THE LAST CAB HOME

A Novella

Adnan Kulane

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CHAPTER ONE

You know, it rains in this city. And when it does, it fucking pours, the kind we writers call "cats and dogs." That was the day. There's a hall on the tenth floor of the EACP Tower that twice a year hosts fifteen interns, culled from thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of applicants.

The orientation started at 2pm, and as it neared its end, only one person had yet to appear at the podium, though it seemed he'd been otherwise occupied. Mikael Gul, the CEO, had demanded to see this batch himself. Uncommon, but he was the man, and he got what he wanted, and what he wanted was more often than not a mystery to everyone else. The clock ticked toward five. Everyone was already halfway home in their minds. Then, at last, the man of the hour appeared. Everyone remembered their posture; everyone but Alexander, whose head had been resting against the glass wall, watching nothing in particular out over

Upper Hill, earphones in. He sat up now, pulled them out, and began to pay attention.

Mr. Gul, as Alex would call him for the five months he'd spend at EACP, wasn't old for a leader in his industry. He was in his early forties, sideburns just starting to gray, though the intensity of his schedule had barely touched him otherwise. His body spoke of a man who saw the inside of a weight room a couple of times a week. He dressed impeccably, a bespoke three-piece suit, a Rolex on his wrist. The man had taste.

He walked to the podium as the MC introduced him, and the fifteen or so naive young men and women in the audience clapped, absurdly, given that the man had kept them waiting an hour and hadn't said a single word yet. Maybe it was the red-soled shoes you could spot from a mile away. Or maybe they were just hungry for a little corporate politics, starved for the man's attention.

Mr. Gul began: "Congratulations, gentlemen and ladies." In the second row, close to the solid wall, not far from the door, sat Celine. Maybe she wanted to run, who even knows, but she found herself wondering: isn't it supposed to be "ladies and gentlemen"? Is the CEO of my company a fucking misogynist? Not that you'd have known it to look at her, composed, attentive, new notebook open, pen in hand.

Mikael continued his speech. Nobody remembered a word of it, but Alex, Celine, and the other thirteen interns all remembered one thing: that after this six-

month internship, only five of them would get a permanent position at EACP. It was war, and only the strong would survive it, and Alexander was certain he was the strongest. He was strong, and weak, in more ways than one. He would win, and lose, in more ways than either of them could yet imagine.

By the end of the day, they'd had their badges processed and been given a tour of sorts. Alex saw the fourteenth floor for the first time, where he'd be working, and where he'd end up doing far more than just work. He met his assigned supervisor.

It had been raining since 4pm. The entire company was in the lobby, all glued to their screens, watching the Uber app spin through an endless "searching." The lucky ones had left early or matched with one of the few available taxis. The rich had already ridden off, perhaps to evening tea with their loved ones. Garry from accounting was among the poor, cussing at his screen, along with Alex and the rest of the interns.

Alex walked out of the building. The apps were hopeless; maybe he could find a taxi outside. At this point, almost everyone was thinking the same thing.

God, it seemed, had shown them mercy, a taxi passed by. Alex waved, and it stopped. Walking toward it, he saw a girl walking toward it too. Turned out Celine had waved as well. They both reached the taxi at the same time, and, of course, they both wanted the ride. The taxi driver was impatient, and though the rain had slowed, it was still enough to soak you to the bone.

Celine conceded without a fight. Alex felt awful about it; he didn't like winning without one, and besides, he liked to think of himself as the kind of gentleman who'd give up his ride for a lady.

"No, please, take it. I'll get another." Alex said it hoping she'd say *no, you take it*, so he could finally go home. Instead she said, "Thank you," and walked toward the door. Alex, keeping up the gentleman act, opened it for her, gesturing with a smile that tried to mask exactly how royally screwed he felt. He stood there as his dreads began to collect the rain, watching her give the driver her address. "Is that the one in Parklands?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"I'm a few blocks from there, mind if we share?" His hand was already on the door handle. He wasn't sleeping outside tonight; *no* wasn't an answer he was prepared to accept. She slid over to the other side of the seat, and that was her answer, she'd never really been planning to say no.

Alex tried, unsuccessfully, to dry his hair. Celine hugged her bag to her chest, leaned against the window, and watched the street as the taxi drove, or tried to, at least, because before long they were stuck in traffic, the rain seemingly unable to make up its mind, like Trump deciding whether to attack Iran. The silence was unbearable for Alex, so he took a stab at conversation.

"So, you work here?"

"Just started." She tried to end it there.

"Me too, unless you're not actually the intern."

"I am." She tried again. Alex wasn't picking up the hint. "Oh, how nice. I'm Alex, well, Alexander, but everyone calls me Alex. I don't even remember my own name anymore. One time I actually wrote 'Alex' on an exam paper. Can you imagine, they failed me for that."

Celine was somewhere between disturbed and amused by this rambling rasta of a stranger. She looked at him a beat too seriously, something close to actual observation, and said, "I'm Celine. Nice to meet you... Alexander."

"So which uni did you go to?" Alex began interrogating her. She was slow enough to answer that he filled the silence himself: "I'm from UoN."

"What's UoN?" she asked.

Alex, genuinely shocked she didn't know, answered, "University of Nairobi."

"Oh, okay," said Celine.

"Are you even from Kenya?" Alex asked, unable to imagine a Kenyan who didn't know UoN.

"No. I'm from the UK."

"Well, that explains it," Alex said, out loud, before he could stop himself, then, trying to cover, "So which university, then?"

"Oxford."

Alex's jaw dropped. He started thinking his UoN card wasn't quite as impressive as he'd assumed thirty seconds ago, and then he started smiling, and before he

knew it he was making some genuinely strange faces with no way to recover, so he simply shut up.

The silence returned. The car had cleared the worst of the traffic, which helped a little. Before long the taxi was close to Celine's building, the rain picking back up as if trying to keep them in it a while longer. Alexander thought to himself: maybe he'd pay for the whole ride, that could redeem this. Then he remembered he was on a budget. He wrestled with the thought for a moment before finally landing on: *impressing a girl is going to kill me financially, but fuck it, I'll do it.*

Celine asked the driver, "Where do I send your money?" as if she could read Alex's mind, and was determined to keep him permanently in her debt. The driver didn't care who paid, only that he got paid. "M-Pesa, to my number."

Alex started up the dance again. "Let me get it."

"No." Celine stepped clean off the dance floor and, to the driver, asked, "Your number?" which he read out loud.

It was done before Alex could say or do anything about it.

And then they were outside Celine's building, and she was out of the car far too fast, like she was running away from him, but she turned back at the window and said, "I'll see you Monday, Alexander." Alex tried to say the same back, but she was already gone, jogging for the entrance, in no mood to wait around while he found

the words, or started rambling again, or got any wetter standing in the rain.

CHAPTER TWO

Alex's place is a studio apartment, but its size never stopped him from filling it with all manner of toys. There's the couch against the wall as you walk in. The coffee table in front of it hosts nothing but his feet. The couch itself is half-occupied by clothes in transit to the laundry bin. There's a kitchen he cooks in occasionally. The bed is the most unkept thing in the whole place, on days like today, he might sleep in his dress shirt without bothering to change. And then there's the temple, as he jokingly calls it: his chair and desk. Relatively organized compared to everything else, aside from the odd book and a cigarette packet. The desk carries the weight of his dual-monitor setup. This is his temple, where Alex reads the market like fine literature, where he codes and trains AI models, and where his entire hope for the future rests. To anyone else, this mess of an apartment might read like a maze. To Alex, it's perfect. He can read it. He knows exactly where the little SIM-eject pin for his three-year-old phone lives in this apartment. He knows the odd roach on sight, and if there's ever a new one, he'll notice, the way a good homeroom teacher notices a new face in the class.

On the balcony of his apartment in Parklands sat Alexander. He had a little chair out there, and something like a table beside it, on the table, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, and his phone. He'd

gotten home and, before he'd even undressed, pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and gone outside to smoke.

Halfway through the cigarette, his phone rang. The caller ID read: *Osama Bin Al-Nigga.*

He answered with, "Wassup, my nigga?" Osman, on the other end, said, "Good, what's good? How was day zero?"

"Shit was tiring, I'm not gonna lie."

"Welcome to employment, my guy."

"Nah, bro, I'm here just in passing." Alex took a drag, then stubbed it out on the pile.

"Well, enjoy this season too."

"I think I might. I shared a ride with this girl from the office, bitch was arrogant as fuck. Imagine, she paid for the whole thing while I was trying to stop her."

"MashaAllah, stop cussing at the girl, brother. And you're broke, might as well let someone pay for your ride. You know you could move to my building, it's cheaper here."

"Nah, bro, I like to live nice. Plus I'm gonna get rich soon, just wait till I sell my model to this company, you're gonna be the one moving to *my* neighbourhood."

"InshaAllah. So, about this girl, it's not even your first official day and you're already meeting ladies, huh?"

"It's a crazy coincidence." Alex tried to defend himself, and told him the whole story. How she lived near him and everything.

"Well, enjoy the weekend, my guy. But not too much."

"You too, bro. I promise I'll keep it halal." Alex joked, hung up the phone, and pulled out another cigarette.

Celine is the polar opposite of Alex in how she lives and how she keeps her place. She'd come back to Nairobi, and though the city still felt foreign to her, she'd managed to make it feel like home in the month she'd been here. Her crochet work pops out from every corner. Her place is a one-bedroom apartment; she has a TV, and these days, homesick as she is, she's been binge-watching British reality shows. She has a kitchen that actually works, and she's made curry one too many times already this month.

Today, after orientation, she ran through her routine. No outside clothes ever touch her bed; she throws them straight in the laundry bin the moment she gets home. She showers. Sometimes she stands in front of the bathroom mirror and thinks to herself, *damn, I am hot.* And she's not wrong, her waist so narrow it looks almost unreal, a belly button piercing drawing the eye to her flat stomach, and a smile that shows her bottom teeth, the one Amani jokes makes her a saint's temptation.

Tonight she chose her pink satin pajamas and a silk bonnet, the satin skimming her body, catching every curve. In bed, she picked up her phone (she tried not

to use it in bed, but there was always something that damn phone needed doing) and called Amani.

"Heyyy, girl!" Amani answered, ever the energetic one.

"Hey," Celine said. She could never keep up with that energy, not that it had ever been a problem between them.

"How was first day?"

"Girl, no. I think I made a mistake coming here. I was so alone. I miss you."

"I miss you too, honey. But remember, you are strong."

"And it rains weird here. I don't know, something about it is all wrong."

Amani laughed hard on the other end. "It rains *weird*? That has to be a new one."

"For real, I'm not lying."

"Well, tell me about the boys. Are they cute? I heard they're cute." Amani asked, a little too excited.

"Girl, I saw nothing," Celine said, laughing softly, that signature laugh of hers, the one so much like peace that if you recorded it and played it for soldiers, you'd have world peace and flower gardens everywhere.

"I did share a ride with this one guy, though. He talked too much."

"Come on, girl, it's you, of course he'd talk too much. How could he not?"

Then Amani got pulled away by something about a tequila shot. "Girl, I'll call you tomorrow, it's Friday, you should get out there."

Celine tried to tell her childhood best friend to be safe, but Amani had already hung up, already back in the club, downing tequila like water.

CHAPTER THREE

I hate Mondays. Everybody hates Mondays. It's the busiest day, and somehow still nothing gets done on it. It's the day alarms are at their most annoying, if they even bother ringing at all. The most pressure-filled day of the week is Monday, and for the EACP interns, today was the first official one. Alex was at the matatu stage earlier than he'd ever been in his life. When he reached the central business district, the makanga was already yelling "Mwisho, mwisho!" banging on the side of a minibus that looked one slap away from retirement.

Alex was supposed to be in Upperhill. However early he'd woken up, it hadn't been early enough. He now had an hour to find a connecting matatu there.

Nairobi's morning rush hour is beautiful in its own right. Alex had no eyes to see it, no room to marvel at it. He was too busy navigating the maze of the crowd. The security guard coming off a night shift, jogging home to bed. The hordes of young men and women who'd partied all night, heading home themselves. The business owners on their way to open up shop. The sex worker walking home with a limp. And there, of all people, Garry from accounting (poor Garry, whose stride was about half the length of a normal person's) nearly flattened by a speeding school bus as he tried to dash across the road, hopping back onto the curb just

in time, looking personally betrayed, as he did most mornings, by a city that refused to adjust its traffic for his pace. The smell of coffee and freshly fried mandazi reminded Alex he'd forgotten breakfast entirely, and his stomach started to growl.

At last, Alex reached the matatu stage for buses heading to Upperhill, except there wasn't a bus in sight, just a long line. He found the courage to take his place at the tail of the corporate snake. The Nairobi sky felt the need to remind everyone it was still July. First came the warning tinkles, then the droplets thickened, like God was stoning them all for their many, many crimes of corporate politics. Everyone scattered for cover, and a minute later, once the rain had slowed to conserve ammunition, a bus arrived. The people who recognized it broke into a run, and before long everyone was running for it. Alex, slow to react, ran too, only to get properly rained on and shuffle back to his spot in shame.

When the next one came, he was ready. He found it in himself to abandon mercy, manners, and whatever small act of classiness he still had left, and won the scramble without a shred of guilt. Somewhere, there's probably a woman in her forties who was late to work because of it, and got yelled at by her boss, but Alex had no time to debate morality and ethics today. The clock was ticking. He couldn't afford to make a shabby first impression on Mwangi, the man whose face he'd

be looking at for the next six months, the man his entire fate depended on.

Alex eventually made it to the office, after missing his stop, still fumbling to find his badge.

The fourteenth floor was one of EACP's trading floors, split into two halves facing each other, four rows of desks to a side, six desks to a row. At the far end, mounted high enough to see from anywhere on the floor, hung the trading clock, the kind with a dial for every major timezone at once, New York and London and Tokyo all ticking along in polite disagreement with Nairobi about what time it actually was. Mwangi wasn't in yet. Alex found his way to the desk they'd shown him on Friday, his space now. The chair was comfortable; he fiddled with it, adjusting the armrest to his preferred setting, parallel with the table. Finally, it was time to log into the computer, see what a billion-dollar company had waiting for its interns, but the second his finger touched the keyboard, he was disgusted to discover it was a membrane one. He threw his hands up and glanced around for someone to complain to, and there was Celine, in the same row, three desks down, already seated, already rested, already completely at home, did she own a magic carpet, or something? They made eye contact. He waved. She waved back.

As had become tradition at EACP, the interns were divided into three groups. Alex and Celine, as they'd learn today, were in the same one.

Otieno, Sammy, and Ken completed Mwangi's group.

When the Nairobi clock read 9am, Mwangi walked in as though he'd been waiting just outside the door for a properly dramatic entrance. He moved with a distinct rhythm, his dress shoes clicking against the marble tiles. He wore a white collared shirt with blue stripes, suspenders, a black suit, last quarter's salary increase was beginning to show itself in the form of a belly.

He walked to the front of the row of his children as he began to call his last cohort, desperately trying to make it a thing, his thing.

Mwangi began with a voice so soft and hushed that the group leaned forward just to catch it. "You missing a sibling?"

Eyebrows went up around the group. It took them a full minute to work out he meant the empty chair. By then it was too late; Mwangi's hand had already hit the table hard enough to produce something like a sonic boom, sending the whole group flinching back into their seats.

Mwangi bellowed, "Somebody tell me where the hell is Kenneth?"

Unlucky Ken happened to be walking in at the exact moment his own name was being yelled across the floor. He sat down fast, clutching his bag to his chest like it might stop a bullet. Mwangi walked slowly around behind him. Ken didn't dare make a sound. Then Mwangi set both hands on his shoulders,

squeezing them almost gently, like he was offering a massage, and said, "Listen to me very carefully. I cannot fire you, as you can see, Kenneth here gets to sit luxuriously among us after strolling in like he owns the company. However. That is the absolute limit of what I both can and cannot do to you."

He let go of Ken's shoulders, and Ken's soul visibly returned to his body.

Mwangi's desk sat on the aisle, with Alex immediately beside him. He dropped into his chair and swiveled to face the group. "I am your father," he said. Then, "If you listen to me, do as I tell you, and complete your tasks diligently, you will have earned your place among us. However," he stopped, turned away, and a second later turned back, "you are a team. Meet each other! Tomorrow, we begin the work."

Mwangi was gestured over by an older woman and rushed toward her. Otieno self-appointed himself the group leader, and broke the silence of the group. "Alright, everybody, since no one is saying nothing, I will take charge." He put his hand on Ken's shoulder, eyes already elsewhere, on Celine, and continued, "It clearly won't be Kenneth." Then, turning to Ken, "Sorry, bro. No hard feelings."

Something in Ken was boiling up: his fists wanted, badly, to throw themselves, but they stayed tied down by his more rational brain. He'd clocked the suit Otieno was wearing; the few times he'd seen a bespoke three-piece wool suit before, he'd known exactly what it was.

It was certainly nothing like the long-sleeve one he had on himself. If he so much as laid a finger on the man, he was certain of one thing. He wouldn't just end up in jail, but the internship he'd fought hard to secure would end on the spot too, and he couldn't picture a career ahead of him after making an enemy like that.

Otieno continued, "My name is Otieno. I'm a graduate of USIU." Pointing at Celine, he said, "You go next."

Celine's face twisted into something like a person who'd bitten into a whole lemon. Before a word could pass her lips, Alex spoke. He was never one to think before his actions or his words, no filter whatsoever. "Whoa, whoa. Easy there, trust fund kid."

"Are you trying to insult me, rasta man? Do you—" Otieno felt threatened, he liked to think of himself as a man who never took a threat lightly, but he was cut off by Alex. "What, do I know who your father is?"

The argument was getting louder, spinning out of hand, before Sammy stepped in. "Calm down, guys. You're both embarrassing yourselves. There's no need for this."

Sammy continued, "How about we just get to know each other's names first. I'll start, Sammy."

Celine, next to him on his left, followed. "I'm Celine."

Otieno didn't speak, a kind of childish strike, the group's refusal to submit to his leadership.

"I'm Kenneth."

"I'm Alex."

"Well, then, that's excellent," Sammy said, satisfied with his own diplomacy. "We're a team, and with only five permanent offers going around, I'd like that to be us. Our whole team. And the only way we get there is by actually being a team."

The group agreed with him. Even Otieno, still sulking, had to admit the logic held.

Otieno left the group, God knows where. Sammy took the opportunity to get close to Ken, at the very least to console him, and maybe find whatever explanation could be found for Otieno's behavior.

Alex approached Celine. "Hey, can we get coffee? I saw a shop down there."

Celine had things to say to him, and coffee sounded like the perfect opportunity to say them, so she agreed.

The coffee shop was quiet, nearly empty. They sat at a table at the far end, as far from the window as they could get.

Celine started speaking as Alex tried to catch a server's attention. "Alexander, I want to be clear about something. I appreciate you standing up for me. But I don't want anyone fighting my battles for me." Before Alex could mess up and say something stupid, like *I wasn't fighting for you*, a server appeared. "What can I get you guys today?"

Alex liked his coffee black, and if it wasn't several shots of espresso deep, it wasn't coffee. "I'll have an Americano", an observation that wasn't lost on Celine.

"And for the miss?" the server asked Alex, who simply stared at Celine in response. She ordered an iced latte, and the server hurried off. Alex still owed a response, and Celine's look made sure he knew it. "Okay, I hear you, I'm sorry. I just couldn't stand it. It won't happen again." Celine seemed satisfied with that.

Before long the orders arrived, and Alex took a sip and was pleased with the coffee, to put it mildly. In his head, he was already thinking the only thing that could improve it was a cigarette. Celine asked, "Aren't you going to add any sugar to that?"

"No. I like it pure. Uninterrupted."

Celine laughed, she'd never imagined coffee could get this existential.

Alex asked between sips, savoring it, "So, you're far from home, huh? I'd have thought there'd be better opportunities there than an internship in Kenya."

"I guess there would be," Celine said, sounding unsure even of her own answer. "I wanted to come back home. And I figured a little adventure wouldn't hurt."

"Oh, so you were originally from here. How long were you away?" Alex asked, oblivious to how invasive the question was.

Celine, already somewhat used to him by now, answered, "A long time. Must be at least seventeen years."

"Well, that's historic. You know, if you ever want a tour, I could show you around."

"I might take you up on that."
"I'll pray you do," Alex said, grinning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dear reader, life has a code, which I believe, naively, to have cracked. Purpose sits at the center of it. However: have fun, do as many side quests as humanly possible. Read in depth and breadth. Learn the arts and the sciences, and contribute to them. Be part of big projects that, at their center, contribute to the betterment of humanity, found one yourself, if it comes to that, as a last resort. Parent a child. Teach, when you get old. Die a boring death.

Alex does not agree with me. His take on the meaning of life is different: make wealth, absurd amounts of it, and die an epic death.

The work had begun, and Mwangi had structured the team. Celine and Alex were the quants of the group. Otieno, Sammy, and Ken were traders. Mwangi himself was a trader.

The quants are like the bottom gears, slow, but the torque they generate is what makes the traders fast and great. Which also means they're mostly invisible.

Alex had been training models for a long time by now. He'd write code, debug it, and, while a model trained, which usually took a long while, he'd play chess, or go for a smoke, sometimes both.

Alex lifted his phone, catching Celine's attention. On the screen, a small green chessboard icon,

chess.com. He tapped it and asked, "Do you play?" She nodded. He passed her the phone. "A game?"

She took it and added herself.

They began to play. She opened with the g-pawn, and Alex nearly yelled *what the hell*, but he'd learned by now not to assume anything about her. Maybe this was some grandmaster hiding behind an account that showed 400 Elo, some eight-hundred-point gap between the two of them, maybe it wasn't even her main account, but she lost in sixteen moves. Alex wasn't the kind of gentleman who let a lady win just for being a lady; he found that reductive, somehow. This became their routine. Celine, sharp enough, eventually got some kind of read on his play and even worked out a plan that won her a game once, just the once.

He excused himself. Mwangi wasn't with the team, off somewhere in a meeting that would, in all likelihood, end with scheduling another meeting. The glass parapet was stunning, while still somehow maintaining its soulless corporate demeanor; it could probably support the combined weight of a couple of Garrys from accounting. There were already a handful of cigarette butts scattered near it, which the cleaner would swear up and down she'd cleared that morning. He reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out his cigarette packet, a few left inside, along with a lighter. He lit the first one, and within two seconds was already reaching for the next. Celine came out onto the balcony too.

"So the rasta man smokes. How cliché," Celine teased.

Alex laughed, his hand already halfway back to his jacket. "Do you?"

"No, no, no." She looked almost offended. "I enjoy life."

Alex took a long drag, nearly the whole length of the cigarette, dropped it, and crushed it under his boot as he exhaled. "I am living."

"You should quit. Maybe you'd live even longer."

"Someday." He changed the subject. "So, Celine. Tell me. What's the big dream?"

"Oh, wow. Straight into the deep end." She stalled.

"Well, yeah." Alex doubled down.

"I don't know. Get the job, maybe." And she meant it, for all her precision, for all the perfect plans she made and executed, Celine didn't actually keep a thirty-year life plan tucked away somewhere.

"No doubt you'll get it. I mean, your code, it's so elegant. I had no idea Python could even look like that."

Celine visibly blushed. "Thank you."

Otieno, from his seat, could see Cupid's bow already drawn and aimed squarely at Alex and Celine, and he wanted to sue.

"What about you? What's the big dream?"

"It is not EACP, most certainly. I'm working on the holy algorithm."

"Nice." Celine wasn't entirely convinced, but she'd seen Alex work. THE trading algorithm might actually be within reach for him. Mythical as it sounded.

"We should go check how the machine's learning," Alex suggested, already leading the way back inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hugs are innocent, and so fundamental, if you really think about it. A hug is just a hug. A handshake is, too, in its way, imagine the hands as tiny bodies, tilting toward each other from opposite sides. That's a hug already, in miniature. You might be thinking, what about a kiss? I hope you're not, are you blind? That's a hug too, literally, plus another, juicier hug happening between the lips, and if you're good, and lucky, maybe a little pitched dance of tongues besides, and it's magic. You're stubborn, I know, so you'll ask about sex next, to which I say: when two consenting adults are inside one another, it becomes something so magic it expands the very definition of a hug. But if you want it stated plainly, some portion of it is, quite literally, a hug.

Alex and Celine shared the innocence of a hug, and that was the beginning.

"Osama. How are you doing?" Alex started the call, his voice unusually serious.

"Are you alright?" Osman couldn't remember the last time Alex had called him anything resembling his actual name, and every kind of bad thought rushed in at once, *is the depressed bastard about to kill himself.* His worry was cut off by what sounded like a purely euphoric Alex on the other end. "I am the best." He kept the same energy going. "Man, I've got butterflies

and shit in my stomach. I think I'm in love. I found the one."

"MashaAllah, who's the lucky girl?" Osman said, happy for him, and already, partly, planning the wedding, and making sure it was halal.

"Celine. Do you remember, the taxi lady?"

"Yes, I do. Isn't she like a coworker?"

"Yeah, a close one. We're actually working on most of our projects together."

Osman's enthusiasm evaporated. "No, you can't do that, Alex."

"I can. I read the company policy cover to cover. I guess they don't care about office romance."

"No, I mean it's a bad idea. It's going to end badly. Trust me, little brother, I've seen hundreds, heard of thousands, the odds are—"

Alex cut him off, a little angry that his friend wasn't supporting him the way he'd imagined. "I know stats better than you, Osman. I'll take whatever odds there are." He kept going. "And if I play it safe, I'll spend the rest of my life wondering what could've been, every time I see her. And I see her every day."

Osman, feeling the anger rising off of him, said, "Well. I'll pray for you the best of it. InshaAllah, kheyr."

Alex finished a whole packet, pacing the room the entire time. Phone in hand, message drafted: "Hello Celine, you are beautiful, smart, and cool and collected every time, and I like you, and would you like to go out with me on a date tonight?" Saturday night wasn't far

off now. It was nearly afternoon already, and he was out of smokes. He found the courage, hit send, and threw the phone onto the bed, where it bounced like it wanted to leap right back off and warn him the day was about to go horribly. It didn't.

Alex threw on blue shorts patterned with yellow flowers and a red t-shirt a size too small, which meant his arms and chest were suddenly bulging through it whether he'd planned that or not. He spent a full minute hunting the house for any cash at all. He spent one more minute changing, and then ran out the door in crocs, set to sport mode.

He quickly found that speed was defeating the purpose entirely, so he slowed to a walk, the pace of an invincible tortoise mid-story. Alex made sure to head far, far north, so he wouldn't accidentally end up right outside Celine's door.

He came back running, a pack of cigarettes in hand and one already in his mouth. Thirty minutes in, it hit him that if she said yes, he actually needed to *be there*, and be ready for it.

She'd replied. He grabbed the phone, tried Face ID, whatever wizardry Apple was calling it these days, and got nothing, no magic trick this time. Ah, the cigarette, he realized. It must've thrown his face off enough to fail the scan. It worked, eventually, just long enough for him to watch the Apple logo wave him goodbye as the battery finally gave out.

Alex plugged in the charger, the one person who was always late exactly when he was needed most. He mashed the power button over and over, holding it down, until the phone finally, grudgingly, began to start up. After the whole ordeal, he finally got to the message. It read: *"I like you as well. I am willing to give it a try."*

Alex broke into celebration, some strange combination of old moves and brand-new ones invented on the spot, because somehow, in his head, this already meant Celine's magical lips were going to kiss him, that he was going to fuck Celine.

Alex realized he'd said "tonight" without any actual plan attached to it, so he called Celine. She picked up on the third ring, and he still wasn't ready with words.

"Hello, Celine."

"Good afternoon, Alexander," Celine said, composed as ever.

"I'll see you in an hour. It's going to be the best date you've ever had."

"Impress me, Alexander."

He hung up the phone and started getting ready. He hadn't showered all day. The wardrobe seemed to mock him with too many colors to choose from. But thirty minutes later he was out on the balcony, smoking, staring at the clock, and out toward the south.

When the hour was up, Alex was outside Celine's building, hailing a ride to the cinema.

Celine walked slowly out through the apartment gates, and in that moment she was the most beautiful woman in the world: a red dress, the heels, her jet-black curls let loose for an adventure of their own.

She opened her arms as though proposing a hug, which caught Alex off guard. She smelled even better than she looked, like a garden of roses. She was just a little shorter than him, exactly enough that when they hugged, his chest was the perfect place for her head to rest.

CHAPTER SIX

Horror movies were an absolute favorite of Alex's. A theater along Ngong Road was showing the latest release at 4pm. He gambled that she'd like it too. She did not. In fact, she hated them.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Sorry, yes. A theater. I hope you like horror films?" Alex asked, doing his best cute puppy face. Celine squinted a little too hard, then recovered and slipped on her poker face. "I don't mind them."

She believed in giving chances, and she gave them wholeheartedly, all the way to the end. She wasn't about to quit on a date thirty minutes in.

Before long they were at the theater, making their way to their seats. It only took the first ugly face on screen for Celine to turn away, and before long she was hiding in his shoulder, which delighted Alex considerably more than the gruesome hacking and slashing did. She showed real courage, watching as much as she could manage, which meant that every time an axe, a knife, or a jump scare hit, which was more or less constantly, she'd flinch and bury herself against him.

When the movie ended, Celine was blushing red with embarrassment.

"Sorry, that one was pretty intense," Alex started.

"Yeah, I don't like horror movies. I didn't want to get in the way of the plan."

As they walked out, "Well, the date hasn't even started yet," Alex said, smirking with confidence. "There's a restaurant just a short walk from here. You'll love it."

Celine, relieved that wasn't the whole evening, kept walking alongside him. "You seemed to be enjoying yourself in there," she commented.

"Having you hide against me is officially my new favorite way to watch horror," Alex teased.

"No, Alexander." Celine gasped in mock offense, hand dramatically over her mouth.

Dear reader, Alex might be a wizard (I had my eyes on him, and so did Celine), and yet a perfectly intact rose appeared in his hand. Celine was thoroughly delighted by the gesture, asked *how* several times over, and kissed him on the cheek for it. My own theory on the trick is considerably less romantic: he's a thief, and somewhere, some stranger's bouquet is quietly, harmlessly lighter because of it.

The restaurant was the kind of fancy where you have to ask how to turn on the tap. Alex had been a few times, always for one thing, their beef burger. Unmatched. He'd had it once and had never been able to order a burger anywhere else since.

They were met at the door by a woman with an iPad.

"Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation?"

"Yes, Oketch."

"Alexander Oketch, table for two?" the woman asked. Alex nodded, and she led them zigzagging through the room to their table.

Celine ordered pasta and a glass of white; the server assured her they paired well. Celine could think of a better pairing, but let the suggestion stand. Alex, of course, ordered the burger. He'd been certain, walking in, that tonight he'd be the picture of elegance, and then the food arrived, and he ate like a caveman. Celine made a point of stealing as many of his fries as she could to make up for the crispiness her pasta was missing. The single rose, which Alex would come to name Rosetta, sat in its glass, drinking water.

Celine came fully prepared to fight him for the bill, but tonight he was Alexander the Wizard once again, no bill ever came, and they walked out the door on a mystery so charming she never even asked how it was done. The magic was too beautiful to interrogate.

They agreed to walk a few blocks before catching a cab. Celine slipped her hand through the loop of Alex's arm. He felt how cold she'd gotten and gave her his jacket, before her hand had found its way back into his anyway. They walked in harmony, their steps synchronized.

After a while, they caught a cab home.

"My legs," Celine complained. Alex was already down there, sliding her heels off, lifting her legs into his lap.

"How do you feel now?" Alex asked, massaging the sole of her foot.

"You have magic hands, Alexander."

The taxi driver kept throwing glances through the rearview mirror. Neither Celine nor Alex cared, not for a single beat, because a minute later, their lips were locked together, tongues dancing kompa.

Their make-out session was interrupted by the driver. "Is this the first stop?"

Alex peeked out for a second to spot his apartment complex and told the driver, "Twende next," wanting to hold onto every last second of it. Celine stopped him. "Wait…"

"It's fine, I'll walk back," Alex interrupted.

"No, I want to see your place," Celine clarified.

Alexander dug the emergency cash out of his wallet and handed it to the driver. "Sina balance, siutume ama niku—"

"Keep the change," Alex cut him off, already walking around to the other side of the car, Celine's heels in hand.

Celine had Rosetta in her hand. Alex gestured for her to hold on tight as he ducked his head low. She tucked Rosetta between her teeth and wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her out of the car, one arm holding her, the other still carrying her heels. Facing him now, she let Rosetta fall from her lips to rest against her chest so she could speak.

"How long are you going to carry me?"

"It's just the fourth floor?" Alex barely got the words out, praying the elevator was somehow already waiting for him, cursing himself for every cigarette he'd ever smoked.

"Me too," Celine said, before adding, "Lucky man."

He pressed the call button, determined not to let Celine's legs touch the floor once, squatting, stretching his hand out to reach it, then stepping in and pressing four.

"Where's the key?" Celine asked, as Alex stood at his own door, doing nothing, trying to solve the puzzle of how to open it while still carrying her. Small beads of sweat were already forming on his forehead.

"The jacket."

Celine set her feet down on the cold floor and searched through the many pockets, finding cigarettes, a condom, and finally the keys. She opened the door, and they made their way in.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Great sex and great murder are indistinguishable. The night was young, and by the time the sun rose tomorrow, Alex would have one more body count. Sometimes you even get both.

Great sex almost always happens between bodies that are well acquainted. Great murder shares this too, often, uncomfortably so, with a killer stalking their target, sometimes invading their space long before the moment itself.

Foreplay is necessary, always. Murder has its own dance of life at the beginning of its end. In the great ones, the victim has to fight for their life. Its absence makes the whole thing flat, boring, anything but great. Tonight, Alex and Celine were not making the mistake of skipping this dance.

At the bathroom door stood Celine, her panties in hand. Alex, resting on the couch, his wine-red tie still on, was beginning to understand he wasn't going to stay that way for long. She threw them at him, smiling. He caught them like an American football and pressed them to his nose, holding eye contact with her the whole time.

"You smell delicious."

Celine went tomato-red, then switched, instantly, to something far more confident. "Dessert is ready."

Great murder is naturally gruesome, the victim's blood, bits of them, ending up on your person one way or another. A knife is almost always the most intimate of weapons, but bludgeoning is a choice too, if you're confident, and strong, and they're considerably smaller than you. It would be a crime in itself to pass up strangulation. You watch the whole of a life in a single flash, first they fight, then they submit, and as you keep squeezing, you watch the hope leave their eyes as they make peace with it. A perfect, isolated tear. You might cry yourself.

Murder takes a life. Sex gives one. Celine would take the pill later that same day.

Alex woke at five-thirty the next morning, unusually well rested, he'd slept thirteen hours before and it had never felt like this kind of rest. After a good long while spent admiring the naked, sleeping beauty beside him (Celine, part of her uncovered by the sheets, goosebumps already risen across her skin), he went out to the balcony.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. After finishing that one, he sat in his chair and watched the slow waking of the neighborhood, the sparse scattering of windows lighting up one by one. The sun was beginning to rise, so Alex lit another to welcome the Sunday morning properly.

Celine rose not long after, sensing the empty bed, or maybe it was just obvious. Alex had left the balcony door open, and the cold had flooded the apartment,

carrying with it the unmistakable, horrid smell of his cigarettes. She found his red t-shirt on the couch; it nearly reached her hips, and even where it slipped from her shoulder, her hips seemed to hold it in place like a warden keeping watch. She tied her hair into a messy bun and splashed water on her face.

She noticed the coffee machine, odd, mostly because it was nearly the only functioning thing in the entire kitchen. She made two coffees, managed to track down the sugar, and found milk in the fridge that was clearly too old to trust. Celine joined Alex on the balcony. "Good morning, Alexander. Coffee? It's pure."

Alex, still somewhat mesmerized by the sight of Celine in his t-shirt, put out his cigarette and took a sip. "Thanks." Then, "Are you always this gorgeous in the morning?"

She giggled, caught herself right before saying *I know*, and asked instead, "Do you happen to own any milk from this year?"

Alex laughed loud enough to wake at least a couple of neighbors. "Sorry. I'll do a proper shop soon."

She tried another sip, then gave up on the strange black drink with entirely too much sugar in it.

"I should head home," Celine said, already turning back inside to find her clothes.

Alex followed her. She was already dressed by the time he caught up. He grabbed his hoodie. "It's cold out." She took it and pulled it on, and Alexander

insisted on walking her home, and after a clumsy scramble to get dressed himself, they walked out the door together.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It took Alex walking back into his own apartment to actually notice the stench of cigarettes, the mess in the kitchen. He thought Celine must have hated it here. He was in love, and love changes a man. This, he decided, was the time to quit. He could see the packet, two cigarettes left in it, sitting right there on the table.

He started cleaning, and the first thing to hit the trash bin was the packet, the lighter close behind it.

He cleaned the kitchen, and in the middle of it found Rosetta, forgotten. He put her in a glass, gave her water, wrote *Rosetta* on the glass itself, took a photo, and sent it to Celine. She replied with a heart emoji. He cleaned the whole apartment after that. Changed the bedsheets. Worked up a sweat, started panting, and finally gave in and hit the shower. For Celine, he was going to be clean. He was going to be a better man. Happy, even.

Clean Alex, on a clean couch, in clean clothes, staring at a wall (who stares at walls, they were just walls). It was Sunday, not even noon yet, and he had nothing to do. He went out to the balcony, thinking maybe there'd be a fight down there, something, anything to watch. There wasn't. He started sweating. His heart pounded. He was shaking like a leaf, and he already knew exactly what he had to do, so he rushed to the trash bin. Dug in elbow-deep, face nearly in it,

and fished out the packet with its two cigarettes and the lighter. He lit the first one, and he was Alex again, so he smoked the second one too, for good measure. Thirty minutes later, he was downstairs, buying another pack.

Time was a friend to smoking Alex. It was evening before he finished the pack. He called Celine to invite her on an evening walk, and she accepted.

Sunday is a lonely time for the atheist. Otieno called too; he had a better offer, apparently, and sounded far more confident about it than the situation warranted. Celine declined. Oh, poor, rich Otieno, that stung. He could just imagine the rasta man winning his girl. He had at least ten girls objectively prettier than Celine on speed dial. He didn't even need to call; a single text would've done the job. But even with his ape brain, he understood, on some primitive level, that beautiful and pretty were not the same thing.

He called anyway, and his favorite booty call answered. Daddy's money, but money was money.

The evening was beautiful. Maybe it was the warmth and color of the sun. Maybe it was love. Alex saw a gleam of happiness on every face he passed. He was in love, and the whole world had turned into color, and happiness, and nice people. Garry from accounting was not having a good day today.

The trail itself was objectively beautiful. Alex and Celine walked hand in hand, fingers interlocked, talking about everything and nothing. They admired the

bougainvillea peeking out from every fence along the way, and Alex stole one flower too many for her, until she had nearly an entire bouquet. She revealed, somewhere in there, that her favorite flowers were sunflowers.

CHAPTER NINE

Relationships are the boring part of a relationship. It's exciting to court, or to be courted. Once the dust settles, and the wrestling ends, two people become one. However boring that gets after the honeymoon phase wears off, it's nonetheless sweet, and there will always be small, random moments outside the routine that make the rest of it bearable. It's worth noting that this boring, slow part is the actual goal, and maybe even worth it.

Over the months that followed, Alex and Celine settled into a rhythm, work, home, sleepovers at each other's places. Celine invited Alex over to her apartment one evening and made her masterpiece: curry, again.

Alex brought his chessboard. Her rating had climbed at least two hundred points since they'd started.

"It's mate in four," Alex said, grinning.

Celine studied the board for a long, hard minute. "I don't see it."

They played it out: a take, another take, a check, the king cornered, and then the knight came in for a smothered checkmate.

"I own your beautiful ass," Alex gloated.

"Yes, you do," Celine said, fueling the fire further.

"You're getting so much better." Alex softened, and kissed her forehead.

They even invented spicy chess: strip with every point won, every significant positional advantage. An elaborate and entirely unnecessary excuse to have sex, but it kept the routine from ever going stale.

In their first month together, Rosetta died, probably from secondhand smoke, though nobody said so out loud. It was cute-sad, the kind of sad that doesn't quite earn real grief, because three days later, Celine brought Alex a crocheted rose.

"This one won't die," she explained. "She's forever. Like us."

"I'll name her Rosetta-E."

"What's the 'E' for?" Celine asked.

"Eternity."

She never actually became Rosetta-E. She was simply Rosetta, the color of Alex's whole room.

Celine had made him plenty of crocheted things by now, but his favorite became the tie, a red crocheted tie patterned with tiny daisies, which became his lucky one. He wore it to every meeting that mattered, including the day he sat down with Mr. Gul to talk about Holy Grail.

As the internship inched toward its end, Alex used every spare minute he could steal, even the gaps between mundane assigned tasks, to finish the project. And finally, he did.

The meeting with Gul went exceptionally well. Mikael was visibly impressed, which meant something, because nothing impressed him, not even the girl his teenage son had once brought home for dinner, who hadn't come close to good enough.

"This will make us billions in additional revenue."

"Yes, sir." Alex called nobody sir, as a rule, but something in Mikael's eyes seemed to demand it. He continued, "I'd like to talk about selling it to EACP."

"Yes, yes, absolutely, this is an important decision. But we'll meet Monday to talk numbers."

That same Friday evening, Mikael Gul had a file thicker than a novel sitting on his desk. It was labeled *Alexander Oketch.*

Mikael read every page. By the time he finished, he knew Alex, knew him, in some ways, better than Celine did. And, of course, he knew about her too. He picked up the phone to his secretary. "Marie, get Peter in here." A pause. "And send someone to tell Celine I'd like to have dinner with her tonight."

Marie, on the line: "Sir, you have the meeting with the man from the central bank."

"Reschedule it. And Marie, handle it delicately."

A minute later, someone pulled Celine aside, right in the middle of making plans with Alex for the evening. A few hushed words were exchanged, and just like that, tonight she belonged to Mikael.

In that same minute, Peter walked into Mikael's office, and from the way papers were scattered across the desk, someone, somewhere, was in trouble.

A car was sent to collect Celine from her apartment. She didn't remember ever telling anyone where she lived. The driver wore an all-black suit with a bulge at his side; he was armed, though she didn't notice. The car drove far, and long, and when it finally pulled up somewhere, the place was dim, elegant, and entirely unmarked, no name anywhere, as though it didn't officially exist.

A young woman led her from the door through a maze of hallways, and at the end of it sat Mikael Gul, as though he owned the place (which, for all she knew, he might), finishing an espresso at that late hour. Could he buy the place outright? Of course he could. A thousand of them, probably, before he even noticed the dent in his fortune. He didn't bother standing. He simply gestured to the chair across from him. She pulled it out, and sat.

CHAPTER TEN

"On the matter of intellectual property rights regarding the trading algorithm resulting from the project code-named Holy Grail, this court finds EACP not guilty of any such violation. Furthermore, having examined the evidence presented, among it the employment contract of Mr. Alexander Oketch, and the internet logs provided by EACP's Information Technology department, which show that Mr. Oketch used property belonging to EACP in the development of the product, both physical infrastructure and working hours, and per the terms of his employment contract, any work produced by him belongs to EACP. Court adjourned."

The judge, an old man, short, stepped down from the bench and walked out, entirely indifferent to the fact that he had just given away the greatest work of Alex's life.

Alex is a man. Alexander is a god. But it turns out that in the case of a god versus a corporation, the corporation wins.

Mikael Gul liked to win, and simply winning was never enough. He had to win totally. Bribing a judge was one element of that total win.

"Celine, tell me, how do you like EACP?" Mikael asked, sipping his espresso.

"It's great. I'm honored for the opportunity."

Mikael was well aware of the little romance budding between Celine and Alex, and he intended to make use of it for all it was worth. Tonight's card was the cold one, a week from now, he'd be taking her boyfriend to court and eating him alive.

"Well, congratulations, you'll be among the select interns we offer a full role." Mikael continued, "The official selection isn't until next month, of course, but you're an exception, and I wanted to offer it to you personally."

Celine was overjoyed. She had no idea why Gul had chosen to select her early, let alone do it in person, over dinner. "Thank you very much, sir."

She fell to pieces after that, rambling about how hard she'd work for the company. It was clear Mikael commanded people, and the sheer power radiating off of him left even Celine stripped of her usual composure. The conversation was brief. Alexander came up. Mikael didn't have to ask outright, careful not to appear as though he were prying, before he'd learned that she knew about Holy Grail, and knew it fairly well.

On the day of the court hearing, Celine was there to support Alexander. Mikael was not. Celine did what she could to comfort him. Alex sat clutching his lucky tie, as if interrogating it, asking it why, of all days, it hadn't been lucky today.

He went home. Celine went with him. Osman called later that day, offering what comfort he could, telling him he was a brilliant engineer, that this couldn't

possibly be the end. Alex said he was fine. He told everyone he was fine. Things had happened too fast for him to fully process what any of it meant. The next day, an email arrived from HR.

He was being terminated.

The knight is noble, and taking him down is a messy business, unless you happen to be an amoral CEO, and a devoted student of Niccolò Machiavelli, in which case it becomes something closer to a thrilling, fun little side quest. You don't attack him head-on, not at first. Act one of the show is stripping away his nobility. Act two is stripping away his hope, once you've already beaten him. And if you aim your attack at the pawn the knight is responsible for protecting, the only way left for the knight to protect it is to fall on his own sword.

The sun had set, and the EACP building sat mostly empty, except for the seventeenth floor, where Mikael's office was. On the balcony of that office sat two men, smoking cigars, drinking expensive whiskey.

Mikael exhaled a long stream of smoke. "This is good. Where did we get this?"

"From some MP, I don't recall his name," Peter said. "He claimed it was Cuban. Sir."

Mikael nodded.

"Was it necessary, sir?" Peter asked.

"Perhaps not. Cruelty is never necessary, until it's too late for it not to have been." Mikael continued, "It's

God's own wish that the greater men destroy the great ones."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dear reader, depression is final. The doctors, the friends, the family (if they even see it at all, and don't simply mistake it for sadness, or stress piled too high) will have you believe it gets better. That you might, someday, feel normal again. You will not. You have stared into the abyss, and now it owns you. Alex is a slave to the abyss as well.

Monday came sooner than expected. It arrived to taunt Alex. He woke early, showered, got dressed, and only then remembered. There was no EACP today. He texted Celine; she was on her way to the office. He sat down at his temple, except it wasn't a temple anymore. It was just a grave now. The source code for Holy Grail stared back at him like a divorced wife telling him he couldn't have her anymore. He'd worked on it for over two years, and today, nothing he did to it could matter. It wasn't his to work on anymore. He smoked, but even the cigarettes had gone dull and boring.

Rosetta stared back at him from her spot on the desk. He talked to her. She had nothing to say back.

He tried to think about what came next and drew a complete blank. The clock ticked by like a tortoise, and he grew agitated, sinking deeper into the abyss with every hour. When evening finally came, Celine came with it. It cheered him, a little, for a short while. She

told him stories; something funny about Garry from accounting.

He thought, for a moment, that he could fight back, bring EACP to its knees. However young he was, however short on resources, it wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility. But then Celine told him about the offer she'd received, the dinner, the car, the broad-shouldered man who'd driven it.

Alex, good chess player that he was, understood something in that instant: there are people who play this game in real life, and they play it better than you ever will.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mother would disapprove, but then again, when had he last even spoken to her. Alex cleaned his apartment. Cleaned himself. He sat at his table and scribbled out a letter, only to tear it up, crumple it, and throw it away. He arrived, eventually, at the idea that this would be his most selfish act, and that he owed no one an apology for it. He thought, briefly, of explaining himself to Osman and Celine, but they'd disapprove too, and try to stop him. He didn't want to be stopped.

He spent a long time turning over how he might actually do it, rejecting each idea in turn, the more violent ones first, the ones that would leave something behind that someone else could never unsee. He thought of Celine specifically, of what it would do to her to be the one who found him, and that thought alone ruled out anything that felt too cruel.

In the end, he settled on something quieter. He found what pills he had in the apartment, took all of them, smoked through the rest of his pack, and switched his phone off before putting it away.

An hour later, he felt dizzy, and thought the time must be close, so he went and lay down. Hours later, he fell asleep.

He woke up with nausea, and thought the aftermath was deeply uncomfortable, only then realizing he was still in his apartment. He made it to the

bathroom and vomited up his last meal. He thought his stomach was empty, but his body seemed determined to bring up something more anyway.

The night before, Celine had tried calling, his phone was off. That morning, she tried again, still off. At work, she tried once more, off. She wondered if maybe he was with Osman, and called him instead.

"Is Alexander with you?"

"No. Why?"

"Nothing. I just, I called him last night, and it's still off this morning."

Osman broke into a cold sweat. He feared the worst, and began, quietly, to pray.

"I'm going to his place to check on him." He was already telling his boss he had a family emergency, and was out the door before he could offer much more of an explanation.

Osman knocked at the door a few times. Alex, weak and still vomiting, was lying on the bathroom floor. Osman called his name, banged on the door, no answer, until he heard the faint, exhausted sound of Alex trying to bring something up. He had a spare key. He let himself in and found Alex on the bathroom floor.

He grabbed his head. "What is happening to you, man?" Then, "Why is your phone off?"

"Get up. We're getting you to a hospital," Osman said, hauling him upright.

On their way out, he spotted the bottle on Alex's desk, and his suspicion was confirmed.

"What did you do?"

He got him downstairs, praying the entire way.

"Hospital. Now," he told the taxi driver. The man opened his mouth to ask which one, thought better of it under the weight of Osman's stare, and simply assumed he meant the nearest.

On the way, Osman called Celine, told her Alex was sick, gave her the hospital, and told her to meet them there.

Alex's unconscious body was dragged into the hospital. Osman, barely able to find the words, told the doctor he might have taken some kind of medicine. Was he sure? No. And did he know what medicine, exactly? No, that either. They told him they'd look into his condition, and that he needed to stay outside and give the doctors room to do their work. He protested, briefly, before a wave of something resembling reason passed over him, and he conceded.

A minute later, he was pacing the hospital hallways like a ghost. White robes, prayer beads out, murmuring prayers in Arabic. Celine joined him not long after, and when he told her what might or might not happen, she found it hard to believe at first, until the pieces started fitting together on their own. He'd seemed off, the past couple of days. How could he do something like this and not say a single word to her? Did he not care about her at all? She moved from worried to angry and back

to worried again, asking Osman over and over if he was going to die. He tried to calm her, told her to pray, told her he'd be perfectly fine before long. Osman found himself grateful for the distraction of comforting her, and the more hope he spoke aloud, the more he seemed to believe it himself, that Alex wouldn't die today.

Though, as it turned out, fate wasn't quite finished with Alex yet. He wasn't out of the woods.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The worst part of trying to die is failing at it. Falling asleep with no alarm set for tomorrow, only to be woken by the beeping of hospital machines instead. Facing a today you never planned for. People staring at you with faces caught somewhere between disappointment and morbid curiosity. Voices dropped to a hush, as if speaking one decibel louder might startle you into jumping out the nearest window. The occasional crying hug.

Alex wore a face full of shame. Celine had her head resting on the edge of his bed, apparently having finally fallen asleep after hours of fighting it. Osman had asked her more than once to just go home, said he'd call the second anything changed. She refused every time, told him flatly that if Alex was going to die, she'd be right there for it.

Of course Osman stayed too. He'd always thought of Alex as something like a younger brother, and that made this his responsibility as much as anyone's.

Osman sat in the corner of the room, closest to the door. The doctors had told him Alex could wake anywhere from seven that evening onward. It was three in the morning now. Osman hated coffee; it made him irritable, and he didn't like handing himself an easy button to press when he was already running short on

patience. Tonight he'd had six cups. Sleep hadn't even crossed his mind.

When Alex's eyes finally started to open, Osman was the first to notice, before Alex himself had fully registered he was alive. Something like rage rose in Osman, and he held it down, refused to let it take hold of him. The doctors had already confirmed the overdose. Celine woke at the movement and hugged Alex with the happiest expression she'd worn in her entire life. Then came the awkward silence, and the quiet game of staring at him with wide, worried eyes. Alex had words ready. *Fuck off. I lived, I lost, for the love of God, just let me die.* But even in his current state, he knew enough to keep those where they were. Instead, he said he was sorry.

Osman and Celine exchanged a glance. Neither of them could quite make sense of that. They didn't approve of what he'd tried to do, nobody would, but as far as either of them was concerned, he had nothing to apologize for. Celine, tears already falling, started in: "Aw, honey, don't apologize. You don't need to. We know, we knew it was a hard time for you. We should have been there more." She moved to his side and held him, as if believing that if she just didn't let go, he'd never have reason to try something like this again. Osman, for his part, decided Alex must have found God in that hospital bed, and that a man who'd found God wouldn't do something like this twice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The doctor said he was on track to recover, but recommended he see a therapist.

"No. I'm not sitting in front of some smug stranger answering stupid questions." Alex protested.

"Just give it a chance, baby," Celine asked, pretty eyes and all.

Alex folded. "Fine. One session. But I already know how this goes."

Osman made no real effort to talk Alex into it. He knew exactly how Alex felt about therapy, and privately, he wasn't much of a believer in it himself.

Osman slept on the couch the night Alex was discharged. The next day, he had a mattress brought over from his own place. He was going to watch him, properly watch him, and started following him out onto the balcony for every single cigarette.

Sometimes they sat out there and talked about nothing. Sometimes about everything. Alex told him what it had felt like, coming that close to death, and about some new sense of clarity he thought he'd found because of it.

"Maybe you should quit, as a first step, toward whatever this rebirth thing is," Osman suggested.

Alex had thought about it, off and on, since the moment he woke up, and hadn't managed to find the nerve to actually try again, so he'd made a kind of peace

with that instead. "Maybe. One day." He could see the effort Osman was putting in, and wanted to give him something to hold onto. "Yeah. You're right, no point loading more onto myself right now," Alex agreed.

Alex loved the company. Every minute of his day was occupied now, which meant there was no time left over to think too deeply about anything. He was fed well; Celine made a point of cooking whenever she could carve out the time. The EACP internship always got more intense toward the end, and even with the CEO's word securing her position, she still had to put in the extra hours.

Celine spent nearly every night at Alex's place now, save for the odd exception. Their sheer proximity made it the easiest arrangement available.

Around this time, Celine and Osman grew closer too, getting to actually know each other. Osman watched the kindness and love Celine had for Alex, and found he had no real choice but to approve of her. Not that she needed his approval, Alex was in love regardless, though he did find all the extra hovering a little smothering.

Alex felt clarity, for once. Next month, he'd apply for jobs (something ordinary, a regular quant role out in the wider world), and he'd make his peace with this smaller, plainer life he'd been handed, and be happy in it. He pictured asking Celine to move in with him, or more likely, the two of them moving into her place instead. He imagined coming home from work to meet

her coming home from hers, imagined the nights they'd spend together after. The thought alone made him happy enough that he caught himself smiling.

A week later, he had his first appointment with a therapist. Oketch called; Alex didn't answer. Osman spoke to him instead, and told him everything. Oketch arranged an appointment with the best therapist money could buy in Kenya. Alex made his own arrangement instead.

"Alexander, how—"

"Just Alex," he interrupted.

The therapist, a woman in her fifties, carried the kind of patience that only comes with real experience. "Okay. Alex. How are you feeling?"

"Great. Never better."

"You tried to take your life. Can you tell me why?"

Alex was already exhausted by this. "I tried. I failed. I'm better now. What's the point of talking about it?"

"Alex, I'm here to help you. But I need you to actually talk to me if that's going to work."

She continued, "Your medical record says you have a diagnosed depression."

"Yes."

"Are you taking your medication?"

"I am." Alex lied. He took it sometimes. Most of the time, he didn't.

They danced around his current state for a while, and once she'd built up enough rapport, she circled back to the same question.

"Alex. Why did you try to kill yourself?"

"Because I'm a failure. I tried my best, and I failed terribly."

Something about the question caught up with him a beat late. "Oh, you're good. But I see you now."

"Alex, I want you to know this is a safe space. Why do you think you're a failure?"

The frustration crept back in. "Can I smoke in here?"

"No."

She doubled down instead. "Why do you smoke?"

Alex stood up and walked out. On his way out of the building, he pulled out a cigarette and was, once again, fully himself. His mind was made up. It was over. Once he'd decided something, there was no appealing it.

He figured he'd walk for a bit, then catch a ride whenever he felt like it.

When he got home, the apartment was empty again. Nobody there. He opened his laptop and checked his email. There it was: he was Alexander the martyr now, and it seemed like every major firm in the city wanted him as their quant. The talk of the street was that he'd gone toe to toe with the lion and walked out still breathing, and everyone wanted a piece of the mind Mikael had tried so hard to destroy.

One company in particular (new, growing fast) made him an offer so good he replied almost instantly.

Later that day, the vice president called personally. Early thirties. Alex had a dinner arranged with him for the following evening.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Beautiful Christmas lights bled through Nairobi. Alex and Celine had a date tonight. He'd settled into his new job easily enough. It was boring. He'd anticipated the boredom going in, but no amount of preparation could have actually readied him for it. It's the curse of being exceptionally good at something, it's rarely ever novel for long. He always looked forward to his time with Celine. Even that, lately, had begun to grow stale too, cracking in ways so subtle neither of them thought them worth mentioning out loud. Not yet.

Tonight was great, though. They were out at their usual place, the food as good as always, and they laughed and talked without pause through the whole meal. Nothing new being said, nothing needing to be, just the easy, well-worn comfort of two people who already knew each other's stories and still wanted to hear them again.

Somewhere near the end of it, Alex reached across the table and held her hand, and let himself dream out loud for the both of them.

"Imagine us... old. Eighty." She laughed softly.

"Sitting on a porch, letting the morning sun rain down on us."

"That's beautiful, Alexander."

They agreed to walk a few blocks before catching a cab, neither of them quite ready to let the night end yet.

Somewhere between the restaurant and the road, a light rain started up, barely more than a mist, the kind that doesn't even interrupt a conversation. Neither of them reached for cover. Celine tilted her face up toward it for a second, laughing at nothing, and Alex thought, not for the first time that night, that he'd like to remember exactly this.

By the time they finally flagged down a cab, the rain had already eased back into nothing. Celine climbed in and settled onto his lap the way she always did on the rides home. Alex ran his fingers through her hair, tracing every inch of her face like he was memorizing it. If he went blind tomorrow, he thought, he'd still never be unable to see her face. Celine had found a kind of home in his lap, if the rasta man could just stop rambling for one minute, she'd have drifted off into sleep long ago. She watched the Christmas lights streak by out of the corner of her eye.

Three days later, Celine received a text message.

I think we should break up.

It carried the full weight of finality. She wanted to ask why. She wanted to say *let's sit down and talk about this*, but her body wouldn't let her get either one out.

For a brief moment, something electric ran through Alexander's whole body, full of a strange, sudden energy. Then the world went gray. Maybe the darkest shade of gray there is. Maybe just black. And he found reason after reason, invented and half-invented, to justify what he'd just done, and for now, it worked.

EPILOGUE

Dear reader, I'll leave you with a piece of wisdom about soulmates. You only get one. When you find them, hold on like your life depends on it, because it just might. And for the love of love, fight for them, even to the bitter end.

In the days that followed Alex's terrible decision, a hole began to open up. The hole where Celine would have been. The hole of his soulmate. The pain of it brought a darkness as deep as any rainy night. Time passed, and Osman, and more packets of cigarettes than either of them could count, taught him to see just enough in that long, unending dark to keep himself from falling all the way into the abyss.

Alex never set foot in a therapist's office again. He never found the happiness of love a second time. Many times he saw Celine's face on strangers. Many times he imagined her walking right through that door. Many times he thought about walking through hers instead, and in all of it, he never once found the selfishness to actually do it.

When the sun sets, the moon tries its best to light our lives, but it's a shame that even its brightest night could never amount to anything against the sun.

Rosetta lived on, on Alex's desk. But without the love of the sun, even she couldn't last forever.

THE END