless, her land swallowed whole if she defaulted.

The two ladies laughed lightly at a joke they hadn't been privy to. Manu forced a grin, but inside he was cold.

Two weeks later, Grace walked into the modest office tucked behind Otenga Bar, clutching a brown envelope against her chest. Her steps were measured—deliberate, as though each one carried the weight

of her household. The smell of cheap disinfectant lingered in the air, mingling with faint traces of stale beer from the bar next door.

Behind the desk sat the manager, his coat draped neatly over the back of his chair. He looked up, eyes narrowing with the careful calm of a man who never rushed.

“You came,” he said flatly.

Grace nodded and placed the envelope on the desk. With trembling hands, she pulled out her title deed and slid it toward him. “This is all I have. I need the loan to settle my suppliers and prepare my land before the rains end.”

The man opened the envelope, eyes scanning the papers with indifference. “One and a half million,” he confirmed. “You’ll pay in three months. Interest clear?”

Grace nodded quickly. “Clear. I will not trouble my daughter. This is mine to handle.”

He smirked, reached for his ledger, and scribbled a few lines. When he was done, he shut the book with a decisive clap.

“You’re now secured under *title L.R. No. 14384/2*. Don’t worry about the fine print. Just pay when it’s due.”

Grace’s shoulders sagged with relief as a notification pinged on her phone: **Received KES 1.5 million from Timau Credit**. She took the signed documents, stuffed them deep into her purse, and whispered a soft prayer under her breath.

Outside, the sky was heavy with clouds, the promise of rain. Grace walked home believing she had bought herself freedom. But in the ledger, she had no name—only a placeholder that meant the land could be taken without a word spoken of her.

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The *Audi* slid silently into the compound, its headlights cutting briefly across the pale walls before dimming. The driver eased it to a stop, killed the engine, and leaned back into the seat. James patted his shoulder.

“Thank you, my friend. Let’s hustle again tomorrow.”

“Yes, boss,” the driver replied with quiet respect.

James stepped out, his polished shoes tapping lightly against the tiled pavement. He adjusted his coat, gave the night one last glance, and moved toward his apartment door. The driver remained in place, waiting until James disappeared inside, before reversing out of the compound and heading home.

Inside, the air was still, almost too clean. James tossed his keys on the console and loosened his tie. He had little appetite, but the body demanded routine. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a dish of chicken soup, a bowl of rice, and two bananas, neatly wrapped in cling film. His maid always stocked the week for him, a quiet luxury he hardly noticed anymore.

He set the soup and rice into the microwave, peeled the bananas slowly, and placed them on a small plate. A hum slipped from his lips—an old tune, unrecognizable even to him—intertwining with the low drone of the microwave.

Phone in hand, he scrolled briskly, eyes skimming headlines, messages, and notifications. Every few seconds his thumb paused, then darted again. The glowing screen painted his face in restless light, while the microwave ticked down in harmony with his thoughts.

James thumbed through his messages, eyes unfocused, scrolling more out of habit than intent. The screen glowed with old conversations, unread promotions, and muted group chats. His mind drifted—until, like a spark in the dark, a thought struck him.

His lips curved into a grin. “Brilliant,” he whispered, clasping his hands together just as the microwave beeped to a halt. The timing almost felt rehearsed.

He set the hot dishes on the counter but ignored them for a moment, fingers already moving swiftly over the keyboard.

James: I hope you are calmer now.

Meet me tomorrow at home.

I have an idea that will solve both our problems.

I’m looking forward to meeting you.

I love you. Goodnight.

He reread the words once, twice. Satisfied, he pressed send. The screen dimmed, leaving his reflection staring back at him—half tired, half alive with anticipation.

Salma’s phone chimes. The notification lights the screen, and she reads James’s message once, twice—then her brow knits into a hard frown.

She thumbs a reply with quick, sharp strokes, each word a strike:

“Don’t ‘I love you’ me after the mess you created. I’m not ready to see your face. I might just kill you. You are costing me my reputation, and I value it most, James. Respect is paramount in my circle. Respect is key!”

She hesitates for a heartbeat, then hits **send**, the message vanishing into the small white bubble that now sits between them. Her throat tightens; she stares at the screen a moment longer, breathing out slowly as if to let the anger settle.

A few minutes later, in his quiet apartment, James’s phone buzzes. He glances down, reads her words, and the smile drains from his face. The room seems to shrink; the green tea goes cold in his hand.

“**Can I call you?**” James texts back. Salma reads the message. She briefly hesitates, then sends a quick thumb emoji.

James stares at his screen, her thumb emoji glowing like a green light in the middle of the night. He exhales in relief, runs a hand through his hair, and presses the dial button.

The line rings once, twice—then she answers. Her silence is sharp at first, but he knows how to bend it. His tone is calm, warm, softer than the man who had barked orders earlier in the day.

Minutes slip into hours. Salma’s stern edge melts, her laughter bubbling through the speaker every so often, carried by his teasing remarks and self-deprecating humor. James leans back in his chair, teacup turning slowly in his hand, his chuckles filling the empty apartment.

By 3 a.m., their voices have grown low, almost whispers. The storm from earlier has quieted into an intimate calm.

“Sleep well, my dear,” James murmurs, barely above a breath.

“You too,” Salma replies, her voice tender, just before the call clicks off.

James places the phone beside him, still warm from the call, and smiles into the silence. His gaze settles on the counter, the meal untouched and cold. With a sigh, he forces down two spoonfuls before abandoning the rest. Appetite escapes him as it always has these days.

“Tina will scold me for this,” he mutters, picturing his housekeeper’s disappointed face. “I’ve barely eaten this week.”

Just as he steps into the bedroom, his phone vibrates. A notification flashes—**Bank: Ksh 100,000 transferred to Manu.** James glances at the screen, frowns briefly, then tosses the phone onto the dresser without a word.

The room falls silent. Moments later, he disappears under the covers, surrendering himself to the night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

James opens his eyes lazily, the cheerful chirping of birds tugging him awake. He groans, pulling his fluffy pillow over his head, then finally sits up with a long sigh. Dragging himself to the tall windows, he pulls the curtains aside. Bright light slices through the darkness, bathing his face in gold. On the balcony, the crisp morning air fills his lungs and sends a shiver down his spine. Below, garbage trucks rumble past as the estate stirs to life. He scratches his belly absently, yawning, before turning on the bathroom heater and heading downstairs to set a pot of tea. Once it begins to brew, he returns upstairs for his shower.

Across town, Salma moves as if to an unseen rhythm. She springs from bed, draws back her heavy curtains, and floods her room with sunlight. In seamless motion, she turns on her bathroom heater, then heads downstairs to set her coffee to brew. Steam rises gently from the pot as she hums her way back upstairs, her voice echoing softly in the mist of the shower.

James skips his usual meditation, pacing instead across his spotless living room in a loose cotton shirt and beach shorts, casual yet deliberate—as though to show he is comfortable, unbothered. Today, grounding himself feels like weakness; he needs his edge intact for Salma. He loads the last of last night's dishes into the washer and lets it hum to life. With a few sprays of lavender, the air shifts—cool, floral, and inviting. He checks his watch, smooths his shirt, and lets his thoughts sharpen on what must be said and what must not.

Salma stands before her mirror, carefully slipping into a dress that clings in just the right places. Her movements are deliberate—slow, as though every button and fold is part of her performance. She leans closer, dabbing perfume at her neck, wrists, and collarbone—a bold scent, designed to linger long after she has left the room. She tilts her head, smiles faintly at her reflection, and steps into her heels.

As the clock ticks toward ten, their worlds converge in silent preparation. James adjusts the throw pillows on his couch, though he doesn't care for their alignment. Salma slides her sunglasses over her eyes, hiding the storm and allure beneath them.

At exactly ten o'clock, the sound of heels clicking on polished tiles breaks the silence in James' apartment door. James straightens, lavender still hanging in the air, as Salma's perfume announces her even before the knock at the door.

James opens the door slowly, leaning against the frame as though he has all the time in the world. His cotton shirt clings lightly in the morning heat, the faint lavender of the room mixing now with Salma's bold perfume.

"You're late," he says with a half-smile, his voice calm but edged.

Salma lowers her sunglasses, her eyes sweeping him deliberately from head to toe. "You look like you're going to the beach, not expecting me."

"Maybe I am," James replies, stepping aside. "You're the tide that never lets me rest."

She lets out a small laugh, brushing past him into the room. "Still full of lines, I see. But tell me, James... Do you ever mean any of them?"

He closes the door softly, the click sounding louder than it should. "Only when you're listening."

Salma pauses, her perfume filling the silence between them. She tilts her head, amused but unconvinced.

"Careful, James. Sweet words won't save you this time."

"Then I won't waste them," he says, meeting her gaze steadily. "I asked you here to solve problems, not to hide from them."

The air between them is charged, both casual in tone but deliberate in posture—a game neither intends to lose.

Salma lingers near the couch but doesn't sit. Instead, she traces the rim of the glass vase with one finger, deliberately making James wait.

"You always think you can pull the strings," she says coolly. "But you forget—sometimes puppets cut themselves loose."

James chuckles, leaning against the wall, arms folded. "A puppet that perfumes the whole house before walking in? You came to play, Salma. Don't pretend otherwise."

Her lips twitch into the ghost of a smile. "Play? Don't flatter yourself. I'm here because you insisted."

"And you showed up," he fires back smoothly. "That tells me more than your words ever will."

Salma locks eyes with him, holding the silence like a weapon. He refuses to look away, the corners of his mouth curling upward in quiet defiance.

Minutes stretch, the air thick with unspoken dares. She steps closer, just enough for her perfume to overwhelm the faint lavender in the room.

"Careful, James," she says softly, almost a whisper. "If you push too hard, you might find I don't bend. I break."

"Good," James murmurs, eyes unwavering. "Broken things can't hide. They reveal their true shape."

The tension hangs, daring one of them to yield. Finally, Salma exhales, her stance loosening ever so slightly. She slides onto the couch, crossing her legs with practiced elegance.

“Enough of your riddles,” she says, patting the cushion beside her. “Let’s talk business before we kill each other with words.”

James lets out a low laugh, pushing himself off the wall. “Finally. The queen grants an audience.” He takes the seat opposite her, leaning forward. “Let’s solve this before we both lose.”

James reaches into the drawer at his side and pulls out a folded clipping. Without a word, he slides it across the table until it rests near Salma’s hand.

“This is our ticket,” he says, his voice steady, almost too confident.

Salma picks it up, unfolding it carefully. She leans back, letting her sunglasses rest against the armrest as her eyes scan the headline. “What am I looking at, James?”

He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “Lucas. One of my customers. The family is threatening to sue.”

She studies the print a moment longer, her expression unreadable. Then she lowers the paper, eyes narrowing. “And how exactly does this help us?”

James smirks faintly, but the weight in his tone doesn’t waver. “Take it easy. I’m not suggesting poison, my queen. Not when I still need you alive.”

Her gaze sharpens at the word “alive.” “Then stop speaking in riddles. Lay it bare. If this is truly our ticket, you’d better prove it.”

James taps the edge of the clipping with one finger. “Lucas’ suicide has opened a gap. His family is desperate, disorganized, and irate. That means leverage—if we move fast enough.”

Salma crosses her legs slowly, her perfume wafting into the stillness. She places the clipping on the table between them. “Leverage, or another scandal to bury us both?”

For a moment, the lavender and her perfume seem to clash in the air. James doesn't flinch. "That depends on how you play your part, *Attorney*." He smiles.

James's eyes harden as he lays out the truth, each word deliberate. "Lucas had secrets—big ones. Since his suicide, the company's stock has been falling fast. Investors are jittery. That panic is our opening."

Salma folds her hands, waiting. He continues: "Lucas was foolish enough to put up his shares as collateral for a loan he couldn't cover. The family is scrambling, cash-poor and desperate. If we move now and buy the block of shares quietly, we can control the board before anyone else sees it coming."

She blinks once. "Buy them out and... what? Then what about the loan-shark angle?"

"We bury it," James says flatly. "We make a deal with the family: we acquire the shares, cover their immediate liabilities discreetly, and in return we get the company. We leverage our channels to quiet media noise, pay the right hands where needed, and restructure so the traces to our lending network never surface."

Salma's jaw tightens. "You mean pay to silence them."

"Essentially," James admits. "Think of it as an acquisition with extra discretion. The debt ledger is messy—Lucas' exposure is significant—but the company itself still has value. We move fast, inject liquidity, take control, and repurpose the business into a clean revenue stream that masks our operations."

She studies him, the strategist at work. "And Lucas's collateral—his shares—is it enough?"

"They're the linchpin. The family will accept cash to stave off collapse, and the shares are transferable. Their panic lowers the market price; we buy at a discount. Once we control the board, we can quietly rewrite things so the loan-shark links are obscured or absorbed."

Salma exhales slowly. “This isn’t just financial risk. It’s reputational—legal. If regulators sniff this out, it’s not only fines. It’s exposure.”

James nods, unflinching. “I know. That’s why I need you. Your ‘friends’ trust your discretion. You handle the optics and the high-level smoothing—media, recommenders, and legal buffers. I handle operations, muscle, and the backend.” He lets the offer sit between them. “We do this cleanly and quickly, and we walk away owning an actual company, not just pockets of cash. We make the noise work for us.”

Salma’s eyes flick to the newspaper clipping on the table, then back to him. “Timeline?” she asks.

“Two to three weeks to secure financing and open negotiations—if we act now.”

She pauses, thinking through reputational fallout, allies to call, and the price of loyalty. Finally, her mouth curls into a measured half-smile. “You buy the shares. I put out the fires where they flare. We move fast, and we leave no fingerprints.”

James nods once, satisfied. “Then we begin tomorrow. No loose ends.”

Salma let her eyes linger on him, her lips curling into a thin smile. The sunlight streaming through the wide windows caught the sharp angles of his face, the playful arrogance in his stride. His words weren’t just strategy—they were fire wrapped in velvet. Dangerous, intoxicating.

“You,” she whispered, almost to herself, “are a wicked man, James.” Her tone held equal parts admiration and warning, the kind of contradiction that made their chemistry electric.

James tilted his head, a sly grin pulling at his mouth as he closed the space between them. “Wicked enough to keep you guessing. But never wicked enough to lose you.”

Her laugh was soft, low, the kind that curled around his spine. “Don’t flatter yourself,” she teased, though her eyes betrayed the pull she fought to resist. “I admire brilliance, not men. But... brilliance like yours has its way of seducing even the strongest.”

James stopped just close enough for his presence to eclipse her air, his voice a husky murmur. “And yet, every time, you let me.”

For a moment the business, the lawsuits, the looming danger — all of it blurred into irrelevance. What remained was a sharp current of attraction neither could tame. Salma’s gaze locked with his, guarded but smoldering.

“Careful, James,” she breathed, her lips dangerously close to a smile. “You might start to believe I belong to you.”

“And if you did?” he asked softly, a dare cloaked in velvet.

She held his gaze, her heart thudding against her chest, before finally retreating — slow, deliberate. The tension lingered like static between storm clouds.

“You’d have to earn me,” she said, cool again, though her eyes gave her away. “And you know how expensive I can be.” She shoves him aside. He lands playfully beside her.

“Why do you deny me?” he asks, fondling her hand playfully. “Your heart belongs to another.” she smirks painfully.

Salma picks her small purse and puts on her sunglasses. “We’ll be in touch. I’ll reach out once I finalize the details.” James nods. She blows him a kiss and leaves.

James watched her glide out, her perfume lingering long after the soft click of the door. He exhaled slowly, fingers drumming on the armrest, unsettled by her parting words. *Your heart is still with another.* The accusation cut deeper than he cared to admit.

He stood, running a hand through his hair, pacing to the balcony where the city sprawled beneath him. The morning air did little to cool the unease burning inside. Salma was right—she always was. Her instincts were razor sharp, sharper than she let on.

James reached for his phone, thumb hovering over a name he hadn't dialed in years. For a fleeting second, he considered pressing it—Pamela. His jaw clenched, and he tossed the phone onto the couch. Some ghosts had no place in the present.

Still, Salma's kiss lingered in the room, mocking him. A promise. A threat. A reminder that in their world, desire and business were never separate—each move on the chessboard could cost more than money.

James poured himself another cup of tea, though his hands trembled slightly. He hated that she could unnerve him this way. Hated it, and craved it all the same.

By the time the clock neared noon, he had composed himself, mask back in place. Whatever Salma planned to finalize, he would be ready. He always was.

James' eyes flicked to the buzzing phone. *Upcoming client meeting in 15 minutes.*

He straightened, rolling his shoulders as if shrugging off the weight of Salma's words. With deliberate calm, he adjusted his cotton shirt, tugged it smooth, and strode toward his study. The space was neat, disciplined—mahogany desk, muted gray walls, files stacked with soldier-like precision. His sanctuary for deals, numbers, and strategies.

He sat, powering on his sleek laptop. The screen reflected his face—composed, unreadable, the face of a man who could not afford cracks in his armor. The tea sat untouched on the desk, steam now fading.

He tapped a few keys, pulling up the client portfolio. Figures danced across the screen—potential investors who thought they were meeting a businessman, not a man whose empire was built on shadows. James smirked faintly. *Masks within masks.*

As the clock ticked down, he reached for his notebook, flipping to a page marked in his tidy script. Bullet points. Questions. Leverage. He underlined one word twice: **control**.

By the time the meeting notification pinged again, James was ready. Whatever storm Salma stirred in his heart, it would not bleed into this call. Not here. Not in business.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The penthouse was tastefully elegant—sleek lines softened by warm tones, with walls adorned in soft art and subtle gold trims. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed Toronto’s skyline, its early autumn haze casting a muted glow across the marble floor. Pamela moved with quiet grace, her silk robe trailing as she set fresh croissants on the glass table.

Across the room, Jamela stirred her coffee, the silver spoon clinking softly against fine porcelain. The faint hum of the city below blended with the low jazz playing from the speakers.

Their conversation floated easily—plans for Jamela’s graduate studies, Pamela’s charity brunch, and Sims’ upcoming trip to Zurich. Yet beneath the comfort, there lingered an unspoken tension, a weight Pamela carried in her eyes—one that no luxury or glass of imported wine could fully conceal.

Then Jamela paused, her tone softer, almost tentative.

“Did you call Grandma?”

Pamela froze mid-slice, the knife lingering on the bagel. For a moment the hum of the radiator filled the silence between them. She avoided Jamela’s eyes, staring instead at the crumb-strewn counter.

Jamela leaned forward, brows drawn. “Pam?”

Pamela exhaled, finally meeting her sister’s gaze. “Not yet. I am... waiting for the right time.”

Jamela tilted her head, unconvinced. “Or avoiding it?”

Pamela gave a faint, tired smile. “Maybe both.”

The question lingered, heavy, as the cold from outside seemed to creep into the room despite the heater’s hum.

The steam from Jamela's mug curled into the still air as she pushed her chair back slightly, her voice firmer than before.

"Mom, I'm not waiting anymore," she said, eyes locked on her mother. "I already have my passport. And my ticket's booked—for next month. I'm going to Kenya."

Pamela's hand slipped off the counter, the knife clattering softly against the plate. She stared at her daughter in disbelief, her breath caught in her chest.

"You... what?" she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Jamela nodded, her face set with resolve. "I need to know, Mama. I need to meet Grandma. I need to see where I come from. You can't keep me away forever."

Pamela's lips trembled as she tried to speak, but no words came. She sank into her chair, the weight of Jamela's decision crashing down on her. The chatter from moments before was gone—replaced by the sharp silence of inevitability.

Pamela's eyes glisten, but she quickly looks down at her plate, pushing the toast crumbs around with her fork. Jamela doesn't press further; she's said enough. The silence between them grows heavy, thicker than the steam rising from their mugs.

Mother and daughter finish their breakfast quietly, each lost in her own thoughts. The streets of Toronto outside remain indifferent—snow crunches under hurried footsteps, cars rumble past, life continues.

Inside, the wide, marble kitchen gleamed beneath soft pendant lights, yet somehow it felt smaller—confined by the weight of unspoken truths. Jamela's resolve sat firm behind her calm eyes, her every movement deliberate as she cleared the table. Across from her, Pamela stood still, one manicured hand gripping the edge of the counter.

The faint hum of the espresso machine filled the silence between them. Pamela's mind churned beneath her polished exterior—a storm she could neither share nor silence. The life she had built, the comfort that surrounded her, suddenly felt fragile, like glass waiting to crack under the truth her daughter would soon uncover.

By the time Pamela gathers her bag to leave for class, the silence had become their only language.

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The midday sun beat down on the rusty tin roof of Grace's house. She sat on the veranda, a faded leso wrapped tightly around her waist, her Bible open but unread on her lap. The village buzzed faintly in the distance—children's laughter, goats bleating, a boda boda engine coughing to life.

Grace's eyes, however, were far away. A heaviness weighed on her chest, the same kind that often came before bad news. She closed her eyes, whispering a prayer, *"Lord, protect my children. Whatever is coming, strengthen me to face it."*

Her phone, resting on the stool beside her, vibrated once—then stopped. She picked it up and saw Pamela's name flashing. Grace hesitated, thumb hovering over the green button. With a sigh, she pressed decline and whispered, "Not today."

The Bible slipped shut on her lap as she stared into the distance, the uneasy feeling clinging to her like a shadow.

At Otenga Bar, the heat of midday sat heavy in the air. The low hum of conversation mingled with the faint crackle of an old radio behind the counter. Manu sat at his usual table, his soda sweating onto the wooden surface, watching the steady rhythm of business unfold.

From the far end, Timon, always in his dark shirt and pressed khakis, beckoned him over with a slow wave of the hand. Manu rose, wiping his palms on his trousers before crossing the room.

“Grace,” the man began without looking up from the ledger. “She came back this morning. Said that her personal finances are short. She needs another top-up.”

Manu’s face tightened. “That fast?”

The man nodded. “She offered the plot being farmed. This time she’s desperate.” He flipped the page toward Manu, the corner of his mouth curling. “We help her, we own her.”

The man slipped quietly through the back door of Otenga Bar, the laughter and music fading behind him. His small office sat in half-light, the smell of dust and stale beer hanging in the air. He shut the door, dropped into his worn swivel chair, and pulled out his phone.

“Mkubwa,” he greeted once the line connected.

“Niambie, boss,” Bram’s deep voice came through, unusually soft — the way a lion might sound before a hunt.

“Tuko na customer,” the man said, thumbing through a stack of crumpled receipts. “Amedefault miezi nne.”

Bram exhaled sharply, the weight of irritation pressing through the line. “Who is it?” he asked, already knowing he wouldn’t like the answer.

“Sammy,” came the reply.

Silence. Then a low grunt. Bram hated defaulters. They made him peel back the side of himself he tried so hard to bury — the collector, the enforcer, the shadow James kept in the dark.

“Ok,” Bram said finally, voice flat and cold. “I’ll be there at the crack of dawn.”

The call ended. The man leaned back in his chair, staring at the flickering bulb above him. Outside, the day settled over the village like a warning.

Bram's SUV screeched to a halt beside the dusty road that ran past Otenga Bar, the morning mist still clinging to the air. The engine's growl broke the village silence. Three bulky men leapt out in unison, their movements sharp and rehearsed; men used to this kind of work.

Timon hurried from the back door of the bar, his shirt half-tucked and face drawn with unease. He greeted Bram with a quick nod and motioned toward the dimly lit office behind the building. They vanished inside for a few tense minutes, the murmurs of low voices barely audible through the thin walls.

Moments later, the group emerged, purpose etched on their faces. Bram led the way, his coat flaring slightly as he moved. The others followed, wordless, boarding the SUV. The vehicle rumbled back to life and roared down the narrow road toward Sammy's compound.

Inside Otenga Bar, a few revellers stirred from their drunken slumber, blinking at the intrusion of dawn and engines. Their whispers rippled through the smoky room like a chill.

At the doorway, Manu stood silently, his arms folded. He watched the SUV disappear into the rising sun, then slowly shook his head — a small, grim gesture, as if mourning a man already gone.

Dogs barked furiously as Bram's SUV tore through the morning mist, its headlights slicing the pale dawn. The vehicle swerved through Sammy's open gates and came to a sharp stop in front of the large brick house. Gravel crunched beneath heavy boots as four men stepped out — Bram at the center, composed and silent, his toothpick rolling lazily between his teeth.

At the doorway, Sammy appeared — small, frail, barefoot — his face twisted in panic. The barking dogs grew louder. The moment his eyes met the Timon's, he spun back into the house, fumbling for the door.

He barely managed to grip the handle before two of Bram's men lunged forward, kicking the door wide open.

The crack of wood echoed across the compound.

Within seconds, Sammy was dragged out, thrown to the cold ground like a rag doll. His wife screamed, her voice trembling, desperate. Pleas filled the air, swallowed by the chaos — the thud of fists, the scrape of boots, the sound of flesh meeting earth.

Bram stood still, unmoving, watching the assault with a calm that chilled the morning air. The toothpick shifted slowly in his mouth as he exhaled, his eyes fixed on Sammy, now coughing blood into the dirt.

"Enough," Bram said at last, raising a single hand.

The blows stopped instantly. The only sounds left were Sammy's ragged breathing and the muffled whimpers of his daughter from the doorway — her slender hands gripping the wooden frame as she watched her father crumble.

Inside the dimly lit house, Bram sat across from Sammy, his broad frame leaning casually against the wooden chair. The air reeked of fear and stale sweat. Sammy's voice trembled as he spoke, words tumbling out like loose stones.

"Please, Timon... just a little more time. Business has been slow. I'll pay you back, I swear."

Bram twirled his toothpick between his teeth, a slow smirk crawling across his face. "Four months, Sammy. You think patience grows on trees?"

Sammy wiped his forehead, his eyes darting between Bram and the hulking men stationed by the doorway. "I'll sell the goats. I'll— I'll find a way."

Bram leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Find a way?” His gaze drifted, lazy but deliberate, toward the doorway where a faint light revealed Sammy’s daughter. She stood frozen, wrapped in a thin silk nightgown, her eyes wide with terror.

A shadow of a grin curved Bram’s lips — cold, deliberate. He didn’t need to speak. One nod was enough.

Before Sammy could react, one of the men moved. The girl screamed as rough hands grabbed her arm. The mother collapsed, wailing. Sammy fell to his knees, his voice cracking. “Please— not her! Take me! Please!”

Bram stood, brushing imaginary dust off his sleeve. “You should’ve thought of that four months ago.”

He turned and walked out, the toothpick flicking from his mouth to the dirt. Behind him, the men dragged the girl to the waiting SUV. Bram turned away, the weight of command heavy in his silence. “Clean up,” he murmured, and the men stepped back into formation. The SUV door slammed shut, its echo rolling across the village like a verdict. The engine roared to life, headlights cutting through the dawn fog. Within moments, the vehicle disappeared down the road — leaving silence, broken only by the sound of a mother’s cry and a man’s hollow plea fading into the morning air.

By midweek, whispers snaked through the village like smoke from dying embers. At the market, at the well, even in the churchyard, the story was the same — Sammy had tried taking his own life. They said they found him hanging from the old mango tree in his compound, a rope biting deep into the bark, his feet just grazing the dust below. His wife had rescued him in the nick of time and rushed him to hospital.

His wife hadn’t spoken since. Some nights, the neighbors claimed, she still sat outside, staring into the dark, calling her daughter’s name softly as if she might answer. Relatives filled the compound, moving like shadows, cooking, cleaning, murmuring prayers. Their voices carried a dull ache — the sound of a family scraping pieces of life back together.

When word reached Grace, her heart froze. She dropped the cup she was holding, the clatter startling even her. Sammy had borrowed from Timon too — just like she had.

Though she still had a month before her first installment was due, a chill ran down her spine. The image of Bram's men — their silent menace — flashed before her eyes. Her confidence, once unshakable, began to crumble.

That night, Grace sat by the window, the moonlight cutting across her face. She tried to steady her breath, but fear had already found a home within her.

Grace couldn't sleep for nights after Sammy's encounter with Bram and his men. Every creak of the rusty roof, every bark of a stray dog, every gust of wind against the iron sheets sent her heart pounding. She began to spend her evenings going through old documents — title deeds, bank slips, her daughter's school letters — as if searching for a way out hidden between the lines.

The sun rose and set, each day bringing her closer to the date marked in red on her small calendar.

Payment due.

When Timon's messenger came by the gate, she almost fainted. "Just a reminder," he said with a crooked smile, tapping his notebook. "Boss hates surprises."

Grace nodded, her hands trembling. "Tell him... I'll find a way."

The man smirked. "You'd better." Then he turned and walked away, leaving a trail of dust that clung to her sandals.

That night, she prayed longer than usual, whispering names — her late husband, her daughter, her granddaughter Jamela. She promised herself she'd keep the girl safe, no matter what.

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CHAPTER NINE

James was early in the office the following Monday morning. The city still yawned awake outside his wide glass windows as he flipped through last week's reports, the soft hum of the air conditioner breaking the silence. The columns of numbers stared back at him, orderly but deceptive. Something was off.

He leaned forward, scrolling slowly, eyes narrowing. A **KES 100,000** deficit glared from the expense sheet like a bruise. He frowned, tapping his pen against the desk. "Alma," he called through the intercom. "Come in for a moment."

Within seconds, Alma's calm voice replied, "Yes, sir."

When she appeared at the door, tablet in hand, James asked, "Do you have any idea where this figure came from?"

She skimmed through her records. "It was processed through the field account, sir. A manual transfer to Manu to restock. I can trace the source."

James nodded, his mind already spinning. The ignored notification from that night resurfaced in his memory — the one he had brushed off while sipping tea and talking to Salma.

He sighed and made a note on his pad: *Follow up with Manu – check bar accounts.*

For now, it would have to wait. The clock blinked **11:58 AM**. He straightened his shirt and joined the noon meeting.

The screen filled with familiar cheerful, relaxed, and eager to impress faces from the marketing team. After a brief round of updates, the team leader introduced their newest team member.

"This is **Jamela**," she said, smiling.

A young woman appeared on-screen, her bright smile lighting up the dull conference grid. “Good afternoon, everyone,” she said, her voice steady but warm. “I’m excited to be here — and I promise to bring both creativity and measurable results.”

The team leader added, “We’ll be leveraging Jamela’s experience in digital marketing and her exposure abroad to expand our market share. Her international perspective will be a big advantage in our upcoming campaigns.”

James nodded approvingly. “Excellent. Let’s make sure we give her everything she needs to hit the ground running.”

As the meeting went on, he couldn’t shake the faint sense that something about Jamela felt... familiar. But he brushed the thought aside and turned his attention back to the numbers that awaited him.

The meeting ended with cheerful goodbyes and fading pings from the online platform.

Jamela exhaled softly, leaning back in her chair. The sunlight filtered gently through the studio’s gauzy curtains, washing the small room in gold. She had secured the space just days after arriving in Kenya—a modest but cozy apartment tucked in a quiet part of the city.

Her laptop screen dimmed, reflecting her calm, radiant smile. *A new beginning*, she thought.

Against her mother’s reluctance, she had left home as planned. Toronto now felt like a dream she had just woken from. Here, she was determined to build something real—something of her own.

She reached for her mug of half-cold coffee, still smiling as she remembered how it had all begun.

It was Laila—her Kenyan pen pal—who had opened the door for her. The two had been friends since high school, sharing letters, laughter, and eventually long-distance calls that carried the warmth of a sisterhood.

When the idea of coming to Kenya first sparked, Jamela had called Laila in quiet desperation after that tense morning with her mother. She had confessed everything—her need for space, her hunger for purpose, her wish to know where she came from.

Laila had listened, patient as always. Then she said, *“If you’re serious, I might have an opportunity that can help.”*

The transition had been smoother than Jamela imagined. Within weeks, she was packing. Her internship as a marketing assistant lecturer wrapped up neatly, and the job offer arrived shortly after.

She had told her mother over breakfast, trying to sound casual while her heart raced. Pamela had protested, pleaded, and finally sighed in defeat. Jamela’s persistence was something she could never tame.

Now, sitting alone in her studio, Jamela felt the gentle hum of Nairobi outside—the distant horns, the chatter, the pulse of life. It all felt new, yet strangely familiar.

She smiled again. *Maybe this is where I was always meant to be.*

The next morning, the city hummed with the soft buzz of activity as Jamela stood before the mirror, smoothing down her cream blouse. Her nerves were steady but her pulse raced with quiet excitement. It was her first official day at the company.

By ten o’clock, she was at the office, welcomed by Alma’s poised smile and the rhythmic clicking of keyboards all around. The marketing team gathered around a glass-walled meeting room for introductions. The chatter was warm—easy laughter, a few jokes, and that polite curiosity reserved for newcomers.

Names were exchanged, handshakes followed, and Jamela quickly felt at ease. Her energy and confidence seemed to blend naturally with the team’s flow.

Then Alma leaned over and whispered, “Mr. James will see you now.”

Jamela froze slightly at the name. She nodded, smoothed her skirt, and followed down the quiet corridor to James’ office.

The door was slightly ajar. She knocked softly.

“Come in,” a deep voice replied.

James looked up from his desk as she entered, his eyes narrowing just a fraction—an instinctive pause, like a faint echo in time. Jamela smiled politely, extending her hand.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Morning,” James replied, his tone calm but measured. He gestured to the seat opposite him. “Please, have a seat.”

The conversation began with routine talk—her background, expectations, and how she envisioned her role. But beneath the polite exchanges, an unspoken tension lingered.

Every now and then, James would glance at her longer than he meant to, as if searching for something in her features. Jamela, too, felt something unsettlingly familiar about him—the cadence of his voice, the quiet authority, the sharpness behind his calm.

When the meeting ended, James stood and shook her hand once more.

“Welcome aboard, Miss Jamela,” he said softly.

“Thank you, sir,” she replied, her voice steady but her thoughts a swirl of questions she couldn’t quite form.

As the door closed behind her, James sat back in his chair, lost momentarily in thought. There was something about the girl—something that pulled at a memory he wasn't ready to revisit.

The late afternoon light filtered gently through the blinds, casting golden stripes across James' mahogany desk. Alma stood across from him, tablet in hand, scrolling through the week's numbers.

James leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled. "So, this is the deficit I noticed earlier?"

"Yes, sir," Alma replied, keeping her tone composed. "The funds were transferred to Otenga Bar—Manu requested a temporary top-up to stabilize their stock supply. I approved it, assuming you'd been briefed."

James arched an eyebrow, the faintest hint of irritation clouding his calm expression. "I see. And did Manu mention why he keeps running short?"

"No, sir," Alma said carefully. "But it's becoming frequent."

James reached for his phone and dialed a number. The line clicked, and a familiar voice came through.

"Mkubwa," Manu greeted, his tone overly cheerful.

"Manu," James began evenly, "we need to talk about these repeated overdrafts. I don't run a charity."

There was a brief pause. "*Osiepa*, things have been rough—the stock turnover dipped, and the depot delayed our deliveries. But we're catching up."

"You'd better," James said, his voice calm but clipped. "Alma's right here. I'll have her balance the accounts and close the books by end of day. I don't want this kind of mess again."

"Yes, boss. Asante," Manu replied quickly.

"Good." James turned to Alma. "That will be all for now. I'll take it from here."

Alma nodded, collected her tablet, and left the room quietly, her heels clicking softly on the polished floor.

James turned his chair toward the window and spoke again, his tone softening. “Now, what is it you wanted to tell me, Manu?”

A pause on the other end. Manu’s voice dropped to a low register. “It’s about one of the loan clients. Sammy.”

James frowned slightly. “Go on.”

Manu cleared his throat. “Bram and his boys... paid him a visit. It got ugly. The man almost died, boss. And... they took his daughter.”

Silence filled the office. The faint hum of the air conditioner was the only sound between them. James’ jaw tightened as he stared at the skyline outside his window.

“People, Manu,” James said finally, exhaling sharply. “We agreed never to use people as collateral. It draws too much heat—and it’s wrong.”

“I know, boss,” Manu replied cautiously. “But Bram doesn’t always listen. He said the girl would square the debt.”

James sighed deeply, rubbing his temples. “Alright. Leave it with me. I’ll talk to the manager myself. This can’t happen again.”

“Understood,” Manu answered quickly.

James ended the call and sat motionless for a long moment, the phone still in his hand. His reflection in the window stared back at him—calm, powerful, and yet, for the first time in a long while, faintly haunted. James leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking softly beneath him. The skyline stretched

endlessly beyond the glass, a blur of ambition and greed. He stared blankly for a long while, his thoughts tangled in the noise of conscience and necessity.

He hated this part. The dirt beneath the shine. The side of the business that smelled of sweat, blood, and whispered threats. He had tried, more than once, to distance himself from Bram's brutal methods—but the reality was cruel and simple. Without that arm of the operation, Salma's clients' money would never move clean.

He reached for his cup of tea, now cold, and swirled it absently. "To hell with it," he muttered under his breath.

He picked up his phone and scrolled to Bram's contact: *Mjr. Bram*. His thumb hovered over the call button for a long second before he finally pressed it.

The line crackled, then a gruff voice answered. "Boss."

"Bram," James began, his tone calm but firm. "We need to cool things down. The noise from the field is getting too loud."

"Just a few defaulters," Bram replied, unbothered. "It's under control."

James' voice sharpened. "I don't want control, Bram. I want silence. No more house visits. No more touching people. Especially women and children. We agreed on that."

A pause. Bram's tone dropped, heavier. "Boss, you know what kind of clients we deal with. They respect fear. Without it, they won't pay."

James exhaled slowly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Then find another way. Threaten their land, their cars, whatever—but keep it clean. We're not thugs, Bram. We're businessmen."

There was a grunt on the other end. "Understood."

“Good,” James said, though the word felt hollow. “Keep operations quiet. I don’t want any heat from the police or the press. And make sure the books are tight—I’ll be reviewing the next cycle personally.”

“Copy that, boss,” Bram replied.

The call ended, and James set the phone down. He leaned back again, eyes fixed on the ceiling. The hum of the air conditioner filled the silence.

He told himself he was keeping the business alive, that this was the cost of growth. But somewhere deep down, he knew—every compromise came with a debt.

And one day, someone would come to collect.

James stared at the dim glow of his phone screen, his reflection merging with the digital letters. *Mine*. The name alone made him exhale sharply. He typed quickly:

“We’ll be taking a loan for the business—cover the port clearances and speed up the vehicle imports. The CFO says liquidity is tight.”

He hesitated, then added:

“Same channels. Same split.”

He hit *send* and leaned back, running a hand over his jaw. A few seconds later, the phone buzzed. Salma’s reply was crisp and confident, as always.

“I’ll sort the paperwork. You know how to make it look clean. Have the forms signed and filed. I’ll handle the legal cover.”

James smiled faintly—business as usual. They had done this dance many times. On paper, the ‘loan’ would appear as a legitimate injection of working capital from a private lender. In reality, it was just laundered money cycling back into their accounts, cleansed by the illusion of corporate debt.

He scrolled through his contacts and tapped *Alma*.

“Evening, boss,” her voice chimed through the receiver.

“Alma,” James said evenly, “I’ve just signed off on the new financing forms. I need you to pass them to the CFO for clearing, then proceed to the bank once it’s done.”

“Understood. Anything else?”

He paused, glancing at the papers spread before him—the neat rows of numbers, the elegant signatures masking a dirty truth.

“No. Just make sure everything looks... seamless.”

“As always,” Alma replied with a hint of pride.

“Good,” James said softly, ending the call.

He placed the phone down beside the documents and stared at the sleek Montblanc pen resting on top.

The same pen that signed multimillion deals, government contracts—and sins.

For a brief moment, his reflection on the polished desk caught his eye. A successful man. A careful man.

A man slowly drowning beneath the weight of his own precision.

He straightened his tie, picked up the forms, and walked out of his office. Another transaction. Another secret locked behind a signature.

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CHAPTER TEN

The morning light creeps through the blinds, slanting gold across the polished wooden floor of the Sims' apartment. The faint hum of city traffic below merges with the rhythmic hiss of the espresso machine. Pamela moves through the kitchen in a silk robe, her steps measured, her expression unreadable. The air smells of roasted coffee beans and something faintly metallic—the scent that never quite leaves after one of her husband's late-night meetings.

Mr. Sims sits at the breakfast counter, already dressed in a crisp shirt, sleeves rolled just enough to reveal his gold cufflinks. He scrolls through his phone, face illuminated by a cold, digital glow.

"You're up early," Pamela says, pouring coffee into his mug.

He glances up briefly, smiling—the practiced kind that never reaches his eyes. "Had a call with investors in Dubai," he answers, voice smooth, steady. "Time zones don't wait for anyone."

Pamela nods, forcing a smile. She knows what *investors* mean—those late-night murmurs behind his study door, the occasional thud of a drawer closing, and the muffled laughter that follows. She's asked before, gently, and been brushed off with a kiss on the forehead and a "Don't worry yourself, sweetheart."

She takes her seat opposite him. Her mind drifts to the past week—to the hushed phone call she caught him ending abruptly when she entered the study, to the transfer notifications she saw flash across his screen. And to the hollow look in his eyes afterward.

"Are you alright?" Sims asks suddenly, noticing her silence.

Pamela looks up, blinking. "Just tired," she says. "I couldn't sleep."

He chuckles softly. "You worry too much. Everything's under control."

Everything's under control. The phrase echoes in her mind like a warning.

After breakfast, Sims leaves for the day, with a quick peck on her cheek and the faint trace of his cologne lingering in the hallway. Pamela stands by the window, watching his black car slide out of the driveway. She exhales slowly, the tension leaving her body—but only for a moment.

Her phone buzzes on the counter.

A message from her daughter. *Have you spoken to Grandma?*

Pamela stares at the screen, thumb hovering. She hasn't. Not since she left. The silence from home had stretched thin and heavy, like a thread ready to snap.

She types a reply, then deletes it. Instead, she walks to the study door. It's slightly ajar. Inside, the faint glow of the computer monitor still lingers—an encrypted chat window is open, the text half-visible:

Shipment cleared. Funds wired. Nairobi.

Pamela's breath catches.

Nairobi.

She shuts the door quietly, her pulse quickening. For a long moment, she just stands there, listening to the hum of the city. The pieces don't make sense yet—but something inside her whispers that they will.

And when they do, everything she's built here—the comfort, the distance, the silence—will begin to unravel.

The apartment is quiet again. Pamela sits curled on the couch, the faint flicker of the television painting the room in soft blue light. Outside, snow drifts lazily past the window. She hasn't touched her breakfast. Her eyes keep darting toward the closed study door—the secret breathing behind it.

Her phone lies beside her, the last message from her daughter still open:

Have you spoken to Grandma?

She scrolls her mother's number, hesitates, then taps "Call."

The ringtone stretches—one beat, two, three—before Grace's familiar voice crackles through, weary but warm.

"Pamela, my child. You remembered me today."

Pamela smiles faintly, a rush of guilt flooding her chest. "Of course, Mama. I just... things have been busy here."

"You and that husband of yours—always busy." Grace chuckles softly, though the laughter doesn't quite reach her voice.

There's a pause. Grace exhales audibly on the other end.

"You've heard nothing from back home, have you?"

Pamela frowns. "Back home? What's happened?"

Grace's voice drops, her words slower now—as though weighing what to say.

"It's Sammy. They found him hanging in his compound. People say it was after some men came to his home. He'd borrowed money from those loan people—the ones Timon runs."

Pamela straightens, her heart thudding. "That's terrible. My God, what about his family?"

"The wife is not herself," Grace says quietly. "And the girl... the girl is gone. Some say she was taken by the men that came that morning."

Pamela presses her palm against her chest. "How can that happen? Isn't anyone doing something?"

Grace sighs deeply. “The police are all over. The whole village is restless—people whispering, watching. You can’t step outside without hearing Sammy’s name. It’s like everyone is waiting for another bad thing to happen.”

Pamela stares into the dim light of the apartment, a slow dread seeping in. Her mother’s voice feels like a thread from another world—one fraying at the edges.

“Mama,” she whispers, “promise me you’ll stay safe. Don’t get involved with those people. Don’t even talk to them.”

Grace chuckles lightly, masking something beneath. “Don’t worry yourself, my daughter. I’m careful. I just thought you should know what’s happening.”

Pamela nods, though Grace can’t see her. “Thank you, Mama. I wish I could be there.”

Grace’s voice trembles slightly through the line, the static humming like a nervous heartbeat between them.

“Things have been rough here,” she says, “but we thank God. At least hearing your voice makes me feel less alone.”

Pamela forces a smile, though her throat tightens. “Mama, I wish you didn’t have to carry so much alone. But I have some news that might cheer you up.”

There’s a pause.

“Ah, wonderful news from my daughter—now that’s rare. Tell me.”

Pamela lets out a small laugh, the first real one of the evening. “It’s Jamela. She’s in Kenya. Actually, she’s in Nairobi. She traveled three weeks ago.”

Grace's breath catches. "What? Jamela? Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Pamela shifts on the couch, glancing toward the still-closed study door. "I wanted to be sure she'd settled in first. She landed a job at a vehicle import company—seems like a good place. She's got a studio apartment now, and... she sounded happy. Really happy, Mama."

"In Nairobi..." Grace whispers, her voice distant now. "So close, and yet you didn't tell me."

Pamela's tone softens. "Mama, she plans to visit you soon—that's why I'm telling you now. I'll tell her to call first before she does, just so you can warn her what's happening back home. I don't want her caught up in the tension there."

Grace exhales heavily. "You're right. Things are still too uneasy here. I'll reach out to her before she comes. You know how stubborn she can be once she makes up her mind."

Pamela chuckles lightly. "Just like her grandmother."

For a moment, the line fills with quiet laughter—thin and fleeting, like a fragile thread holding two worlds together. Then Grace's voice dips low again, thoughtful.

"You've done well to tell me, my child. Maybe this is a sign—that our lives are beginning to circle back."

Pamela nods, though her chest feels heavier than before. "Maybe," she says softly, "or maybe it's a warning."

"Don't say that," Grace replies, half-joking, half-serious. "The world has enough shadows as it is."

They speak for a few minutes more—about the weather, about Jamela’s new job. Their conversation fades with mutual goodbyes, and Pamela lowers the phone onto her lap. The snow outside glows faintly under the streetlights, falling steady and soundless—much like her mother’s unspoken fears.

Pamela sits still, phone resting on her lap, her reflection faintly visible in the dark window.

Snow continues to fall outside. The apartment feels colder.

She glances once more toward the study door—and the word "*Nairobi*" from earlier flashes through her mind.

The distance between her mother’s trembling voice and her husband’s secret dealings collapses into a single, chilling thought.

Picking up her phone again, she scrolls through her messages until she finds one to Jamela that was left unanswered.

How was your first day?

Pamela types back slowly:

We need to talk. Soon.

The matatus blared their horns like a thousand restless trumpets as the city woke. Jamela weaved through the throng at Westlands’ roundabout, clutching her bag close, her eyes wide with both awe and fatigue. Nairobi moved differently—fast, loud, alive. It was a rhythm she hadn’t yet mastered.

A billboard flashed "*Karibu Nairobi—The City That Never Sleeps,*" and she couldn’t help but smile. They weren’t lying.

At the office, the hum of computers and chatter filled the open-plan floor. Her new colleagues at the vehicle import company were friendly but sharp-edged, the kind of people who talked in figures and

deadlines. During her onboarding, she jotted down notes quickly, nodding as the marketing head explained client funnels, brand visibility, and monthly targets.

“Your experience abroad will come in handy here,” he told her. “Kenya’s market is unpredictable—we like to think global but act local.”

She smiled politely, though inside, she felt the gulf between those two worlds widening.

At lunch, she sat alone at the small rooftop café, gazing over the skyline. The air carried the mixed scent of roasted maize and exhaust fumes. A street preacher’s voice echoed faintly from below, tangled with the laughter of office workers rushing past.

Her phone buzzed. A message from her mother:

“Spoke to Grandma. She’ll call soon. Be patient, my dear.”

Jamela sighed in relief. She had been waiting. There was something about her grandmother she couldn’t explain—a pull, like a quiet whisper in her chest calling her home.

Back in her studio apartment that evening, she poured herself a cup of instant coffee and opened her laptop to finish a report for James’ firm. The city lights glittered beyond her window—a constellation of possibilities. Yet beneath that shimmer, she felt the ache of distance, of questions left unanswered.

She placed a small framed photo of her mother and grandmother on the desk—the only keepsake she’d brought from Toronto.

“I’m finally here,” she whispered to herself. “And maybe, this is where I’ll find the truth.”

Her phone screen lit up just then—a notification: **Incoming call: Grandma Grace.**

The phone buzzed softly against the desk, its glow slicing through the dim evening light. Jamela smiled when she saw the name: *Grandma Grace*. Jamela smiled and reached for it, her heartbeat steadying, unaware that the call would soon open doors she wasn't ready to walk through.

"Grandma!" She answered brightly, her voice filled with warmth and excitement.

Grace chuckled, her voice steady but faint. "My sweet child. I can't believe I'm hearing your voice from so far."

"It's not that far anymore, Grandma," Jamela said cheerfully. "I'm here in Nairobi now. I can't wait to see you. I've missed you so much, even though we've never really met properly."

Grace's heart stirred at those words. "You're just like your mother," she said softly. "Always speaking from the heart."

"I want to visit soon," Jamela continued eagerly. "I want to see the homestead, the mango tree you told me about, the hill behind the school—everything."

There was a pause on the line—the kind that carried unspoken worry. Grace stared at the flickering flame of her kerosene lamp, the shadows playing against the wall.

"Let's wait a little, my child," she said finally, her tone tender but cautious. "Your mother told me she might be coming home with your dad during the April holidays. You can all come together, hmm? It will be better that way."

Jamela leaned back in her chair, her excitement dimming only slightly. "Oh, right. She mentioned that yesterday. He's meeting a business partner in Nairobi, so they'll be around."

"Good," Grace replied, forcing a smile that Jamela couldn't see. "It will be nice—all of us together again after so many years."

Jamela grinned, imagining the scene—three generations finally under one roof. “I’ll hold on, Grandma. But you’ll have to make me your famous chapati when I come.”

Grace laughed softly, a rare sound that filled her small house with warmth. “That I can promise.”

As they said their goodbyes, Jamela felt a quiet thrill in her chest. She had never felt this connected—to her roots, to her family, to the pulse of a place she barely knew but somehow belonged to.

When the call ended, Grace sat silently, the phone still pressed to her ear. Outside, the night insects began their chorus. She knew the meeting would happen—and when it did, everything she had kept buried for fifteen years would begin to unravel.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning sun crept through the blinds of Bram's modest apartment, slicing sharp lines across the room—across the framed military medals, the weathered combat boots by the door, and the pistol laid neatly beside his wallet on the table. Discipline never left him, not even after the discharge.

Bram sat on the edge of his bed, tying his laces with the same precision he once had in the army. Every movement is deliberate. Controlled. He had always believed that order was the only thing standing between man and chaos—yet his life now danced on the very edge of it.

He rose, his tall, solid frame moving with silent authority. He walked to the mirror and studied his reflection. The scar running from his temple to his jaw was the only souvenir from *Boni Forest*. The official report called it an “honorable discharge”—after all, he'd led his unit out of an ambush. But the truth was bloodier. He had defied a direct order, choosing to save his men instead of protecting the intelligence cargo. The army couldn't court-martial a hero, so they decorated him and sent him home.

Home—where men like him didn't fit anymore.

Now, his loyalty belonged to James and Salma—the only ones who understood his kind of order: structure through fear, loyalty through silence, and power through precision. The world called it crime. Bram called it survival.

He picked up his leather jacket, the smell of old gun oil and tobacco clinging to it, and stepped out into the streets. His phone buzzed—a coded message from one of his three trusted lieutenants. They were his brothers-in-arms, bound not by the law, but by debt, respect, and shared sin.

He smiled faintly. These were his people now—broken men, like him, who had seen too much to ever go back.

Despite his ruthlessness, Bram lived by a code: he never betrayed those he served. To James, he was more than muscle; he was the man who did what others wouldn't, who walked where others feared to tread. And though he feared nothing, there were things—rare things—he cared for deeply. The small photograph of a woman and child, tucked inside his wallet, reminded him of that. A past he'd lost before *Boni*.

He slipped the pistol into his holster, tucked the photo back, and exhaled slowly.

Outside, the world buzzed with indifferent life—matatus honking, traders shouting, and dogs barking. But Bram's world was quiet, razor-sharp, and cold.

He walked toward his car, eyes fixed ahead. Another day. Another job.

As he drove towards the *Pier*, he recounted his first encounter with the man who had pulled him from the depths of the abyss.

The night had been unusually cold in Kawangware, the kind that made breath turn to fog and men tuck their hands deep into worn-out jackets. James had just finished rinsing down a silver SUV, humming softly as water splashed against the concrete. He'd noticed the tall, broad man leaning against the fence—calm, unmoving, the way soldiers stand when they've seen too much.

"Good work, bro," the man said, his deep voice carrying the weight of authority and something quieter—fatigue. "You handle cars like you've been doing it forever."

James chuckled. "When you wash dreams for a living, you get good at it," he replied, wringing his rag.

That was the first time Bram smiled—faintly, almost reluctantly. "Used to wash tanks, not cars," he said, the corner of his mouth twitching upward.

James paused, curious. "Military?"

"Boni forest," Bram replied flatly. "Did my time. Didn't come back the same."

“I am Abraham, by the way. Nice to meet you. Your work speaks highly of your values.” James chuckled. He’d received that compliment many times.

Their conversation was brief but magnetic—two men from different worlds, both trying to rise above the grime of the city. By the time Bram left, James had earned his respect—not through bravado, but through the quiet dignity of his hustle. After parting, James had received a call from Salma the following morning. She had invited him over to her apartment in Lavington. Salma’s call had changed everything in James’s life. She’d been direct, confident, and disarmingly poised.

“I like men who think beyond their shadows,” she’d told James over coffee that afternoon.

“I see potential in you. With my network and your... street sense, we could build something. Big.”

James, still washing off the residue of poverty, had nodded eagerly. The attraction was instant but layered—her poise, her vision, and the promise of power.

That night, he thought about, muscle, someone who could anchor their operations in the rough parts of the city. His mind went back to the man with the haunted eyes and military composure.

He found Bram again, this time guarding the same compound near the carwash.

“There’s a business opportunity,” James had said. “Not the clean kind, but the kind that pays.”

Bram studied him for a long moment, then smiled—the same slow, dangerous smile.

“I’m listening.”

And that was how the partnership began. Bram still remembered those early days. Back then, it was just the three of them—James with his vision, Salma with her connections, and Bram with his discipline. As business grew, he brought in three men he trusted with his life—former comrades from his days in the forces: Otis, the silent driver, who could tail anyone without being noticed; Kenga, the muscle, a man whose fists spoke more than his words; and Wekesa, the strategist, with a knack for logistics and an uncanny memory.

They operated like a unit—efficient, invisible, loyal. To them, Bram was Mkubwa. Not a boss, but a commander.

In the dead of night, they'd gather at his apartment, sharing bottles of cheap whisky and unspoken truths. They rarely laughed, but when they did, it was deep and genuine—the laughter of men who knew death too well to fear it anymore.

“James is different,” Bram would say, swirling his glass. “He’s got a clean face but a dirty mind. That’s the kind of man who survives in this city.” Otis would nod, eyes half-closed. “And the lady?”

Bram’s smile would fade. “She’s the kind of woman who builds empires—and burns them down when she’s done.”

The men would fall silent after that, understanding the weight of his words. Loyalty bound them all, but ambition—that dangerous spark—could one day test the ties they’d built from blood and trust.

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Salma had grown up in a house where marble floors gleamed and silence carried authority. The daughter of a renowned architect and a diplomat mother, she had learned early that wealth wasn’t just comfort—it was language. Every polished surface, every imported dress, and every dinner party taught her how the world moved when one spoke the right way and knew the right people.

By twenty, she could navigate a room full of investors with the same ease she used to disarm a suspicious customs officer. Her charm was deliberate—curated. Her mind, sharp as glass. She was both her father’s ambition and her mother’s grace fused into one dangerous woman. Her mother, a diplomat, taught her early that language could build bridges—or burn them cleanly without smoke. Her father, a prominent architect, taught her precision: the art of structure and how one wrong angle could collapse an empire.

Between the two, Salma learned that the world belonged to those who could construct and destroy with equal ease.

So when she chose law, it wasn't rebellion—it was refinement. A weaponized education.

By twenty-six, she was already "*Esquire*," her mother's proudest title for her, and one James would later use with affectionate irony.

She had practiced briefly—corporate and trade law—before realizing that the courtroom wasn't where power lived. Power lived in backrooms, in quiet negotiations, in the kind of conversations that left no fingerprints. And so she pivoted—using her connections and understanding of contracts to build her own import business.

To most, she was the embodiment of success: educated, eloquent, and impossibly composed. To those who truly knew her—Bram, perhaps James—she was a tactician hiding behind charm, a woman who trusted control more than emotion.

But for all her confidence, Salma had always felt a quiet ache—a longing that power and privilege never filled.

Then came James.

He wasn't like the men she knew.

No expensive watch, no practiced charm. Just ambition raw enough to feel honest. He didn't stare at her wealth; he looked *through* it—saw the woman beyond the polish.

Their first meeting had been transactional—she needed someone to manage a part of her expanding import business, someone grounded, smart, and untainted by the city's elite games. Yet when she met James, sitting opposite her in a modest café, sleeves rolled up, eyes steady but guarded—she felt a strange pull.

For the first time, she hesitated.

“I see potential in you,” she’d told him, but what she hadn’t said was that she saw herself reflected in his quiet hunger—the same fire that had driven her out of her father’s shadow.

James had first called her *Esquire* during one of their late-night meetings, back when they were still finding their footing in business. He had said it teasingly, his tone light yet filled with admiration.

“Everything you say sounds like it’s been passed through a legal filter,” he had joked. “Are you sure you’re not billing me for this, *Esquire*?”

She had smiled then—really smiled. “Careful,” she’d warned softly, “I just might.”

That nickname stuck, and every time he used it, something in her softened.

It was a reminder that beneath her carefully structured persona, someone saw her—*not* as the businesswoman, not as the heiress, but as Salma, the woman who had once dreamt of justice before the world taught her that power was the better defense.

With James, she could occasionally forget the burden of control. But that was precisely what terrified her.

But James... James carried a ghost. Pamela.

Salma could tell—from the way his gaze lingered somewhere else when she laughed, from the distance in his smile.

So she did what Salma always did when she wanted something: she strategized. If she couldn’t have his heart, she’d have his loyalty. And if she had his loyalty long enough, perhaps the rest would follow.

That was how she drew him into her world—as a partner, a co-owner, and a trusted ally. What began as business soon tangled into something softer, something she could partly control.

And yet... James disarmed her.

In meetings, she would find herself distracted—his voice low and measured, his hands tracing figures on the table, that faint crease that appeared on his brow when he was deep in thought.

“Salma?” he’d say, and she’d blink, realizing she’d been staring.

She’d recover with her trademark poise, brushing it off with a smirk. “Just thinking,” she’d reply.

But inside, she hated that he could make her lose control—even for a second.

She had built an empire on strategy and timing, but around James, she found herself hesitating, wanting.

At times, when James would lean back in his chair and call her *Esquire* in that teasing voice, she’d feel her composure falter for a heartbeat. It was fleeting, but in Salma’s world, even a heartbeat could be dangerous. So she buried herself in work, in strategy, and in the meticulous art of control. Because control had never betrayed her—people had.

Yet no contract, no boardroom, and no legal clause had ever prepared her for the quiet chaos James brought into her world.

And that made her dangerous—because when Salma wanted something, she didn’t stop until she had it.

Bram was different. Where James was quiet ambition, Bram was execution—precise, disciplined, and unflinching. She’d incorporated him early on when she realized her business needed more than charm; it needed protection.

Bram respected her. Not just as James’ partner, but as a commander of her own quiet war. She spoke to him in clear terms—no hesitation, no double meanings. The kind of leader soldiers trusted.

He called her “Madam,” never Salma. She liked that. It kept their relationship clean, professional, and immune from the softness that sometimes blurred her lines with James.

Bram understood her moral elasticity.

She had drawn the maps of their operations—how to move money, when to act, who to trust—and he executed them without question.

But she could see the flicker of doubt in his eyes whenever James was mentioned.

Bram thought she was distracted. Perhaps he was right.

Their relationship was built on mutual respect and cold pragmatism. Bram never overstepped, never questioned—but his loyalty came at a cost.

He demanded clarity. Boundaries. And he enforced them.

“James can make the plans,” Bram had once said, his voice low. “But I make sure no one bleeds for them.”

Salma trusted him, sometimes more than she should. Bram didn’t smile much, but he obeyed without hesitation, carrying out things she could never put on paper.

Still, she knew Bram watched James—assessed him like a soldier studying a commander he didn’t quite trust.

It was Bram who made sure the books stayed clean, the collections stayed discreet, and the deals never tied back to her name.

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Salma’s office towered above the city—a wall of glass that caught the dying gold of the afternoon sun.

The view was magnificent, but she rarely saw it. Her attention was always on the table—on the details, the signatures, and the silence that followed power.

Her fingers moved swiftly over the documents before her, the soft scratch of her pen punctuating the quiet hum of the air conditioner. A half-empty cup of green tea sat beside her laptop.

Then her phone buzzed.

James: “Loan cleared. We are good to go. Also—remind me to tell you about Sims. Possible partnership.”

Salma paused mid-signature. *Sims?*

The name echoed faintly in her mind—she’d heard it before in a diplomatic corridor years ago, back when her mother still entertained foreign guests. Sims was known in discreet circles—a “businessman” with global reach and a shadow trailing just behind his generosity.

She leaned back in her chair, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

James’ idea of “partnership” was always layered. Him bringing Sims to the table meant the stakes were higher than usual.

Her assistant, Rita, stepped in quietly.

“Ma’am, the legal drafts for the port clearance are ready for your review.”

“Leave them here,” Salma said absently, already scrolling through her phone for Sims’ file.

When Rita left, she allowed herself a moment to breathe. Her reflection stared back at her from the dark glass—sharp, poised, and tired.

She remembered her mother’s words, “*In law, you argue your way into truth. In business, you argue your way out of it.*”

She smiled faintly. “You were right, Mother.”

Her phone buzzed again. This time, it was James calling.

“Esquire,” he greeted, his voice low and amused, “you sound busy.”

“Always,” she replied, glancing at the pending documents. “You mentioned Sims?”

“Yes. He’s in Toronto but plans to visit Nairobi soon. There’s talk of merging interests—logistics, possibly tech imports. Could open a few clean channels for us.”

Salma’s pen stilled over the desk. “Clean channels? That would be a first.”

James chuckled on the other end. “You wound me, Esquire. Think of it as diversification.”

“You’re too optimistic for a realist,” she said, a trace of fondness breaking through her cool tone. “Send me his details. I’ll vet the contracts and his background.”

“Already done. Oh, and Salma—”

“Yes?”

“Don’t scare him off before he lands.”

A small, genuine laugh escaped her. “No promises, James.”

When the call ended, she stared at her reflection once more. For a fleeting moment, her eyes softened—that strange familiarity she felt when James called her *Esquire* had returned. But the softness quickly hardened into calculation.

Sims. The name carried weight. And if her instincts were right, this meeting would be about more than business.

She closed the laptop, stood, and walked toward the window. The city stretched endlessly below her, restless and glittering. Somewhere out there, her next move was already unfolding—a web of deals, loyalties, and coincidences converging toward something she couldn’t yet see.

But she would be ready. She always was.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

The sun was only beginning to rise, casting long streaks of gold through the blinds of the Sims' apartment. The smell of roasted coffee filled the open kitchen. Pamela stood by the counter, still in her robe, watching the city stretch awake beyond the glass.

Behind her, Sims spoke in a hushed voice in his study, the door half closed. His tone was calm—too calm. She couldn't make out the words, only the occasional shift in his accent when he grew serious. It was the same tone he used during his "online briefings."

Pamela sighed and turned back to her coffee.

He'd told her this trip to Nairobi was part business, part family—"a chance to meet partners and let the sun wash away the fatigue of winter."

She should have felt excited. After all, it had been years since she'd been home.

But something about the way he said "partners" lingered, heavy and opaque.

The sound of a chair scraping broke her thought. Sims stepped out of the study, dressed in a crisp shirt and slacks, his face glowing with morning confidence.

"Morning, darling," he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "I confirmed the meeting in Nairobi—the team's expecting us next month."

Pamela smiled weakly. "That's awesome. I spoke to Mama last night. She'll be happy to see us."

Sims chuckled. "Good, good. You women can have your reunions while I handle my business."

Pamela's eyes trailed after him as he poured himself a glass of juice. "What kind of business, exactly?" she asked lightly.

"Consultations," he replied, flashing that disarming grin. "It's all clean, Pam. Don't overthink it."

She nodded but didn't respond. She'd seen the kind of "consultations" that had clients wiring money at midnight, the kind that left him pacing in his study with his laptop camera covered.

Across the ocean, Jamela adjusted her camera, her bright smile lighting up the screen. "Mom, I can't wait for you guys to get here! You'll love the city. It's loud, it's fast—but there's so much energy. You'll see!"

Pamela appeared on the other end of the video call, her face glowing on the small screen. "You sound happy, baby."

"I am," Jamela said, pouring cereal into a bowl. "I even met with Laila at work. And guess what? I'm planning to visit Grandma soon—maybe we can all come together once you land?"

Pamela hesitated, glancing at Sims, who was pretending not to listen. "That sounds... lovely," she said finally.

Jamela beamed. "Great! I'll plan the trip around your schedule."

They talked a bit longer—about the weather, about her new job, and about how Nairobi traffic was nothing like Toronto's calm streets. When the call ended, Jamela sat for a moment, smiling at her reflection in the dark laptop screen.

It's going to be perfect, she thought.

She didn't notice how her phone buzzed quietly beside her—a text from Grace, unread:

"Call me when you can, dear."

At that same hour, Grace stood at her doorway, watching the fog lift over the hills.

Grace exhaled sharply. Her heart swelled at the thought of seeing her granddaughter again—grown, bright, and accomplished. But behind the joy, unease gnawed quietly.

She looked at the horizon, at the same dirt road where Sammy's tragedy had begun, and whispered a prayer under her breath.

Her loan payment was due soon. The crops hadn't yielded well. And the men who ran the loan office had eyes everywhere.

The thought of Jamela—sweet, curious Jamela—walking into this world of hers made Grace's stomach tighten.

She folded Pamela's letter carefully and placed it under the small brass cross on her dresser.

"Lord," she whispered, "let them come in peace. Let them never know what I've done."

Outside, the roosters crowed. The morning light fell across her small house—bright, calm, and utterly deceiving.

As the sun shone steadily through the day, the hum of the city outside was a low, constant murmur. James sat behind his polished oak desk, eyes fixed on the small blinking light on his phone. The line connected, and a calm, smooth voice came through.

"Mr. James," Sims greeted, his accent sharp yet cordial. "I trust you received the documents from Salma?"

James leaned back in his chair, his fingers drumming lightly on the armrest. "I did. Everything checks out. The figures are clean, and the ports should clear by the end of next week."

"Perfect," Sims replied, his tone dripping with satisfaction. "Efficiency is what I like about your operations."

A brief silence followed—the kind that spoke volumes. Both men knew that what they handled wasn't entirely *official*.

James broke it first. “I hope our mutual friend in Mombasa keeps his mouth shut this time. The last shipment nearly drew too much light.”

Sims chuckled lightly, the kind of laugh that never reached the eyes. “I’ve taken care of it. You won’t have to worry.”

James nodded slowly. “Good. Then once the clearance is confirmed, I’ll have Alma finalize the transfer from our end.”

“Excellent.” Sims paused, then added casually, “I might tag my wife along this time—make it a bit of a retreat once we seal the deal. Nairobi’s too warm to waste on business alone.”

James’ brows lifted slightly. “Oh? You didn’t strike me as a family man, Mr. Sims.”

“I try to keep both worlds balanced,” Sims said with a light laugh. “Business and family—though the former always needs more attention, doesn’t it?”

James smiled faintly but didn’t respond. There was something in Sims’ tone—too polished, too smooth—that put him on edge.

“Well then,” Sims concluded, “I’ll see you in a few weeks. Ask Salma to keep her lawyers sharp. The contract will need clean signatures before anyone starts snooping.”

“Of course,” James replied. “Safe travels, Mr. Sims.”

The line clicked dead.

James sat still for a moment, his thumb tracing the rim of his cup. The word *“wife”* lingered in his head.

He leaned forward, tapping a few keys on his laptop. His screen flickered, pulling up the incoming client’s dossier.

Name: Jonathan Sims

Business: Jojo Investments – North America

Accompanied by: Mrs. Pamela Sims

He froze. His hand hovered over the touchpad, his pulse quickening. He clicked the next tab to open the client's photograph—and just as the image began to load, his phone buzzed sharply, vibrating against the desk.

He glanced at the caller ID: **Mine.**

Salma's voice bubbled through the moment the line connected.

"James," she purred softly, a teasing lilt in her tone, "I'm feeling a little lonely tonight. Come for dinner, won't you? It's been too long since we shared a meal that wasn't about work."

James inhaled slowly, his eyes flicking back to the half-loaded image still on the laptop screen. Then he closed it with a soft click.

"Dinner sounds perfect," he said evenly. "Let me check with Alma."

He called Alma and confirmed that his schedule was clear for the evening. Within minutes, he grabbed his keys and stepped out, calling his driver.

The *Audi* purred to life as they left the compound, city lights reflecting off its glossy black surface.

James leaned back in his seat, loosening his collar.

Whatever the day had started as, it was ending in Salma's world—warm light, rich wine, and the one woman who could still make him forget everything else.

The city lights spilled softly through the tall glass windows of Salma's living room, painting her cream walls with streaks of gold and shadow. The faint hum of *Etana's "Weakness in Me"* played in the background—Salma, humming cheerfully to the tune.

Salma moved with the calm precision of someone used to control—her silk dress whispering against her skin as she poured two glasses of wine. When James stepped in, the scent of amber and rosewood filled the air.

“You made it,” she said, offering a glass.

“I said I would,” he replied with a faint smile, taking the drink. His shirt sleeves were rolled to his elbows, his tie loose—a rare sight of ease in him.

They talked at first about business—the docks, Bram’s updates, the new logistics permits—until Salma suddenly stopped, setting her glass down. She turned to face him, her eyes searching.

“James,” she began quietly, “can I ask you something... personal?”

He hesitated, sensing the shift. “Go ahead.”

“You’ve built this empire from nothing. You trust so few people, not even me sometimes. And yet...” her voice softened, “there’s always been someone else in your eyes. Someone who keeps you from... falling completely.”

James’ jaw tightened. The silence between them stretched—heavy, intimate.

Salma continued, her voice almost a whisper now. “Who is she, James? The woman who still holds you even when she’s not here?”

He looked away, staring at the reflection of city lights in his glass. His voice was low and deliberate.

“Her name’s Pamela.”

Salma froze slightly, but he didn’t notice.

“She was my sweetheart,” he said, finally meeting her gaze. “Years ago. Things didn’t end well. We had dreams—big ones—but life got messy. People change. So did I.”

Salma’s lips parted as if to ask more, but James raised a hand—not in dismissal, but in quiet plea.

“That’s all there is to it, Salma. The past is where it belongs.”

He took a slow breath. “What matters now is us—this partnership, this...” He hesitated, then said it, finally, without the veil of business, “—whatever it is between us.”

Her heart skipped. She wasn’t used to hearing vulnerability from him—not James, the man who could walk through chaos and never flinch.

“Do you mean that?” she asked softly.

James stood up and stepped closer. His hand brushed hers, firm but careful. “I do. You’ve been the constant I didn’t know I needed.”

The air between them grew charged—warm, magnetic.

Salma’s lips curved into a slow smile, equal parts relief and triumph. For once, James wasn’t just her business partner—he was *hers*, even if just for the night.

She raised her glass again, her eyes never leaving his.

“To us,” she whispered.

He clinked his glass lightly against hers, his voice low.

“To new beginnings.”

As they ate, the night outside deepened—and somewhere in the dark, the half-loaded photo on James’ laptop finally finished loading.

Pamela’s face smiled faintly from the screen—unseen, yet ever-present.

The night unfolded in quiet waves—a gradual unraveling of restraint.

The duo fondled each other lovingly. What began as lingering glances and unspoken words soon deepened into a flood of emotion neither could contain.

Each buried thought, each long-suppressed feeling rose to the surface, breaking through the walls they had so carefully built.

By the time dawn whispered through the curtains, the two had become one—bound by desire, history, and the dangerous comfort of finally being understood.

The weeks leading to Sims' arrival were charged with a quiet electricity.

Between meetings and late-night calls, James and Salma existed in their own unspoken rhythm—a dance of glances, smiles, and gestures that blurred the lines between business and affection.

There were the *unofficial visits*—James dropping by Salma's office with the excuse of a “quick update,” staying longer than he should. The *coffee breaks* that stretched into hours, where laughter replaced strategy and their eyes lingered a second too long.

Sometimes, a bouquet would arrive at Salma's desk—lilies, roses, or tulips, depending on his mood. Her assistants whispered, guessing who the secret admirer might be, though everyone already knew. At times she'd be caught smiling at her screen, fingers dancing furiously over the keyboard, a soft blush coloring her face.

At the office, James carried a new kind of ease—the kind that couldn't be taught or faked. His suits seemed sharper, his step lighter. Even Alma noticed the change; the tension that used to haunt his mornings had vanished, replaced by an air of quiet satisfaction. The boardroom felt warmer, meetings less strained. It was as if love itself had entered the room—uninvited, yet welcome.

It was late evening when James called Salma to his office. The lights of the city spilled in through the tall glass windows, painting faint gold lines across the carpet. She entered quietly, her perfume tracing the air before her.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked, her tone half playful, half expectant.

James leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on her with that familiar mix of admiration and calculation.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I wanted to talk before the week gets away from us.”

She took a seat opposite him, crossing one leg over the other—the lawyer, the lover, the partner in crime.

“You sound serious.”

He smiled faintly. “Sims will be landing next week, Thursday. I think it is strategic that you met him. It’ll make the transaction smoother—the man likes dealing with people who look like they know what they’re doing.”

Her brows arched slightly. “You want me to charm him, don’t you?”

“Charm isn’t the word, but sure, you can.” James said with a smirk. “Just be you. He’ll trust that.”

Salma studied him for a moment, tracing the edge of his desk with her fingers. “You really trust this man?”

“I do,” he replied. “Enough to make this deal work. Once it’s done, we’ll have more room to move... no more dancing around investors or fake loans.”

For a moment, silence filled the room—heavy but not uncomfortable. Then, her lips curled into a knowing smile. “You’re making this sound like a date,” she teased.

James chuckled, standing to pour two glasses of wine. “Maybe it is. A very profitable one.”

As he handed her the glass, their fingers brushed. The air shifted—just slightly—that familiar pull anchoring them again.

“To Thursday,” she said, raising her glass.

“To Thursday,” he echoed, unaware that fate had already marked that day for something far greater than profit.

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Grace stood at the arrival gate, her hands trembling slightly as the stream of passengers poured through the glass doors. She then saw her—Pamela, her only daughter—her face lighting up the terminal like a warm sunrise after years of distance. The two women fell into each other’s arms, their embrace long and wordless, the kind that speaks of love carried across oceans.

The sight drew soft smiles from bystanders; even the airport attendants seemed to pause for a heartbeat.

Behind them, Sims stood patiently, a pleasant smile on his face. He adjusted his sunglasses, lifted the suitcases with a practiced ease, and hailed a cab waiting at the curb. The three settled in, the city of Nairobi unfurling before them—restless, sun-washed, alive.

The midday sun shimmered against the car windows, bathing them in amber light. The streets buzzed with hawkers, matatus, and pedestrians all moving to the pulse of the city. Inside the cab, conversation came in quiet bursts between Grace and Pamela, laughter and memories filling the spaces between moments of comfortable silence.

Then Grace’s phone chimed. She glanced at it—a message from Jamela.

Sorry, Grandma. I won’t make it to the airport. We’re meeting clients out of town. I’ll be back late this evening—dinner sounds perfect though!

Grace sighed softly, a faint smile tugging at her lips. She typed a quick reply, telling her granddaughter to stay safe and not to worry.

Sims' phone buzzed next. He excused himself, turning slightly toward the window as he answered.

"James," he said, his voice shifting into the calm, businesslike tone Pamela had come to recognize. "Yes, we just landed. Checking in now. Two o'clock works perfectly."

He hung up, pocketing the phone with a faint nod of satisfaction.

"Business call?" Pamela asked.

"Just my partner checking in," Sims replied easily. "We'll meet him at the hotel—shouldn't take long."

The cab veered off the highway and into the tree-lined avenue leading to the city's financial district. The air shimmered with heat and the promise of long-awaited reunions, unaware of the quiet web of fates drawing ever closer to collision.

The hotel lobby hummed with quiet luxury—soft jazz from unseen speakers and the faint scent of polished mahogany and orchids lingering in the air.

At the reception desk, Sims was checking them in, speaking to the concierge in his casual, practiced tone. Beside him, Pamela drifted idly around the lobby, her eyes tracing the tall glass panels and gold accents that shimmered in the midday light. She felt momentarily suspended—between jet lag and nostalgia, between past and present.

Grace had already been shown to her room. She walked ahead slowly, leaning slightly on the handrail of the grand staircase. The weight of age rested on her knees, but her eyes were bright, alive with the joy of reunion.

Pamela turned a corner—and stopped.

Coming down the corridor was James, his stride calm and assured, his light linen shirt rolled at the sleeves. He was walking toward the maître d', ready to reserve a table for his two o'clock meeting. Behind him, Salma followed—composed, radiant, her perfume trailing like a soft memory.

Then—the collision of two worlds.

Pamela nearly brushed past him before their eyes met. Time seemed to stall. Her lips parted in disbelief. Simultaneously, James caught sight of her. For a heartbeat, the world seemed to pause—his breath hitched, the chatter dimmed. It had been years, yet her presence struck him with disarming familiarity.

“Pamela?” he called softly.

She shuddered. Their eyes met—recognition flashed, followed by a silence thick enough to drown in.

“James,” she said, her tone gentle, her surprise barely masked.

He took a slow step forward, almost uncertain. “It’s really you.”

“You!” she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper.

For a heartbeat, neither moved.

Recognition spread between them like an old flame rekindling itself in silence. James’ face softened, torn between the impulse to pull her into an embrace and the shock of seeing her again—here, *now*, of all places. Before either could say more, Salma approached, her heels clicking sharply against the marble floor. She slipped beside James, looping her arm through his. Her smile was poised, but her eyes were sharp—reading the unspoken current between them. She studied Pamela with a calculating glance, then looked up at James. Her fingers brushed his arm—a subtle tug that carried the weight of a question she didn’t need to voice.

James cleared his throat. “Salma, this is Pamela,” he said, his tone measured. “We... used to date.”

Pamela's lips curved into a polite, restrained smile—but inside, the words stung, each syllable reopening something buried.

Salma's expression shifted—the hint of a smirk playing at her lips. “Oh,” she said lightly, her voice honeyed but edged with steel. “*The Pamela*.” She tilted her head, her eyes never leaving the other woman. “I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

Pamela blinked, caught between curiosity and discomfort. “Have you?”

Salma's smile widened just slightly. “Yes. I suppose I should thank you,” she said sweetly. “It took me quite a while to completely pluck you out of his heart.”

The words landed like a glass shattering softly between them.

Pamela drew in a slow breath, masking her reaction behind a calm, practiced composure. “Well,” she said coolly, “it seems you’ve done quite the job.”

James hesitated, sensing her unease. “Salma,” he began softly, “would you mind waiting for me at our table? I’ll just have a quick word with Pamela about—about an old friend.”

Salma blinked. The request cut deeper than he realized. She swallowed hard, forcing a smile that didn't reach her eyes. “Of course,” she said coolly. “Don't take too long.”

She turned and walked toward the restaurant—her composure perfect, her hurt visible only in the stiffness of her shoulders.

James exhaled quietly and turned back to Pamela. “Can we sit?”

She nodded. He gently touched her arm, guiding her toward a small corner table in the lobby. The hum of the fountain filled the silence between them as they sat.

He studied her face—the years had added grace, not age. “You look well,” he said softly.

She smiled faintly. “You too. I didn’t expect to see you here... or anywhere, really.”

Before the past could spill into words, a familiar voice broke in.

“Ah! There you are!” Sims strode toward them, a genial grin on his face. He extended his hand to James.

“You must be the man I’ve been speaking to—James, right?”

James rose and shook his hand firmly. “Yes. It’s good to finally meet in person.”

Sims turned to his wife, amused. “You two already know each other?”

Pamela’s lips curved into a polite smile. “Kenya is smaller than it looks.”

James nodded lightly, concealing a knowing glint in his eyes. “Yes, it seems the world keeps getting smaller.”

Sims chuckled, oblivious to the quiet electricity between them. “Well, that makes this even better—friends working together.”

Pamela and James exchanged a brief glance—one that lingered just a little too long before both turned away, their smiles perfectly measured, their memories carefully caged.

Sims settled in one of the seats, room cards in hand, smiling broadly. He turned to Pamela. “Honey, this is the man I was telling you about—James. The one I’m meeting for the partnership.”

Pamela nodded half-heartedly as she replayed Salma’s hand brushing lightly against James’s arm—possessive, subtle, practiced. Her heart stuttered.

The lobby’s calm returned, but in the air between them, something dangerous had awakened — old love meeting new desire, under the indifferent hum of a hotel’s midday quiet.

Pamela excused herself with quiet grace. “I’ll let you two gentlemen handle business,” she said, rising from her seat. Sims smiled warmly as she walked away, while James’s gaze lingered a fraction too long before he composed himself.

“Shall we?” Sims gestured toward the restaurant.

They made their way to the table James had reserved earlier—a secluded corner overlooking the courtyard garden. But as they approached, James stopped short. The table was empty. The untouched glass of water and the extra napkin neatly folded beside the vacant chair all felt like silent witnesses to something unsaid.

He frowned slightly, scanning the room. Salma was nowhere in sight.

“That’s odd,” he murmured, pulling out a chair. “She was supposed to be here already.”

Sims settled across from him, setting his phone aside. “Traffic, maybe? Nairobi’s never kind around this hour.”

James forced a small laugh, though unease flickered in his chest. He pulled out his phone and dialed Salma’s number. Once. Twice. The calls rang unanswered. Her silence pressed heavier than it should have.

He slipped the phone face down on the table and cleared his throat. “She must’ve gotten caught up somewhere,” he said, waving it off. “No worries—her role is mostly on the legal end of things. I’ll brief her later.”

Sims nodded, unbothered. “That works. I mainly wanted to go over the partnership framework before we meet your full team.”

James nodded, slipping effortlessly back into his business persona. Yet as they began discussing figures, terms, and timelines, part of his mind drifted elsewhere—to the image of Salma walking out of the lobby, her back straight, her silence louder than any words.

Pamela half walked, half ran down the corridor, her heels clicking unevenly against the tiled floor. She fumbled with the keycard, then shoved the door open and burst into her mother's room, nearly collapsing onto the carpet.

Grace, who had just lowered herself onto the bed after a long morning, sprang up in alarm.

"Pamela! What is it?" she exclaimed, rushing forward as her daughter bent over, breath shallow and face flushed.

Pamela waved her off weakly, dropping into the armchair by the door. She held her cheeks between her palms, trying to steady her breath. "Give me a second," she whispered, her heart still racing.

Grace hovered beside her, torn between worry and curiosity. After a moment, she exhaled softly and said, "Jamela texted. She won't make it to the hotel, but she'll meet us at dinner instead."

Pamela let out a deep sigh, relief and disbelief mingling on her face. "That's better," she said absentmindedly, still catching her breath. Then she looked up at her mother, eyes wide, voice trembling between shock and disbelief.

"You would never imagine who I just met in the lobby."

Grace froze, the words hanging in the air like something sacred and forbidden.

"Who?" she asked softly, though a part of her already knew.

Pamela looked up, her voice trembling slightly, the disbelief still fresh in her tone.

"James, Mum. *James*."

Grace blinked, her lips parting but no words coming out. For a long moment, she just stared at her daughter, the name sinking in like a distant echo from another life.

Pamela sat forward, her hands now animated as she tried to put into words the shock of seeing him.

“He looked... different. Confident. Polished. He’s clearly doing well for himself. He was checking in with my husband, I think—Sims is meeting him about business. They seem to be working together on something big.” She paused, her tone softening. “He’s changed, Mum. Not the James I knew back then—but still him, you know? The eyes, the way he smiles...”

Grace watched her daughter’s face closely. There it was—that faint glimmer, a flicker of old warmth that she hadn’t seen in years. She sighed and lowered herself onto the edge of the bed.

“And... was he alone?” Grace asked carefully.

Pamela hesitated, looking away. “No,” she said finally. “He had a woman with him.”

Grace tilted her head slightly, sensing the weight in her daughter’s tone.

“What woman?”

Pamela exhaled. “Beautiful. Poised. The kind that turns heads even when she’s just standing still. Her name’s Salma.” She paused, remembering the woman’s confident smile and piercing gaze. “She had that... polished look—expensive perfume, tailored suit, calm voice. But there was something else—she looked at me like she already knew me. Like she was daring me to explain myself.”

Grace’s brows furrowed slightly. “And what did James say?”

Pamela gave a small, humorless laugh. “He said I was his *former girlfriend*. Just like that. As if I were a closed chapter in some old story.”

Grace reached out and placed a hand over her daughter's. "Maybe that's what you both need—to see that the story ended."

Pamela looked down, her voice barely above a whisper. "Maybe, Mum. But it didn't *feel* like an ending."

The elevator doors slid open with a faint chime, and Salma stepped out, her heels clicking sharply against the marble floor. Her reflection flashed across the gold-trimmed mirrors in the parking lot—composed, elegant, flawless—but her jaw was tight, her lips pressed into a restrained line.

She reached the parking lot and let out a slow breath, the humid air brushing against her face. Pulling out her phone, she saw two missed calls from James. Her thumb hovered over the screen.

"Now you remember to call," she murmured bitterly.

A flicker of the moment replayed in her mind—James, gently holding Pamela's arm, guiding her to a seat, concern written all over his face. The way he'd looked at her—that familiar look, one that wasn't meant for a "former girlfriend."

She scoffed under her breath. "*Former girlfriend*," he'd said.

Salma opened her messaging app, stared at the blank chat for a moment, then locked the screen again. No. She was never a second option—not to anyone. If James wanted to explain, he'd have to call again. And this time, he'd better have more than excuses.

She slipped into her car, revved the engine, and pulled out of the hotel driveway, her face calm but her chest heavy with quiet anger.

Miles away, Jamela leaned back in the passenger seat of a company SUV as it sped down the highway, the late afternoon sun glinting through the windows. Her colleagues chatted lightly in the backseat, their laughter fading under the hum of traffic.

She checked her phone—a text from her mother, **Mommy**:

We just arrived. Grandma and I are resting at the hotel. Can't wait to see you tonight.

Jamela smiled softly, her heart warming at the thought. She typed back quickly:

Can't wait to see you too, Mum. Just finishing up with a client visit. Should be back before dinner.

She tucked her phone away and turned to look out the window. The city skyline shimmered in the distance—vast, alive, and full of possibility.

A soft excitement bubbled in her chest. She couldn't wait to meet her grandmother finally after so many years. She'd grown up hearing Grace's stories and her laughter over the phone—and now, they'd finally sit together, share a meal, and fill in the missing years.

The low hum of the city barely reached the quiet luxury of Salma's townhouse. The golden hue of the lamps danced across the marble floor, casting soft shadows on the white drapes swaying gently by the open balcony. The faint scent of jasmine filled the air.

James stood by the glass door, his jacket draped neatly over the back of the couch, sleeves rolled up, the evening light reflecting against his wristwatch. He looked jaded and contemplative—as if the weight of the day clung to him even now.

Salma appeared from the kitchen with two cups of green tea. Her silk robe shimmered faintly as she crossed the room, her expression unreadable. She handed him a cup without a word.

"You didn't answer my calls," James said quietly, his tone cautious.

Salma took a slow sip, eyes fixed on him. "I saw them," she said finally. "I wasn't sure if they were meant for *me*... or your old flame in the lobby."

James exhaled, setting his cup on the table. "It's not what you think, Salma. Pamela—she was just—"

“—someone you couldn’t stop looking at?” She cut in, her voice soft but edged. “You sat her down, James. You *left me standing there*.”

He stepped closer, searching her eyes. “I didn’t plan that. I was just...caught off guard.”

Salma turned away, setting her cup down with deliberate grace. “You forget, I’m a lawyer. I can tell when someone’s withholding half the truth.”

The tension thickened between them, hanging in the air like an unspoken dare.

James sighed, lowering his voice. “You’re right. I was caught off guard because... Pamela was...is a part of my past. I never expected to see her again. But that’s all it is—past. What matters to me now is *you*.”

Salma’s lips trembled slightly, her guard faltering. She turned back toward him, the fire in her gaze dimming into something more fragile. “Then prove it,” she whispered.

James stepped closer until their faces were only inches apart. “I already am.”

Silence wrapped around them, the only sound the faint hum of the city beyond the balcony. Slowly, Salma’s hand reached for his—hesitant, testing. He met it halfway, his fingers closing around hers with quiet certainty.

Whatever words were left unsaid dissolved into the stillness of the night as they stood together, the world outside blurring into insignificance.

Back at the restaurant, the terrace glowed beneath strings of soft amber lights, the hum of the city distant but comforting. A soft breeze carried the aroma of grilled tilapia and cinnamon tea. The night was warm, Nairobi alive beyond the glass railing.

Pamela sat beside her husband, Sims, her laughter bright and unguarded. Across the table, Jamela animatedly recounted a story from her new job, her hands gesturing in lively arcs, her words tumbling

over each other with excitement. Grace watched her granddaughter with quiet pride, the wrinkles at her eyes deepening as she smiled.

“You should have seen his face, Grandma!” Jamela said between laughs. “The client thought I couldn’t negotiate just because I was young. By the end, he was the one begging for a deal.”

Grace chuckled softly. “You’ve got your mother’s tongue and your father’s fire,” she said, sipping her soup. “It’s a dangerous combination.”

Sims smiled, raising his glass. “To dangerous combinations,” he quipped. Everyone laughed.

Pamela leaned back, watching her daughter glow under the lamplight. “I can’t believe how fast you’ve grown, Jamela. It feels like just yesterday you were running around the compound chasing dragonflies.”

Jamela laughed. “And you were shouting at me to put on sunscreen.”

Grace joined in the laughter, shaking her head. “That’s the same compound that nearly gave me a heart attack with all your experiments. Remember when you tried to build a rocket?”

“Oh, don’t remind me,” Pamela said. “She almost blew up the chicken coop!”

The table erupted in laughter again—easy, genuine, the kind that briefly dissolves years of distance and worry.

As the laughter faded, Grace’s smile lingered, though her eyes turned thoughtful. “I’m glad you’re all here,” she said softly. “It’s been too long since we sat like this.”

Pamela reached across the table and squeezed her mother’s hand. “We’ll make up for the lost time, Mama. I promise.”

Sims cleared his throat, breaking the tender silence. “Actually,” he said with a grin, “I have a surprise for you all. After my business meeting tomorrow, I was thinking we could drive down to Naivasha for the weekend. A small retreat—just us.”

Jamela’s eyes sparkled. “That sounds perfect! I’ve been dying to see the lake.”

Grace smiled, though something unreadable flickered across her expression. “That would be lovely,” she said softly.

The waiter arrived with dessert—slices of passion fruit tart and steaming cups of masala tea. The conversation eased back into laughter, stories, and soft teasing. Beneath it all, there was a rare warmth—a fragile bubble of peace that each one silently wished could last.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The morning sun streamed through the panoramic windows of **Elysium Towers**, where Salma's law firm occupied the top floor. The air smelled faintly of polished wood and lavender—her signature touch.

Seated at the head of the long glass table, poised and confident, every inch the accomplished attorney was Salma. Beside her, James leaned slightly back in his chair, his calm composure masking the silent tension from their earlier misunderstandings. Across from them, Sims adjusted his cufflinks, his smile broad and businesslike, while Pamela, elegantly dressed in soft beige, reviewed the final draft of the documents.

"Everything seems to be in order," Sims said, handing the papers back to Salma.

Salma nodded, her professional tone smooth and unflinching. "Good. Then let's proceed." She motioned to the secretary, who laid the final contract copies before each of them.

Sims reached for the pen first, signing with a flourish that matched his charm. "To prosperous beginnings," he said, glancing at James.

James smiled. "To clean beginnings," he replied—the words carrying a double edge only he and Salma could sense.

Salma's gaze flickered toward him briefly, her expression unreadable. She signed next, her handwriting elegant and deliberate. Then she slid the folder toward Pamela.

Pamela, who was added as the witness, hesitated for a heartbeat before signing—not out of doubt, but an odd intuition she couldn't quite name. As the final signature dried, cameras clicked, hands were shaken, and polite laughter filled the room.

"Congratulations, everyone," Salma said, her voice velvety smooth. "Our partnership is official."

By mid-afternoon, the Sims family was packed and ready. The silver SUV glided out of the city, the skyline fading behind them.

Pamela leaned her head against the window, watching the hills roll by, her thoughts a blend of satisfaction and quiet fatigue. Sims hummed softly beside her, his phone buzzing occasionally with business notifications.

In the backseat, Jamela filmed snippets of the journey on her phone—the vendors at the roadside, the herds of cattle crossing, and the open air and sunlight she had missed all her life.

Grace sat beside her, clutching a shawl around her shoulders. Her gaze drifted beyond the passing trees—toward memories, and worries, and things she'd rather not bring up during this long-awaited family trip.

As they drove toward Naivasha, laughter drifted from the car, the road ahead golden under the setting sun. None of them knew how entangled their fates were about to become.

Saturday afternoon, the family strolled towards the lake. The lakeside resort buzzed softly with laughter and music. The Sims family sat beneath a large parasol, a gentle breeze rippling across Lake Naivasha. Flamingos dotted the scene in the distance, their pink reflections shimmering against the sunlight.

Pamela and Sims chatted with another couple they'd met that morning, their conversation easy and warm. Jamela lay sprawled on a picnic blanket nearby, flipping through a magazine while occasionally stealing glances at the lake—the serenity a stark contrast to the bustle of Nairobi.

Grace, sitting slightly apart under the shade of an acacia tree, let the warmth of the afternoon sun sink into her aging bones. For a moment, everything felt almost perfect—the laughter of her daughter, the gentle hum of life around her, and the quiet peace she hadn't known in months.

Then her phone vibrated on her lap.

She squinted at the screen, the message glowing coldly in contrast to the bright afternoon light:

“Your first installment is due Monday. Purpose to pay.”

Her heart thudded once, hard. The breeze suddenly felt colder.

Grace’s fingers trembled slightly as she locked the screen. She glanced toward Pamela, who was laughing heartily at something Sims had said—so full of life and ease. She couldn’t bring herself to ruin the moment. Not yet.

She folded the phone into her shawl, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

The birds chirped. The lake sparkled.

But Grace’s mind had already drifted far away—back to the village, to Bram’s men, and to a debt that could soon swallow her peace whole.

Pamela excused herself from the group and walked toward her mother, who sat gazing blankly at the horizon. Grace’s hands were clasped on her lap, her phone resting facedown beside her cup of tea.

“Mama,” Pamela called softly as she approached.

Grace startled slightly but quickly lifted her face, summoning a bright, practiced smile. “You’re back already? You should be enjoying yourself, my dear.”

Pamela frowned for a moment, reading the faint worry lines around her mother’s eyes—the kind that no amount of sunshine could soften. But Grace’s warmth, so genuine in its performance, eased her doubt.

She sat down beside her mother, looping an arm around her shoulders. “I missed you already,” she teased, leaning playfully against her.

Grace chuckled, the sound light and rehearsed, her eyes returning briefly to the lake. “You and your big heart. Always worrying about your old mother.”

Pamela smiled and reached for her drink. “You’re not old, Mama. Just... vintage.”

That earned her a genuine laugh. For a fleeting moment, everything felt right again.

Then, as the laughter faded, Pamela unlocked her phone. Her mind wandered back to the strange encounter at the hotel—James, his polished calm, and Salma, radiant and cold in equal measure. Curiosity pricked at her chest.

She typed *Joy Salma* into the search bar and took a slow sip of her juice, waiting as the page loaded.

Grace glanced at her daughter out of the corner of her eye—the smile still fixed on her lips, though her thoughts were miles away, spiraling around a single word that pulsed in her memory like a wound:

Monday.

The lake shimmered. The world around them was still and perfect.

But beneath that calm, two storms quietly brewed—each woman keeping her silence for the sake of the other.

The golden light stretched lazily across the lawns, bathing everything in a soft warmth. Pamela’s fingers scrolled down the glowing phone screen, her lips parting slightly in awe.

“She’s stunning,” she murmured, half to herself. “I can’t match that.”

Her mother turned to her, curiosity flickering across her face. Pamela caught the look and quickly forced a smile. “Nothing, Mama. Just—someone’s profile.”

But she couldn't look away. The woman on the screen radiated sophistication—bold confidence framed by elegance. *Esquire Joy Salma*, CEO, philanthropist, law graduate, and founder of *Archangel Vehicle Imports*.

Pamela frowned. "She even owns a vehicle imports company!" she whispered in disbelief.

Then paused.

Archangel Vehicle Imports...

Where had she heard that before?

A spark of recognition ignited like a struck match. She turned sharply, scanning the terrace until she spotted Jamela lounging under a blanket, phone in hand and earbuds on.

Pamela rose abruptly, her heart thudding. "Jamela," she called softly, walking over. She scooted beside her daughter and patted her shoulder. "Sweetheart, you told me you work at a vehicle imports company, right?"

Jamela removed one earbud, surprised. "Yeah, Archangel Vehicle Imports. Why? Is there a problem?"

Pamela's lips parted, but no words came out. "No," she managed at last, forcing a casual tone. "Just checking."

She returned to her seat, the screen's light washing her face pale in the dimming evening. Her thumb hovered uncertainly before she clicked on the company link.

There it was—the company's profile page. The logos, offices, sleek cars... and then the list of directors.

Her breath caught.

James Odhiambo – Chief Executive Officer.

Pamela froze, her pulse hammering. The phone trembled slightly in her hand. She looked up, her gaze distant—a thousand thoughts colliding in her mind.

Grace watched her daughter silently, noticing the color drain from her face. Pamela didn't speak. She simply stared at the glowing screen, eyes fixed on the name that had once meant everything to her.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The soft thump of Afrobeats filled Laila's living room. Perfume, laughter, and the faint tang of red wine lingered in the air. The trio—Jamela, Laila, and Alma—were draped lazily on beanbags and throws, surrounded by pizza boxes, half-empty glasses, and the glowing haze of fairy lights.

Jamela had always liked these nights. They were her escape from the hum of Archangel's office—from the endless reports, polished smiles, and the quiet distance of her boss, James. Here, she could just *be*.

Laila, the loudest of the three, was recounting her latest romantic misadventure with dramatic hand gestures, her laughter echoing off the walls. Alma, on the other hand, was a picture of composure—or had been, before the wine began to do its work.

By midnight, her words started to blur into a whispery confessional.

“You know,” Alma slurred slightly, tracing the rim of her glass, “sometimes I think my boss and Salma have... something.”

Jamela looked up, curious. “Wait, *your boss*? You mean James?”

Alma's cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red. “Mm-hmm. James. The one and only. The entire office is buzzing about it—the way he smiles when her name comes up, or how she drops by with that knowing smirk.”

Laila let out a mischievous giggle. “Ooooh, workplace romance! That's some premium gossip right there!”

Jamela tried to laugh, but the name *Salma* sent a flicker through her chest. She leaned forward, wide-eyed. “So they're actually together?”

Alma shrugged dramatically, her professional restraint long gone. “Who knows? But... if they’re not, they should be. I mean, the tension in that office is *cinematic*.” She laughed, clutching a pillow to her chest. “And to think I used to have a *crush* on the man. But I told myself, “No, Alma, you’re a professional woman.”

Laila burst into laughter. “Professional until the second glass of wine!”

Even Jamela couldn’t help it—she laughed until tears welled up. The three of them giggled, snorted, and teased until the night softened into comfortable silence.

Later, when Laila had dozed off and Alma’s breathing had evened out, Jamela sat quietly, her thoughts running wild. *James*. The name lingered, familiar yet distant. She thought of her mother’s sudden change of tone earlier that week, the slight tension when she mentioned work, and now this connection to her boss’s mysterious partner.

She shook her head and smiled faintly. “What a small world,” she whispered to herself, reaching for another slice of pizza as the night folded into gentle sleep.

The elevator doors slid open with a soft chime, and Jamela stepped in, her laptop bag slung across her shoulder and a cup of steaming cappuccino in her hand. She pressed the button for the tenth floor, humming lightly under her breath as she scrolled through her phone.

Just as the doors began to close, a manicured hand slipped between them. The sensors blinked, and the doors glided open again to reveal *Salma*.

She was elegance personified—crisp white blouse tucked into tailored trousers, her perfume faint but commanding. Jamela immediately straightened, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“Good morning,” Jamela offered brightly, her usual bubbly tone echoing softly in the enclosed space.

Salma's reflection in the mirrored wall turned to meet her gaze. "Morning," she replied with a small smile, eyes sharp and assessing.

Silence lingered for a few seconds before Jamela, ever the conversationalist, broke it.

"It's such a beautiful day today. I think Nairobi's finally decided to be kind to us," she said, chuckling softly.

Salma glanced sideways, amused despite herself. "Our new digital marketer is quite chatty?"

Jamela froze mid-sip, eyes widening slightly. "You—you know about me?"

Salma's smile curved with quiet authority. "Of course. I know everything and everyone here."

Her voice carried a mix of warmth and subtle dominance that left no room for doubt. Jamela blinked, momentarily lost for words. She had only seen Salma in company-wide meetings or through office whispers—the woman felt almost mythic, the kind of leader people admired from afar but rarely interacted with.

Salma noticed the flicker of awe and amusement in Jamela's expression. Her smile softened, almost maternal.

"Relax, Jamela," she said gently. "You're doing well. James speaks highly of your work."

Jamela's heart skipped a beat. *James?*

"Oh—he does?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

Salma nodded, eyes returning to the elevator display. "He doesn't praise people easily. Keep it up."

The elevator dinged. The doors opened to the fifth floor. Jamela stepped out, turning back slightly.

“Thank you, Ms. Salma. It’s—it’s really nice to finally meet you.”

Salma’s eyes lingered on her for a heartbeat longer, something unreadable flickering in their depths.

“Likewise, Jamela.”

As the doors slid shut, Jamela exhaled slowly, her heart still racing. There was something about Salma—her grace, her certainty—that drew her in and unnerved her all at once.

Little did Jamela know, that short elevator ride had sparked a curiosity in Salma too—one she wouldn’t admit but which would soon become impossible to ignore.

Jamela’s day floated on an invisible cloud. The elevator moment replayed in her mind with a kind of dazed excitement. She couldn’t stop smiling as she sat across from Laila in their favorite café, stirring her iced latte absentmindedly.

“You will not *believe* who I shared an elevator with this morning,” Jamela said, her voice brimming with the thrill of gossip.

Laila arched an eyebrow. “Oh, don’t tell me—the CFO again? The one with the sad eyes?”

Jamela rolled her eyes, laughing. “No! *Salma*. The Salma. Ms. Archangel herself.”

Laila nearly choked on her drink. “No way! What did she say? Wait—did she recognize you?”

Jamela leaned forward, lowering her voice as if sharing a sacred secret. “She *knew* me, Laila. She actually said, ‘*So you’re the new digital marketer.*’ I mean, how? She’s never even around!”

Laila grinned. “That’s power for you, babe. Queens know everything.”

Jamela smiled, gazing dreamily at her drink. “But it’s not just that. She has this... aura. Like, calm but intense? She’s stunning, but it’s not just looks—it’s the way she stands, like she owns the world. I swear, I felt like a schoolgirl in front of her.”

Laila smirked. “Oh, someone’s got a boss crush.”

Jamela threw a napkin at her, giggling. “Shut up. I’m just saying she’s... magnetic. And weirdly familiar, you know?”

Her voice trailed off. Familiar—the word sat oddly on her tongue. She couldn’t quite place why.

“Anyway,” Jamela said quickly, shaking off the thought. “I can’t wait to tell Alma at dinner tonight. She’s going to freak out.”

The elevator doors parted with a soft chime at the eleventh floor, releasing Salma into the wide, glass-lined corridor. Her heels clicked in a slow, deliberate rhythm—the confident catwalk of a woman who owned both the space and the silence around her.

She adjusted her cream blazer as she approached *James’* office. The hum of muted voices from behind the tinted glass hinted at another meeting in progress.

Behind the reception desk, Alma looked up from her computer and broke into a courteous smile.

“Good morning, Ms. Salma,” she greeted warmly.

Salma offered a half-smile. “Good morning, Alma. Is James in?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alma replied quickly, then hesitated. “He... already has a guest inside.”

Salma raised a finely sculpted brow. “This early?” she asked, her tone light but laced with quiet curiosity.

Alma instinctively reached for the phone. “Would you like me to buzz you in?”

Salma lifted a manicured hand, signaling her to stop. “No need,” she said softly, her voice calm — almost too calm.

She took a slow step toward the door. Through the frosted glass, she could make out the faint silhouette of two people — one sitting, one standing near the desk. Salma tilted her head, listening.

A familiar voice floated through the barely open door.

“You’ve really done well for yourself, James,” the woman said with a nostalgic warmth that froze Salma in place.

Salma’s heartbeat quickened. The voice — smooth, tender, unmistakably *intimate*.

She leaned a fraction closer, the scent of lavender from her own perfume mingling with the cold office air.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” the woman continued.

Salma’s breath caught in her throat.

Pamela.

The name flashed like lightning in her mind. Her jaw tensed. She closed the door as quietly as she had opened it and straightened her blazer, her face composed though her pulse raced beneath the calm veneer.

“Please tell him I stopped by,” she said evenly to Alma, her tone betraying no hint of what she had just heard.

Then, without another word, Salma turned on her heel and walked back down the corridor—every click of her heels sharp, steady, and deliberate—a woman reclaiming her poise even as something inside her began to stir like a gathering storm.

Later, across town, Salma sat at her mahogany desk, staring absently at the city skyline through her glass office wall. The sound of the air conditioner hummed in the background as her thoughts drifted—not to contracts or clients, but to the girl in the elevator.

Jamela.

There was something about her—her bright eyes, her confidence, her warmth. Salma had met countless young professionals, but this one had left a faint tremor in her chest.

She closed her eyes, leaning back in her chair. *Why does she feel so familiar?*

Then, the unease crept in. The sharp resemblance — the tilt of her smile, the slight arch of her brows —
Pamela.

Salma's fingers tightened around her pen. It was uncanny, almost haunting. She had only seen Pamela once, but the memory of that brief encounter still pricked at the edges of her mind. Both women — Pamela and this Jamela — had a way of stirring something deep and uncomfortable within her.

Insecurity.

It was a feeling Salma was not used to. She was control, grace, and precision — yet these two women, in their very different ways, seemed to dismantle that quiet armor.

Her phone buzzed — a text from James:

Dinner tonight? I'll bring the wine.

Salma stared at the message for a long moment before typing back:

Sure. But we need to talk.

As she set the phone down, her reflection in the glass caught her eye. For the first time in years, she didn't recognize the calm, self-assured woman staring back.

The sound of clicking heels echoed through the marble corridor of **Harrison & Mocha Advocates**. Inside the firm's largest boardroom, a dozen lawyers sat hunched over thick files. At the head of the table, *Salma* stood poised, hands resting on the glossy surface, her expression calm but unreadable.

Across from her sat *Mr. Karanja*, a prominent businessman whose once-golden empire now teetered on the edge of collapse. Allegations of tax evasion, creative accounting, and embezzlement swirled around him like vultures circling a dying beast.

"Let's be clear," Salma began, her voice low but commanding. "You moved **twenty million** through shell accounts registered under your logistics subsidiary. That's not creative accounting, Mr. Karanja — that's a paper trail with your signature at every turn."

The man fidgeted, his gold watch clinking nervously.

"Counsel, please — these were internal reallocations. You lawyers like to dramatize everything."

Salma's lips curved into a cold, polite smile. "Dramatize?" She leaned closer, her perfume — sharp jasmine with a hint of spice — filling the room. "You hired me to *contain* this scandal, not to play ignorant. KRA will want their pound of flesh, and I won't defend a man who lies to me."

The room fell silent. Associates exchanged uneasy glances.

She turned to her junior counsel. "Amina, call the forensic accountant. I want full verification of all transactions through *Miranda Holdings* EoD."

"Yes, Ms. Salma."

As the young lawyer hurried out, Salma closed her eyes briefly, massaging her temple. A faint ache pressed behind her eyes — not from the case, but from the image of *James and Pamela* earlier that morning. The smile. The tone. The history.

Her phone buzzed.

James: *You left without saying a word. Can we talk?*

She stared at the screen, her expression hardening. *Now you remember I exist?* she thought bitterly.

Mr. Karanja's voice broke her reverie. "Counsel, can you guarantee I'll be safe?"

Salma slipped her phone face-down on the table and looked up, her composure restored, eyes sharp again.

"I don't guarantee safety," she said. "I guarantee results."

She stood, gathering her files. "Gentlemen, this meeting is adjourned. I'll call for a private briefing once I've reviewed the documents. Until then, I suggest you stay off the front page."

As she exited the boardroom, her assistant jogged to keep up.

"Ms. Salma, should I clear your afternoon?"

"No," Salma replied, buttoning her coat. "Keep it open. I might have... a personal matter to handle."

Her gaze drifted out the window — the city skyline glittering under the noon sun.

The lawyer, the lover, the woman — all at war within her.

Across town at the hotel, Pamela sat on the edge of her bed, still dressed in the soft beige blouse she'd worn to the office. Her reflection in the mirror looked different — lighter somehow — like a part of her had been restored after years of dormancy. The meeting with James had gone better than she expected. His easy smile, that same half tilt of the head when he listened... it had taken her back years in a heartbeat.

She had replayed the moment in the car, on the elevator, even now as the city lights bled through her curtains. A friendship — perhaps that was all she wanted. Or maybe it was the truth itching beneath her ribs, the one she had carried alone for so long.

Her thumb hovered over her phone before she finally pressed *Call — Mum*.

The line clicked.

“Pammy!” Grace’s voice came through, cheerful at first. “You sound happy. How was the retreat?”

Pamela smiled faintly. “Good, Mum. Peaceful. I met an old friend today. James.”

A brief silence. Then a shift in tone — subtle, but sharp.

“James who?”

“James mom,” Pamela said softly, bracing herself. “We used to—”

“I know who he is.” Grace’s voice cut through, the warmth gone. “Pamela, what business do you have meeting that man? You have a husband. A good, hardworking man. You’re not a girl anymore.”

Pamela inhaled deeply, her chest tightening. “It wasn’t like that, Mum. It was a business meeting, through Salma actually. I just...” She hesitated, searching for the right words. “I thought maybe it was time to make peace with the past.”

Grace sighed — the long, weary kind of sigh Pamela knew too well. “Some doors are better left closed, my daughter. You made your choices. Whatever peace you’re looking for, you’ll not find it in a man you left behind.”

Pamela stared at the floor, voice trembling just a little. “And what if he deserves to know the truth, Mum?”

A pause. Then:

“The truth?” Grace’s tone sharpened again. “You listen to me, Pamela — you have a life now, a family. Don’t go digging graves in the name of honesty. Some truths ruin homes.”

Tears welled up in Pamela’s eyes. She forced a small laugh, the kind people use to disguise pain. “You make it sound like I did something terrible.”

“You did what you had to do,” Grace said gently now, though her words carried steel. “Just don’t undo it.”

The line went silent for a long moment before Pamela whispered, “Bye, Mum.”

“Stay safe, my daughter,” Grace said. But the endearment felt hollow.

Pamela ended the call and sat there in the dark, phone still in hand. The air felt heavy — her mother’s words pressing against her chest.

She reached for the drawer beside her bed, pulling out an old photograph: her and James, laughing at the lake, arms tangled in the wind. She traced his face with her thumb.

“Some truths ruin homes.”

Her mother’s words echoed — but so did another: *He deserves to know.*

Pamela slid the photo back into the drawer, closed it softly, and whispered to the quiet room,

“Maybe this time... I’ll decide what truth is worth.”

Salma sat in her living room, legs crossed, the dim glow of the wall sconces casting golden shadows on the cream walls. Her wine glass sat untouched on the coffee table. She kept glancing at her phone, then at the clock on the opposite wall.

“Where is he?” she muttered, the words slipping out before she could stop herself.

Another minute passed. Then—*ding!*—her phone vibrated against the glass tabletop. She snatched it up, half expecting James’s name to flash on the screen. It wasn’t him.

Email notification:

Subject: *FYA—The dossier you requested + recent photos.*

Her assistant never disappointed. Salma’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smile as she opened the message. The attached folder loaded slowly—the progress bar creeping forward—and when the images appeared, her eyes narrowed.

“So,” she murmured, “you’re still the same, James.”

She reached for her phone again, scrolling through her contacts until she stopped at *Bram*. She pressed *Call*.

“Bram,” she said when he picked up, her voice sharp, businesslike. “I’m sending you something in a moment. Check your email. I want one of your PIs on this — a woman, preferably. Discreet. I need everything on *her*.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Understood. Personal or professional?”

“Both,” she said after a beat, her tone cooling. “You’ll know when you see the file.”

She hung up before Bram could ask further questions. Then, with practiced calm, Salma reached for her laptop and pulled it closer. The screen glowed to life, reflecting in her eyes like two sharp blades. She opened her calendar, clicked *Schedule Meeting*, and began typing.

Subject: *Follow-up: Karanja Case.*

Participants: Prosecutor Maina + Salma Shah.

Time: 10:00 a.m., Monday.

The Karanja case had grown messy — tax evasion, embezzlement trails, offshore transfers — and the press was already sniffing around. It would be another fire to contain. But fires didn't scare Salma. They fed her.

She leaned back, finally taking a sip of her wine, eyes drifting to the phone again. Still no message from James.

Her jaw tightened.

“You'll reach out when you're ready,” she whispered to the silence. “And when you do, I'll already know everything.”

She clicked the folder open once more, zooming in on the face that had stirred all this unrest — Pamela's face — frozen mid-laugh in a candid photo.

A slow, deliberate smile formed on Salma's lips.

“This time,” she murmured, “I'm not the one playing catch-up.”

That evening, the house was unusually quiet when James arrived. The scent of vanilla candles hung in the air — calming, deceptive. Salma sat in her robe by the fireplace, her laptop open, but her eyes distant.

“You're late,” she said, her tone casual, almost too controlled.

“I had a long day,” James replied, loosening his tie. “Traffic was hell.”

Salma shut the laptop softly, stood, and walked to the bar counter. “Was the day long,” she asked, pouring herself a glass of wine, “or the *meeting*?”

James frowned. “What's that supposed to mean?”

She turned, glass in hand, her gaze sharp. “Don’t play dumb, James. You met Pamela. Sneaking around like I wouldn’t notice.”

He sighed. “Salma, I met her in my *office*. That’s hardly sneaky.”

“You think I’m a fool?” Her voice cracked, anger rising. “You think because I’m in love with you I can’t see when something’s off? The way you looked at her that day at the hotel — I’ve never seen you that shaken.”

James took a step closer. “She’s from my past, Salma. That’s all.”

“That’s *not all*.” Her voice softened suddenly, trembled. “Then why does your *present* feel like a lie?” she shot back. “Why do I feel like she still has a piece of you I’ll never reach?”

He looked away. “You’re being unfair.”

“Every time she’s mentioned, you go quiet. You zone out. And now you expect me to believe it’s the *past*?”

James opened his mouth, then closed it again. He didn’t have an answer that would calm her.

She laughed bitterly. “Unbelievable. The man who taught me control has me spiraling because of one woman. And to make it worse—” she hesitated, “—I can’t shake this feeling about Jamela either. The resemblance, the way you talk about her sometimes—”

“Salma!” James snapped, frustrated. “Jamela is just an employee.”

Salma’s eyes flashed. “So were you once.”

The silence that followed was heavy. James rubbed his temples, guilt and exhaustion clouding his thoughts.

The silence that followed was thick and painful. James dropped onto the couch, head in his hands. Salma turned away, clutching her glass of wine, her mind racing between jealousy and dread.

Outside, somewhere across town, Bram locked his office and stared at the email one last time before slipping his phone into his jacket.

The night air hung heavy with silence, broken only by the soft hum of traffic far below. Inside, the faint clink of a wine glass echoed from the kitchen — Salma's glass, untouched for nearly half an hour. James sat on the couch, shoulders slumped, his jaw tight. The argument still lingered in the air like smoke — sharp, bitter, unresolved.

When his phone buzzed, he glanced at it and froze. *Pamela.*

He hesitated, then stood quickly, glancing toward the hallway to make sure Salma was out of sight. He swiped to answer and walked out to the balcony, half closing the sliding door behind him. The city lights stretched out beneath him, cold and unfeeling.

"Pamela," he whispered.

Her voice came trembling through the receiver. "James... I shouldn't be calling, but I needed to hear your voice."

James exhaled, dragging a hand through his hair. "You shouldn't have," he said softly, though his tone betrayed more longing than anger.

"I know." She sniffled, trying to steady herself. "I keep replaying everything. I shouldn't have shown up. I shouldn't have—"

"Don't," he interrupted, his voice breaking slightly. "You and I... what we had wasn't a mistake. It was an oath, Pamela. Something sacred. Something that wasn't supposed to be broken."

Pamela's tears fell faster. "I didn't want to break it, James. You have to believe me. I— I couldn't control what happened. Back then, I—" Her voice faltered, choked by emotion. "There's something you need to know. About that time. About..."

Her breath hitched. "About Ja..."

Before she could continue, the soft *swish* of the sliding door made James turn.

Salma stood there, silhouetted by the pale moonlight, wearing the satin robe she'd thrown on earlier. Her face was unreadable — calm, almost too calm.

James froze, guilt flickering across his face like a caught flame. He fumbled for composure, ended the call abruptly, and slipped the phone into his pocket.

For a long second, neither spoke. The air between them thickened — filled with unspoken questions and heavy, electric silence.

Then, slowly, Salma crossed the distance between them. She didn't say a word. Instead, she wrapped her arms around him from behind, resting her head lightly against his back.

It wasn't forgiveness.

It wasn't affection.

It was survival — an act of quiet control, an attempt to steady her own trembling heart.

James stood still, his hands hovering uncertainly over hers. He could feel her breathing — slow, deliberate — and he knew she knew.

Below them, the city lights blinked indifferently. Somewhere in the night, a truth waited to surface.

Two weeks of digging had turned into a web of connections Bram hadn't seen coming. His contact at the national records office had finally sent the last batch of files that morning. The PI, Nora, leaned against his desk, flipping through her notes.

"Pamela Akoth now *Pamela Sims*," she said, tapping the top page, "born in the same village as your boss. Daughter to Grace Akinyi. Grace's record shows a wholesale grocery business that went under five years ago. There's also a loan — KES 2million — from *Timau Credit*. She defaulted after the first payment. Only interest has been paid since."

Bram frowned. "Timau Credit? You sure?"

Nora nodded. "Cross-checked with all our contacts at Timau. Verified." She slid another folder his way.

"And here's the kicker — Pamela has a daughter. Twenty-four years old. Birth certificate lists the father as *James Odhiambo*."

Bram froze. His throat went dry.

"That can't be right," he muttered. "James never said..." He trailed off, mind racing.

He dismissed Nora, then immediately dialed Manu's number. The call connected after two rings.

"Manu here."

"Hey, Manu, it's Bram. I need to confirm something about a client—Grace Akinyi. Timau's her creditor, right?"

"Yeah," Manu's voice replied, cautious. "She's been dodging Timon lately. Loan still open. Only interests cleared. What's your interest in her?"

Bram hesitated. "Just cross-referencing something for a client. But listen, don't mention my name."

Manu chuckled darkly. “When it comes to debts, my friend, names don’t matter. Money talks.” “Also, tell your client Grace’s running out of rope,” Manu said before hanging up.

Bram hung up, exhaling sharply. The implications were dizzying. Grace. Pamela. James. The same village. The same timeline.

He looked down at the folder again, Pamela’s picture paper-clipped to the report. “Damn, boss,” he whispered, “what have you walked back into?”

He knew he should hand the file straight to Salma — it was her instruction. But after what he’d just uncovered, that didn’t feel right. If James didn’t know, this could blow up in ways none of them could contain.

Bram rubbed his temples, torn. “Do I warn him first,” he muttered, “or let him find out on his own?”

The choice felt like holding a live wire.

The late-afternoon sun hung low over the waterfront, painting the **Pier** in streaks of gold and shadow. Salma moved briskly through the corridor of the private restaurant, her heels clicking in sharp rhythm against the wooden floor. Her oversized sunglasses couldn’t mask the tension in her face. She barely acknowledged the waiter who led her to the secluded room at the far end — the one Bram had booked under a false name.

Bram was already there, sitting with his back to the glass window overlooking the calm water. A manila envelope lay on the table between them. He rose briefly when she entered, his posture straight and measured, military habit never quite lost.

“You’re late,” he said, not unkindly.

“Traffic,” she muttered, sliding into the chair opposite him. Her voice carried the clipped calm of a woman who knew she didn’t want to be overheard. “You said it was urgent.”

Bram nodded, pushing the envelope toward her. “It is. Everything you asked for — and more.”

Salma stared at the sealed flap, fingers hesitating. “What’s in there?”

“Pamela Sims,” Bram said. “And her mother, Grace Akinyi. Both from the same village as James. Her mother has a loan with us — a big one given her income. She defaulted. That’s not all.”

He paused, watching her eyes narrow, the lawyer in her bracing for impact.

“She has a daughter,” he continued slowly. “Twenty-four years old. Name’s Jamela.”

The word hit like a bullet. Salma’s lips parted, but no sound came out. Her gaze darted to the envelope as though it might burn her if she touched it.

“James...” she whispered.

Bram nodded once. “He’s listed as the father on her birth certificate.”

The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the faint creak of the pier boards underfoot and the distant crash of waves. Salma’s breathing grew shallow. She finally reached for the envelope, tore it open, and glanced through the photos and documents inside. Each page was another blow — the dates, the names, the village.

Her hands trembled slightly.

“I knew it,” she said under her breath. “I knew there was something about that girl. The way she smiled, the way he looked at her...”

Bram leaned forward, his tone cautious. “I don’t know what you want to do with this, Salma. But this isn’t just gossip — it’s a storm waiting to happen. And when it breaks, it’ll hit *him* first, then you.”

Salma shut the folder slowly, pressing her palm on it as if to contain everything inside. “No, Bram,” she said, her voice low and hard. “It’s already hit me.”

She stood up abruptly, sliding the folder into her bag. “You did good. No one else needs to know about this — not yet.”

Bram studied her for a moment. “You sure about that?”

Her eyes glistened briefly before she turned toward the door. “I’m sure,” she said. “For now, James doesn’t know that I know.”

As she walked out of the private room, the light from the sunset flashed across her face — beautiful, furious, and breaking all at once.

Bram exhaled heavily, leaning back in his chair. He knew what that look meant. War was coming.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Soft music floated through Jamela's apartment, blending with the laughter of three women sprawled comfortably across the floor, surrounded by half-finished cocktails and open takeout boxes. Laila was animatedly narrating a story about her disastrous first date, hands flying in every direction, while Alma, half-drunk and draped across a beanbag, laughed so hard her eyes watered.

Jamela sat cross-legged by the couch, a hardback book open on her lap — *Salma A. Omar: Law, Power, and Purpose*. She was on the chapter about the lawyer's rise to prominence, but her mind was elsewhere, half-lost between the printed words and the warmth of friendship around her.

"—and then the guy asks if we can *split the Uber*! Can you imagine?" Laila said between giggles.

Jamela smiled absently, eyes fixed on the same paragraph she'd been rereading for the past ten minutes.

"Wow. That's... something," she murmured, flipping a page she hadn't read.

Alma raised her glass, her speech a little slurred. "You think *that's* drama? You haven't heard *real* drama, girls."

Laila rolled her eyes. "Oh no, here she goes."

"I'm serious!" Alma insisted, sitting up a little straighter. "The kind of drama that shakes offices and hearts."

Jamela looked up, amused. "Okay, tell us, gossip queen. What happened now?"

Alma lowered her voice dramatically, though she was clearly enjoying the attention. "So, last week — Salma walks into the office, right? Early morning, sharp heels, that don't-mess-with-me look. She gets to James' door — and guess who's inside?"

Laila leaned in, eyes wide. "Who?"

“Some woman. Beautiful, classy type with an accent. I think her name was... Pamela?”

Jamela’s head snapped up from her book. “Wait. Pamela?” she asked, her tone cautious.

Alma nodded vigorously, not noticing Jamela’s change in expression. “Mmh! She was there, talking with James. And you should have seen Salma’s face when she heard her voice. She didn’t go in — just peeked, froze for a second, then stormed off like a scene from a telenovela. Dramatic as hell.”

Laila burst out laughing, clutching her stomach. “Classic Salma!”

Jamela, however, wasn’t laughing. She tried to play along, forcing a smile, but her pulse quickened. “And you’re sure it was *Pamela*?”

Alma nodded again, reaching for another sip. “Yeah. I even overheard her introducing herself when James opened the door a few minutes later. Pamela Sims, I think. Fancy accent, sweet smile. You could tell they had... history.” She giggled, swirling her drink. “Salma was *fuming* all day after that. Poor James had no idea why she was breathing fire in the daily stand up meeting at 10 o’clock.”

Jamela’s laughter faded completely. The book lay open but forgotten on her lap. Her thoughts raced—Mom? *At Archangel? Talking casually to James?*

She blinked, trying to piece it together, but it didn’t make sense. Why would her mother be there? And why would Salma — her boss’s girlfriend, the same woman whose book she’d been reading — storm away like that?

“Hey, Jami,” Laila called, waving a hand in front of her face. “Earth to Jamela! You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Jamela forced a nervous laugh. “No, no. I’m fine. Just— uh, something clicked in my head.”

She reached for her drink but didn't sip. Her mind was miles away, her reflection trembling faintly in the cocktail glass.

Something wasn't adding up.

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The Pier was calm that evening, the lake stretching into a silent shimmer under the sinking sun. Bram sat at his usual corner, one leg crossed over the other, a glass of whiskey before him. He was the kind of man who didn't seem to drink for pleasure but for thought. The waiters knew him by now—quiet, disciplined, and unyielding in the way he observed the world.

Laila spotted him before he saw her. She'd been coming to the Pier with friends for weeks, always noticing him tucked in his corner, his stillness almost out of place in the vibrant lounge. Something about him drew her in—the rough edges softened by calm eyes, the air of someone who had seen too much but chose silence over explanation.

She walked straight to him, confident and unbothered. "You don't look like you come here for the music," she said, resting her hand lightly on the chair opposite him.

Bram's gaze lifted slowly, assessing. "And you don't look like the type who asks strangers questions."

Laila smiled. "Maybe I'm just curious. Or maybe I don't like drinking alone."

He gestured slightly with his hand. "Suit yourself."

She sat, crossing her legs, ordering a mojito before turning back to him. "I've seen you here a few times. Always alone. Always staring at the water. Are you hiding from something or someone?"

Bram's lips curved faintly, though it never reached his eyes. "Some things don't need hiding. They stay hidden on their own."

Laila laughed softly. “That sounds poetic for a man who doesn’t talk much.”

“I talk when I need to,” he said simply.

There was a comfortable silence between them after that. Laila spoke more than she intended—about her work in digital marketing, her chaotic new job at Archangel, her best friend Jamela who was coming from abroad soon. She even mentioned how suffocating the city felt sometimes and how she came to the Pier to breathe.

Bram listened. Occasionally, he’d nod, or ask a question that showed he’d been paying attention. There was something about his quiet that drew her words out like water from a spring.

“You talk like life owes you something,” he said finally.

“Maybe it does,” she replied, leaning forward slightly. “Or maybe I just ask for what I want.”

Bram looked at her then, really looked—at the fearless confidence in her eyes, the youth that hadn’t yet been bruised by disappointment. He didn’t respond, but a small, reluctant smile ghosted across his face.

When she finally stood to leave, Laila brushed a strand of hair from her face and said, “You should try smiling more. It suits you.”

Bram’s reply was almost a whisper. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She walked away, her laughter blending with the hum of jazz behind her. Bram watched her go, then turned back to his drink. He didn’t know why he couldn’t stop thinking about the girl with too much light in her eyes.

Maybe it was her boldness. Maybe it was the way she made him forget, even for a moment, the darkness that followed him everywhere.

That night, when he finally left the Pier, he didn't go straight home. He stood by his car for a long time, thinking of her name—Laila—and how easily it had settled into his thoughts.

A few days after their first meeting at the Pier, Bram found himself back at his usual corner seat, his drink half-finished and untouched for a while. The thought surprised him—how he'd begun to glance at the entrance every so often, waiting without admitting he was.

Then, late that Friday afternoon, she appeared.

Laila walked in alone, her steps slower this time, her usual spark dimmed by exhaustion. Her hair was loose, and she looked like she'd had a long day. Still, there was that familiar glow about her—the kind that made her hard to ignore. Bram's lips curved slightly.

He rose and strode toward her, his presence towering yet calm. When she turned and saw him, her eyes widened in surprise before softening into a warm, teasing smile.

“Well, look who it is,” she said, her voice light but tired. “You look like someone who's been waiting for me.”

Bram smirked. “You can say that. But don't flatter yourself—I just got bored of my drink.”

She laughed quietly and waved to the waiter. “That's a terrible lie,” she said, sitting down and motioning for him to join her. “You don't look like the type who gets bored easily.”

Bram slid into the seat across from her. “You talk like you know me already.”

“I read people,” she replied, stirring her drink once it arrived. “And you—” she tilted her head, studying him—“you're one of those who pretend not to care but notice everything.”

He said nothing at first, just let her words hang there. The Pier was quieter than usual, the low hum of chatter and slow music wrapping around them.

“Rough day?” he finally asked.

“You could say that,” she sighed, taking a sip. “Deadlines. Clients. A boss who doesn’t believe in peace and quiet.”

“Archangel still keeping you busy?” he asked, a trace of amusement in his voice.

Her eyes widened slightly. “You remember?”

“I remember most things that interest me.”

The air shifted. She met his gaze, her expression softening. “Well, that’s flattering,” she said, trying to sound casual. “Coming from a man who barely talks.”

“Maybe I’m changing.”

“I like this version better,” she said simply.

He gave a low, surprised laugh. “Careful. You’ll make me think you’re serious.”

“I am,” she countered, smiling. “You should smile more often. It looks good on you.”

He looked away, shaking his head with quiet amusement. He wasn’t used to this—to being read so easily, to someone daring to peel through his calm exterior without fear.

They talked for hours, the conversation easy and unforced. Laila shared stories about her work, her friends, and her dream to one day start her own digital agency. Bram mostly listened, offering short but thoughtful remarks.

When she finally stood to leave, she lingered beside his chair. “Same time next week?” she asked, her voice hopeful, playful even.

Bram looked up, a small smile tugging at his lips. “If the drink’s good,” he said.

She grinned. “Then I’ll make sure it is.”

As she walked out, Bram leaned back and watched her go. The fading sunset cast long shadows across the Pier, and for the first time in a long while, he wasn’t thinking about work—or the things he’d done for James and Salma.

He was thinking about Laila.

And the strange, dangerous warmth she had managed to awaken in him.

A few weeks after Jamela had fully settled into her new role at Archangel, the trio—Jamela, Laila, and Alma—gathered for one of their usual Friday night hangouts at Laila’s apartment. The living room was warm and alive with laughter, the faint scent of pizza and cheap red wine hanging in the air. Music hummed softly in the background as the three lounged in mismatched pajamas, their hair undone, faces glowing with the ease of friendship.

Laila, legs tucked beneath her on the couch, was unusually quiet that evening, a shy smile tugging at her lips as she scrolled through her phone. Jamela noticed first.

“Okay, spill it,” Jamela said, leaning closer. “You’ve been smiling at that screen like you’re in a movie.”

Laila bit her lip and tried to play it off, but Alma—half-tipsy and already giggling—snatched the phone from her hand. “Who’s *he*?” she demanded dramatically.

Laila laughed, tugging the phone back. “Fine, fine. His name’s Bram.”

“Bram?” Jamela echoed, curious. “That’s... interesting. What’s he like?”

Laila twirled a strand of her hair around her finger, a dreamy look softening her face. “He’s... mysterious,” she said slowly. “Not shy exactly, but guarded. You know? The kind who doesn’t talk much, but when he does—it’s like he means every word.”

Jamela raised a brow. “Sounds dangerous.”

Laila laughed. “No, not that kind of dangerous. Just—different. He makes me curious. I want to know what’s behind those silences.”

Alma sighed dramatically, leaning back on the couch with her wine glass dangerously close to spilling. “Ah, young love,” she slurred, pointing at Laila. “You should *totally* take the bullet for the team.”

“The team?” Jamela asked, giggling.

“Yes,” Alma said, sitting up straight and waving her free hand. “Since I’ve already given up on love—” she placed a hand over her heart, feigning heartbreak—“after my dear boss was stolen by Miss Perfect Lawyer, someone has to keep the dream alive.”

Laila burst out laughing, nearly choking on her drink. “You mean Salma?”

“Yes, *Salma the Snatcher*,” Alma said, her voice wobbling between laughter and bitterness. “And Jamela here,” she pointed playfully, “is still a baby. So, Laila, it’s on you now. You’re our last romantic hope!”

Jamela threw a cushion at her, laughing. “I’m not a baby! I just... have priorities.”

“Yeah,” Alma teased, rolling her eyes, “like being the good girl of the group.”

“Someone has to be,” Jamela retorted, still laughing.

Laila smiled at them both, shaking her head. “You two are impossible. But seriously—he’s different. I don’t know where it’s going, but... I kind of want to find out.”

The room softened into laughter and gentle teasing again, but beneath it all, Jamela felt a strange tug in her chest. Outside, the Nairobi night stretched deep and silent, the hum of the city fading beneath the rhythm of three young women laughing.

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It was a lazy Friday afternoon, the kind that hummed with weekend anticipation. Jamela's small apartment was in chaos—clothes strewn across the bed, a half-zipped suitcase open on the floor, and Alma dramatically sprawled across the couch, watching Jamela pack as if it were the end of an era.

"Everybody has plans; now I'm all alone," Alma pouted, tossing a pillow at Laila. "You two are heartless. Abandoning me like this."

Laila caught the pillow midair and threw it right back. "Please," she laughed, "you'll probably find someone new to terrorize before the day ends. And besides—" she paused, grinning mischievously—"some of us have *better* plans."

Jamela glanced up briefly, folding a blouse with care. "Bram again?" she asked, though her tone was light and teasing.

Laila smirked. "Of course. I'm not wasting my Friday sitting around complaining." She adjusted her hair in the mirror. "We're meeting at the Pier later. I think this weekend might just outshine all of yours combined."

"Show-off," Alma muttered, sitting up. "You and your mysterious man. At least I'll have Netflix. And wine. Lots of wine."

Jamela just smiled, shaking her head as she zipped up her bag. "You'll survive, Alma."

“Hmm, you’re too excited to care,” Alma teased, eyeing her friend. “You’re packing like you’re never coming back.”

Jamela laughed, the sound warm and unbothered. “It’s just the weekend. I promised Grandma I’d visit. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh,” Laila said, exchanging a knowing look with Alma. “Next thing we know, she’s moving in there, milking cows and forgetting about us city girls.”

They all burst out laughing. The easy rhythm of their friendship filled the small apartment—Alma’s dramatics, Laila’s sharp wit, and Jamela’s calm warmth weaving together like familiar music.

When the laughter finally settled, Jamela sat on the edge of the bed and exhaled, a soft smile on her face. “You two are impossible,” she said.

“Maybe,” Laila replied, reaching for her bag. “But you’ll miss us anyway.”

Jamela smiled again, her eyes distant for a moment. “Yeah,” she said softly. “I already do.”

Outside, the sun dipped lower, painting the city in shades of amber. Each of them was headed toward a different kind of weekend.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The bus wheezed to a stop at the small, bustling market center, its brakes hissing like a sigh of relief.

Jamela stepped down, blinking against the golden afternoon sun that spilled over the village. The air was thick with dust and the scent of roasted maize, mingling with laughter and chatter that felt oddly familiar—alive, raw, and comforting in a way the city never was.

The narrow road leading from the bus stop was alive with movement. Traders sat beneath makeshift umbrellas, their voices rising in practiced rhythm.

“Madam, fresh mangoes! Sweet like honey!” one woman called, holding up a basket with a hopeful grin.

“Tomatoes, three for twenty!” Another shouted from across the path, slapping dust from her kitenge skirt.

Jamela smiled, clutching her small suitcase tighter as she maneuvered through the crowd. Every few steps, someone greeted her warmly, mistaking her for someone’s daughter or niece — the village had a way of never forgetting faces, even when it did.

She paused for a moment near a stall selling beadwork, her eyes catching on the colors—vibrant reds, deep blues, and golds shimmering in the light. For a fleeting second, she remembered the bracelets her grandmother used to make when she was little, the rhythmic clinking of beads on the veranda, and the smell of burning firewood in the distance.

Her phone buzzed. A message from her grandmother: *“Are you almost home, my dear? I’ve made your favorite. Don’t talk to too many strangers along the way.”*

Jamela smiled. That was Grace—still protective, still warm, even after all the years apart.

She tucked the phone back into her bag and continued walking, her steps steady now as the noise of the market faded behind her. The road narrowed, lined with acacia trees and the distant hum of evening crickets.

Somewhere beyond the bend lay her grandmother's compound—and with it, memories she didn't yet know were waiting to unravel.

The scent hit Jamela before she even stepped inside—the rich, earthy aroma of simmering stew, mingled with the faint smokiness of firewood. Inside, the small dining room glowed with lamplight, its familiar clutter unchanged: woven mats, enamel plates, and the little calendar that still hung crooked by the window.

Jamela sat cross-legged at the table, watching as Grace ladled generous portions of stew onto their plates. The broth shimmered with oil and color, dotted with tender pieces of goat meat and fresh herbs from the garden.

“Grandma,” Jamela said, eyes wide, “you made *this* yourself?”

Grace raised an eyebrow. “Who else would, my dear? The pot still remembers my hands.”

Jamela laughed and tore off a piece of soft ugali, dipping it into the stew. The first taste drew a quiet hum from her. She tried to speak, but the flavor—spicy, comforting, familiar—pulled her into silence. Instead, she ate with her hands, each bite more eager than the last.

Grace watched her, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. “I see the city hasn't spoiled you completely,” she teased.

Jamela grinned between mouthfuls. “It tried. But no restaurant could ever touch this.”

When she licked her fingers clean, Grace chuckled, shaking her head. “That's how I know you're truly home.”

They sat there a while, sharing the kind of quiet that didn't need words. Outside, crickets sang, and the night pressed close—gentle, familiar, alive.

Grace reached across the table, resting her hand lightly over Jamela's. "You came back right on time, child."

Jamela looked up, surprised by the tone. "Right on time for what?"

Grace only smiled, her eyes glinting with something unreadable. "You'll see. But first, eat. There's strength you'll be needing soon."

Grace rose from her chair, her joints creaking softly against the quiet. Without a word, she disappeared into the back of the room. Jamela leaned back, curiosity piqued, the aroma of the stew still clinging to the air.

When Grace returned, she was carrying a round, polished gourd—its surface smooth and deep brown, bound at the neck with a strip of leather. She set it on the table with a proud thud, eyes gleaming.

"This!" she declared, the corners of her mouth lifting into a triumphant smile.

Jamela tilted her head, intrigued. "What is it?"

Grace knelt to fish a glass from the rack tucked under the dining table. "Patience, child. You'll soon find out."

With practiced hands, she unsealed the gourd. A sharp, tangy scent filled the room—earthy and sour, yet somehow inviting. Jamela's eyes widened as Grace poured the thick, creamy liquid into two glasses.

The smell hit her first, making her gasp. "Oh!" she exclaimed, half laughing, half unsure.

Grace chuckled. "Fresh from Nandwa's herd this morning. *Mursik*. Real Kalenjin milk, aged just right."

Jamela couldn't resist. She reached eagerly for her glass and took a long, confident sip. The sour milk was cool and silky, coating her tongue with a strange, stinging tang that made her eyes widen and her lips curl into a smile.

She smacked her lips, delighted. "Oh, Grandma—this is *amazing!*"

Grace laughed, the sound rich and full. "Now you sound like your mother the first time she tried it. Thought I'd bewitched the milk!"

Jamela wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, still grinning. "This is the best meal ever. The city should know what it's missing."

Grace leaned back in her chair, satisfied. "Let them keep their fancy coffee and bottled water. Here, we drink what keeps the spirit strong."

They clinked their glasses together, and Jamela drank again, the taste already turning into memory.

The night deepened around them, the chorus of crickets now the only sound beyond the soft hum of their voices. The lamp on the table flickered, casting long shadows that swayed against the walls.

Grace's stories poured out in slow, rhythmic waves—tales of mischief and miracles, of Pamela as a barefoot girl racing through maize fields, her laughter carrying through the hills. Jamela chuckled between bites of roasted groundnuts, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Are you sure you're talking about *my* mother?" she teased. "Because the woman who raised me couldn't even stand a speck of dust on her shoes."

Grace cackled. "Ah! That's what happens when children grow up—they forget they once rolled in mud and ate guavas straight from the tree."

Their laughter filled the small room, warm and unguarded. But soon, Grace's tone softened. Her eyes grew distant as she spoke of other times—of the babies she had lost before Pamela, of nights spent praying for the strength to keep living.

Jamela listened, her smile fading into silence. Grace's voice trembled only once, when she said, "When God finally gave me Pamela, I swore I'd never let harm touch her—not even a shadow's worth. She became my whole heart."

Jamela reached across the table and clasped her grandmother's hand. "She was lucky to have you," she whispered.

Grace squeezed back gently. "No, child. *We* were lucky to have her."

The quiet that followed was heavy but tender, the kind that binds more than it breaks. Jamela's eyes stung; she didn't bother to hide the tears that slipped down her cheeks.

Then Grace smiled faintly, her gaze drifting somewhere far beyond the walls. "I still remember the day she told me she was expecting you. She was trembling, holding that secret like it was both a gift and a curse."

Jamela straightened in her chair, her heartbeat quickening. "Grandma..." she began softly. "Tell me about my father."

Grace blinked, the question catching her like a sudden wind. Her fingers froze around the rim of her glass.

For a long moment, she didn't speak. Only the lamp hissed.

Grace's lips parted, but no words came. Her gaze drifted to the lamp flame, trembling slightly in the still air. The question lingered there—heavy, demanding—but she couldn't find a place to begin.

Jamela waited, her hands clasped on the table. She could almost hear her grandmother's thoughts turning, the effort it took to reach back through time.

Then—*bzzz, bzzz*.

The sound startled them both. Grace blinked, fumbling for the phone on the side table. On the screen, a familiar name pulsed: **Pammy calling.**

She let out a long breath—a sigh that was part relief, part escape. “Ah,” she murmured. “Saved by the bell, hmm?”

Jamela smiled faintly, wiping her eyes. “Go on, Grandma. Don’t keep her waiting.”

Grace pressed *accept*, and the room lit up with Pamela’s face—glowing even through the grainy video. Her smile was wide, her voice bright.

“Mama! You’re still awake at this hour?”

Grace held the phone slightly away, angling it so both faces fit in the frame. “How could I sleep? Look who’s here with me.”

Pamela’s eyes widened. “Jamela! My baby girl!”

“Hi, Mum!” Jamela waved, grinning despite the tears that still clung to her lashes.

For a few moments, the screen filled with laughter and overlapping voices. Pamela asked a dozen questions—when did you arrive, how’s the village, have you eaten?—and Grace answered every one with proud delight.

“I made her *ugali* and goat stew,” Grace said, her tone triumphant. “And she’s already finished half a gourd of *adila*!”

Pamela laughed. “So soon? She’s officially one of us now.”

Jamela chuckled. “It’s... growing on me,” she said, glancing at the gourd still sitting on the table.

Grace and Pamela shared a knowing look—one only mothers could exchange. Then Pamela’s voice softened. “Mama, thank you... for welcoming her, for showing her what home really means.”

Grace’s eyes shimmered again, her smile tender. “It’s about time she knew her roots, my daughter. These stories belong to her as much as to us.”

Pamela nodded, her expression bright with pride. “She’ll learn everything. The land, the customs, the songs—even the ones you think she’s too modern to like.”

Jamela laughed, shaking her head. “Challenge accepted.”

For a while, the three generations talked and teased, their voices weaving through time and distance—one thread of love binding them across screens and years.

When the call finally ended, Grace sat for a moment in silence, her phone still in her hand. The tension that had hung between them earlier now felt softer, almost forgotten.

Jamela leaned closer. “Grandma?”

Grace smiled gently, eyes far away. “Tomorrow,” she said. “We’ll talk about him tomorrow.”

And outside, the crickets sang louder, as though keeping their secret for just one more night.

Morning crept into the room softly, carried by birdsong and the smell of dew settling on red earth. The rooster’s call came late—perhaps outdone by the laughter of children already chasing goats across the yard.

Jamela stretched under the thin blanket, her muscles stiff but her heart oddly light. Outside, she could hear Grace humming—low and sure—an old tune that swayed like the wind through maize leaves.

By the time Jamela stepped out, the sun was already spilling gold across the hills. Grace stood by the fence, a cane in one hand, her scarf tied neatly around her head.

“You sleep like a city girl,” she teased. “The sun nearly found you dreaming.”

Jamela smiled sheepishly. “I’m adjusting to the village clock.”

“Mm. The land waits for no one,” Grace said, handing her a woven basket. “Come—we’re going to the farm. You’ll see what keeps this old woman young.”

The path to the fields wound through homesteads and patches of wildflowers. Jamela greeted neighbors as they passed: women balancing water pots, men herding cattle, and children giggling as they followed the two women at a distance.

When they reached the farm, the land stretched before them in green waves—neat rows of yams, sorghum, and sweet potatoes shimmering under the sun. A few laborers bent low among the crops, pulling weeds and loosening soil with their hoes.

Grace’s voice grew animated as she walked Jamela through the fields. “This is where your mother learned to work. She used to complain that the soil scratched her hands. But look—see how soft it is when you respect it.”

Jamela knelt, letting the earth crumble between her fingers. “It’s richer than I imagined.”

Grace nodded proudly. “Every grain of this land has a story. Every crop carries someone’s sweat. That’s how you know it’s alive.”

A young man nearby looked up from his work and waved. “Good morning, Mama Grace!”

Grace lifted her hand in response. “Morning, Otieno! Don’t forget to check the yams near the stream—last week they were still too tender.”

Jamela watched the ease with which Grace commanded the space, her voice blending with the wind, her presence rooted in everything around her.

There was a peace here—a rhythm—that the city had never known.

Grace turned to her, smiling softly. “You see, Jamela, this is the kind of wealth people forget to count. The kind that feeds not just the body, but the soul.”

Jamela nodded, breathing in deeply. “I think I understand now why Mum misses this place so much.”

Grace chuckled. “And one day, you’ll miss it too.”

They walked on together, the basket swinging gently between them, the fields whispering secrets that only the land could tell.

The afternoon sun blazed high, pressing its heat onto the red earth as Grace and Jamela made their way back from the farm. Their feet were dusted brown, the hem of Jamela’s skirt flecked with dry soil. They chatted lightly—Jamela teasing about how Grace managed to keep up such a brisk pace.

They were almost at the gate when a shadow moved across the path.

Timon stepped out from behind the jacaranda tree. Small, wiry, with a cap pulled low and a toothpick dancing lazily between his teeth.

“*Mama Grace*,” he drawled, a thin smile cutting across his face, “I see you’re still strong. The sun hasn’t slowed you yet.”

Grace froze mid-step. Her hand, still holding the basket, trembled slightly. The color drained from her face.

“Timon,” she murmured, voice barely steady.

Jamela glanced between them, her smile fading. She sensed the shift immediately—the warmth of the day giving way to something cold and taut.

Timon took a few slow steps closer, his eyes flicking to Jamela with interest. “And who’s this pretty one? Your granddaughter?”

Grace’s hand shot out instinctively, pulling Jamela behind her. “Leave her out of this,” she said sharply.

Timon’s smirk deepened. “Ah... so she doesn’t know.”

The words seemed to slice through the still air. Grace’s eyes flashed, her jaw tightening. “Enough,” she hissed. “Whatever you came for, I’ll settle you soon. But you’ll keep her away from this.”

Timon’s grin faltered for a moment, replaced by a knowing look. He nodded slowly, letting the toothpick fall from his mouth. “I’ll hold you to that, Mama Grace.”

He stepped aside, his presence lingering like a shadow long after he disappeared down the path.

Jamela touched her grandmother’s arm. “Grandma... who was that?”

Grace swallowed hard, forcing a weak smile. “No one you need to worry about, my child.”

But her voice betrayed her. It trembled at the edges—like a truth fighting to stay buried.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Behind them, the wind rustled through the trees, carrying whispers that neither woman dared to name.

Night had fallen quietly, wrapping the village in a stillness broken only by the croak of distant frogs and the low hiss of wind through banana leaves. The air inside the house was heavy—thick with the smell of woodsmoke and unease.

Jamela lay awake, staring at the woven ceiling, replaying the afternoon in her mind: the man, the look in her grandmother's eyes, and the name *Timon* hanging like a ghost between them.

Then she heard it—a soft, trembling voice from the next room.

She slipped from her bed and padded to the doorway. The faint glow of a lantern spilled across the sitting room. Grace sat on the edge of her chair, phone pressed to her ear, her free hand gripping her shawl tight around her shoulders.

“Yes... I know what I promised,” Grace whispered. Her voice quivered, every word a careful plea.

“Please, give me just a little more time. I’m not refusing, I just—”

She paused, listening. Jamela caught the sharp tone from the other end—low, male, threatening.

Grace's eyes widened. “No, no, don't come here. I said I'll settle it. You'll have your money by the end of the week.”

Her hand shook so violently that the phone nearly slipped from her grasp.

“Please,” she whispered again. “Not in front of her. I beg you.”

A heavy silence followed, then the line went dead.

Jamela took a tentative step forward. “Grandma?”

Grace turned sharply, startled. Her eyes were glassy, her lips trembling. “You—you shouldn't have heard that,” she stammered, lowering the phone to her lap.

Jamela crossed the room and knelt beside her. “I couldn’t help it. You’re shaking.”

Grace tried to wave her off, but her hands refused to obey. The strength that usually anchored her had vanished. Jamela reached out gently, guiding her grandmother to lean against her shoulder.

“Breathe, Grandma. It’s okay,” Jamela whispered.

Grace’s breathing came in shallow bursts, tears slipping down her lined cheeks. “I didn’t want you to see me like this,” she murmured.

“It’s alright,” Jamela said softly. “You don’t have to hide it from me.”

She rose quickly, fetched a glass of water from the jug, and returned to find Grace trembling still. She held the glass to her grandmother’s lips, steadying her hand.

“Just a sip,” Jamela urged.

Grace obeyed, the water spilling slightly as she swallowed. Her throat worked slowly, painfully.

When she finished, Jamela set the glass down and rubbed her grandmother’s back in slow, soothing circles. “There,” she murmured. “You’re safe now.”

For a moment, Grace leaned into her, eyes closed, her body heavy with exhaustion and secrets.

“Whatever this is,” Jamela said quietly, “you don’t have to carry it alone.”

Grace didn’t answer. But her silence spoke louder than words—an unspoken promise that the truth, once feared, was inching closer to light.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The city pulsed differently on Fridays—anxious, electric, alive. Laila slipped through the crowd at the waterfront, her heels clicking against the wooden pier as evening light shimmered on the waves. The air was humid and smelled of perfume, with laughter rising from the nearby restaurants.

Bram was already waiting at their usual spot—a quiet table by the railing, two glasses of wine half-filled, condensation tracing slow paths down the stems. He stood when he saw her, smiling the way he always did, easy and sure.

“You’re late,” he said, though there was amusement in his tone.

Laila rolled her eyes, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “You try getting through traffic on a Friday with half the city heading out of the city.”

He pulled out her chair. “Worth the wait, though.”

She smirked, sitting down. “Flattery before food? You must really want something.”

Bram chuckled, leaning back. “Only your company—and maybe a promise that this weekend won’t end with you storming off like last time.”

Laila tilted her glass toward him. “No promises. You like me better unpredictable.”

Their laughter melted into the hum of the evening crowd. For a while, they talked easily—about work, the city, and the new art exhibit she wanted to see. The sun sank lower, and the sea turned a deep shade of violet.

Then Bram’s tone softened. “You know, Laila, we’ve been doing this for a while now. The weekend trips, the dinners... us. It’s starting to feel—”

“Dangerous?” She teased, though something in her voice trembled.

He smiled faintly. “Real.”

Laila looked out at the water, her reflection rippling against the waves. The word lingered between them—*real*—and for a moment, she didn’t know whether to be thrilled or terrified.

“Then let’s make it a weekend worth remembering,” she said finally, reaching for his hand.

Bram’s fingers closed around hers, warm and steady. “That’s the plan.”

The rain had started sometime after midnight—soft, rhythmic, tapping faintly against the balcony glass.

Laila stirred under the weight of the sheets, Bram’s arm heavy across her waist. She carefully slid out of bed, padding barefoot across the dimly lit room toward the bathroom.

On her way back, a faint glimmer from Bram’s desk caught her eye—the corner of a folder left half-open, papers fanned out like a careless secret. She reached for it, intending to close it, but her elbow brushed the edge, sending the file tumbling to the floor.

“Damn it,” she whispered.

She crouched to gather the scattered sheets. As she did, a photograph slipped free and fluttered down beside her foot. Laila picked it up—and froze.

It was a woman’s portrait, slightly aged but elegant. Her eyes were kind but carried a gravity that pulled at something in Laila’s memory.

“Looks familiar,” Laila murmured, squinting at the image in the dim light. She turned it over—no name.

She slid the photo back into the file, but something on the page below caught her attention: **Jamela Odhiambo**. Her pulse quickened.

“What the—”

Laila flipped through the papers. There were names, reports, financial records, and a detailed background summary—Pamela Sims, next of kin: Jamela Odhiambo. It wasn’t just a file. It was a dossier.

“Jamela?” she breathed, voice trembling. “What is Bram doing with all this info about Jamela?”

Her hand hovered over the photo again. She lifted it closer to the lamplight. “And isn’t this Jamela’s mother?” she whispered.

The rain outside grew heavier, drumming louder against the glass.

Behind her, a soft creak broke the silence. Laila’s heart lurched. She turned sharply—Bram stood in the doorway, half-shadowed, watching her.

His voice was calm, but his eyes were not.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

Laila swallowed hard, the photo still clutched in her hand.

“Bram,” she said slowly, “why do you have Jamela’s file?”

Bram stepped into the light, shirtless, his expression unreadable. “You shouldn’t be going through my things, Laila.”

Laila straightened, clutching the photo against her chest. “Then maybe you shouldn’t leave *files* lying around with people’s personal information—people I actually *know*.”

He exhaled through his nose, slow, controlled. “It’s not what you think.”

“Oh, really?” Her voice cracked slightly, but she stood her ground. “Because it looks exactly like what I think. You have Jamela’s name—my *best friend’s* name—buried in your secret paperwork, and this—” she waved the photo at him “—this is her mother. Care to explain why?”

Bram crossed the room with deliberate ease, each step measured. “It’s business, Laila. Sensitive work. You know I handle private investigations sometimes.”

Laila’s laugh came sharp and disbelieving. “Private investigations? Don’t insult me. You said you worked in *logistics*. Since when does logistics involve stalking people’s families?”

He froze for a moment, then smiled thinly. “You’re tired. You’ve had wine. Let’s talk about this in the morning.”

“Don’t.” Her voice dropped, cold and trembling. “Don’t you dare patronize me.”

Bram’s jaw tightened. “You’re making this bigger than it is.”

“No, Bram. *You* made it bigger. You’ve been hiding things since day one—vanishing for days, the vague phone calls, now this.” She waved at the scattered papers, her anger bleeding into fear. “What are you into? Why Jamela? Why her mother?”

He looked past her toward the rain-soaked window. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Then *make* me understand!”

He turned sharply, eyes flashing. “It’s complicated, Laila. And it’s dangerous. The less you know, the better.”

There it was—that word. *Dangerous*. It hit her like a slap. She stared at him, realization dawning slow and cold.

“I should have listened to my gut,” she whispered. “You always were too smooth. Too careful.”

Bram took a step toward her, hand out. “Laila, don’t—”

She recoiled. “Don’t touch me.”

The air between them thickened, electric with mistrust. For a long moment, only the rain filled the silence.

Finally, Laila pressed the photo back onto his desk, her hand shaking. “You can keep your secrets, Bram.

But stay away from Jamela. If you hurt her—or if this is some kind of sick game—you’ll regret ever meeting me.”

She turned and stormed toward the bedroom, gathering her things with trembling hands.

Behind her, Bram stood motionless, his expression unreadable. Then, softly, almost to himself, he murmured, “She was never supposed to find out.”

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Laila’s breath fogged in the cool night air as she stood by the door, her coat half on, eyes wild with disbelief. Bram’s voice followed her down the hallway, calm yet sharp as a blade.

“Laila, wait—just listen!”

She didn’t. The elevator doors slid shut on his voice, leaving only her reflection—shaken, tearful, furious.

Outside, the city buzzed with indifferent life. Laila stumbled to the curb, heart thudding, the photo of Pamela burned into her mind. She raised her arm and hailed a cab.

As it slowed, her phone buzzed violently in her palm. *Unknown number*. She ignored it. Slid into the back seat. Slammed the door.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

She blinked, dazed. “Just—drive. I’ll tell you where later.”

The cab pulled into the streaming night, headlights slicing through rain. Laila leaned her head against the window, replaying the scene—the file, Jamela’s name, Bram’s deflection. *James? Jamela’s father?* The thought made her stomach twist.

She grabbed her phone, scrolling to Alma’s number. It rang once. Twice. Straight to voicemail.

“Damn it,” she muttered, rubbing her forehead. Her hands trembled as she debated whether to call Jamela. *Tell her now? Or wait until she’s back?* The secret pulsed in her chest, heavy and hot. “God, what have I walked into?” she whispered.

Far away, under a sky smeared with clouds, Jamela jolted awake to the sound of labored breathing.

“Grandma?” she whispered.

Grace sat hunched at the edge of the bed, coughing violently, her frail body wracked with spasms. Each cough sounded like it tore something deep inside.

Jamela sprang up, panic rising. “Grandma! What’s wrong?”

Grace waved her off weakly, gasping. “It’s... it’s nothing. Just a chill—” She winced, clutching her chest.

Jamela’s heart pounded. She grabbed her phone, scrolling through contacts she barely used. No doctors.

No neighbors’ numbers. No one. Her hands shook as she dialed the only number that made sense.

Her mother picked up almost instantly. “Jamela? Why are you calling at this hour?”

“Mum—it’s Grandma. She’s—she can’t breathe properly. She’s coughing badly. I don’t know what to do!”

There was silence, then a sharp intake of breath. “Listen to me. There’s a small clinic near the old dispensary, just past the chief’s camp. Do you hear me?”

Jamela nodded, tears stinging her eyes. “Yes, but—it’s so dark. There’s no transport. I can’t call a cab out here.”

Her mother’s voice trembled now. “Find someone, anyone. Knock on doors if you must. Just get her to that clinic. Please, Jamela.”

Jamela’s throat tightened. She looked around helplessly at the dark compound, the sound of crickets thick in the night. She manages to get a neighbor, Mzee Okoth. The two hold Grace as they walk her out to the clinic.

Jamela half-ran, half-stumbled through the uneven path, Grace’s arm draped over her shoulder. The night air was cold and wet, each breath burning her throat. Dogs barked in the distance. A rooster crowed somewhere too early.

“Hold on, Grandma, please—just a little more,” Jamela whispered, her voice breaking.

Grace’s head lolled weakly against her. “I’m... I’m fine, child. Just tired...”

Jamela’s tears mixed with sweat as she caught the dim light of the clinic ahead—an old tin-roofed building with a flickering bulb at the entrance.

At the clinic, the room smelled of antiseptic and dust. A nurse hurried over, eyes widening at the sight of Grace’s pale, trembling frame.

“She’s been coughing, can’t breathe properly—please, help her!” Jamela gasped, out of breath.

“Put her here,” the nurse directed, motioning to a stretcher. Two attendants appeared, rolling Grace away toward the small treatment room. Jamela followed but was stopped at the door.

“Wait outside, please.”

Jamela froze. “But—she’s my grandmother—”

“Outside!”

The door shut in her face. She stood there, barefoot, her pajamas streaked with dirt, her hands trembling around her phone. The minutes dragged, filled only by the faint beeps of machines and muffled voices.

Then, the doctor stepped out—mid-40s, weary eyes.

“Are you a relative?”

Jamela nodded quickly, heart pounding.

“She’s having a heart attack,” he said, voice grave but steady. “We’re stabilizing her, but she needs advanced care. We’ve called an ambulance to transfer her to the referral hospital in town.”

Jamela’s knees buckled. She gripped the wall for balance. “A heart attack?”

“Yes. Do you have any family we can contact?”

Jamela looked at her phone, tears blurring her vision. “I—I’ll call my mother.”

The doctor nodded. “Be quick. The ambulance is on its way.”

The horizon bled faint pink as the ambulance arrived, sirens slicing through the dawn quiet. Jamela stood by the doors, barefoot on the cold ground, clutching her phone like a lifeline.

Grace was wheeled out, an oxygen mask strapped to her face, IV lines trailing. Jamela climbed into the ambulance beside her, gripping her grandmother’s frail hand.

“It’s okay, Grandma. You’re going to be fine. Just hang in there,” she whispered through tears.

The siren wailed as they sped through the dusty road toward the city. Jamela's reflection in the window looked ghostlike—eyes red, face streaked with dust and grief.

An hour later, the ambulance doors burst open. A team of medics in blue scrubs took over, speaking in urgent fragments—

“BP’s dropping.”

“Push 5 milligrams.”

“ICU, now!”

Jamela stumbled after them, feet aching, tears streaming freely.

They vanished behind the ICU doors, which closed with a heavy click, leaving her outside in the sterile hallway.

For a moment, the world was utterly silent. Then, Jamela slid down the wall, phone still in hand, the sound of her own sobs filling the corridor.

The white walls blurred before Jamela's eyes. She sat hunched on a hard plastic bench outside the ICU, her bare feet tucked under her. The faint hum of machines and the rhythmic squeak of nurses' shoes filled the still air.

Her phone buzzed violently on her lap. The vibration jolted her back to reality. She blinked, disoriented, and glanced at the screen: **Mommy CALLING.**

Her throat tightened. She swiped to answer. “M–mama...”

“Jamela? What’s happening? You sound—sweetheart, breathe, talk to me!” Pamela's voice cracked through the speaker, thick with panic.

Jamela tried, but her words tangled in sobs. “She—she couldn’t breathe... I didn’t know what to do... the clinic—then the ambulance—now they—they said it was her heart...” Her voice dissolved into raw, broken cries.

Pamela’s silence was heavy, but her tone stayed firm, maternal. “Listen to me, my girl. I need you to calm down. Please. Take a deep breath. Can you do that for me?”

Jamela pressed the phone against her ear, trying to match her mother’s slow breathing. Her chest ached, but the sobs began to fade.

“That’s it,” Pamela murmured softly. “Now tell me everything, from the start.”

Jamela sniffled, wiped her face with the back of her hand, and forced herself to speak clearly. “It started last night. Grandma got a call... she looked terrified. I didn’t know who it was, but she said something about a debt, and... someone named Timon. He threatened to come here.”

Pamela inhaled sharply on the other end. “Timon?”

“You know him?” Jamela asked, startled by the shift in her mother’s tone.

Pamela hesitated. “No... I—no, I don’t think so.” Her voice wavered. “Jamela, are you sure that’s what she said?”

“Yes, Mama. And she was crying. I think she’s been hiding something. Something serious.” Jamela glanced toward the ICU doors, the beeping machines faintly audible beyond. “He scared her so much she collapsed.”

A pause. Then Pamela said quietly, “This man—if he’s still around the village—don’t go looking for him. Promise me that.”

Jamela’s jaw tightened. “I can’t promise that.”

“Jamela—”

“No, Mum. I need to understand what’s happening. If this man caused her stress, if he’s been harassing her... I need to know why.”

Her tone was calm now, but her eyes burned with quiet determination.

Pamela sighed, a sound caught between fear and fatigue. “You’re your mother’s daughter,” she whispered under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Pamela said quickly. “I’ll try to get there as soon as I can. Just stay close to her, okay?”

Jamela nodded, clutching the phone tighter. “I will.”

When the call ended, she stared through the glass at the faint figure of Grace lying still beneath white sheets, her chest rising and falling with the rhythm of machines.

Jamela whispered to herself, voice barely audible—

“I’ll find him. Whoever he is. I swear I’ll find him.”

Pamela sat on the edge of her bed, the early light streaming through half-drawn curtains. Her eyes were swollen from a night of tears and worry. A half-packed overnight bag lay open beside her — a mess of clothes, papers, and a trembling hand that hadn’t stopped shaking since the call from Jamela.

She stared at her phone screen. One name glared back at her.

James.

Her thumb hovered.

After all these years...

She pressed *call*.

The ringing tone filled the room — once, twice—then, a click.

Pamela exhaled sharply, relief flooding through her. “Thank God you answered,” she began, her voice cracking. “It’s been so long, James. Listen, I—”

A sharp, unfamiliar voice cut her off.

“Who is this?”

Pamela froze. “Oh... Salma. It’s you.”

A long pause followed. The kind that tightened air.

“Can I speak to James, please?”

On the other end, Salma’s breath hitched, then steadied. “He’s still asleep. Can I take a message for him?”

Pamela hesitated. “It’s personal. I’d really prefer to talk to him directly.”

Salma’s tone hardened, calm but dripping with suspicion. “Well. I’m his fiancée. Whatever’s personal to him... is personal to *me* too.”

Pamela blinked, the words hitting like a slap. For a moment, her throat closed around unspoken sentences — years of silence and buried truth pressing at the edges.

“I—” she started, then stopped herself. Her resolve melted into defeat. “It’s fine. I’ll call later.”

And she hung up.

The phone slipped from her hand, landing softly on the duvet. Pamela stared ahead, her reflection faintly visible in the wardrobe mirror — a woman torn between past love and present fear. She whispered under her breath, voice breaking, “He’ll never get to them on time.”

The phone still glowed in Salma’s hand. She didn’t move for several seconds, eyes fixed on the screen.

Pamela.

The name alone was enough to set her blood simmering. Slowly, she turned to look at James — asleep, peaceful, oblivious. His arm hung lazily over the side of the bed.

Salma’s jaw tightened. She brushed a strand of hair from his forehead, her expression softening for a moment — then hardening again.

Her mind spun. Pamela calling this early, *personal* matters, that tone in her voice... No. It wasn't a coincidence.

“Not again,” she muttered, setting the phone down carefully on the bedside table. She sat at the edge of the bed, staring at James’ sleeping face.

She knew he loved her. She knew it. But, *she's back*.

The thought pulsed, hot and corrosive.

She stood, crossed her arms, and paced to the window, staring out at the city skyline. Her reflection glared back at her—controlled, composed, but barely.

Pamela’s voice still echoed in her mind. *Can I speak to James, please?* The nerve. After all these years.

Salma clenched her jaw. “You’re not walking back into his life,” she whispered under her breath. “Not now when things are finally well between us.”

She turned, looking back at James—still asleep, unaware of the battle already brewing around him.

Her eyes hardened.

“I’ll make sure she stays gone this time.”

**** **** ****

The key slipped twice before it finally caught. Laila pushed the door open and stumbled inside, the faint glow of the city filtering through the blinds. The rain had turned into a soft drizzle, but her hair and coat were still soaked through.

She closed the door with her foot and leaned against it, eyes closed for a moment. Her heart still beat too fast. The silence pressed in on her like a weight.

Droplets of rain trailed down her arms as she clutched her purse to her chest. She fumbled for the switch, flooding the small living room with a warm, muted light. Everything looked painfully ordinary—her couch, the half-read book on the table, the empty glass from the night before.

Laila dropped her purse onto the couch and collapsed beside it, her body sinking deep into the cushions. She exhaled shakily, a sound halfway between a sigh and a sob.

Her phone buzzed on the table. She snatched it up—**no new messages**. With trembling fingers, she dialed again.

“Come on, Alma,” she muttered, pacing now. The ring tone echoed through the quiet apartment. Once. Twice. Then voicemail. Again.

She threw her head back. “God, you are *so* useless when it actually matters!” she shouted, her voice cracking.

Silence.

She rubbed her face with both hands, groaning softly. “Maybe it’s the wine... I shouldn’t have had that last glass.” Her words slurred slightly from fatigue, not from drinking. “I shouldn’t have gone to Bram at all.”

Frustration surged. She yanked off her wet coat, letting it fall to the floor, followed by her shoes. She stumbled toward the bedroom, shedding her damp clothes one by one until she reached the bed.

The sheets were cold against her skin as she fell face-first onto the mattress. Her muffled voice broke through the stillness:

“What the hell did I get myself into...”

She groaned, rolling onto her back. Her eyes traced the ceiling, the faint patter of rain tapping against the window. Her mind wouldn’t stop replaying Bram’s voice—calm, evasive, wrong.

Her phone buzzed once more. She sat up sharply—but it was just a spam notification. She let the phone drop to the floor.

For a moment, everything went still.

Then, in a small, broken whisper, she said to the empty room,

“Jamela... what if he’s after you?”

She turned over, pulling the covers up to her chin, but sleep didn’t come easy. The rain outside drummed on, relentless and knowing.

**** **** ****

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The lunchtime crowd hummed around them—cutlery clinking, laughter rising and fading like background music. But at the corner table near the window, three women sat in an island of silence.

Jamela stirred her cup absently, watching the steam curl into the air. Her eyes were tired, ringed with sleepless nights. Across from her, Alma slouched in her chair, sunglasses perched on her head, sipping a cold soda with slow, deliberate gulps. Laila sat beside her, quiet and fidgeting, tracing circles on the rim of her glass.

The sunlight filtered weakly through the glass, painting muted patterns across the table.

“Food’s taking forever today,” Alma muttered finally, her voice thick from exhaustion.

Jamela managed a small smile. “Maybe it’s just the lunch rush.”

Her voice was soft, distant.

Laila looked up, studying her friend’s face. “Any news about your grandma?”

Jamela hesitated. “They’re moving her to Nairobi tomorrow morning. The doctors say she’s stable enough for transfer. But...” She trailed off, her gaze dropping to her untouched drink. “They found a clot. She needs surgery.”

Alma’s expression sobered instantly. “Oh, Jami...”

Jamela shook her head quickly, forcing a fragile smile. “It’s fine. Mum’s with her. I’ll join them after work.”

The three fell silent again. The hum of the café filled the void between them.

Alma finally broke it with a nervous laugh. “This is so weird. Us—quiet. People probably think we’re mourning someone.”

Jamela’s lips twitched. “We kind of are,” she murmured.

Laila’s fork paused midair. “Don’t say that.”

“I mean,” Jamela continued softly, “not death exactly. But it feels like something’s ending. I don’t know what.”

Laila’s stomach tightened. The words landed too close to home. She took a sip of her drink to hide the tremor in her hands.

Alma glanced between them, sensing the tension. “Okay, enough sad talk,” she said, forcing a grin. “We’ll go visit Grace this weekend. Bring her flowers. Maybe she’ll yell at us for crowding her bed.”

Jamela gave a weak laugh. “She probably will.”

“Good,” Alma said, pointing her straw like a sword. “That’s how we’ll know she’s getting better.”

Jamela nodded, eyes glistening as she blinked back tears.

Laila looked at her, guilt and affection warring inside her. She wanted to reach across the table and tell her everything—the file, the photo, Bram’s lie. But the words stuck like stones in her throat.

Not now, she told herself. Not while she’s breaking.

So she smiled instead. “Yeah. Flowers sound good.”

The waiter arrived with their food, the clatter of plates startling them from their thoughts. The three women murmured thanks, picking at their meals half-heartedly.

For the first time in years, they ate without chatter, each lost in her own storm.

From the outside, they looked like any trio of friends on a lunch break. But beneath the calm surface, things were shifting—quietly, irreversibly.

After lunch, Jamela returned to her desk. The rhythmic hum of printers and muffled chatter filled the open-plan office. Jamela sat at her desk, eyes fixed on her laptop screen, a spreadsheet glowing in front of her. Rows of numbers, transaction codes, and account names—her world suddenly distilled into data.

Her pen tapped against the desk. Something wasn't adding up.

She leaned closer, scrolling through her grandmother's bank statements. Loan disbursements. Credit repayments. Interest deductions.

Then—a name that made her blood run cold.

Timau Credit Holdings.

Jamela frowned. "That's... not a microfinance," she whispered. The name triggered a faint memory—she had seen it once before in a company report at work.

She quickly cross-referenced the account number with corporate records. After several minutes of searching, a revelation hit her like a slap.

Timau Credit Holdings – Subsidiary of Bram Holdings Limited.

Jamela froze. "Bram?" she breathed out. "Laila's Bram?"

Her fingers trembled as she minimized the window, staring blankly at her reflection in the dark screen.

"Why would Bram's company be connected to Grandma's loan? What the hell is going on?"

She needed to talk to someone—fast.

Jamela walked briskly down the corridor, clutching a folder to her chest. Her heart pounded in her ears.

Alma would know what to do—she always did.

But when Jamela reached Alma's desk, the chair was empty. The office was quiet, save for the faint hum of the air conditioner. Alma's **laptop** sat open, screen unlocked.

Jamela hesitated. "Maybe she just stepped out..."

Just as she turned to leave, a notification pinged at the corner of the screen.

New email: Jonathan Sims.

Jamela's hand froze on the desk. *Jonathan Sims*. Her stepfather.

She shouldn't. She really shouldn't.

But curiosity—and fear—took over. Her eyes darted to the hallway, then back to the screen. She leaned in and clicked.

EMAIL SUBJECT:

Shipment Details – Confidential

EMAIL BODY:

Greetings!

I'll be sending in the products on Tuesday. They will be loaded into a brand-new Audi—a gift for my daughter, Jamela. It's her birthday this Thursday. Please receive the gift before she does so that you can unpack our goods. She is not to be privy of our dealings. Your discretion is appreciated.

– Jonathan Sims

Jamela's breath caught. Her name. *Her name.*

She reread the message, eyes wide with disbelief.

A gift. A car. Products. *Unpack our goods.*

Her stomach twisted. "What dealings?" she whispered. "What the hell are you into, Dad?"

Her mind spun—Grace's debt, Bram's loan firm, and now this email linking her stepfather to Alma's boss. It was too much to be coincidence.

She backed away from the desk, pulse racing. The office felt suddenly cold.

Jamela's phone buzzed in her pocket—another hospital update from her mother. Grace's condition was worsening.

She shut her eyes, clutching the phone. Everything was unraveling at once—family, friends, trust.

When she opened her eyes again, there was only resolve.

"I'm going to find out the truth."

**** **** ****

A week after Grace's burial, Jamela sits at her desk, muted tones fill the open workspace — the hum of printers, the faint clatter of keyboards, and the sterile buzz of fluorescent lights.

Jamela sits at her desk, a fortress of spreadsheets, files, and post-it notes around her. Her eyes are red but dry now — the tears had stopped days ago, replaced by something colder. Her fingers move quickly across the keyboard, her expression set, focused, unreadable.

She's on the phone.

"...Yes, I understand the terms. But who signed the disbursement? I need the record of who approved Grace Akinyi's loan... Yes, I'll hold."

Her voice is calm — too calm.

The kind of calm that only comes after grief hardens into purpose.

A notification pings on her phone. Group Chat: *"The Powerpuff Girls 🦋"*

Unread messages scroll endlessly: memes, brunch plans, voice notes from Alma, check-ins from Laila.

Jamela's "last seen" was three days ago.

The chat pings again:

ALMA: *"Hey babe, haven't heard from you. We're worried. You okay?"*

LAILA: *"Thinking of you, J."*

Jamela sees the message preview on her phone, stares for a second, then flips the phone face-down and resumes typing.

The following day at lunch, Alma sits alone at their usual corner table, stirring her coffee absently. Her bright, chatty self is dimmed. She keeps checking the door, hoping Jamela will walk in.

Laila arrives late, sunglasses on, face pale. She sits quietly across from Alma.

Alma forces a smile.

"You heard from her?"

Laila shakes her head, voice faint. "She's not answering my texts."

Alma sighs. "She's grieving, I get it. But... it's like she shut the world out."

They fall into silence. The air is heavy, filled with the unspoken weight of loss and guilt.

Laila's fingers tremble as she reaches for her cup. "I can't even look her in the eye, Alma."

Alma looks up, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Laila opens her mouth but can't find the words. *Not yet.*

She looks away. "Forget it."

At night in her apartment, stacks of paper clutter her coffee table — loan documents, company registrations, and scribbled notes. The only light comes from her laptop screen, casting her face in a pale blue glow.

Pinned to the wall:

TIMAU CREDIT HOLDINGS → BRAM HOLDINGS LTD → ARCHANGEL FINANCE GROUP

Strings of yarn connect names, photos, and logos.

At the center of it all, a photo of **Grace**, smiling.

Jamela stares at it, jaw tight.

"I'll find them, Grandma," she whispers. "Every one of them."

Her phone vibrates.

ALMA: *"Call me please. I'm really worried."*

She ignores it.

Then another notification pops up.

Incoming Email: *"Re: Loan Account Closure – Timon Mwangi."*

Jamela opens it instantly. Her eyes widen as she reads.

EMAIL BODY:

Dear Ms. Jamela,

Per your inquiry, we request you to stop digging into graves you can't fill. Grace offered her plots of land as collateral. We have already seized all we can to close her account. Be advised.

Timon Mwangi.

Jamela's hand tightens into a fist. Her pulse races.

Her breath hitched. *Stop digging into graves you can't fill.*

The words echoed in her mind — cold, final, mocking.

Her hands trembled as she re-read the message. The audacity. The cruelty. Her grandmother's life had been reduced to a "closed account."

She wanted to scream, to call someone, anyone — but who?

The police? The regulators? She had no tangible proof. The names were ghosts behind shell companies.

Her chest tightened as anger began to pulse through her veins, steady and hot. "You'll pay for this," she whispered under her breath. "All of you."

She pushed the laptop aside and grabbed a folder from the floor — the one containing printouts from Alma's computer, the email from Jonathan Sims, and bank records she had quietly copied from Archangel's internal files.

Her grandmother's loan was *only one part* of something much larger.

Her stepfather's company, **Jojo Investments**, was at the top of several suspicious transactions — coded transfers and supplier deals with names that matched *Archangel Vehicle Imports* and others.

And James — her mother’s old flame, Alma’s boss — was right in the middle of it all.

She scribbled connections furiously on a notepad:

**Jojo Investments→ Archangel Vehicle Imports→ Bram Holdings → Timau Credit → Timon
Mwangi**

A full circle.

Her pen stopped mid-sentence.

If her suspicions were right, Grace’s loan wasn’t just a predatory deal — it was part of a *laundering network*.

She leaned back, exhaling shakily. “James and Sims...” she whispered. “You’re the real monsters here.”

The quiet of the apartment pressed in. A car passed outside, headlights slicing through the blinds and casting shadows over the wall where Grace’s photo hung.

Jamela stared at it, her resolve hardening like stone.

She had lost her grandmother to their greed — and she wasn’t about to lose herself to fear.

She opened her phone and began typing a new message:

Alma: I need to talk. Urgently.

**** **** ****

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A sleek digital screen displayed charts and figures as **James** sat at the head of the long glass table.

The department heads spoke in turns, droning through profit summaries, quarterly forecasts, and upcoming audits.

James wasn't really listening. His mind wandered — half on the numbers, half on the uneasy feeling that had been gnawing at him all week.

Then—his phone buzzed on the table. **SALMA** flashing across the screen.

He frowned.

Not now.

He silenced it and typed a quick message:

In a meeting. I'll call you back.

He slid the phone aside and nodded absently as Hamza, his CFO, spoke about offshore accounts and investor compliance.

Then—the phone buzzed again.

Same name. Same urgency.

James glanced around the room, irritation crossing his face. “Excuse me,” he said, forcing a polite smile.

“Carry on with the projections. I'll be right back.”

He stepped out into the corridor, closing the boardroom door behind him, and answered the call.

“Salma? What's so urgent you had to—”

“James! We're doomed.” Salma's voice trembling but sharp echoed on the other end.

He stopped walking. “What?”

“You heard me!” she snapped. “I’ve been getting calls since morning. Our mutual friends—those investors from Zurich and Lagos—they’ve been approached by **anti—money laundering agents.**”

James’s stomach turned cold. “That’s impossible. How did—”

“Someone blew the whistle,” Salma cut in. “And not just some rumor. Whoever it is, they have *details*, James. Real ones.”

He rubbed his temple, pacing the hallway. “Who could have leaked this? Everything was compartmentalized. The reports, the loans, the transfers—they were all—”

“Hidden?” Salma interrupted bitterly. “Apparently not well enough.”

James exhaled sharply, thinking fast.

“Okay. Listen. Don’t talk to anyone. I’ll have Bram—”

“James,” she hissed. “We’re past Bram’s muscles. I’m not going down for this. We need to meet. Now.”

Her voice dropped to a near whisper, but it was lined with panic.

“They’ll trace everything. The shell companies, the loan arms, even the offshore accounts tied to *Sims’ group*. And when they do—your name will be first on that list.”

James froze mid-step, his reflection in the glass wall staring back at him like a stranger.

“Where are you?” he asked finally.

“At my office,” Salma said. “But not for long. I’m packing what I can. We’ll meet at the Pier. In thirty.”

The line clicked dead.

James lowered the phone slowly, his heartbeat thundering in his ears.

Someone had blown the whistle.

And whoever it was, they knew everything.

He turned toward the boardroom door, but the chatter inside was distant now — the empire he'd built, the stability he'd prided himself on, all trembling at the edges.

For the first time in years, **James felt fear.**

**** **** ****

Soft jazz played from a small Bluetooth speaker on the counter. The smell of sautéed onions and garlic filled the air — Alma's way of comforting people.

Jamela sat at the dining table, laptop bag by her side, eyes scanning the glow of Alma's open computer. The screen showed the Archangel Finance dashboard — open, active, logged in.

"Wine?" Alma called from the kitchen.

Her voice carried the same cheerful warmth Jamela had always known, but there was something wistful beneath it.

Jamela forced a smile. "No, I'm good, thanks."

Alma poked her head out, spatula in hand. "Still on your caffeine-only diet? Girl, one day that'll kill you."

Jamela chuckled softly, though her fingers were already moving. She reached into her bag, pulled out her flash drive, and quietly inserted it into the laptop. A small window blinked open — *New device detected.*

"Alma..." Jamela began, her tone soft, almost guilty. "I really missed this."

Alma smiled as she stirred the pan. “Me too. It feels like forever since we just... hung out. You’ve been so quiet lately. The office doesn’t feel the same.”

Jamela nodded, eyes darting between folders — *Contracts, Confidential Reports, Internal Memos, James Odhiambo – Executive Accounts*. She clicked. Files began copying, one after another.

“I’m sorry,” Alma said after a pause. “About your grandma. I didn’t want to crowd you, you know? People mean well, but grief needs space.”

Jamela’s throat tightened. “Yeah... I appreciate that.”

“Just promise me one thing,” Alma continued, her voice growing softer, almost maternal. “Don’t fall apart. Grace wouldn’t want that. You’re stronger than you think.”

Jamela froze at that — *Grace wouldn’t want that*.

If only Alma knew what she was doing at this moment — betraying a friend to avenge a grandmother.

The transfer bar on the screen crawled forward. **76%... 88%... 94%.**

Jamela minimized the window just as Alma walked back into the room, wiping her hands on a towel.

Alma set two bowls of pasta on the table and sat down opposite Jamela, smiling. “You know, I’ve been thinking — maybe we should do a weekend getaway. Just us girls. No work, no drama. I miss the laughter.”

Jamela smiled faintly. “That sounds... nice.”

Her pulse was racing. The flash drive in her bag now held enough evidence to bring James’s empire to its knees.

She picked up her fork, twirling the pasta mechanically. Alma chatted on about office gossip, about how Laila had been avoiding everyone lately.

Jamela listened — or pretended to.

Her mind was already elsewhere.

On Grace.

On Timon Mwangi.

On the shadowy network tying Bram, James, and her stepfather together.

By the time she left Alma's apartment that night, she had the leverage she needed.

And for the first time since Grace's death, **Jamela didn't feel powerless. She had to take immediate action.**

**** **** ****

The following morning, Jamela sat stiffly at her workstation, headphones on, eyes locked on her screen.

The world around her — clacking keyboards, ringing phones, the faint hiss of the coffee machine — blurred into nothing.

On her monitor, an encrypted upload bar crept forward: **Uploading: ARCHANGEL_FILES.ZIP – 92%... 96%... 100%.**

A small notification blinked: **File sent successfully.**

She exhaled slowly, fingers trembling. Somewhere across the city, a renowned investigative journalist at *The Standard* now held everything — the fraudulent loan chains, the shell companies, the names. James Odhiambo's name. Bram's. Even her stepfather's.

Jamela shut her laptop, heart hammering, and whispered under her breath, “Do something right, grandma. Please let this count.”

James leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples as the meeting dragged on. Charts and financial projections filled the projector screen, but his mind wasn’t there.

Salma’s frantic voice from the call still echoed in his head:

"Someone has blown the whistle, James. Concrete details."

He tried to maintain composure, nodding at the finance head who was presenting quarterly results. But the figures meant nothing now. The walls were closing in.

He typed a short note on his phone: **Call Salma – after the meeting. Contain leak ASAP.**

Suddenly his phone buzzed again — *Alma*.

He frowned and silenced it. Another buzz. Persistent. He sighed and stepped out of the room.

“Alma, I told you—”

“Sir,” Alma’s voice quivered, “there are... there are some officers here asking for you.”

James straightened. “Officers?”

“Yes. They say it’s about an ongoing investigation. Should I—?”

But before she could finish, James was already walking — fast.

Two plainclothes officers stood by the entrance — serious, unreadable. Not the usual security allies who occasionally came by for a “chat.”

“Mr. James Odhiambo?” one asked.

“Yes.”

“We’d like to speak with you regarding certain transactions tied to your company. Privately.”

James hesitated, then nodded. “Of course. My office is—”

“That won’t be necessary, sir. If you could come with us.”

Their tone left no room for negotiation.

He turned to Alma, forcing a calm smile. “Tell the board to adjourn. I’ll be back shortly.”

But Alma saw it — the tightness in his jaw, the stiffness in his walk. Something was very wrong.

As the trio walked toward the exit — James sandwiched between the officers — the rest of the staff whispered, heads turning like spectators at a slow-moving storm.

Alma’s pulse raced. She grabbed her phone and dialed.

“Salma, you need to pick up—” she hissed, pacing behind the reception desk.

After two rings, Salma’s voice came through, low and alarmed.

“What is it, Alma?”

“They took him. Two officers just came for James. I don’t know what’s happening but—”

Salma’s sharp intake of breath cut her off. “Oh God.”

“Salma?”

But the line went dead.

Alma stood frozen, staring at the glass doors where James had just disappeared.

For the first time in years, she felt the ground shift beneath her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jamela is seated in her cozy studio in the evening. The TV flickers in the dimly lit room, casting blue light across Jamela's face.

A news anchor's voice cuts crisply through the silence:

“Breaking news: Business magnate and Archangel vehicle Imports CEO, James Odhiambo, was arrested earlier today in connection with a series of fraudulent transactions and money-laundering schemes spanning several years. Authorities say investigations are ongoing...”

Jamela sets her cup of tea down, eyes fixed on the screen. Images flash — James in handcuffs, escorted into a black SUV; Alma standing at the entrance, distraught; Salma on the phone, her face pale.

The anchor continues,

“Leaked documents obtained by an anonymous whistleblower point to complex networks involving offshore accounts, illegal loan operations, and shell companies—”

Jamela leans back on her couch, exhaustion washing over her. A faint smile plays on her lips.

“Justice,” she whispers. “Finally.”

Tears well in her eyes — a mix of grief, relief, and righteous fury.

She wipes them away, opens her notebook, and writes a single line:

Pick up Dad's ‘gift’ tomorrow.

Her gaze hardens.

“That will be the final nail,” she mutters to herself.

The news continues to drone in the background — faces of men in suits, seized documents, bank accounts frozen — but Jamela is already thinking three steps ahead.

Across town, the same news bulletin flashes across her TV.

Laila stands motionless, one hand over her mouth, the other clutching her phone.

“James Odhiambo, CEO of Archangel Vehicle Imports, was today detained by the Financial Crimes Unit...”

Her knees weaken. She sinks onto the arm of the couch.

Her mind races — Jamela, Bram, the files, the confrontation.

“Oh my God...” she whispers. “Jamela.”

She dials Jamela’s number — *ring... ring... ring*. No answer.

She tries again. Still nothing.

She paces the floor, panic rising.

She grabs her purse, ready to rush across town, but when she opens her ride-hailing app — *No cars available*.

She stares at the screen, frustration bubbling over.

“Not now! Come on!” she yells.

Rain begins to patter outside. She turns toward the window, her reflection pale and trembling.

“I have to tell her... before she finds out everything,” she murmurs.

Chaos reigns.

Files are strewn across the dining table — contracts, transaction sheets, printed emails. Salma is on the phone, her voice trembling but sharp.

“David, please — you owe me. I need a criminal defense team *now*. He’s been taken by the F.C.U., not local police. That means this is federal.”

She hangs up, then calls another contact, pacing the floor in agitation.

Across the room, Bram sits hunched over a laptop, typing furiously.

“I’ve encrypted the backup drives. If they haven’t gotten to his office servers yet, we can still purge the correspondence.”

Salma shoots him a look. “Do it fast. They’ll be raiding the main branch by morning.”

Bram nods grimly.

Salma’s phone buzzes — another call. She answers quickly.

“Hello? What? ... They’re freezing his accounts?”

She lets out a broken laugh, disbelief in her tone. “They’re really going for the kill...”

Bram closes the laptop. “Then we’re next.”

Salma glares at him, panic flashing in her eyes. “Not if we get ahead of it. Find the leak, Bram. Whoever did this — find them before the media does.”

The rain outside has grown heavier, drumming against the windows. The apartment, once full of frantic movement, is now eerily still — save for the hum of Bram’s laptop and the ticking of the wall clock.

Salma’s phone buzzes on the table.

She glances at the screen — an *unknown number*.

She hesitates, then opens the message.

The text is short. Cold. Precise.

ANONYMOUS: I will be securing the final evidence tomorrow. Meet me at the car depot for a talk.

Salma's face drains of color. She stares at the message, her lips trembling. Her hand moves to her mouth as a muffled, broken sound escapes her.

"Oh God... they know," Salma whispers hoarsely.

She shoves the phone toward Bram with shaking hands. He takes it, squints at the message, then leans back, his expression darkening — but then, slowly, a smirk creeps across his face.

"We've got the leak, boss. Don't worry." Bram says quietly, amused.

Salma buries her face in her hands, voice quivering with dread.

"Handle it... quietly. Do it tomorrow. Go instead of me." She pauses, gathering herself.

"I want James cleared of this by EOD tomorrow. No mistakes, Bram. None."

She rises abruptly, her composure fracturing. She storms off toward her bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

Bram remains seated, staring at the locked door for a long moment — his smirk fading into something colder, harder.

He gets up, grabs his coat, and heads out into the storm.

The windshield wipers drag rhythmically as Bram starts the engine. His phone buzzes on the dashboard.

New Message: LAILA

I need to meet you. Now.

Bram stares at the notification for a few seconds, jaw tightening.

He exhales sharply through his nose — frustration, maybe regret — then taps the screen and swipes it away, leaving it *unread*.

The car idles in silence.

Then he shifts into drive, eyes cold, the glow of streetlights sliding over his face as he disappears into the night.

**** **** ****

The next day, Bram arrives at the depot. He spots a fair lady looking around nervously. Jamela pockets her phone, glancing around uneasily. The silence feels heavy, charged. Her phone buzzes again —

LAILA.

She answers, relief in her voice.

“Laila, not now—”

“Jamela, you need to listen. It’s about James.” Laila says urgently, voice trembling.

Jamela frowns.

“What about him?”

A pause — the sound of Laila’s shallow breathing on the other end.

“James... is your father.”

Jamela freezes.

Her eyes widen — disbelief, confusion, betrayal all colliding at once.

“What?”

She turns slowly, as if trying to piece together reality — and in that split second,

a **GUNSHOT** tears through the air.

The sound echoes across the empty lot.

Jamela's breath catches. She looks down — a red bloom spreads across her cream silk blouse. Her knees buckle. The phone slips from her trembling hand but she catches it mid-fall, pressing it to her ear.

"Laila... I've been shot." She says weakly.

Her voice fades, dissolving into a choked gasp.

The phone falls to the ground — Laila's panicked voice shouting through the tiny speaker.

From a distance, Bram's SUV backs away slowly, the engine rumbling.

He never steps out, never looks back — his taillights disappearing into the haze.

Jamela collapses beside the Audi. The world blurs around her as silence swallows the depot.

The echo of the gunshot fades into the cold morning air.

The stillness that follows is deafening — the world seems to hold its breath.

Jamela lies sprawled beside the silver Audi, her phone still glowing faintly beside her hand. Her blouse is drenched crimson, her breaths shallow and ragged.

In the distance — the faint whine of a siren, growing louder.

Moments later, a battered **white van** speeds into the depot. The doors fling open and **NADIA**, the investigative journalist Jamela had contacted, leaps out, flanked by two **female officers**.

"Jamela! Jamela, can you hear me?"

They rush toward her. The officers draw their weapons, scanning the area — but the **black SUV** is gone, its trail of dust already settling.

One officer crouches, tapping on her tablet as she runs the **license plate**.

She frowns.

The plate's fake. No match on record.

Damn it—she curses.

Nadia kneels beside Jamela, her hands trembling.

She presses two fingers to Jamela's neck.

"There's a pulse... faint... help me!" Nadia shouts

The second officer kneels, begins **CPR**, pressing rhythmically against Jamela's chest. Nadia takes over the breaths, tears streaking her face.

"This is unit 09! We need an ambulance at the old Thika depot — female gunshot victim, critical condition!" the first officer shouts.

The officer's voice cracks slightly, betraying urgency.

Jamela gasps faintly, her lips moving, trying to form words. Nadia leans closer.

"Salma... the car... Sims..."

Her voice trails into silence.

"No, no, no— stay with me, Jamela! Stay with me!" Nadia whispers.

The officer continues chest compressions, counting under her breath.

The air fills with the rhythmic thud of her palms and Nadia's broken sobs.

Then — nothing.

Jamela's body stills. Her arm falls limply to her side.

The officer stops, her voice low.

"She's gone," the second officer states.

Nadia covers her mouth, her sobs muffled by the roar of an arriving ambulance.

“She was trying to expose a laundering ring. The shooter’s gone — black SUV, no plates,” the first officer explains, gesturing at Jamela.

A medic kneels, checks for signs of life, then gently covers Jamela’s body with a sheet.

Nadia’s eyes burn with fury. She looks at the Audi — the supposed “gift.”

She pulls out her camera, begins photographing the car, her hands trembling but resolute.

“ You didn’t die for nothing, Jamela.” Nadia says softly to herself.

“We’ll finish this.”

The camera’s shutter clicks — once, twice — echoing like gunfire through the hollow depot. The police rummage through the new *Audi* sports car uncovering contraband items hidden within the car’s seats and tire wheels.

**** **** ****

The rain taps gently against the windowpane, a steady whisper in the background. The television hums low, casting shifting light across the dimly lit room.

Pamela sits at the small desk by the window, scrolling through her tablet — her eyes heavy from exhaustion and days spent at the hospital.

A **notification** pops up from the international finance blog she’s followed while in Toronto::

**BREAKING: Kenyan Business Magnate Arrested in Multi-Million Dollar Money
Laundering Probe**

Pamela's thumb freezes above the screen. She blinks, her breath catching.

The headline expands — and there he is: **James Odhiambo**.

“James...” she whispered.

Her pulse quickens. She sets down the tablet with trembling fingers, staring at it as if it might change.

The article scrolls automatically, listing shell companies, offshore accounts, and links to several criminal fronts. *Sims!* Words blur together — *fraud, laundering, loan rackets*.

Pamela leans back in her chair, her heart thudding painfully.

Oh, James... What have you done?

She presses her hand to her chest. A strange heaviness spreads through her — not anger, not yet — but an inexplicable dread, an ache that seems to pull from deep inside her.

The rain outside grows heavier, streaking the glass with rivulets of light.

Her phone lies silent beside her. She glances at it — no messages, no calls. Pamela hasn't checked in since morning.

A thought flickers — cold, sudden.

She pushes it away.

She's fine... she's just tired. She'll call soon.

But the words ring hollow.

Pamela rises, pacing slowly across the room. Her reflection in the mirror looks back at her — weary, haunted.

She pours herself a glass of water, but her hands tremble so much she spills some onto the counter. The glass clinks softly as she sets it down.

The dread grows heavier — that deep, maternal sense of something breaking far away.

She grips the edge of the counter, closing her eyes as if bracing for an invisible blow.

“Please, God... keep her safe.” She whispers

The rain outside turns into a downpour. Thunder rumbles faintly in the distance — a low, warning growl.

Pamela moves to the window, staring out at the storm. Somewhere, deep down, she feels it — the unraveling, the loss coming for her.

But she doesn’t know yet how close it already is.

**** **** ****

Television screens across Nairobi flicker with the same breaking headline:

**“ARCHANGEL SCANDAL: WHISTLEBLOWER SHOT DEAD – EXCLUSIVE
DETAILS EMERGE.”**

Jamela’s face fills the screen — a photo from her university days, smiling, radiant.

The anchor’s voice cuts through the static:

“Authorities have confirmed the identity of the anonymous informant behind the explosive Archangel exposé — Jamela Odhiambo. Sources say she provided evidence leading to the arrest of business magnate James Odhiambo, who is now facing charges of money laundering, fraud, and racketeering...”

Alma sits frozen, her eyes locked on the screen. Laila stands beside her, trembling, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“I told her... I told her just before it happened. I didn’t know, Alma. I didn’t know he’s—” laila broke, her voice shaking.

She breaks down mid-sentence. Alma pulls her close, both of them shaking, silent sobs filling the room.

“She didn’t deserve this... not her.” Alma sobbed.

They hold each other, the TV still echoing the reporter’s calm, devastating narration.

“Police confirm that Jamela Odhiambo died at the scene from a single gunshot wound. The suspects remain at large...”

Across town in Salma’s office, the blinds are drawn. The only light comes from the television replaying the same news.

Salma sits behind her desk, pale and still. Across from her, **Bram** sits rigid, eyes downcast.

“Did you know it was her?” Salma whispers.

Bram slowly shakes his head.

“I only saw her back. I didn’t—I didn’t know, boss.”

Salma’s voice trembles as she stares at him, disbelief tightening her throat.

“Does James know?” She asks again, her voice hoarse.

Bram’s silence is answer enough. He shakes his head again, his jaw tightening.

“I am doomed, Bram. I gave the order.”

“What do I tell him? That I killed his daughter... to save him? To save *us*?”

Her voice cracks on the last word. The air between them thickens — guilt, horror, and silence.

Bram looks away, unable to meet her eyes. Outside, sirens wail faintly in the distance — the city humming with the chaos they’ve unleashed.

Salma buries her face in her hands, her composure collapsing for the first time.

“She was just a girl... and I made her my enemy.” She cried.

The screen behind her replays Jamela's smiling face once more, frozen in time — a cruel echo of the innocence they've destroyed.

**** **** ****

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The cold hum of fluorescent lights fills the narrow corridor. An officer approaches **James**, who sits slumped on the metal bench, his face gaunt but still proud.

“You have a call. International.” an officer called out at James. He pauses, checking the clipboard.

“Pamela Sims.”

James straightens, a flicker of confusion and unease crossing his face.

“I’ll take it,” James said.

The officer nods and gestures toward the small phone booth at the corner. James lifts the receiver.

“Pamela?” James answered, slowly and cautiously.

On the other end, her voice trembles — hoarse, distant, breaking under the weight of grief.

“James... she’s dead.”

James frowns, not understanding.

“What— what are you talking about? Who’s dead?”

A long pause. Then Pamela’s words come through, fractured by sobs.

“Our daughter, James. Jamela... She's dead.”

The world around him seems to stop.

“Which daughter?” he whispered, stunned.

His voice cracks — not out of disbelief, but out of the desperate hope that he misheard.

“Jamela. *Our* daughter, James. She was shot... she was the one who exposed you.”

James freezes, his knuckles whitening around the receiver. His breath catches, eyes darting as the truth claws its way through him.

“No... no, Pamela... that can’t—” James cried in a hollow voice. He paused

“How?”

Pamela’s sobs echo softly through the static.

“She died trying to make things right.”

James’s knees weaken. He leans heavily against the wall, the receiver pressed to his forehead.

A single tear escapes down his cheek — the man who once commanded respect now stripped to a hollow shell.

The officer watches from a distance, uneasy.

James hangs up slowly, his hand trembling. He whispers to himself, barely audible:

“My daughter... I killed my own daughter.”

The phone dangles from its cord as James sinks onto the cold floor, the sound of his quiet, broken sobs echoing down the corridor.

Two days later, the hum of fluorescent lights and the faint clatter of metal doors fill the air. **James** sits slouched at the table, staring blankly at the grey wall opposite him. The man who once commanded boardrooms now looks hollow — his sharp eyes dulled by grief and exhaustion.

Across the room, **Bram** is escorted in by a guard. His gait is steady, but his eyes betray a storm of conflict.

“You have ten minutes.” The warden said.

Bram nods and sits across from James. Silence stretches between them. The sound of breathing, heavy and uneven, fills the space.

“Why hasn’t she come?” James asked without looking up.

Bram shifts in his seat, avoiding James' gaze.

"She's... handling things. Trying to get you out."

"Handling things?" he asked, raising his head, eyes narrowing.

A bitter chuckle escapes him.

"She's good at that — handling things."

Bram clenches his fists, unsure of what to say.

"Who gave the order, Bram?"

Bram freezes. His throat tightens, the words caught halfway between truth and fear.

"James... you need to stay calm if you want to get out of here."

"Answer me, damn it!" he said, voice rising, anger breaking through.

Bram looks down, saying nothing. The silence says it all.

James leans back, fury and heartbreak coursing through him.

"She knew, didn't she?"

Bram lifts his head slowly, confusion flickering in his eyes.

"Did Salma know Jamela was my daughter before she sent you?"

Bram's lips part, but no sound comes. His silence again is the answer.

James nods, laughing bitterly through tears.

"She killed my daughter... to save me."

He stands abruptly, the chair scraping across the floor.

"Tell her I need to see her. I have nothing more to say to you."

He turns to the **warden** standing by the door.

“We’re done here.”

The warden nods and opens the gate. James walks out, shoulders hunched but steps firm — a man shattered but still burning with purpose.

Bram remains seated, staring at the table, his reflection warped in the scratched glass.

His phone buzzes in his pocket — *Salma*.

He doesn’t answer.

He just whispers to himself:

“We crossed the line, boss... we all did.”

**** **** ****

The metallic clang of the door reverberates through the quiet room. The air feels heavy, thick with resentment and unspoken grief.

James sits waiting — eyes red, jaw tight. The guard ushers Salma in. She’s impeccably dressed, but her face tells another story — sleepless nights, nerves stretched thin, mascara faintly smudged.

The guard steps out, leaving them alone.

“James...” she said softly.

James doesn’t respond. His eyes pierce through her like glass.

“You came.”

“I— I had to.”

“Why? To look me in the eye after what you did?”

Salma flinches.

“James, please. I didn’t know—”

“Didn’t know? You gave the order, Salma! You sent Bram to clean up a leak, and that leak was my daughter!” James said, voice rising.

Salma’s voice cracks.

“I didn’t know it was her, I swear! I knew about Jamela, yes— but I didn’t know she was the one behind the story. I didn’t—”

James stared at her, disbelief hardening into rage. “You *knew* she was mine, and you said nothing?” he demanded, his fists trembling at his sides.

Salma’s lips quivered. “I wanted to tell you, James, but everything was falling apart. I didn’t want to lose you—”

“You lost me the moment you kept her a secret,” he cut in sharply. “You watched me nurse my broken heart trying to find closure.”

Salma reached out, her voice breaking. “I was trying to protect us.”

“Protect us?” James scoffed bitterly. “You burnt *everything* worth protecting.”

“Jamela...”

“Don’t you dare say her name!” James interrupted, slamming the table.

The echo bounces off the cold concrete walls. Salma’s hands tremble; tears spill down her cheeks.

“James, I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you she was your daughter. But everything went wrong so fast. Sims came in, the transfers— the laundering— everything spiraled. I couldn’t risk losing you.”

James laughs bitterly, shaking his head.

“You already did.”

Silence. The only sound is Salma’s uneven breathing.

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a small envelope.

“I didn’t come here to fight you.”

She slides the envelope across the table. James hesitates, then opens it.

Inside — an **ultrasound photo**.

He stares at it, confused.

“I’m twenty weeks along. It’s a boy” Salma says quietly

James looks up slowly, disbelief written all over his face.

“He’s yours, James.”

For a moment, everything freezes. The weight of her words pressed between them.

“Does this change anything? Should I forget Jamela’s death because you’re carrying another?”

Salma’s lips tremble.

“No... but— maybe he deserves a chance to have his father.”

James stands abruptly, rage and anguish colliding in his eyes.

“How can I be anyone’s father now? You made sure of that. You were to handle the legal ends. Seal everything tight. And now...I’m bearing the brunt of the fall? You covered yourself, Salma. You left me unprotected! And my daughter...How do I get back from this?”

Salma’s tears flow freely. She nods slowly, accepting the blow.

She dabs her eyes with a handkerchief, straightens her coat, and forces herself to breathe.

“I’m sorry, James. For everything.”

She stands, slips the ultrasound back toward him, and walks to the door.

Before she exits, she glances back one last time — the pain barely masked behind her poise.

“I hope one day... you’ll forgive me.”

She leaves.

The door slams shut, leaving James alone with the ultrasound photo trembling in his hands.

He sinks into the chair, the dam finally breaking. Silent sobs shake his body as he whispers to the empty room:

“Jamela... I’m so sorry.” He whispers.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

James shuffled his feet on the cold floor. His blank eyes stared straight ahead as he continued to listen to the two officers speak. He was engulfed in a swirling current of emotions, pulling him deeper into his own mind. His consciousness was submerged beneath a heavy, invisible layer, separating him from the external world as each thought wrapped around him like tendrils, holding his attention captive and drawing him further away from reality.

His senses were dulled to his surroundings. Sounds, once clear, now seemed distant and muffled, like hearing through a thick fog. The two officers were now a blur as his eyes glazed over, unfocused, staring blankly into space. The dull colors of the environment faded even further into a muted backdrop, secondary to the vivid imagery playing out in his mind. Time itself seemed to distort. The minutes stretched into hours, and slipped away unnoticed as he became lost in the labyrinth of his thoughts. The outside world continued its rhythm, but he remained adrift in an internal sea, the ebb and flow of his thoughts consuming all his attention.

“We found her,” said Inspector Maranda. As these words reverberated in the small visiting room, his physical sensations were diminished. The texture of the chair he was sitting in, the temperature of the room, even the passage of air as he breathed in and out—all these faded into insignificance. He was barely aware of his own body, so engrossed was he in the mental landscape he had unwittingly created that the line between reality and introspection blurred.

“You are allowed to come with us and view the body for proper processing to be done.”

These words brought him back to the present moment. He struggled with the overwhelming intensity of the unsettling confusion, balancing between oblivion and reality.

A few hours later, the police land cruiser rumbled to a stop outside the cold, gray building of the city morgue. The air was thick with the sterile scent of disinfectant and quiet dread. James stepped down slowly, his wrists still bearing faint marks from the cuffs. The officers flanked him, their expressions solemn, as the mortician—an older man with weary eyes—led them through the dimly lit corridor.

Their footsteps echoed against the tiled floor, the sound hollow and final. At the far end of the room, a lone table gleamed under the harsh fluorescent light. A body lay upon it, draped in a white sheet.

James froze mid-step. His breath caught in his throat, his knees weakening. One of the officers placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Take your time,” he murmured softly.

James swallowed hard and forced himself forward. The mortician gave a slow, understanding nod, then folded back the cloth. The world seemed to still as James’ eyes fell on the face beneath—pale, serene, and achingly familiar.

He wept. Hard and quiet. Shaking uncontrollably as he held the cold and limp body of Jamela in his rough emasculated hands. Jamela’s hands hang loosely by her side. Her white blouse still drenched in blood and tears. Her bony cheeks were caked with dry blood. Her blank eyes staring at the ceiling above.

“James, it’s time. Come on. Let’s go.”

He felt a firm grip on his shoulders which shook him back to reality. He was lost. His world, the ever bright and promising world he had hoped for, was filled with blackness and despair. He looked up at inspector Maranda, his eyes pleading with him to allow him more time. But alas! He drew Jamela’s eyes shut. He shut the doors to her soul. He shut the pain and sorrow the young life had experienced. Maybe

because he was guilty, and could not stand the blank stare of the dead girl. Maybe. Or maybe because he thought it was the best he could do to end the girl's misery; but she was already dead.

Inspector Maranda helped him up. His body was frail. The agony had weakened him to his bones. His knees hurt from kneeling for too long. The coroner covered Jamela's body with a white sheet, and wheeled her back to storage. James was led back to the police land cruiser. As he sat at the back, inspector Patrick placed back the handcuffs on his hands. As he felt the cold metal touch his dehydrated skin, he knew. He understood well enough that his heart would never light up again. The cold seeped into his veins and embedded itself in his heart. He was sure it would never leave.

"Twende!" shouted Patrick as he tapped the side of the cruiser, signaling that they were ready to leave.

James watched as the vehicle rolled out off the morgue compound. He sniffled as he wiped his nose with the back of his hands. He took a final glance as the tall black gates were drawn shut. He sighed and leaned on the cruiser seat. He shut his eyes and drifted off into his own thoughts.

The clang of the cell door echoed like a gavel striking the final verdict. Ten years — or five million shillings. Numbers that once meant power now felt meaningless. James sat on the edge of the narrow cot, staring at the cracked wall before him. The silence in his head was louder than the noise outside.

He had built empires on deceit, stacked fortunes on other people's pain, and convinced himself it was survival. But now, stripped of all the noise, he could finally hear the truth — the hum of guilt that had always lived beneath his success. He saw Grace's face, Jamela's warmth, Salma's trembling confession, and Pamela's distant eyes. Each memory cut deeper than the next.

He buried his face in his hands and whispered to no one, “Was it worth it?” The walls didn’t answer. Only the slow drip of water from the sink filled the air, like time itself reminding him — every choice has a cost, and some debts can never be repaid.

THE END

Epilogue: Two Years Later

The city stirred beneath a muted morning sky, the kind that seemed undecided between rain and light. Nairobi had changed in two years — slower, quieter perhaps, as if still reeling from truths it had once tried to bury.

On the screens that lined the avenues, the headlines crawled in solemn repetition:

“Business Tycoon James Odhiambo Released after Paying KES 4.5 million fine.”

Outside Kamiti Maximum Prison, a woman waited by the gates, her coat pulled tight against the morning chill. She stood still, clutching a small boy to her chest. The child stirred, his warm cheek pressed against her neck. He was nearly two now — *Jamil* — his father’s eyes set in a softer face. She waited — her hands clasped tightly around a folder of papers, the final proof of the 4.5-million-shilling fine she’d hustled quietly to raise.

When the iron gates groaned open, James stepped out. The years had carved themselves into him: his once-commanding posture had bent slightly, and streaks of gray lined his beard. Yet, in his eyes, there was a quiet alertness — the kind born of loss and long nights of thought. When their eyes met, no words passed between them. There was too much history, too many ghosts.

For a moment, neither spoke. Her lips parted, her voice trembling as though unsure it had permission to exist.

“James... this is your son.”

James’s gaze fell on the child. He hesitated, as though the truth were too delicate to touch. Then, slowly, he reached forward and brushed his fingers against the boy’s cheek. The boy blinked sleepily and wrapped his tiny fingers around one of his father’s.

Something broke in James — something both heavy and necessary. The bitterness that had clung to him like a second skin began to peel away. He looked up at her— and though forgiveness did not yet live in his words, it shimmered faintly in his silence.

They stood there for a while — three shadows against the slow-rising sun — and when James finally spoke, his voice was low.

“Let’s go home.”

Thousands of miles away, across the Atlantic, **Pamela Sims** stood before a modest hall in Toronto.

The banner behind her fluttered lightly in the draft:

The Grace Initiative – Empowering Rural Women Through Financial Literacy

Pamela’s eyes swept across the faces in the room — young women, eager, bright, carrying notebooks and dreams that might have once belonged to her daughter. A framed photograph of Jamela and Grace hung behind her. Their smiles seemed to soften the room, even from across time.

“My daughter believed,” Pamela began, her voice steady though her hands trembled, “that truth — no matter how dangerous — can free us. She stood against things bigger than herself because she wanted others to stand taller. Her courage cost her everything, but it gave all of us a chance to live differently.”

A hush settled. Somewhere at the back, someone dabbed at their eyes.

Pamela smiled faintly — a sad, luminous kind of smile — and looked once more at her daughter’s picture. “This foundation,” she said, “is her legacy. And it’s ours to protect.”

After the ceremony, Laila and Alma lingered outside the center. The winter sun spilled over the street, painting long shadows that touched both their feet.

They had grown quieter over the years — the wild laughter that once echoed in cafés replaced now by something gentler, wiser.

“She’d have loved this,” Alma said after a long silence, her breath fogging in the cold. “All of it.”

Laila smiled, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Maybe she’s watching. Making sure we don’t mess it up this time.”

They laughed softly — not the way they once did, but enough to feel alive again.

Back in Kenya, the countryside rolled out under an amber sky. A single road cut through the open fields, leading toward the horizon.

James stood beside an old pickup truck, his arm resting on the door as Salma cradled Jamil on her hip. The child laughed at something in the distance — a bird, perhaps — and the sound felt like sunlight breaking through old clouds.

James turned to the open fields, his eyes unfocused, his thoughts deep and heavy.

In the midst of building empires of deceit, he thought, I lost everything worth keeping. But sometimes, truth finds a way to rise from the ashes — even when all that’s left is ruin.

He looked back at Salma, at the child who now held her necklace between his fingers, and reached out to take her free hand. For the first time in years, he felt the fragile warmth of peace — not as forgiveness, not yet, but as the simple desire to begin again.

That evening, in a quiet corner of Nairobi’s cemetery, the investigative journalist placed a candle beside Jamela’s grave. The wax melted slowly, its light flickering against the carved inscription:

“In Memory of Jamela Aoko Odhiambo— The Truth Shall Not Be Silenced.”

The wind rose gently, carrying the scent of the candle into the night — up toward the hills, across the city, and far beyond the oceans, where her name had become more than tragedy. It had become a symbol — of truth, of courage, and of what it costs to stand for both.

And somewhere between the silence and the wind, it felt as if Jamela’s voice lingered still — whispering softly, *keep going*.

In the end, truth did not restore what was lost — it never does — but it lit the path forward for those left behind. *In the midst* of betrayal and grief rose something quieter, purer: understanding. Salma learned that power could not capture love, and that love could not erase guilt, but it could nurture repentance. James discovered that redemption is not granted by freedom, but by the courage to face what truth reveals. And through every heart she left behind, Jamela’s spirit endured — not as a martyr, but as a mirror — reminding them that even in the ruin of their choices, there was still a chance to begin again, to live honestly, and to love without fear.