

“Paradise is a perfect name for this place.” Olivia stood on polished stone floors as she surveyed the massive thatched roof over the reception area. Bouquets of bird-of-paradise flowers were strategically placed in the lobby among the rattan furniture with tropical-print-covered cushions. She’d love to touch those flowers, but it might be frowned upon.

“So glad you approve, Ms. Stone. I’m Mary Emani. I hope you enjoy your time with us. Your oceanfront room is down the hallway to the right. It’s a long walk, but the view is breathtaking.”

Olivia accepted the key and checked the room out, and it didn’t disappoint. Her suite was the perfect setting for a romance novel. A large wall of windows framed a seascape of white sand, swaying palm trees, and ocean waves. The bed was encircled by a satin-edged mosquito net, and a display of fuchsia bougainvillea stood placed on the vanity. Towels were folded in the shape of a swan, welcoming her to Zanzibar. Chilled pineapple juice and stemware waited to refresh her. Perfect for a weary traveler with jet lag.

She poured a glass and enjoyed the sweet nectar while she rubbed the satin on the mosquito net. After donning a sundress and some sandals, she secured her valuables in the safe and grabbed her sunglasses and the book she'd started reading on the plane. Exploring the grounds and watching an African sunset sounded enjoyable after her eventful afternoon.

"Is your room to your liking?" Loy Makua, the hotel manager, asked as she strolled through the lobby.

"Oh yes, it's perfect." She stopped to smell the bouquet of roses on the counter.

"Please take one of the roses, Ms. Stone. Let us know how we can make your stay more pleasurable."

She thanked him, pulled a bloom from the bouquet, and made her way to the beach. At the edge of the sand, she closed her eyes and let the breeze wash over her. The salty air lifted her hair off her perspiring skin. After she removed her shoes, powdery sand oozed between her toes while cool water crept closer with every wave, threatening high tide that would consume this stretch of beach soon. Standing at the water's edge, she watched a sailboat gliding on the horizon in front of a deep-blue sky. Dark clouds in the distance threatened a storm.

Moving back toward the resort, she got comfortable in a lounge chair under a thatched umbrella and let the events of her busy morning ease away. Relaxing, reading, and a short nap was a great plan for a pleasant afternoon if she could get a sweet little boy out of her mind. He thought she was his mother. How sad. Olivia watched the waves coming and going in a repetitive rhythm, allowing her thoughts of the child to linger. Which was better, she wondered, not being able to have children, like herself, or to have a precious child like Judah and leaving him motherless? Sometimes there aren't answers but, life keeps going, like the waves slapping the sand over and over.

She opened her book and tried to remember where she'd stopped reading. She was thumbing through the pages when

her eyes stopped on the words “He grabbed her,” which took her back to the angry Indian she’d encountered at the port. It sent shivers down her spine. She took a deep breath and tried to shake off its lingering effects. It was probably a scary case of mistaken identity. But he didn’t follow them. She could see him watching their exit in the rearview mirror. *Glad that’s over.*

A waiter walked in her direction. “Can I get a soft drink, Bwana?” She needed something refreshing to help her move past those bad vibes.

“Yes. We have Coke and Sprite today.” He waited. “Coke is great.”

He hurried to serve her.

Squeals of children entering the cool waves made Olivia smile. Their laughter sent the gulls into flight, but they soon returned to steal chips the kids dropped as they played.

Her waiter used a bottle opener to open her Coke. She held her glass of purified ice as he poured the soda, thanked him, and took a long drink. Drops of condensation formed quickly under the tropical sun.

Finding her place in her book, she read several pages until the author described how the touch of the hero’s hand affected the heroine, transporting Olivia to the moment Eli reached for Judah. His touch sent warmth through her body. As they stood face-to-face, she could see the tiniest touches of gold in his amber eyes. As their gazes locked, she felt a connection with the handsome missionary. Did he feel it too, or was he looking for differences between her and his late wife? Joy gave him Judah; she was a whole person, not like Olivia. Was he thinking about her when he stared at Olivia? That was probably it, she figured. He was still grieving. But when she was in trouble, Eli had come to her rescue, making him her hero, a valiant knight in a shining Land Rover.

She enjoyed a nap, stretched, and read several chapters in her novel. As the afternoon faded, her thoughts returned to Eli.

She removed the rose petals off the stem one by one, feeling the softness and savoring their fragrance as she removed each petal sort of like the “he loves me, he loves me not” game she played as a girl. Relationships are complicated, and this would never work. It would be wise to keep him in the friend category. She’d be gone in two weeks, and he’d be here in Zanzibar unless she found a job on this island. He’d said something about his time at this missionary post coming to an end. They were moving in opposite directions. She decided to enjoy her time on the island without getting her emotions entangled.

As she stepped into the dining room, the smell of freshly baked bread and steak being grilled wafted in her direction. Her stomach growled. Losing her lunch in the Indian Ocean left her with quite an appetite.

“Ready for dinner, Ms. Stone? Your table is prepared. Follow me.” The manager turned and led her to a linen-covered table complete with candlelight and flowers.

“Thank you, Bwana Makua. I haven’t eaten since lunch in Dar es Salaam. This is lovely.”

“Your soup will be served first, then help yourself to the buffet. We have a variety of dishes to please our diverse clientele. Enjoy your dinner!” He bowed, then left her table.

After a bowl of oxtail soup, she gave the waiter her drink order and visited the grill for a piece of steak. As she held her plate for the chef to serve a cut of meat, she caught a glimpse of a man in white robes near a large column. *No! Not again.* Surely, other Indian men dressed in robes like that in Zanzibar.

At her table, the waiter served her a drink. After surveying the restaurant for Ali Baba, not seeing him, she relaxed and enjoyed the wonderful food. Tourists from several corners of the world surrounded her. An array of languages and clothing styles made it entertaining to people-watch. Loud American children competed with uncontrollable Indian offspring to see who could exhaust their nanny the fastest.

A bush baby caused quite a stir as he climbed the rafters of the restaurant. Olivia watched the furry nocturnal animal creep higher, away from the sound of silverware hitting china and noisy children demanding attention.

Her waiter brought her another soft drink.

“Is the bush baby tame, Bwana?” Olivia watched the quiet animal climb higher.

“No, they are very shy. There are two of them. Look, the second one is following her mate. Some Americans named them George and Barbara. They come out at night and watch our guests. We leave food for them when we close each evening.”

Olivia tried to take a photo, but they were too far away and candlelight made the restaurant too dim.

After ordering hot tea and flan for dessert, she checked her phone for messages from her friends Ellie and Jocelyn. When she looked up, she saw him. Aga Kahn stared at her from across the restaurant with his fists clenched as the brisk evening breeze blew his robes. Her breath caught. Her hand shook. *He doesn't give up, does he?*

The waiter served her tea.

“Bwana, who is the man in the white robes? Does he work here?” She poured sugar into the cup.

He looked at the Indian man. “I have not seen him. He is not employed at Ocean Paradise.”

“Please ask the manager about him. He is making me nervous.” She held both hands around her warm cup.

“I will right away.” He hurried to speak to his boss.

Olivia's cell rang in her hand. She jumped, startled by the ring. She answered the unknown number. “Hello.”

“Olivia, this is Eli Deckland. I've seen some of Aga Kahn's men watching my house and wanted to make sure you were okay.” He sounded nervous, rushed his words.

“I had a wonderful afternoon until Ali Baba showed up during dinner.”

“Did he threaten you again?” Eli’s voice intensified.

She looked up to find the Indian staring at her. “No, he has kept his distance. I think he just wants me to know he’s watching. But it makes me edgy.”

“Is your room secure?”

“Yes. There are good locks on the windows and doors.” She took a sip of her tea.

“Don’t walk there alone. Have an employee go with you. Then call me, okay?”

“I don’t want to keep bothering you, Eli.” She cut into her flan.

“You didn’t create this problem. I’ll be up for a few hours. Call me when you’re securely in your room.”

“Will do.” She ended the call and finished her dessert.

The manager made his way to her table. “The Indian gentleman said he was here on business. He’s not staying at the resort.”

“He stared at me during dinner, making me uneasy. I think I’d like to go to my room. Can an employee walk with me?”

“I will be glad to accompany you to your quarters, Ms. Stone. Would you like more tea before you retire for the evening?”

“No, I’m good.” She stood, left a tip on the table, and followed him down the long dark hall.

Looking authoritative in his suit and tie, Manager Makau led the way. “I hope you enjoyed your afternoon.”

“I did. The resort is amazing, and your staff is efficient and kind. A couple of days of relaxing on this beach will be a true vacation. Thank you for escorting me, Bwana.”

He took her key from her hand, opened the door, and stepped aside for her to enter. “Sleep well, Ms. Stone.”

“Thanks.” Once the door was closed, Olivia changed

quickly, closed the mosquito net around the bed, lifted one side, and slipped between the sheets. With a cell phone in hand, she smiled and pressed Eli's number.

"Hello," he answered in a hushed voice.

"Did I wake you?"

He took a minute to answer. "No. I was checking on Judah and didn't want to wake him. Are you in your room?"

"Yes. The manager was my escort. I'm safe and sound." She fluffed her pillows and reached for the book she was reading on the beach.

"Thanks for letting me know. I feel responsible for your troubles today with Aga Kahn."

"I appreciate your concern for my safety. I'm locked up, safe and sound for tonight. I plan to lie on the beach, soak up some sun, and watch the waves come in and out. I'll be with other guests at the resort. You do your missionary thing. This place is safe."

"Okay. Sounds like you're going to enjoy our beautiful seascape. Rest well, Olivia."

"You too." She ended the call, but her thoughts stayed on Eli. A man of integrity who was willing to sacrifice for others to know the Lord. His strong, clean-cut look, his concern for her safety, and his love for his son put Eli head and shoulders above any man she'd ever met. His tender touch sent warmth through her even as she relived the moment. How long do men wait after their wife passes before they open their hearts to love again? What was she thinking? He was probably thinking about his late wife when he looked at her face. *I don't want to be a replacement.* She chided herself and attempted to rein in her runaway imagination. What she needed was a lasso.

After checking on Judah once more, Eli got busy with his studies for Sunday's sermon. Nightly noises of nocturnal animals became a sound machine that tuned out the chaos of Zanzibar as he focused. With a special message burning in his heart, he researched biblical examples to use to bring his point home to his congregation.

Frances knocked on his door. "Bwana, Jessicah is in much pain. Could we call the doctor?" Frances was jostling Jessicah's baby, Becca, who was unhappy.

Eli rose from his desk. "Yes, give me Becca and her bottle and call the doctor. Is it her heart?"

"Yes. She said her chest is hurting, and her arm." She went to the phone table and made the call.

Eli got comfortable in the living room of his modest home and fed Becca her bottle. Jessicah had issues with her heart when Joy hired her as house help, but having Becca had taken its toll.

"Bwana, the doctor is coming. Do you want me to take the baby?" She stepped closer.

"I can feed her and get her to sleep if you can stay by Jessicah. Tell her I'm praying for her. I know she's struggling." He took the bottle out of Becca's mouth and put her on his shoulder to burp her. "Frances, ask the doctor if there's anything we can do to make Jessicah more comfortable."

"I will." She left to help her friend, Becca's dying mother.

Eli laid Becca in his arms again and let her finish her bottle. He gazed at her light-brown skin, perfect pink lips, and beautiful blue eyes. "Sweet baby girl, your mother is going to heaven soon. But don't worry, if the good Lord blesses my plan, I'll take care of you."

She watched Eli, not understanding his words but seeming comfortable in his embrace as sleep weighed her eyes.

Eli prayed for Becca and her mother while the doctor



attended to his patient. Divine intervention would be appreciated as their futures hung in the balance.

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The sounds of workers sweeping the sidewalks woke Olivia. The call of ibis flying overhead entertained her as she dressed. A gauzy sundress over a swimming suit was her choice for this day of leisure. After a breakfast of fresh fruit, eggs, and bacon, she got comfortable in a lounge chair under a thatched umbrella.

“Mama, you buy from me so I can feed my babies?” A Zanzibari woman in bright, mismatched clothes was peddling an armload of kikois, pieces of cloth in African prints.

“Bei gani, how much?” Olivia sat forward and asked for her price.

The woman gave her a fair price, so she chose three pieces, one for herself and one for her two best friends, Jocelyn and Ellie. Olivia gave her the money, took off her sundress, and tied the kikoi around her, using it as a cover-up. The Zanzibari woman smiled before moving on to other customers.

Olivia’s cell phone rang as she grabbed her novel.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Liv. It’s Ellie.”

Olivia smiled. “It’s the wee hours of the morning there. Why are you still up?”

“Jet lag. I did the Australia route. They were short a flight attendant, and the extra money will pad my savings account. Liv, I’m curious. You like Zanzibar?”

“It’s an exotic island, a piece of paradise. I’m enjoying the beach today, and I’ll start seeing the sites tomorrow. So the jury’s still out on me having a future here.” She paused. “What’s really on your mind, Ellie? I can hear you chomping popcorn.”

Olivia donned her sunglasses to keep additional salespeople from gaining eye contact with her.

“I received an interesting e-mail from the editor of *Above & Beyond* magazine.”

Olivia sat up and covered her other ear. “Isn’t that the magazine you applied to with the Timbuktu article and photo proposal?”

“Yes. They’re interested and want to have a phone interview with me tomorrow.” Ellie chomped some more popcorn.

“Ellie, if they want an interview, they could offer you the project. Are you ready for that?” Olivia asked.

Ellie paused a beat. “I’m excited about the possibility—”

“But...”

“But I’m scared too. What if they pay my expenses, send me there, and I do the job but it’s not good enough? And they’ll assign an interpreter for me since I’m not great at French. What if we don’t get along? Maybe I’m not ready.”

“Ellie, your photography is superb. Your writing is in a dozen magazines. And you get along with everyone who crosses your path, even our grumpy old neighbor Mr. Oswald. You’re exhausted, jet-lagged, and letting a case of nerves talk you out of an amazing opportunity. You need to quit eating popcorn, get some sleep, and start over in the morning. Ace the interview and book a ticket for Mali, West Africa.

This job can change your life. It’s what you’ve dreamed about doing for years. Give it to the Lord and rest in Him. You’re going to succeed.”

“I needed to hear that, Liv. That’s why I called. Thanks.”

“No problem. The Lord has given you amazing talent.

You can’t hide it. Text me after your interview.”

“You got it. I feel better. Love you. Bye.”

Ellie’s call ended. Olivia looked at her phone and smiled. Ellie always hung up fast.

The clear water looked so refreshing that she took her kikoi

off and walked to the edge of the waves. Wading in about three feet, she stood, watching tropical fish swimming around her legs. Angelfish, clownfish, and yellow tang swam close, eating reef pods. It reminded her of her father's hundred-gallon saltwater tanks he had in his office when she was young. She'd gone to sleep many times on his couch, watching the fish while he worked at his desk. Then he'd carry her to bed while she pretended to be asleep but loved being held. Great memory.

She hurried to her chair; the beach waiter was bringing her a strawberry slush.

"This will refresh you, Ms. Stone."

"Perfect timing. Thank you, Julius." She reached into her bag and handed him a tip, then took a long drink, causing a brain freeze. *Ouch*. She took smaller sips finishing it slower than she started. Using her phone she took pictures capturing paradise on its screen as cockatiels flittered about in the tropical trees.

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Enjoying a samosa and some spice tea, Aga Kahn worked at his home office, planning an acquisition of another property in Stone Town. Some threats could bring the price down; he'd have to visit the owner again. His cell vibrated in his pocket. "Yes."

"Aga Kahn, the Sahar is at the resort, in a lounge chair on the beach, asleep. She is not packing her luggage yet." Rahad paused. "You want me to keep watching her?"

"No. Complete my other directives. I plan to watch the docks later today."

"Yes, Aga Kahn. I will get it done." He ended the call.

Kahn checked his watch, stacked his papers, put them in his briefcase, and called for his driver. He had enough time to make a surprise visit to Stone Town before the ferry arrived.

A warm shower after a day at the beach felt soothing. Olivia dressed for dinner and took a seat at her assigned table. The light breeze cooled her neck since her hair was up in a messy bun. Her large hoop earrings banged her skin, making her question her jewelry choice.

“Did you have a nice day, Ms. Stone?” The resort manager, Makau, bowed slightly as he greeted her.

“Yes, I did. I feel refreshed.” She sat back for him to put her linen napkin across her lap, then laced her fingers on the tablecloth.

“You will enjoy Zanzibar.” He opened a bottle of water and poured it for her. “Our soup is mushroom tonight. We also have roasted goat on the grill and fresh prawns as our specialty. Please enjoy.”

She passed on the soup, skipped the salad, but left her napkin on the table and went straight for the grilled vegetables and prawns. When she saw Aga Kahn staring in her direction she almost dropped her plate. It was obvious he knew she didn’t leave on the ferry. He wanted to frighten her into leaving. Goose bumps rose on her flesh as she strode to her table. Ignoring the Indian, she took her time trying to enjoy her meal. After having tea and dessert, she requested to see the manager.

“How can I be of service, Ms. Stone?” The manager waited.

“The Indian man has been watching me again tonight. Would you walk with me to my room, Bwana?” She put her cloth napkin on the table.

“Absolutely. Are you ready?”

She stood. “Yes, if you’re free to be my escort.”

“I’ll lead the way.” He turned toward her accommodations. “These lights were shining last night. I will have them checked immediately.” The manager, Loy Makau, crunched glass under

his shoes. He looked down. "I fear they have been broken with purpose."

When they neared her room, she gave him the key. He opened the door, turned on the light, and held the door for her to enter.

"No!" She stood, staring at a huge mess. "Someone has ransacked this room, Bwana. How did they get in?" The mattress was off the bed. Her suitcase had been emptied, and her clothes were strewn across the floor. Toiletries were scattered.

The manager checked the restroom as he called security. "Would you feel more secure if we moved you to another room? You cannot stay here."

"Yes, if you have a vacancy, and could we keep the location quiet?" Olivia's hands trembled.

"I'm sure we have a vacancy, and keeping the location silent is a good idea." He made another call to arrange alternate accommodations.

Olivia walked to the windows, being careful not to touch anything. "Bwana, two windows are unlocked. I made sure they were locked when I left the room. This frightens me."

"They were planning to return." He dialed another number and spoke as it rang through. "I'm calling the police. Please see if anything has been stolen."

She opened the safe. Her iPad and camera were still there. "Bwana, I think they tried to get into the safe. There are scratches by the lock."

Security arrived just before the police. They took pictures and brushed for fingerprints. Their antique methods would have been comical in different circumstances.

After waiting and watching for half an hour, Olivia approached the officer. "May I gather my clothes and toiletries?"

"Yes, but we would like to keep your suitcase until it is

checked for prints.” The police officer in charge spoke as he worked.

The manager gave her a laundry bag for her things. “I will collect the remainder of your belongings. Would you like to go to another room now?” He held up another key.

“That would be wonderful. I’m exhausted.”

He led her to a different section of the resort and made sure she was inside, with the door locked, before he left her, returning to the scene of the crime.

Olivia checked the window locks, breathed a sigh of relief, and lay across the bed. Her phone chimed with a message.

This is Eli.

Are you okay?

She punched in his number.

“Hello. You okay?”

“No. I’m not okay. I had the manager walk me to my room. Some of the lights were out, making the hall pitch black. When he opened my door, the room was ransacked. My clothes were all over the floor.”

“No! Where are you now?”

“I’m in a new room. I think it’s a presidential suite or something. It’s plush, and extra locks have me confined. Hotel security and the police are working on the crime scene. I got my things out of the safe, my pajamas and toiletries off the floor, and left the rest until tomorrow. The manager told me he would secure my property.”

“I’m sorry this happened. How are you now?”

“Still a bit shaken. It angered me until I found two windows unlocked. Then, I was scared. The manager said they were probably planning to return.” She took a deep breath and blew it out.

“Is there anything I can do?” Eli asked.

“Pray that I can sleep tonight. I’ve got jet lag and a bad case of nerves.”

“I’ll do that. Do you feel safe now?”

“Yes. It’s on the second floor, close to the lobby. They left me an air horn to use if I need assistance. I’m sure he’s long gone since the police are here.” She sat up and removed her shoes.

“Olivia, what are your plans for tomorrow?”

“I was going to start touring the island, but I think I’ll stay here and enjoy the beach or one of the pristine pools. This place is gorgeous.”

“You’re safe in crowds. Stay close to other people. Okay?”

“I can do that. The manager said he was hiring extra guards to secure the resort while I’m here.”

“I’m glad.” He paused. “Do you mind texting when you wake up in the morning?”

“Sure. Thanks for checking on me.”

“Sleep well, Olivia.”

“Good night, Eli.” She smiled, picturing the good-looking missionary, definitely a hero who would occupy her thoughts all night since jet lag had her days and nights messed up. But his handsome face was enjoyable to imagine. Not a waste of time at all.