

## CHAPTER 1



*A*s Harry sat at the bar in the Tiki Lounge in Diani Beach, just a short walk from the white sand, he wondered whether he'd been betrayed. Aldo was supposed to meet him here, and the fellow was more than an hour overdue. Granted that appointments in Kenya are more good intentions than hard deadlines, Aldo's client expected to get what he'd paid for. The trip package had been prepaid, as was customary, and so far all the bookings had been solid and the accommodations sumptuous. Harry doubted whether Aldo had absconded with any funds. But this was wary Harry's first venture offshore in a lifetime, and part of the deal was supposed to be Aldo's companionship and watchful guidance.

Harry would later learn that Aldo was in Mombasa meeting with an attorney, David Odiengo. Since Esther was in Mombasa as well, did they meet? Were they somehow working together? On what? And for whom? These became questions that nagged at him.

Esther, a local hottie, was an eligible widow who might be in her thirties, perhaps forty, and seemed to be captivated by Harry's charm, if not his looks. She would be too old for the younger men of this resort town, unless she was rich, which she apparently wasn't. But Harry was no prize when it came to physique. His body was thickset

and pudgy, and he was losing his hair. He liked to think he had heart. He didn't think himself wealthy, either, but people here assumed he was. She'd taken to teasing him with the nickname "Harambee." Neither had told him what it meant, literally. Aldo had hinted it was complimentary. But now both of them liked to taunt him with it, usually accompanied by wide grins and chuckles. And Harry's affable, round face was now familiar enough around this little town that others were catching on, too, and they seemed just as amused. Good-naturedly, he hoped.

It wasn't until he was studying a banknote in this solitary moment at the bar when he saw *Harambee* emblazoned on the banner of the Kenyan coat of arms, just beneath two lions rampant guarding a tribal shield. Harry pulled out his phone and searched online for the definition, discovering that the national motto in Kiswahili means *We Pull Together*, or simply, *Unison*. Harry still didn't make the connection. He was aware that people on the street were likely to greet him as *Papa*, a respectful term for an older gentleman of any race, or *mzungu*, meaning *white man* or — if uttered with extra emphasis — meaning *crazy* (or *clueless* or worse) *white man*.

Harry Harambee would discover that, to some of his new friends, he would be *one of the boys* or *one of our boys* or *one of my boys who has our money*. Which is to say, *One for all and all for one*. Or, he feared, *You for us and all you have for all of us*.

Unity!

Had she taken advantage of him? Or was he exploiting her? Was he allowing himself to be manipulated, or was he asserting himself into her life?

But despite these troubling considerations, for once his life was interesting.

So, perhaps Aldo wasn't taking advantage, just trying to make Harry's life seem more worthwhile. That was what the fellow had promised.

And so here Harry was, killing time pleasantly at the Tiki. Waiting for Aldo. When Esther had taken off for Mombasa this morning, he'd mentioned he would be here in the evening. But it wasn't like they'd made a date. He'd only known her three days.

Harry was on his fourth gin-and-tonic, which the inexperienced adventurer might assume he was consuming to ward off malaria. True, malaria is serious and all too common in any part of equatorial Africa. But Harry knew, despite age-old claims by habitually soused Brits of the Raj in India, that the quinine dose in the tonic isn't nearly enough to have much medicinal effect. (If you consumed enough to knock out the disease, the toxicity would probably kill you.) What's more, malaria, while prevalent and widespread, is the word Kenyans use to describe everything from gut-wrenching influenza to the common cold. On a bus trip, a Kenyan-born white aristo told Harry that doctors encourage the locals to worry they have malaria whenever they have a cough or a fever or even the sniffles. They'd report to a clinic, and nine times out of ten they'd get an injection of distilled water and go home with an envelope containing two aspirin. The justification for this ruse was presumably to make sure that the relatively small proportion of patients who actually have the disease will bother to get treated. Harry wondered whether this canard was a benign public-health control measure or simply a racist myth to portray the descendants of indigenous tribes as gullible and easily controlled.

Where was Aldo? The sun had long since gone down and Harry was getting hungry. The Tiki specialized in marinated shrimp and calamari barbecued on skewers, and Harry was thinking a dozen of those and a few cold Tuskers would sit just right. He disliked eating alone, but he wasn't going to let his loyalty to Aldo deprive him of a good meal. And, should Aldo show up, Harry resolved he'd make the fellow pay this time, at least for his own dinner.

Just then, the loud put-put of an approaching boda boda cut out as the bike slid to a stop on the gravel of the car park. A passenger hopped off the back, and the driver sped off. As the newcomer stepped from the darkness into the warm light of the bar, Harry's reaction was a mixture of lust, disappointment, and alarm. It wasn't Aldo. It was Esther. And she was wearing a new, low-cut print dress with a matching turban, bright-red loop earrings and a necklace strung with giant beads of the same color, and designer heels. A smartly coordinated handbag hung on her forearm.

Her unblemished skin was almost as black as any Kenyan's Harry

had met. It wasn't until he'd ventured over to this side of the world that he realized how black African Americans *aren't*. Many, if not most, are some shade of coffee-and-cream, and, by one glimpse of them on television, any Kenyan could tell you their ancestry must be as much white as black. Indeed, indigenous Kenyans also tend to be suspicious of Arabs and Indians, whom they consider not white but *other*.

This morning Esther had appealed to Harry for money, explaining that her son and daughter needed textbooks for their advanced courses. These textbooks were not only expensive but also rare as hen's teeth, and the only bookstore authorized to sell them was in Mombasa. So she'd have to take a *matatu* to the ferry at Likoni and then into town and hope she'd be there in time before the precious books were sold out.

Harry had marched to the ATM next to the coffee shop where they'd had breakfast, withdrew a stack of crisp banknotes, and made sure to give her some extra for the transport and lunch in the city.

But why had he done this for her? She hadn't asked for it as a loan. She hadn't promised him anything in return. He'd complied cheerfully because nothing about this trip was going as planned and because she was gorgeous and because he *could*.

Esther and Aldo seemed to know each other, but Harry hadn't yet learned how. Maybe she could tell him why his friend was late. Or whether he was coming back at all.



WHEN HARRY BEGAN HIS ADVENTURE, as he still liked to think of it, he told himself he'd be a happy man if he only managed to dip his toes in the turquoise water of the Indian Ocean. He was too old and too unskilled and too cautious to surf. He was too impatient with children to help one build a sandcastle. He might consider snorkeling — that is, if the sea wasn't too choppy, if the boat operator seemed reputable and didn't gouge him on price, and if they gave him a mask that didn't leak.

It all started when the too-slick Aldo Barbieri, a friend of a friend, suggested a tour package for Harry. Barbieri had proposed they meet

for a late breakfast at Barney's Beanery on the Santa Monica Promenade. Harry had met the guy at Vince Delgado's lawn party, one of those events Harry usually avoided. Vince came on like a pal and hosted poker nights. But at every opportunity he'd be hustling insurance annuities.

"What do you like to do?" Barbieri asked as he dunked a biscotti in his cappuccino and then snarfed it down.

"Simple enough. No expectations," Harry said. "Balmy weather and a beach. They're telling me I need to relax."

"Who is this *they*?" the Italian in a Calloway golf shirt and Ralph Lauren cardigan wanted to know.

"My daughter. Some friends. Vince, for one, which I guess is why he put us together." Then he added, lest he be accused of leaving her off his list of important persons, "Also, my wife."

"That's right," the faux-amiable fellow said and looked up. "My condolences. In our worst moments, we wish for them to be dead." He actually smiled. "And then they are. Life is so unfair."

"Forty years," Harry said and sighed. "You don't get over that in a day." Barbieri's humor might be lame and tasteless, but Harry couldn't deny its truth. His last years with Lucille hadn't been all that happy. They argued, she suffered. He never seriously wished for her to go. But he wanted the tension to ease. And he wanted her suffering to end. And then it had, more abruptly than he'd expected.

Lucille's passing was two years ago. The period since then could go down in his diary, if he'd kept one, on a page or two. Bored aimlessness. Amateurish golf with guys who wanted to sell him timeshares or reverse mortgages. Spurned invitations to bridge parties. More recently, offers from well-wishers to set him up on polite dates with lonely crones.

This first meeting with Aldo had occurred in August in the pre-pandemic year of 2019, typically a hot month in Southern California. But on this day the breeze off the ocean was downright chilly. Always cautious about temperature, Harry wore a windbreaker over his button-down shirt. Nevertheless, he ordered a cold beer, his summer drink, thinking it was a manful choice for a guy-meetup with the fellow he assumed would be his vacation planner.