***ILLUSIONS***

***Moral Lesson : We always need to walk in the right path, even if we stand alone.***

***CHAPTERS***

1. ***A New Phase***
2. ***Sweet Honey!***
3. ***Another Banger!***
4. ***Crikey!***
5. ***The Black Hole***
6. ***Romance Scammers***
7. ***The Dark Diary***
8. ***Inside the Lion’s Den***
9. ***True Colors***
10. ***Sunrise at Midnight***
11. ***Double-crossed***
12. ***Jailbreak!***
13. ***Tender Memories***
14. ***We’ve Struck Gold!***
15. ***Surviving the Storm***
16. ***Bad Blood***
17. ***Blame the Government?***
18. ***Impostors***
19. ***Out of the Woods?***
20. ***A Game of Chess: Checkmate!***
21. ***Situation: Critical!***
22. ***Back to my roots***
23. ***The Bitter Pill***
24. ***What has Christianity ever done for us?***
25. ***Guilty or Not Guilty?***

***Characters***

***Zoe Maloba- a rich celebrity  
Destiny- Leader of the Cheetah Girls  
Kourtney- Zoe’s friend  
James- Zoe’s brother  
Doctor Chan- James’ doctor  
Mark Lingual- The manager of the Cheetah Girls  
Steve Wilbert- Mark’s partner and accomplice  
Christopher Mallow- Mark’s business partner  
Maggie- owner of the Children’s Center  
Ibn Mohamed- Captain of Destiny’s plane  
Lucy, Trishna and Susan- Members of the Cheetah Girls  
Fatuma Ahmed- Hotel Manager  
Khadija- Fatuma’s daughter  
Terresa Mendoza- Chris’ ex-wife  
Isabela Osvaldo- Fatuma’s friend and brothel owner  
Officer Perez- Officer in Mexico  
Bill- Mark’s butler  
Officer Hassan- Officer in Dubai  
Marshal Otieno- Kourtney’s ex-boyfriend  
Bob- Marshal’s driver  
Anita Adhiambo- Marshal’s ex-girlfriend  
Sasha- Marshal’s child   
Brian Sulubu- Anita’s current boyfriend  
Jose Martinez- Zoe’s friend and ex-thug  
Officers Antonio and Rodrigo- Officers in Honduras  
Mr. Manager- The manager in Honduras  
Paloma- The manager’s child  
Nia- Kourtney’s child  
Tatiana, Jewel and Paul- Zoe’s children  
Kate***

1. ***A NEW PHASE***

After performing her latest single, Zoe walked off the stage wearing a vibrant smile on her face. Her fans were eagerly waiting for her next performance. They were so excited to see their role model play. Zoe was a famous singer and YouTube star who faced a lot of cyber bullying for her joyous nature. They would say that she looked high and that it was not normal for a person to be bursting with excitement all the time unless she was faking it. Others made fun of her for being an atheist but she never let them get the best of her. She was indeed quite different from other celebs. Most people found her annoying saying that she was too loud and even other celebrities started dissing her. But who cares anyways? She was super rich I’ll give you that.

She then went backstage to meet some of her fans. There, she would sign books, give autographs and even take pics with them. They were really excited. But before she went backstage, her manager came to have a word with her. What she was about to be told would drastically change her life for the worst. Her manager took in a deep breath, exhaled, sighed and said, “Your parents have been involved in a serious accident and we’re not sure if they’ll make it.” At that point it felt like the whole world was suddenly still; stuck at that dreadful time. She did not know how to react and she could not even cry. She was simply shocked. She asked for a moment alone. She went to her tour bus and just sat there staring at the wall. The fans were soon told that Zoe would not be answering their questions today. Many wondered what had gone amiss while others started spreading rumors that she was not feeling well because she was drunk (you know how fans are).

She rushed to the hospital and found her parents in critical condition. She started crying her heart out and was escorted out by some nurses to get some fresh air. Since she was super rich, she paid for the best medication to be given to her parents and hired some expert doctors. She logged off all her accounts in social media for she did not want to focus on fame at the time. She just wanted her family to be well; that’s all. Her elder brother, James (who was 17 years old) offered a shoulder to lean on through the difficult time. Even though their parents received the best medication, their health seemed to be deteriorating. After two days, their parents eventually passed on. That was the most heartbreaking moment ever. They had to live as orphans for the rest of their lives. As only teens they were not mature enough to make the right decisions and therefore needed a parental figure in their lives.

After the burial and some counselling, Zoe decided to forget the past and focus on her carrier. She went back to social media and continued with her normal lifestyle. She started going on tours and won awards and everything seemed great. The hate on social media stopped and she even got many more opportunities like guest starring on shows.

After a year, her brother was called to Kowloon in Hong Kong to star in a reality show. This was indeed going to be a big opportunity for him and he could not wait to start. Zoe knew that she would miss her brother but she wanted him to pursue his dreams of being an actor. After a few days he left. He started off well and would generate a lot of income. They became the most successful siblings in history and it could not be more perfect.

On Zoe’s 15th birthday, she was so excited because she had not seen her brother in such a long time. She received a phone call from an unknown caller and she said, “Hello? My name is Doctor Chan from Bangzhu Hospital. I wanted to tell you that your brother lost his breath, collapsed and died because of Corona.” At that moment she felt as if the whole world was against her. She had her tongue tied, dropped the phone and fainted. Covid-19 was a disease which had originated from China and had started spreading to the rest of the world. It could be spread through the shaking of hands, hugging or kissing of an infected person. The virus entered the body through the eyes, nose and mouth. There was very strict guidelines about how to prevent the virus in China but since it had not spread to Kenya, Zoe was still able to book gigs but unfortunately her brother had become the latest victim of the disease.

It was sad that such a young girl had to experience so many misfortunes in life. In fact, most of her friends abandoned her saying that she was bad luck. She felt so alone. She also lost millions of followers due to some videos which got leaked of her vaping. Ironic right? From riches to rags. Although she was a big influencer, she did not have that much money and soon there house was auctioned because she did not finish completing the mortgage.

She went to a nearby children’s center and sought assistance there. The nanny was so welcoming however, it was the opposite when it came to her fellow children. They bullied her day and night. She tried so hard to fit in but they just would not budge. She acted like them all the time; trash-talking, cursing, swearing, doing the middle finger and all the things that rebellious teenagers do. They called it being ‘cool’ and ‘less nerdy’. They eventually started liking her and she felt as though after a while they would fully accept her into their clique.

The nanny (Maggie), who at first liked her started to despise her for her foolish and irresponsible behavior. The truth is, she only liked her because she thought she would be a good influence to the others since she had seen Zoe from music videos and her songs were always about love and unity. Instead of her influencing the spoilt teens, it seemed like it was the other way round. Maggie almost lost her cool one day when Zoe came to the center drunk. She asked her where she had come from. Under the influence of alcohol, Zoe felt that Maggie was being too ‘bossy’ and said, “Shut the hell up you annoying bitch. This is my life and I can do whatever I want with it and you or anyone else can’t boss me around. Nonsense.” Maggie picked up a huge stick that was laying on the ground and just as she was about to whack the stupidity out of the girl, Destiny (the head of the Cheetah Girls clique), arrived just in time. She begged Maggie to let the girl be and assured her that she would talk to her. Maggie agreed but deep down, she knew Destiny would do no such thing cause……let’s be honest, Destiny was not exactly the ‘mature’ type and was even worse that Zoe. Plus, only lies ever came out of her mouth.

1. ***SWEET HONEY!***

The next day, the Cheetah Girls called Zoe out and told her that it was finally time for her initiation into the clique. She was more than excited. She felt as if she was now truly one of them. Her initiation was to be performed that Saturday. Maggie was a Christian who usually went to church on Saturday (Seventh Day Adventist) and they knew very well that she would return at dusk. Some other girls from the neighborhood were also invited. Fact is, the Cheetah Girls was a very wide clique with very many members from them to people of other cities. Wow! The girls arrived at two o’clock and Destiny welcomed them. In the first part of her initiation, Zoe was to be given a tattoo on the hand in the shape of a cheetah with the initials ‘C.G.’ meaning ‘Cheetah Girls’. It was painful but the desire that Zoe had to be one of them was too much that she did not even mind the pain. Next, she was to sing the Cheetah Girls anthem which was:

‘As a Cheetah Girl, I rule the world, just like the actual cheetah,

No one tells me how to live my life, I live by my own rules,

Anyone who tries to stop me will surely regret it so don’t even try,

As a member I will remain loyal to the Cheetah Girls and never abandon it.’

After that she was to get a nose ring with the initials ‘C.G.’ meaning…yeah you guessed it…Cheetah Girls. They then drank and ate to their fill and then their friends left before Maggie could come back.

When Maggie arrived home, the Cheetah Girls had already cleaned the entire compound and it was clean…too clean. Maggie knew something was up. She was no sock-puppet. Since Zoe had been made the new president of the center, taking over from Destiny, Maggie called her to give her instructions. When Zoe came, Maggie immediately saw the jewelry and tattoo even though she tried to hide it. She knew that Zoe had undergone the initiation ceremony. It was not the first time that a girl had been initiated during her absence. The previous three girls had also been initiated when she went to church. A part of her felt responsible for the misfortunes but what could she do? She could not cry over spilt milk. It was too late to save any of them.

Later that night, Maggie called Zoe to try to correct the bad parenting she felt she had given them by ignoring the ‘Spare the rod spoil the child’ policy. “Hey Maggie, what’s up? You called me,” Zoe said. “Yes my dear sit down. I wanted to talk to you about the Cheetah Girls. I really don’t think like that clique is doing you good and Destiny is a bad influence so if you could please-”. Zoe did not let her finish, “With all due respect Maggie I believe I have every right to decide who I want to hang out with. No offence but I don’t tell you when to talk to your friends and when not to talk to your friends so please stop poking your nose in my business. Thank you. By the way I have a lot of cleaning to do so I’ll be taking my leave now. Bye. Call me when you have something relevant to discuss.” Maggie was baffled by this response and she never tried to give Zoe or any of the Cheetah Girls a pep talk again. She felt like it was a lost course.

The Cheetah Girls started spending less and less time at the center. After breakfast they would all leave and return at dusk, drunk and some of them even unconscious. One day, while they were in the club partying, they met a squad of boys who called themselves, ‘The Black Gang.’ The Black Gang started bragging that they were earning money unlike the Cheetah Girls who were just having fun at their own expense. The boys boasted about selling cocaine and heroin abroad and earning more money than the Cheetah Girls. In an attempt to try to prove that they were just as cool as the boys, they ended up in a dark alley searching for the manager of The Black Gang. When they finally met him, the manager chased the girls away saying that they looked like snitches who would at one point throw him under the bus.

However, the girls were not the type of people to take no for an answer. They soon discovered where the manager lived and went there every day to try and convince him to re-consider his decision. Eventually, they got to him and he decided to give it a try. He booked them a room at the Stains Hotel. The girls packed their belongings and ran away from the center. When Maggie found out about it she was furious but helpless at the same time. All she could do was wait for fate to teach them a hard lesson through experience.

The hotel was as beautiful as all the emeralds in the world. It had big bedrooms all with a huge comfortable bed and a television set the size of one of the walls of the room. The girls had never seen so much splendor in their lives and it felt like a dream. Before they went to bed, they heard a knock at the door. A tall, slim man who was dressed in a rather dashing suit entered their hotel room. He was dark in complexion and wore a golden ring on each finger. He also had a silver watch encrusted with diamonds. Don’t get me started on the shoe- he was wearing the latest trends and they were well polished by his butler too (at least he looked like the kind of person to have a butler but maybe not).

He cleared his throat and began, “You are the Cheetah Girls I presume. I am Steve Wilbert. I heard that you want to become part of our business. Mark Lingual (the manager) has told me so much about you girls and your determination. It’s clear you have good qualities but we don’t know if you will keep your mouths shut in case something is to go wrong. You know we can’t have a bunch of moles working with us….it will be bad for the business.” They all looked at Destiny because she was their leader and they felt that she was the one who was supposed to speak on their behalf. Destiny looked around and then said, “You can trust us, Sir. We would never betray your trust. I can guarantee you that we are not snitches.” Steve looked at them suspiciously but said nothing. After a few minutes of glaring at them he finally said, “Well then, I guess the deal is sealed.” He left without saying another word.

The following day, Mark went to talk to the girls. He told them that it was too risky to carry the merchandise together on the same trip and so he would be sending them one by one and he would also book a hotel where they would stay after they had finished the job. Since Destiny was their leader, it was only common sense that she was given the job first. She went to meet up with Mark in the evening to discuss how she was going to smuggle the goods. She had no idea what she was carrying or even where she was going.

Mark welcomed her into a fancy restaurant and said, “I’m sure you have a lot of questions and you are very nervous about all this but let me just start by saying that you have absolutely nothing to be worried about and you will forget about the whole thing when you set your hands on the cash. This is a very good opportunity especially for a young girl like you. You still have an awesome future ahead of you and what better way to start than with a wad of cash and a giant mansion all for a teeny tiny job? This is what you must do. You will wake up tomorrow at three o’clock because your flight will depart at six and you must be at the airport by four. Your trip is to Dubai. We will give you a suitcase and in that suitcase will be some food products and baby clothes laced with some drugs. The drug in particular here in heroin. Heroin is highly illegal which means that it is very expensive and in one shipment you can get about two million Kenya shillings! When the police ask you where you are going you’ll just say that you own a boutique in Dubai and you are taking the clothes there but you don’t really like their food so you are carrying a bit of your own. Do not tense when they ask you a question or else they’ll know that something is up and that will be that will be the end of you. Just be calm and everything will go smoothly okay? Or are you going to chicken out like a coward?” Destiny shook her head and said that she was no coward. She was ready for her first mission.

That night, she ate and slept early in order to be freshened up for something that was surely going to be a long day. She set her alarm clock and had some shut-eye. The following day she woke up on time and her friends helped her to prepare. To be honest, they were all filled with anxiety but no one wanted to show it. She bid them goodbye and was drove by a land rover to the airport. During the drive, she thought about some of the consequences of her actions. She definitely did not want to go to jail at the age of sixteen. She comforted herself by thinking about the amount of money she would make once she was in Dubai. She literally had no idea where she was supposed to go once she arrived in Dubai but she knew that Mark would not desert her (or at least she hoped not). The Cheetah Girls had travelled prior to New York in the United States of America where they would be making all their shipments from. “It will be easier and faster,” Mark had said. Destiny was to travel the following day to Dubai as she would be making her first shipment.

When she arrived at the airport, a chubby man who looked like a goon approached her and gave her the suitcase Mark had told her about. It was a medium, brown suitcase and it was super heavy. The goon then looked at her straight in the eyes and said, “Do not mess this up rookie, or you are dead meat!” Destiny slowly stepped away. She felt creped out by the guy. She then went to have her suitcase checked. Destiny had never visited an airport before and so she had a problem finding her way around. She also thought that a person would be checking the suitcase physically but to her surprise, it was run through a machine which was more accurate and had a better chance of detecting drugs. Jomo Kenyatta International Airport was no stranger when it came to arresting drug smugglers and so they knew exactly what to look for. This only added to her worries but she had been told not to tense so she tried as best as she could to hide it. Thinking about all the money she would make always seemed to get her in a good mood and so she did exactly that.

The police called her aside. They started whispering among themselves. At that point she was as sure as death that she was busted. She thought of running away but that would only make the scenario worse. She then gathered up the courage to ask, “Is there a problem officers?” One of them said, “The machine revealed that you are carrying strange items in your suitcase. Do you mind if we check it out?” Destiny said that it was no problem at all but deep inside she was petrified. She was taken to a special room and an officer asked her why she wanted to go to Dubai. Destiny said, “It’s always been my dream to live in Dubai. I even own a boutique there for children. That’s why I’m taking these clothes there. Although Dubai is fun and all, I really don’t like their food and so I carried some of mine. No offence but their food is gross don’t you think?” The police did not seem amused by the joke and they just looked at her with a straight face and continued checking her bag. They even dismantled the suitcase itself but they did not find anything. “Well, I guess your story checks out. Don’t worry about the suitcase, we will give you a new one. Sorry about all of this. Have a safe trip to Dubai,” one of the officers said. Destiny heaved a sigh of relief. That was the scariest moment of her life.

1. ***ANOTHER BANGER!***

The flight to Dubai was long but worth it. When she arrived at Dubai International Airport, she got past the officers with no hiccups. When she had almost left the airport, a short, beautiful, dark-skinned lady approached her and said, “Are you Destiny? Mark sent me. Just give me the suitcase and I’ll take it from here. You’ve done your part and you will be greatly rewarded. Destiny looked around to make sure that nobody was seeing them or even eavesdropping on their conversation and gave her the baggage. The lady then gave her some cash and an address of a hotel she was supposed to stay in until it was time to head back to Kenya. She took it and found a taxi which took her to the hotel. She was super relieved that she no longer had the suitcase. She just wanted to lay down and relax.

When she arrived at the hotel, the secretary welcomed her without even asking her for her documents. It was clear she was in on the charade. She was welcomed into a room which had clean furniture, a big screen television and a beautiful closet with clothes which were just her size. She took the moment to call her friends and told them how lucky she was to have escaped the police at the airport. She then took a shower and went for a long slumber.

The next day, she was awakened by a knock at the door. She rubbed her eyes, wore her slippers and slowly opened the doors for she had been told about robbers who liked robbing big hotels and so she was scared. A tall, slim, light-skinned guy entered the room without even greeting her. He wore an elegant suit with shiny, well-polished black shoes. He took out a large, brown envelope, mumbled a few words and finally spoke to her saying, “My name is Christopher Mallow and it’s a pleasure to meet you. You have done a great job although our spy told us that your nerves were visible. The police who questioned you were not well experienced and if they were, they would have known that you were lying from the very beginning. That is indeed a rookie mistake that freshmen do but it was too risky so maybe do better next time or else we will relook some of our decisions. Anyway, what’s done is done and technically you completed the mission. Here is your reward. For transporting more than two kilograms of heroin, you will get two hundred and sixty five thousand Kenya shillings. Congratulations.”(That was a lot lower than what she should have made but for an ignorant teenager like her, they knew they could easily take advantage of her lack of knowledge.) He handed the envelope over to her and she reluctantly took it. She was still traumatized from the previous day’s experience and it was not something she could let go of that easily. It was time to put her big girl pants on and erase all the worries from her mind. She knew she had to make another shipment in a few days’ time. Christopher left and Destiny went downstairs to take breakfast.

Everyone in the hotel was so kind to her and she received first class treatment. She did not have to lift a finger. Everything was done for her. This kind of lifestyle made her forget about the horrors she had gone through at the airport. In fact, that was their plan all along. They wanted her to make another shipment as soon as possible and they did not want her to draw attention to herself by panicking. Destiny was in fact very naïve even though the Cheetah Girls thought she was the smartest off all of them. She was willing to do anything for money which made her quite gullible. After breakfast, her butler took her to the main tourist attractions in Dubai like the famed cityscape at Burj Khalifa, soaking up the sun at Jumeirah Beach Residence, waking through history in Al Fahidi Quarter, skiing then shopping at Mall of the Emirates and finally snapping sunset pics at Dubai Frame. This was indeed a dream come true since she has always wished to go to Dubai since childhood. Of course they avoided the roads with a lot of traffic cops since her documents were fake. If they were at all caught, they would face more than fifteen years behind bars. It was a long and tiresome journey but it was worth it.

That evening, as they went back to the hotel, Destiny saw Christopher talking to the manager of the hotel. The butler stopped the vehicle just next to them. They stopped their conversation and watched Destiny as she came out of the white limousine. They looked worried. Destiny immediately knew that something was amiss by the expression on their faces. She went to her room and sat on the window seat. The manager and Christopher were still talking but it looked like they were in a heated argument. After some time she finally decided to eavesdrop on their conversation. She walked stealthily downstairs and tiptoed to a corridor where she could hear everything.

“I’m telling you, we should kill her. She is of no benefit to us anymore!” Christopher shouted. “Lower your voice she might hear us,” the manager replied. Destiny was shocked beyond words. There she was in an unfamiliar state, she had smuggled heroine which could give her twenty five years behind bars, she had forged documents which had a penalty of fifteen years behind bars and now her allies wanted to kill her? Could things get any worse? (Never say that by the way.) She continued to listen keenly. “Listen Chris, she still needs to take cocaine to Mexico. No one is willing to transport that large amount and you know that. She is a child and so she is very vulnerable. She does not know the consequences of her actions yet. Let’s have her make this last shipment and fingers crossed that everything will turn out fine. We will then dump her to an orphanage in Mexico and we’ll find another annoying rat from the Cheetah Girls to do the dirty work for us and the best part is, we get to keep all the money. Now you tell me, isn’t that a sweet deal?” the manager added.

This was too much for the poor girl to handle. She fell down with a thud knocking over some essential farm supplies that were in the corner. She tried to get up but the magnitude of the fright left her weak. Christopher and the manager rushed inside and found her wallowing in pain and confusion. They did not even ask if she was okay. The manager just asked, “How much of that did you hear?” Destiny suddenly gathered up the courage and said in a loud voice, “You egocentric middle aged man. Well I never trusted you from the very beginning but I never thought you would stoop so low. And here I thought I was helping you but turns out I was just making a fool out of myself. And if it isn’t the nice, loving Mrs. Manager. Do you hug your mother with those hands? Hands filled with cold, innocent blood. How many have you killed already? How many more will you kill? Jackass!” Christopher raised his hand to slap the sense out of the girl but the manager stopped him and whispered, “Listen here girly, you are going to do exactly what we tell you or I will personally end you okay? If you do as I say, nothing bad will happen to you, but if you don’t you will not only walk the plank but also go to jail for thirty years. Decision is yours. Have a good night.”

The baffled girl watched as the two left in a fancy, white jeep. She walked to her room and wept the whole night. She had no one to talk to. She only realized that her communication had been cut off when she tried to contact the Cheetah Girls. It was limited to only the hotel staff. She finally drifted off to sleep but only for a few hours. She was woken up by a phone call. It was Mark. He wanted to video call. She grudgingly took it. Mark started, “Wow, you look like you are in a sour mood. What’s got you so upset in this lovely morning?” Destiny sighed and asked, “What do you want boss? I’m really not in the mood today,” Mark told her that she was to transport two kilograms of cocaine to Mexico. He informed her that she would get her first check immediately after. Deep down Destiny knew that he was lying but she felt so helpless that she just decided to go with it. This time, it was going to be an evening flight and she was required at the airport at exactly four o’clock in the evening.

After the phone call, she woke up and went to have breakfast. When she saw the manager she rolled her eyes and moved along. The manager scoffed and mumbled some few words before leaving on her convertible Mercedes Benz. Destiny knew that she was filthy rich for she seemed to have a car for each day of the year. She barely spoke to anyone that day and she told her butler to take the day off. She stood at the balcony of the hotel for a while and gazed at the horizon. She was feeling a bit nostalgic. She flashbacked to the days when she still lived under Maggie’s roof. That is the point she started wishing she had done things differently at a specific point in her life. She remembered the Chicken Girls and her best friend, Zoe. She wished she could give her one last hug before going to the orphanage. She cursed the day she had met the Black Gang. She thought they were the main cause of this problem.

1. ***CRIKEY!***

The saying ‘time flies’ can accurately describe that day. Within minutes it was already two o’clock. Destiny went to have another shower and dressed up really well. She put on some make-up which made her very attractive. She was wearing a black crop-top, ragged jeans and a pair of pink stiletto shoes. When she went downstairs, she found Christopher sitting at a table in the far end of the room sipping some whiskey. He waved is arm as a way of directing her to the table. Destiny tried to pull a fast one on Mr. Christopher. She said, “Well, last night I spoke to the boss and he assured me of my safety and said that you have no control whatsoever over me. How do you explain that? Were you guys just trying to intimidate me? If so then spot on.” Christopher put the bottle of whiskey down and took a cigarette. He then took the lighter and lighted it and started smoking in her presence then he said, “I see you are pulling my leg huh? Do you know the difference between you and this cigarette? Huh? This cigarette is actually helpful unlike you naïve, spoilt child. Mark is not even my boss. We are just business partners so that means he can’t tell me what to do. And by the way you’ve got a lot of nerve talking to me like that. I do not have to explain myself to a mere help. Shut up and listen. When you reach the airport, a security officer will approach you. He will give you a suitcase and in it will be some books. Now the cover of the text books are actually laced with drugs. A few of them will be clean to keep the police off your trail. Here is your story if you get flagged by the police. You’ll say that you are a college student who is part of the student exchange program in your school. You are going to Mexico to learn Spanish and you are very excited about it okay?” Destiny stopped him before he could finish, “That story doesn’t even add up. If I am part of the student exchange program in school then why am I travelling solo for Pete’s sake?” Christopher got very mad and said in a hoarse voice, “I don’t know girl. Figure it out! Do I have to think of everything?”

“Before I go can I have a taste of that whiskey? My last wish is that.” Christopher handed her the bottle and she gobbled his last swallow. It was quiet for some time before she got up and went to the airport. She took a taxi and headed for the airport. She hoped for the best but prepared for the worst. When she arrived at the airport, the security officer that she had been told about came and gave her the suitcase with the goods. She had this strong feeling inside telling her that something was about to go wrong but she decided to think positively. She started her way to have her luggage checked. She tried to hide her nerves but it proved to be more and more challenging. She felt as if the world was closing in on her. Security officers were watching her every move. She felt like someone had sold her out or that someone had seen the security officer giving her the luggage. She was so helpless.

To her surprise, nothing at all happened. They did not notice the contents in her suitcase nor the forged documents. The only strange thing was that their flight had been delayed for three hours due to some maintenance issues. She was still bummed about the whole orphanage thing but she would much rather have to live in an orphanage than go to jail for almost thirty years. She decided to enjoy the first-class flight as much as possible for it was certainly going to be the last one. She was served the finest wine and received the best treatment. She had her headphones on and drifted off to sleep. It was going to be quite a long journey and she needed to make herself comfortable.

She was awakened mid-flight by a loud bang. In the cabin, she could hear people panicking with the shout of ‘Fire! Fire!’ All hell broke loose when smoke started filling the plane. The oxygen masks had already dropped and she had put them on but she knew it would only give her approximately twelve minutes of oxygen. At twenty thousand feet there was barely enough oxygen left and if the pilots did not manage to fix the acute problem it would end up in a catastrophe. Some passengers loosened their seat belts and walked towards the front since there was a very toxic smoke at the back of the plane. The flight attendant tried all she could to keep the atmosphere calm in the cabin but it was all chaos. Some passengers were crying and screaming, others just sat down and confessed their sins to the Almighty and others were panicking and doing really unnecessary things.

In the cockpit was even more chaos than in the cabin. The captain and the first officer both had different views on what was going on with their crippled aircraft. The plane suddenly entered into a nose-deep dive. The first officer’s toupee flew across the cockpit exposing his bald, shiny head. The captain pushed on the control column to try and gain control of his plane. The first officer was overwhelmed by the whole scenario and barely made any inputs. The plane became a little bit controllable but it was unreliable. The captain issued a ‘Mayday’ call which meant that they were in a state of emergency and the surrounding areas needed to be cleared of any traffic. He needed to land as soon as possible and could not risk colliding with another aircraft. “Hello ladies and gentlemen, this is your first officer speaking. We are having some minor problems with our aircraft and we are going to make a ditch on the Red Sea. I would advise you all to remain calm and put on your life jackets. Flight attendants, please prepare the cabin.” Ditching is when the plane lands on water. It had been done successfully in 2009 in New York City’s Hudson River and the pilots were greatly awarded. They were given the Mater’s Medal of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators in recognition of their “heroic and unique aviation achievement”.

The first officer began to read the checklist for the ditching procedure. The plane suddenly banked to the right, then to the left, and finally pitched up. It pitched up at the rate of seven degrees per second. Captain Ibn Mohamed worried that his plane was going to stall. He applied full throttle and pushed the nose of the plane down. The plane leveled up but for only two seconds. It once again entered a nose-deep dive. The passengers were screaming like crazy. Apart from the horrendous fire now they were stuck in deep dive at a catastrophic speed. It’s a miracle that the plane did not rip apart. The captain and his first officer pulled back on the control column and attempted to restore the plane back on course. Unfortunately, their frantic efforts proved futile. The plane plummeted to the sea killing everyone on board, even Destiny.

The National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) investigators were quick to arrive at the scene. The plane debris was floating on the calm waters of the Red Sea. They found Destiny’s things and went through them hoping that it would shed some light on what happened on the plane. They thought they had nothing until a police officer who had been called to ensure the investigators’ safety came with his drug-sniffing dogs and the dogs immediately went wild over the belongings. The investigators knew there was something up with the luggage. Besides, dogs never lie. That is one of the reasons they are regarded as man’s best friend. Although it was not intact, they managed to find a sizeable piece of textbook cover which they sent to the laboratory in France. When the news came that the cover was filled with cocaine, the investigators were told to stop the investigation and instead, the Federal Bureau Investigators (FBI) was called. They had better tools and more experience with drugs so it was only fair for them to be in charge of the whole thing.

The investigation took weeks but in their final report, the FBI said that a bomb had been planted on the aircraft and some parts of the controls had been messed with and that’s why the pilots had difficulty in controlling the aircraft. It was an act of sabotage and the FBI needed to find out who had done it. The two black boxes (Flight data recorder and flight cockpit recorder) shed little light on what had actually transpired on the accident flight. Nobody knew why the investigation suddenly came to a halt after that incident but many thought that they had been bribed by the criminals to stop the investigation. Many took to the streets protesting but it all fell on deaf ears as the government warned that anyone caught ‘disturbing the peace and stability of the society’ will be forced to pay a fine of up to twenty thousand UAE dirham.

1. ***THE BLACK HOLE***

When news reached the Cheetah Girls that their leader had passed on, they were filled with so much sorrow. They cried the whole night and were unsure of their next step. When they were told that a bomb had been planted on the plane, it was obvious to them that terrorists had hijacked the plane and they could not imagine the horror their poor friend had been exposed to. The Cheetah Girls cremated her body and kept the ashes in a safe in the room so that she would always be with them. It was a source of comfort for them and they were glad they were close to their leader even though she was in the spiritual world.

With time, the girls decided that it was time to pick a new leader. The votes were cast and counted. Zoe was the chosen one. She was happy and scared at the same time. She did not want to experience what Destiny had gone through. Also, she did not imagine she could fill in the shoes Destiny had left behind. The girls assured her that it would be alright and they even wanted Mark to guarantee their safety. Mark sent in a long letter expressing sorrow for the loss of Destiny and said how helpful she had been. On a separate note was an address of a hotel nearby where Mark said he wanted to meet up with the girls. The girls thought long and hard about the merits and the demerits of their actions and finally decided to go. Their reasoning was as follows:

“In an unknown land very far from home was it wise to disobey Mark even though he had given them so much pleasure?”

“Was it wise to lose their only source of income just because of a few insecurities?”

“They were still kids and getting a job somewhere else would be tricky so why waste the opportunity?”

The five remaining girls dressed in glamorous attires and went to Singh Hotel. Mark was seated there with Christopher although the girls had never seen Christopher before. Destiny was the only one who knew his true colors. They had two bottles of beer and they were sharing a cigarette. This hotel was awful. It was like a club. Everyone was smoking weed and most of them had gone unconscious. It was a pathetic, smelly place and the use of vulgar language was the norm. The girls tried to hide their disgust and they took a seat on the table. Zoe was directly opposite Christopher and he looked directly into her eyes as if trying to uncover the truth about something. It was deafly quiet for a few minutes before Zoe broke the silence, “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your friend Mark?” Mark laughed and said, “Oh, sorry. Where are my manners? Zoe, Chicken Girls, this is Christopher but you can call him Chris. He is my business partner. He manages all my accounts during my absence and he always makes sure the job is done well.” He turned over to Christopher and said, “Chris, these are the Chicken Girls I was telling you about. This is Zoe and she’ll be taking over from Destiny. She is responsible and keeps her mouth in check. I can guarantee you she will be no trouble. You will work well with her.”

The night ended with some random conversations which left the girls confused because they thought that Mark was going to give them another mission. They drank alcohol and danced for some time then Mark paid the bill and left in a convertible car and the girls went back to the hotel in a taxi. When they arrived at the hotel, they were not very sleepy so they decided to order some popcorn and watch a scary movie. Susan then noticed that the door was a bit cracked, almost as if someone was trying to pry it open. The girls were a bit curious but they did nothing about it. Little did they know that Christopher had ordered some of his goons to break into the room and install bugs all round. They were being monitored through the cameras and they had no idea they were being spied on. Had they known, they would have kept their mouth shut about Mark.

It all started when Lucy, a very notorious girl brought up Destiny in a conversation that they were having. This was her statement, “Guys, do you think that Destiny was sabotaged? Think about it, she never called nor texted then she suddenly dies in an ‘accident’? Wasn’t Mark supposed to make sure that she was safe? Plus I think Christopher knows who Destiny is. She obviously needed someone to tell her what to do since Mark was far away. What if it was Chris? I am a little concerned.” The girls seemed to think about her statement for a little while but ignored it saying that it was just a coincidence and that Chris seemed like a genuine person. However, Christopher was alarmed. She thought Lucy would blow his cover as the good guy and expose him as the true snake he was. He told Mark about all this and together they hatched up a plan to get Lucy out of the picture without raising suspicion.

Mark called Zoe and told her that he was taking her for a tour just to thank her for being a great leader. The naïve, little girl suspected nothing. Mark first took her to a club and got her drunk for he knew she would be much free with him then. “So, for how long have you known Lucy? What type of girl is she?” Zoe could barely talk. She was not used to that much alcohol in her system. She mumbled gibberish. “Girl, I am talking to you. How long have you known her? Where did she come from anyway?” Zoe felt dizzy and held her head with both arms. She had a severe headache. “Waa” was the sound made by Zoe as she puked on Mark’s tuxedo. “Why you stupid bitch! Look at what you did to my outfit bastard-” he suddenly stopped. He realized getting angry would blow his cover so he wiped his jeans and told his butler to take care of the ‘idiot’. Zoe had already gone unconscious by the time the butler returned her to the hotel. Her friends were worried but the butler reassured them that it was no big deal and that she would eventually get better.

The following morning, Zoe woke up feeling refreshed but she had no memory whatsoever about what had transpired the previous day. Her only chance of finding out who Mark really was had gone to waste. According to her, it had been the best day of her life and she really enjoyed spending time with Mark. He was like a ‘father’ in her life. I wonder what kind of father takes a sixteen year old to a club and fills her system with alcohol. Strange world, right?

Anyways, my thoughts are not really needed in this issue now are they? So why poke my nose into another child’s business? At the hotel the so called ‘smarty pants’ started telling her friends about the wonderful day out. Only God knows what that girl was saying……………..dude! You were drunk how the heck do you know what transpired the previous day? She was just imagining the whole scenario. She praised Mark so much and that bustard was watching them through the security cameras.

“Why don’t I feel like a clown in a zoo? The way I thought Zoe was a different piece of cake. Turns out she is just as foolish as the rest of them. The little girl is an idiot! Why if something bad would have happened to her my hands would have been clean. Can you believe this precious little soul drank until she became unconscious? Then she expects me as the so called ‘father figure’ in her life to take her back to the hotel. Ha! As if! I am not going to clean up anybody’s messes! Chris, we got to come up with a new plan to get Lucy out of the picture. Any ideas?” Mark asked. Chris put his cigarette down and frowned, “Mmmh, she will be a tough nut to crack. But I’ll figure something out. I always do. Anyways, enough trouble from some bratty teens……when is our next shipment?” Mark frowned, “Security is very tight in United Arab Emirates right now. We need to up our game. We need new ideas on how to safely smuggle our goods without any interference from these so called men in blue.”

Suddenly, Chris’ phone rang, “Well brother man, I better take this. I’ll catch you later.” Mark was truly very suspicious about the phone call Chris received. He seemed so tense and Mark knew there was something up his sleeve……he just did not know what it was! (Oh well, that’s the thing about the dark side…..you never know who to really trust. But that’s his problem.)

Mark went to the hotel that night to talk to Zoe, who knows why? The girl was rather embarrassed to see him. She apologized for her actions. Mark assured her that it was no big deal and that everybody messes up sometimes. He knew that the perfect way to a girl’s secrets is through the heart. He even bought her a red rose and some chocolates since it was Valentine’s Day (Uuuugh the nerve! I could just push that guy off a cliff). Zoe felt so loved and gave a chuckle. At that very moment, Lucy passed by. Mark gave her a death stare….but not an obvious one (Of course he did not wanna make his little precious pearl anxious…..such a bore!). Lucy just giggled, thinking that Mark was only playing games with her. Poor thing! If only she knew what fate had in store for her, maybe she would not be chuckling right now. The cars, money, room service and vacations….she needed to enjoy them while she still could, because afterwards, life would grow very sour. Sorry, pretty girl.

Mark did not stay for long though….actually, he was only there for like five minutes. Truth be told, he only went there to confirm if Zoe had complete trust in him. The sad chick did. She was overjoyed to see the handsome lad. After the presents, Zoe went back to the Cheetah Girls. They were indeed very envious because they did not receive any presents from Mark, unlike Zoe. They felt that Mark had started to pick favorites unlike their former discussions before where he promised to always love them and always treat each and every one of them equally and treat them with respect. They were heartbroken but lucky for them, they had a friend with dozens of tiny, crushed, white chocolate which they could enjoy.

1. ***ROMANCE SCAMMERS***

It was Friday, and Mark had gone to the club for some chill time. He was worried because his business had started going downhill. He felt betrayed by Chris. He felt like Chris did not care whatsoever about their business. This was not fair on his behalf. “I am between a rock and a hard place,” he thought, “I need to get this man out of the picture but then again I am growing bankrupt. I need another stupid bitch to do all the dirty work like Destiny. I never thought I would be in need of another rascal in my life again. Gosh! This is so messed up. What can I do now? I wonder if that Zoe chick or whatever can manage the dirty work. This shipment needs to be perfect. I wonder if she can do the job without any rookie mistakes. Besides, she’s only a newbie. What does she know?” He thought about it for a while then he decided to talk to Christopher. Perhaps he could brainstorm an idea on how to continue with their business and who was to take charge of the smuggling. Who would fill the void that Destiny left? Even so, could she execute it with the perfect technique that Destiny had? (To be honest, I don’t think so.)

Eventually, after the long consultation with Chris, they decided to bid all their money on the young lad, Zoe. If she was apparently ‘best friends’ with Destiny as she claimed, they were hoping a little bit of her smarts had rubbed off on her. However, Chris suggested that the best way to make sure that the little girl was happy and in a conducive environment was to take her to the same hotel he took Destiny when she was on her first mission. Chris was to be in charge…again! (Of course we all know this snake never has nice intentions and Mark was also taken aback by the suggestion. As much as he did not like the idea, he had no reason to decline Chris’ offer for it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Such a shame!)

Zoe received a phone call from Mark. She squealed as though she had won the bet of a mega jackpot, as though she had received a license to fly without wings. (Don’t mind me though, maybe I’m just jealous or maybe I am just in a bad mood right now whatever). Mark made her happy and she truly felt loved whenever she was standing next to him. Was it the diamond earrings, Gucci belt or perhaps the Calvin Klein T-shirts with the lavender fragrance? Mark had started buying her so many anonymous presents. I don’t know how many nights Zoe had ditched the Cheetah Girls just to go clubbing with Mark. Now I don’t want to be a party-pooper or anything but legend has it that there was something going on between Zoe and Mark. Something fishy. All I can say is, if the shoe fits, then wear it Cinderella. Mark informed his so called ‘love’ about the plan. Zoe was super excited. She thought of it as a vacation between her and her honey, sweetheart, darling…and all the non-sense and senseless lies she had fixed in her mind. Oh well, sweet child, it ain’t no crime to fall in love. She quickly packed her bags that night in preparation for the flight the next day. She did not bother to wake any of the Cheetah Girls up. Why would she? They would probably try to convince her to stay. They did not like her relationship with Mark anyway. “Stupid bitches! They are probably all just jealous of my new found love. The love of Romeo and Juliet, so beautiful and yet so daring like the love between Tokyo and Rio,” she thought.

The next morning, she knew she had to tell the girls before she left. It was the right thing to do. As much as she pretended not to care, the Cheetah Girls had been through so much together and she genuinely had a secret chamber in her heart filled with love for these guys. They were her second family. She broke the news to them in tears. She was sad to leave her second family. In the end, they all decided it would be the best move for the business and it was high time they stopped mourning Destiny and got back on that high horse. They bid her farewell as they headed downstairs. Surprisingly, they found Christopher waiting for her while dressed in a rather casual ragged jeans and a Coca-Cola T-shirt. (One would think he was an advertiser for the Coca-Cola Company). “Hey girls, lovely morning, isn’t it? The Cheetah girls fake smiled. They had already put a red flag on Christopher ever since the death of their best friend and leader and also the fact that he never showed any interest of hanging out with them or even merely knowing their names. He only knew three people from the group: Destiny, Zoe and Lucy. The rest were the etc. usually written in one of those English textbooks when giving examples. It did not bug them much this time round though. This is because they knew it would be the last time in a long while that they would be seeing him. The next time they would probably see him would be when he brought Zoe back from the mission and even then it would not bug them because they would have their little ‘cupcake’ re-united with them. It would be so fantastic there would be absolutely be no room left for hatred. “Good morning Chris, please take care of our little beauty. Remember to bring her back safe and sound without any sort of scratch on her body or else…” Trishna, one of the Cheetah Girls’ members said. “Of course I will. By the way, may I know your name?” Chris inquired. “It’s Trishna, one of our few members that you don’t know about or by the looks of it, you don’t even want to know about,” Kourtney responded rather boldly. The environment became tensed in the few minutes that followed. “Let me smoothen things out.” Zoe finally said, “Chris listen, we were six members originally. You already met Destiny, our former leader. Of course you are aware that I am the current leader right now. This is Lucy, Susan, Trishna and Kourtney. Are we now cool? I hope so.” Chris chuckled and said, “We are cool. I actually have the interest to know each and every one of you even up to the personal level it’s just that due to lack of time, I can’t do that and I hope you all understand that. Zoe dear, let us leave. We will be late for our flight. Excuse us girls.” Chris grabbed Zoe’s arm and they left. There was eerie silence in the room after she left. The girls were truly afraid for they did not know what Chris’ intentions were. All they knew was that she had gone on a mission.

At the airport, Zoe had the most spectacular time with Chris that she immediately fell in love. Chris on the other hand noticed this and decided to just roll with it. She would be an easier prey if she trusted him. He did not waste any opportunity to complement her. “Wow! You have the eyes of an angel and is your voice always that sweet?” he would say. Chris had booked a one of a kind super jet with supersonic speed. They enjoyed the first class experience as Chris entertained Zoe with stories about all the five star hotels he had been to and the excellent room service. Zoe hoped that one day Chris would also take her to one of these hotels. (Oh well, I guess the young lad’s dreams were valid). It was going to be a long trip to Dubai but Zoe did not mind. Being on this specific flight reminded her of her earlier years as a star when she had her own private jet. She would go on tours in different parts of the country and receive quality treatment, as she should. Of course at the time she thought she was a queen. Thinking about her earlier life made her remember her brother who died in the cold arms of Covid-19. The hatred for that disease filled her heart with so much fury that she actually had dreams of becoming a doctor. Her plans were that she would soon quit this criminal life once she had enough money to sustain herself for a couple of years and join the medical field. To be honest, she always loved helping people and as a star, she used to donate some of her toys and shoes to the orphans and the needy children in Asia and other parts of Africa. Her thoughts were cut short when Chris said that they were going to the Mega Diners Hotel where one of his friends was the manager. Although Zoe did not know it yet, that was the same hotel that Destiny had been taken to. Chris left this vital detail because he knew that Zoe was emotionally attached to her best friend and that if she knew this, it would definitely affect the business. Chris wanted Zoe to transport multiple bags of cocaine and heroin to different countries of the world and he needed her to be in tip-top shape in order to do that.

When they finally arrived in Dubai, Chris told Zoe that he had a very important appointment with an accomplice that would greatly benefit the business. He called his personal driver and instructed him to take Zoe to the ‘usual place’. The driver without even asking questions took Zoe’s luggage and placed it in the vehicle. Zoe got in the shotgun and kissed Chris goodbye. There is no doubt she was head over heels in love with this guy. It was a quiet drive to the hotel and the driver did not make the environment any easier by the venomous glances he gave to the little teen. When they arrived at the hotel, Zoe was shocked to see Christopher already at the airport talking to the manager. Zoe went over to them and they immediately stopped their discussion. Zoe smelt a rat but decided to ignore her guts due to the new found feelings she had for Chris. Poor thing! Who can save her from herself and her bad intuitions? “Chris dear, I thought you were in a meeting. How is it that you have arrived before me?” she asked. “Babe, I went to the place but unfortunately, the guy stood me up. Pathetic I know! But then I decided to come here and welcome my little darling when she arrived,” Chris defended himself. (Urgh, this love story is getting pathetic don’t you think?) Zoe smiled shyly before she noticed the manager’s glaring eyes. Realizing her awkward position at the time, she decided to introduce herself to the manager who welcomed her with open arms. The manager as we already know was a very cunning woman and she wanted to maintain good relations with the girl so that she would never suspect her ill motives even by a whisker.

Zoe, being so exhausted from the long trip decided to go in the hotel and immediately take a nap. She was directed to her room and handed the keys. The room looked so elegant that one would think that it belonged to Queen Elizabeth. There was a walk in shower with giant mirrors and a fan for fresh air. This definitely must have reminded Zoe about her life back when she was a star. She must have slept for hours because she was woken up the next morning by several knocks on the door. She reluctantly got out of bed and opened the door. She was surprised to see Christopher carrying a bar of white chocolate in his hands. “Hi, how is my little angel doing? I hope you had an awesome night,” he asked. “Yes, yesterday I was so excited and I am glad to finally have had some shut-eye. How is your morning by the way?” she asked. “My morning is fabulous especially now that I have seen you. I just wanted you to have a taste of the beautiful city of Dubai so I decided to get some chocolate from the finest candy store around. Here you go and I hope you enjoy.” He handed her the chocolate bar which she gladly accepted and appreciated. Seems odd that Christopher would go to Zoe’s room early in the morning just to give her a bar of chocolate doesn’t it? Well, fun fact, the chocolate bar was laced with drugs given to Chris by the manager. All Zoe could remember was her walking to a closet and then she fainted. She slept for four hours before she finally came to. She could not recall the events that had taken place the previous seven to eight hours. She then noticed that the door had been pried open. Chris obviously wanted to be aware of all the happenings in that room thus he installed cameras everywhere. If only the poor girl knew she was being spied on and that her so called ‘boyfriend’ was not really the gentleman he claimed to be, she would have known that she had just stepped on hot coal. And you all are aware of the saying, ‘If you play with fire for long, you’ll get burned’.

1. ***THE DARK DIARY***

Two days after her arrival in the hotel, her sweetheart, Chris came to see her with his usual box of chocolate and this time he was also carrying a bouquet of daisies. Zoe gave him a warm smile before ushering him to her room. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and said, “Come in, babe.” She was dressed in a rugged pair of shorts, a white crop-top and some blue flip-flops (you know the casual wear). Chris was indeed delighted to see her. He gave a chuckle and said, “My princess looks as elegant as always.” Zoe felt warm inside. She loved hanging out with Chris for he always made her feel like a queen. Surprisingly, Chris did not have any urgent issues to discuss with her. He just wanted to make sure that all the bugs were well hidden. And indeed they were. He then left in the same strange manner that he had come with.

While Zoe was going over the box of chocolate he found a note in it; a love note. She began to read it out loud:

“My love,

They say the best way to a girl’s heart is through chocolates

Therefore I decided to lighten up your morning with some

I adore your brown eyes that gives my world meaning

A flashlight that leads me to the light

My treasure, you are indeed a gem to be protected.”

(Hmmm. I must say though that for a man as sneaky as Chris, he sure does know how to play his cards well. I must admit that even though I didn’t like him, that was totally romantic and he would have any girl on her knees begging him to take her as a wife.)

Zoe was overjoyed that immediately she started twirling. She missed some steps and saw herself sprawling to the floor. She was not hurt though. As she bent to pick the note, she noticed something hidden under the bed. It was a pink, glittery book and it was surrounded by dirt. In fact, the whole area was dirty. Looks like the cleaners had missed a spot. She carefully took the book, placed it on top of the bed and tried to open it. Oh no! It had a lock with a small keyhole on the side. Zoe quickly fumbled in her bag and took out a hairpin. (Will it work? I hope so. Curiosity is killing me.) She quickly maneuvered her way with the hairpin until the diary was finally opened. She started staring keenly at this book. It was empty! All that hard work just ended up being for nothing. She threw the book down roughly with anger and disgust. It landed on the floor with a thud and opened to the middle of the book. That is when Zoe noticed some hasty writings and immediately recognized whom they belonged to. How could she ever forget her best friend’s handwriting? She was with no doubt that that was Destiny’s hand writing. But why would she only write a page? All those were questions that crisscrossed her mind. Unfortunately, they neither came with answers nor with a person to direct them to. Clearly, there was only one way to know. Just pick up the freaking book and read it.

“Dear diary

My life has been such a mess. I’ve been denied access to everything including talking to my friends. I regret everything I did. I wish I was back at the orphanage with Maggie. Maybe then my life would be better. Chris and the manager have been wolves in sheep’s clothing. I am currently waiting to be transported to an orphanage in Mexico. I miss my friends so much. If anyone is reading this, please warn my friends, ‘The Cheetah Girls’. Warn them about this snake called Christopher.”

Zoe was shocked beyond expression. She fell on the floor with a thud and started mourning for the loss of her dear ally. At least now she knew that Lucy had been right about Christopher all along. What a conniving middle-aged idiot. It’s like all the emotions she had previously felt for him vanished into thin air. He was the master-mind behind the sabotage! The sabotage of Destiny’s death. She let out an ear-piercing scream. She had mixed feelings of guilt, anger and stress. She could not imagine the pain that her best friend had gone through realizing that she was all alone and that all her communications had been cut off. There were two things she knew she must definitely do. First, she had to ensure that the murderer of her best friend was rotting in jail for a lifetime. Secondly, she had to warn her best friends about a snake in their presence. Since Chris and Mark were business partners and Maggie’s saying that, “Show me your friend and I’ll tell you your character”, Zoe knew better than to trust Mark. It was clear that he was also in the charade.

She was taken out of her world of fantasy by a knock at the door, “Is everything okay, sweetheart? You’ve been in your room for quite some time now. Don’t you wanna take a spin of Dubai?” the manager said in a rather soothing voice. Zoe clicked in disgust. She could not imagine why a grown woman would find pleasure in deceiving young innocent high-scholars. How many had she already deceived? And how many more was she planning to deceive? Jackass! Zoe could not control her disgust any more. She calmed herself down. She knew that she would blow her cover if she continued to be angry. She needed to get as much information as she could from the manager. They would be important for filing a report against them and also in terms of planning on how to escape. She quickly powdered her face to hide the cry marks and locked her room. She then went downstairs where the manager was waiting for her. She smiled exposing her pearl white teeth. The manager smiled back and told her that she had planned an awesome ‘vacation’ for her.

They went to a coal black Mercedes Benz that had been packed outside the hotel. The manager coughed the engine and their journey began. Zoe neither cared about where they went nor did she want to know. She just wanted to get out of this country. The manager on the other hand noticed that the lively, hipper and always energetic girl who was forever happy to be taken back to her days as a celebrity was rather dull and pale. Whatever could be the problem? She was super quiet throughout the journey until she finally posed the question, “Mrs. Manager, may I know your real name please?” The manager was taken aback by the question but nevertheless, she did not hesitate to answer calmly, “Fatuma Ahmed dear. Why do you ask?” Zoe took in a deep breath and said, “I just wanted to know you more. Is there a problem with that?” The manager, or should I now say Fatuma, shook her head. Zoe boldly continued, “Do you have a husband or kids here in Dubai?” The manager first gave a chuckle and said,” Wow! Chris didn’t lie when he said you have a curious mind indeed. Why do you even want to know about them? Hahahahahaha. Anyways, I have a daughter, she is called Khadija and my husband passed away three years ago before I met Chris. He was called Khan Kumar. He was everything in my life. My shelter, my best friend, my advisor…mmmh…” Zoe realized the topic was making Fatuma uncomfortable so she decided to lighten up the mood in the vehicle by playing pop music by her favorite artist, Ariana Grande, which Fatuma also seemed to enjoy. She sang to the lyrics and shaking her body to the beats.

Zoe kept thinking about what Fatuma had said. Could it be that the depression and loss of family income made Fatuma turn to a life of crime just to get enough greens to support her family? How old was Khadija by the way? She forgot to ask but she knew she could not ask her now. Things could get too emotional. Besides, Fatuma would get too suspicious about her true motives. I can’t lie though, they had a fantastic time. They went to the beach and KFC restaurant. It had been so long since Zoe had eaten in one of these fancy restaurants. She was for once in her life happy and remembered the good old days.

1. ***INSIDE THE LION’S DEN***

Back at the restaurant, Zoe decided it was time to unmask Mark and Chris to the Cheetah Girls. She quickly took out her phone (The phone Chris had given her when she arrived as a token of their love. A love that never lasted as long as the sticker in an Imperial Leather soap. Oh well! That’s the thing about romance. Today we love each other, tomorrow we don’t. That is why Kenyans have an iconic quote, “Mtaachana tu”). She quickly dialed and Kourtney picked the phone.

“Hello, who’s this?” Kourtney asked.

“It’s your friend, Zoe. I’ve got big news to tell you. Quickly put the phone on speaker mode because what I want to say is firsthand information which cannot be delivered by anybody else.” Zoe said.

Kourtney quickly called the remaining members of the gang, Lucy, Susan and Trishna. After they were all settled in the beanbag chairs, Kourtney told Zoe to continue.

“My friends, we are in hot soup. I figured out what happened to our dearest friend Destiny and it’s not pleasant at all. First of all, Chris is not who he says he is. He had something to do with Destiny’s death. They had also threatened to take her to an orphanage in Mexico once she found out about his true intentions. You see, Mark’s company is one which lies to young high-scholars to exploit them then throw them away like trash. I think they are also planning to do something bad to me…I just know it. I know all this because I came across Destiny’s diary. You may not believe this but this was the same room that Destiny was held captive! I called all of you because I am freaking out and I need you guys to brainstorm ideas on how I can get out of here. I am honestly scared you guys. Please help!” Zoe said in a voice about to cry.

The Cheetah Girls needed some time to absorb the shock of a lifetime. They could not imagine that Mark of all people, the person whom they had trusted the most would end up hurting them so deeply. They were completely helpless. Susan started crying and said, “I want to go back to Maggie. Indeed, you never know the value of what you have until you lose it. I wanted to be rich without doing anything but I forgot that nothing comes on a silver platter. Now they are threatening my freedom. I have anxiety. I had so many dreams, so much to live for, and so much to fight for. Why is life this unfair? Why can’t we ever have normal problems?”

The rest of the gang went to comfort her. Kourtney went on to finish the conversation, “Zoe, thanks so much for informing us about this. We will notify you on our escape plan once we are done with this episode. Good night. We love you.”

Zoe hang up the phone and jumped on her bed. She let her tears flow whichever way they wanted. She was so fed up with her life at that point that she did not even care about anything. It’s like she took a time capsule and went back in time and started regretting some of the choices that she had made that had come to stab her right in the back. She wished she had been wiser during a certain period in her life. (But wait…what was that on the wall? Yes, I mean the thing flashing red. Oh no! Don’t tell me…it can’t be). The CCTV cameras installed when Destiny was in the room had not been removed and they were still active. Two things happened that night, Christopher overheard Zoe’s conversation with the Cheetah Girls and Mark also overheard the conversation on this other side of the world. They were both immediately alarmed. Mark was more furious because despite knowing that Chris had something to do with the death of Destiny, the Mexico thing was completely out of question. Mark was absolutely clueless about a children’s orphanage in Mexico. So that’s why all of his clients have been disappearing…Amy, Kim, Mildred and the list goes on. It was actually an organization by Chris and the manager, because Chris was planning to ditch Mark sooner or later. Fun Fact: Mark did not even know who the manager was. In this game of chess, Mark was surely losing…and he was losing bad. One thing clear in his mind though, there was absolutely no way he was gonna go down alone. If he was just a small dingy, he was gonna make sure he sinks with the entire titanic.

He decided that in this battle he was certainly not gonna win alone. If they were playing checkers, he would play chess. He decided to seek help from an old friend and someone very familiar to Chris. Someone who was aware of his conniving mind and who could outdo him. Someone very close to his heart and someone who could see through him like glass. And that someone was none other than Teresa Mendoza, Chris’ ex-wife and currently Mark’s girlfriend. As Mark sipped his glass of champagne, he said in a victorious voice, “Checkmate!”

He knew though that he had to do something about the Cheetah Girls. They had too much dirt on him. He could not go and explain everything to them because they would certainly not believe him. Besides, why does Mark need to explain himself to a couple of spoiled teens? He immediately thought of a ‘go to’ plan. He sent some of his goons to the girls’ room and told them to tie them up and take away their phones. The screams that came out of the room were unbearable. The goons finally decided to cover their mouths with masking tape since they could not bear their ‘child-like screams’ any longer. Poor girls were completely helpless. They cursed the day they had ever met Mark but what could they do now? Was it simply just helpless for them? There is a Swahili proverb that goes, “Maji yakimwagika hayazoleki.” They had already made their grievous mistake but now what?

In Dubai, things also took a turn for the worst. Zoe was woken up in the middle of the night by the banging of the door. She tiptoed towards it and slowly opened it. She was met by a hot slap that sent her sprawling down in pain. Her attacker gave her no time to react. He continued kicking her on the belly severally before finally picking her and banging her head against the wall continuously. It was then that Zoe got a glimpse of who the person was. It was non-other than Chris, her lover, her whole world. Why she never knew his character could change so drastically. While she was still trying to figure out what had gone amiss, he yelled in a frightening voice like that used by a commander in an army, “You are the author of all my problems. If it wasn’t for you, I would still be in the game. If it wasn’t for you, my life would still be perfect. Why did you open your big mouth to the Cheetah Girls, you blabbermouth?” Zoe was dumb-founded. How did he know? Who told him? Seeing the surprised look on her face he laughed loudly then said, “Hmmmm, you seem like a very smart girl. How is it that you could not notice the numerous CCTV cameras all around you, huh? Look around, are you blind?”

He took out his gun and pointed it towards her skull. He was beaming with anger and his eyes had turned blood red. He aimed and just before he could fire, a blow came from the back. Someone had hit his head with a bottle of wine. His eyes popped out as he fell on the floor and remained silent. Zoe looked up to see the face of her savior. Zoe was shocked by the sight of Fatuma Ahmed. How could she even double-cross her best friend just for her sake? Fatuma smiled and said, “I agree, he is a jerk but he is not wrong. You messed up everything by blabbering the truth to the Cheetah Girls. Now Mark knows everything and we can’t blackmail him any longer. The only reason I let you escape is because you remind me of my daughter Khadija…vicious, brave and always ready to defend her friends. You have to leave and never come back here. I will help you.” Zoe was both confused and happy. Tears of joy cascaded down her cheeks.

Fatuma’s plan was simple. She was to transport two kilograms of cocaine to Mexico where Isabela, Fatuma’s friend will be waiting for them. After taking the baggage, she would help her get a temporary home as she planned an escape route for Zoe. Zoe hugged Fatuma so tightly as she cried and thanked her for being supportive of her. The preparations were made that very night. Her flight was to depart at 11pm. She was quickly rushed to the airport by Fatuma’s butler and she made it to her flight. Since she had not been informed about the dangers of drug-trafficking and the number of years she could face behind bars, she was neither worried nor scared. She was so confident that she never got flagged by the police.

During the flight Zoe was super excited. She imagined her life back in Kenya. She imagined how her first stop would be the orphanage to apologize to Maggie and beg her to take her back in. She would then immediately go to the police station and help her friends escape the danger they were in. She hoped and prayed that they were all safe and sound. She missed them so much that she started crying. She did not even notice how fast time flew by until the first officer declared that they were preparing for the touch-down at the first country that they would be stopping at before they proceeded with their journey to Mexico, Mali. They did not take long in that country though. Before she knew it, they were doing a final touch-down in Mexico. She heaved a sigh of relieve as she got off board. She had escaped.

1. ***TRUE COLORS***

Isabela immediately went up to her as soon as she got out of the plane and said, “Excuse me, are you Zoe? Fatuma’s friend?” Zoe quickly nodded and she directed her to her Tesla. She took the baggage and thanked her for making the dangerous and risky journey. Zoe found her to be a very jovial girl, actually. “So, Fatuma told me you will be working with me for some time.” Zoe nodded and said, “Yes, Fatuma told me that you will help me get to Kenya.” Isabela was caught unawares by the response. She was actually super shocked. Fatuma had not mentioned anything about going back to Kenya. In fact, she had not mentioned Kenya at all. What was the girl talking about? Instead of a quiet house upcountry as Zoe expected, she was taken to a busy street and stopped next to a hotel. Zoe was excited for she had been very famished. She had not had a decent meal in hours and so she was super excited when they arrived at the hotel. Instead of searching for a table so that they could dine as they got to know each other more, they went upstairs, to a club. What on earth were they doing there? The poor girl was rather in a state of limbo. Just then, some two men arrived, completely drunk and one asked Isabela, “Wow, you brought a fine one today. How much for a night?” It was then that it dawned on her. The dancing, the drinks, the half-dressed waiters…this was no hotel, it was a brothel. She was out of the frying pan into the fire. This was totally uncalled for. She blamed herself for trusting her mortal enemy so much. How could the manager stab her right in the back like that? She had to find an escape route…fast!

Back in the hotel, Chris finally came to. He was burning with fury. Fatuma was seated on Zoe’s bed staring at him.

“You’ve got a lot of nerves lady, after helping that little rascal escape you still think you are welcomed in my life. Get lost before I blow your brains out!” Chris said.

“You are so dumb. What were you thinking pointing a gun to her head like that? You need to thank me for clearing this mess of yours. Thanks to me she is now stranded in Mexico and I’m pretty sure Isabela has given her the shock of her life. Now she only has two options: to work at Isabela’s brothel or to go to the children’s orphanage we initially wanted to send her to. Knowing Zoe, she will definitely pick the children’s orphanage. See, problem solved. Without any bloodshed.”

Chris laughed and said, “Wow you really are a smart one now. I knew I wasn’t making a mistake signing a contract with you.”

Back in the brothel, it was a nightmare for Zoe. There she was, standing in the presence of two men who were seemingly interested in buying her. She cried and pleaded with Isabela to help her out. She was willing to do anything just to get out of that disgusting place. Isabela looked at her keenly and said, “There is one way, Marishna Children’s Home is not far from here. I can transport you there instead if you want. It was then that it all dawned on Zoe. Her so called best friend had led her astray. It was stupid of her to think that Fatuma could ever betray Chris anyways. She felt so stupid but she had no option but to agree with the offer. She was taken to another room as Isabela made the preparations for her departure. At that point she felt helpless, weak and betrayed. She started singing one of her favorite songs by Jessie J called ‘Masterpiece’ which goes:  
“I still fall on my face sometimes,

And I can’t color inside the lines,

‘Cause I’m perfectly incomplete,

I’m still working on my masterpiece,

And I, I wannna hang with the greats,

Got a way to go but it’s worth the wait,

No, you haven’t seen the best of me,

I’m still working on my masterpiece.”

That was actually the first time that she paid attention to the lyrics of the song, for the first time, they actually made sense to her. Her ‘Masterpiece’ was the art of being a celebrity and no matter what, she was gonna get her title back.

As she was still wandering in her miasma of confusion, Isabela came to her and said that her men were ready to take her to the orphanage. She assured her that everything would be okay. She gave her a warm hug and bid her farewell. She told Zoe that at the orphanage she would be treated like a queen. She would get a new phone that she could use to call all her friends in case things got boring or if she was in trouble. Why did she have to lie though? Maybe she was training to be a politician who give us all their promises and dreams then once they get into office they remain quiet and use all the money on their selfish needs. Zoe was glad with all the singers who pointed that out like Demi Lovato in her song ‘Commander in Chief’ which goes:

“But you can’t get enough of shutting down systems for personal gain,

Fighting fires with liars and praying for rain,

Do you get off the pain? We’re not pawns in your game,

Commander in Chief honestly, if I did the things you do,

I couldn’t sleep seriously, do you even know the truth?

We’re in a state of crisis, people are dying,

While you line your pockets deep,

Commander in Chief, how does it feel to be able to breathe?”

In her world her Commanders in Chief were Isabela, Fatuma and Chris. Selfish people who cared about money and who didn’t give a sh\*t about humanity.

When the truck arrived, Zoe got on the back and Isabela gave her a warm blanket to protect herself from the cold. It was a rather cold night and the weathermen had predicted that it would rain cats and dogs the following morning. They therefore needed to arrive at the orphanage before dawn. Zoe decided that there was no way she was going to ruin her life in a foreign orphanage. She would rather go back to Maggie. She waited until they reached a narrow path with no CCTV cameras then she jumped off. She rolled on the ground for what seemed like hours before she finally hit her head on a boulder nearby and stopped. She had gone unconscious. When she finally came to, she found herself lying on a hospital bed surrounded by officers in all directions. Turns out, she jumped off next to a military barrack. The CCTV cameras usually present were damaged and were to be repaired. They discovered her body as they were going for their morning run.

They looked at her keenly before one of them who identified himself as Officer Perez asked, “What’s your name young girl, are you from around here?”

“Yes. My name is Lavender Hernandez and I live in the town nearby. I got hit by a bus yesterday as I was heading home,” Zoe replied in a calm voice hoping they would not discover her.

“You know it’s an offence to lie to an officer right? The men who were carrying you came in search of you. They told us everything about you. Your real name, Zoe, and the fact that you are a migrant from Kenya who is staying here illegally. Not in my country though…Now that you are better, I am taking you to the Juvenile Prison to serve your sentence of at least nine years behind bars,” Perez said with finality.

Zoe was surprised. Why was the world this cruel to her? How can a man with a name as beautiful as Perez bring so much doom into her life? Where was that silver lining the Greeks always believed was under every dark cloud? The officers quickly cuffed her and before she became aware of what was happening, she found herself at the gate of the prison. She was ordered to take off all jewelry before the cell doors were finally shut behind her. The Cheetah Girls were not aware that their dearest friend had been arrested. Why would they even? They had their personal problems to attend to. For example, how to avoid the transportation to Spain that Mark swore would be the following day.

1. ***SUNRISE AT MIDNIGHT***

As the girls are still coming up with ideas on how to escape, Kourtney needed to use the washrooms. Mark’s butler, who was keeping an eye on them offered to take her. “Does your boss feed you often? Because you look so dull, lighten up!” Kourtney said as she was washing her hands. The butler responded in a rather frowning voice, “Don’t even get me started. That old piece of junk better pay me my amount in full cause I’m done with this place. I deserve better than this junkyard he calls a hotel.” Kourtney then pleaded with him to let her go. She promised herself that she would come back for the girls after finding Zoe and arresting both Mark and Christopher. She knew it was dangerous to walk as a group considering the fact that they did not have legal documents. The butler pondered about the merits and the demerits of the deal before he finally agreed to help her. Since he was also Mark’s personal assistant, he controlled Mark’s flights. He therefore had access to Mark’s airplane hangar where his private jet was. (You know how these tycoons always have wealth but he was too cheap to allow the girls to use one of his private planes. He would much rather have them risk their lives in these ordinary airports. Such a shame!) He called Mark’s pilots and pretty soon, they arrived. It was a long and stressful flight for Kourtney. On one hand she was happy to have escaped while on the other hand, she was super worried for her friends. What would happen in case Mark decided to pay them a visit and she wasn’t around? And what would Mark do to the butler who was given the role of guarding them and making sure none of them escaped?

Luckily, her prayers were answered. Instead of Mark coming to see them on his own, he decided to send Teresa Mendoza on his behalf. Besides, wasn’t she his other half? It only made sense that she got involved in the family business. Teresa did not hesitate to show Mark a supporting arm. Was she really into this romance thing or was she just a gold-digger? She entered the room dressed in a red crop-top and a pair of blue booty shorts. It was hard to imagine that this was somebody’s wife. On her wrist she had some Gucci bling bangles and she also wore an anklet of the same brand. Her face was beaming with radiance. She had an awesome shade of pink on her lips, some blush and sparkly eye shadow on her eyes. Simply put out, she was drop-dead gorgeous.

She stared at them and gave out a hearty laugh. “Wow, it’s an honor to finally meet you. Hahahahaha…you girls make me laugh. You know why? You are naïve, amateurish and you always lack a plan. My girls you are letting me down. Why is it that you chose to embarrass the female species? If you want to copy someone I suggest that it should be me. I have many plans from plan A to D. For example, that lowlife of a man Chris was not spoiling me enough with his riches so I decided to hook up to Mark, who is willing to spend all his riches with me. But now? Mark’s business is going downhill so why not go back to the left over dog food? Too bad the internet has it that he is now dating one Fatuma Ahmed. But I’m sure he’ll instantly forget about her in case something bad happens to her like maybe if she gets run over by a car. Mmmmh who knows? Her death may come sooner than expected.”

The girls looked at her in disbelief. How could a woman so gorgeous be so deceitful, wicked and disgusting? She made them feel sick inside and all of a sudden the beauty they once saw vanished and in its place was a dark shadow. To be honest, she now looked like a clown. How could they be blinded by such cheap make-up? Her face was flooded with pimples that she tried to hide with the powder and foundation. Well, it didn’t work.

She stayed for some time before finally saying, “Well, I had better hit the road. Enough of staring at rascals and dumb dumbs. Time to go to my sugar daddy and get all the goods I need just because of a single teardrop. Ciao.” Really? Who on earth was she calling dumb? Did she know that the cameras in the room had not been tampered with? Not even a little bit? Mark was very comfortably seated on his office chair watching the truth unfolding. He was extremely mad at himself for trusting his so called ‘butler’. The butler did not even bother coming back. He knew that he was dead meat if he dared to show his face again in that hotel. The only reason Mark did not stop him was because he did not have any faith whatsoever in Kourtney. “Besides, she is just a kid!” He thought. He was also extremely mad at himself for trusting Chris’ ex-wife so blindly. Truly, he had witnessed the true meaning of the saying, “Love is blind.” He was definitely going to make Teresa pay, big-time! What on earth did she think Mark was, a sock-puppet?

Meanwhile, when Kourtney arrived in Dubai, the first officer walked up to her while holding a tray filled with plastic cups, slipped on the floor and fell right beside her. She felt obliged to help him up. As they were clearing the mess, the first officer took out a note from his pocket, handed it to her and whispered, “This is the address of the hotel you are going to. Bill, Mark’s butler said that that is Christopher or whoever’s hotel. In this envelope there is some money to sustain you for at least a month. After that, you are on your own.” She quickly took the money and got back on her seat. They had already landed so all that was left was to leave the plane anyways. They had landed at a private airport so there was no need for much worry since all those folks were just Mark’s guys. Everything was okay save for the fact that she had no one looking after her anymore. No Mark, no Chris, no Cheetah Girls…she was completely alone. If she messed up, it would mean a dead end! No take backs!

After departing from the airport, she immediately searched for a taxi and gave the driver the address of the place. As the journeyed on, Kourtney took the time to have a glance at the beautiful streets of Dubai. It was quite different from what she was used to in Las Vegas. There was this cool breeze that seemed to blow all her problems away. She stared surprisingly at the warm beaches and all the cool buildings. She was taken from her world of fantasy by the sudden halt of the driver in front of a grand hotel. The biggest and most elegant hotel that she had ever seen. She thanked the driver for the wonderful job he had done and asked for his number in case she would ever require his services again. After some warm hugs of goodbye, Kourtney was left there staring at the eight-floor building. Wow! Much splendor! No sooner had she absorbed all that was happening than she heard the hoot of a car. She quickly hid herself behind one of the rose bushes. She watched keenly as the vehicle came to a halt in front of the hotel. “Who could that be?” She wondered. Just then, a man dressed in a navy-blue tuxedo, looking rather too formal for the cool Saturday morning got out of the white jeep and came to open the door to a middle-aged lady who looked as if she was in her mid-forties. Kourtney recognized the man at once. “Oh no! He is bad news. But it’s good I recognized him. Who was he trying to fool under those shades?” She remained hidden and watched them chuckle their way into the hotel. They seemed to be in such a splendid mood.

Kourtney closely followed them from behind and watched them help themselves to some drinks which were in the freezer. The woman took some cocktail while Chris went all in with the champagne. At the time, Kourtney still didn’t know who Fatuma was. But one thing she was certain of, if she was hanging out with Chris, she was either a bad or worse character than even Chris himself. She always reminded herself of the quote her grandmother always insisted on telling her, “He who walks with a thief becomes a thief.” She then saw Chris put the champagne flute down and open the briefcase he had faithfully been carrying for so long. In it was a pink note-book like thing and a lock on the side. “That must be the diary Zoe told us about. Yes, I am sure. That is certainly Destiny’s diary! If I get it, I can use it as evidence against Chris and Mark. They are the authors of my problems and I won’t stop until they have all been arrested. I just want to untangle myself from this knot of lies,” Kourtney wondered.

“What do we do about this book, Fatuma? It could cause a big financial crisis in the business if its contents ever got leaked. I’d have to use all my salary on lawyers and bail and other unnecessary stuff don’t you think?” Chris asked her seriously.

“I suggest you burn it. They can’t arrest you without evidence. Besides, that little rascal Zoe has been arrested and is now in Juvi. Who do we have to worry about now hmmmm? Let me answer that…absolutely nobody. Cheers to a happier life,” Fatuma said with finality.

Kourtney’s emotions could not be put in words. Now she knew where her dearest friend was. In Juvi, but which one? She felt more determined than ever to expose Chris and Mark. “You think my friend will suffer because of you, bastard? Well think twice because it takes two to tango,” she whispered. When the duo was done with their drinks, she quickly followed them upstairs. Fatuma went to one rooms and banged the door behind her while Chris moved further ahead on the corridor. He opened the door but in his drunken state forgot to shut it completely. Kourtney went and peeped and she observed Chris return the diary back in the briefcase and place it under his bed. He then took off his tie and shoes, fell on the floor and began snoring. He was woken up a few seconds later by a phone call.

“Dude, what’s up? You can’t even let me have a few minutes of shut-eye? Anyways, what do you want? Your salary?” Chris asked in a sleepy voice.

Kourtney brushed the call off and thought maybe one of Chris’ many employees could want their pay early due to some emergency or something. Chris immediately shot up from his bed, put the pair of shoes and the tie back on and headed for the door. Kourtney was in big trouble. Where on earth could she hide? She then took a huge risk. She dashed to the room where Fatuma was and quietly turned the knob. She got in and locked the door. Fatuma turned and turned but it was by mere luck that she did not wake up. When Chris left, Kourtney quickly went to his room and took out the briefcase from under Chris’ bed. She quickly took out the diary from the briefcase and as she was about to open it, something hit her head hard. She wallowed in pain and turned to see who her attacker was. She was met by a blurry image of the middle-aged woman she saw downstairs. Turns out she wasn’t asleep after all! Kourtney dropped the diary and, fell down with a thud and suddenly, there was a blackout.

She woke up in the hospital with officers surrounding her from all directions. She had still not fully recovered from the blow she received. She saw a blurry image of Chris staring directly at her. “Where am I?” She asked in a soft voice.

“Aaah....Miss Kalani. I am glad to see that you have recovered. My name is Officer Hassan. Dr. Christopher here tells me that you are a migrant from Mexico who illegally crossed the border in search of employment. Dr. Christopher here tells me he told you he did not have a job to offer you so you broke into his hotel room and attempted to steal his personal journal thinking he was lying. His girlfriend walked in and thought you were a thief so she hit you as a self-defense mechanism. Are you willing to accept this crime or should we reveal the Surveillance cameras footages from yesterday?”

Kourtney was left bewildered. They had out-smarted her. Nothing she said would be believable by the cops so she said nothing. She just stared into space. “Since you cannot justify your actions, you will be deported back to Mexico where you belong in the Juvenile Prisons,” Officer Hassan said with finality. Kourtney could only watch as she was transported to Mexico with the hand-cuffs still on her hands. The shame! If she could ever become a police officer she thought, she would listen to all the citizens and not just the high and mighty ones. She would give everybody a chance to defend themselves. When she arrived at the Juvenile Prisons, they were dirty, stinky and disgusting. “What is this?” She exclaimed showing her disgust. “Oh sorry Princess Cinderella, what were you expecting, a five-star hotel? Save me your whining and just put on your uniform! Breakfast, lunch and supper must be taken on time, lights on is at four in the morning and lights out is at 11.30pm. Now hurry up to cell 7 because that is where you will be staying for the next ten years!” The officer in charge commanded.

“Seven is supposed to be my lucky number and now it’s my new cell? This is just a nightmare!” Kourtney grumbled. She was pushed into the cell and the cell doors shut behind her. “Hey be gentle!” She called out.

“Don’t mind them, that’s how they are. You should have seen how they treated me when I first walked in here. Anyways, I’m your new cellmate,” a voice said. The voice sounded familiar. She turned around. “No way!” Kourtney screamed, “Zoe is this really you?” Zoe gave her a bear hug and said, “I hope you didn’t miss me so much old friend.”

1. ***DOUBLE-CROSSED!***

It was a very emotional moment for both the girls. They both cursed the day they ever agreed to team up with Mark, Chris and their lies. Kourtney explained to Zoe all that had happened when she left the states for Dubai. She explained how Mark had completely changed to his true colors. Zoe was so shocked by the revelation. She thought no one could meet Chris’ level of hypocrisy but clearly she was wrong. Mark had certainly taken the lead in this game. But could they catch up to his expertise level? That was the only question that was pondering in her mind.

That night, after completing all the prison duties, they finally slept with a sense of comfort. At least someone they knew was there with them and at least someone there could offer protection for a little while. They however knew that they had to find a way of escape, eventually. They kept on looking for any possible alternatives. To do that, they had to look at stuff from a criminal’s point of view. Any cracks on the wall, and broken glass, any spoon that was left on the floor to rust was an alternative. They knew there were many ways to escape but they also knew of the massive consequences. One wrong move and their sentence would be doubled. They were going to take the risk, besides, that is what Zoe’s role model Ben Carson had said in his famous book, “Take the Risk”. Besides, what could be possibly worse than jail time?

As they were still pondering about the different ways they could use in escaping, Kourtney noticed an officer staring at them keenly. She got worried and panicked. Maybe they had been discovered. She put her index finger on her lips ushering Zoe to shut up. Zoe got the message and paused for a second. The officer walked right next to the cell. He stopped and said, “Kourtney, is that you?” Kourtney was completely left bewildered. She stepped back before asking, “How do you know my name? Who are you?” It was then that the officer took off his hat and stared directly into her eyes. Both girls immediately recognized the man. “Marshal, what are you doing here?” They asked in unison. He took some time before sighing and finally responding, “Well, after my breakup with Kourtney, I decided to do something productive with my life. I figured the only reason you broke up with me was because I did not have a job and so you thought I was a good-for-nothing man right? Well, I thought a man in uniform would impress you but when I eventually called the center and asked Maggie about you she said you guys ran away.”

Kourtney was still in shock and trying to process everything in her mind but then she said, “You are right about everything except the fact that I broke up with you because you were jobless. Nah…the only reason I broke up with you is because you were cheating on me with my best friend Destiny. That’s all.”

“That is not true my love, but you were always the one my heart beats for. I had no interest in Destiny whatsoever, not at the center and not now even in the spirit world. Sorry to bring the issue up. I am sure it hurts to lose a friend. But all in all, I want you to give me another chance in loving you my dear,” Marshal pleaded.

Kourtney said she would only consider him under one condition; he had to help them escape and get to Colombia. The girls reasoned that the safest route to follow so that they don’t get flagged by the police would be through Panama, all the way to the Darien Gap until they arrived in Colombia, then would fly back to their homeland. Marshal assured them that he was going to help them with their mission if it meant a chance in securing Kourtney’s heart once and for all. They all bid goodnight and that night, the girls slept a little more peacefully than the other night. They prayed that Marshal would succeed in finding an escape route and they also prayed that all their friends were safe and that Mark was not torturing them.

Back in Las Vegas, the situation was critical! Mark got up from the floor and looked around him. Blood stains were everywhere. He vividly remembered the events that took place the previous night. After witnessing Teresa’s betrayal, Mark had planned to swindle her off all her money. Mark wanted to freeze all her accounts and leave her without even a single penny. He invited her out on a dinner date in his penthouse. Teresa was dressed in a white, knee-high dress with marching earrings. She had black stiletto shoes on each foot and was carrying a black purse. Mark stood up to greet her. As they shared a bear hug, she took out the knife that was in her purse and stabbed Mark on the side. She left him sprawling in pain as the blood oozed and spoiled her new dress. She took a glass of orange juice that had been on the table and said, “I’m sure this baboon probably poisoned this. Do not think you can fool me, Mark. I’m the queen in this game of chess. I have all the power and you…you are just a pawn in my game. Ciao.” She poured the orange juice all over his still body. She thought he was dead but how wrong she was.

Mark got up feeling a sharp pain in the stabbed area. He grunted and said, “I blame myself. This is what I get for getting involved with my mortal enemy’s ex-wife. Ouch. Teresa one, Mark zero. But not to worry. The scores will change as soon as my health is back on point.” He staggered to the living room and called his men and told them to hurry and take him to the nearest hospital. It did not take long before his men arrived and he was quickly transported to Phoenix Referral Hospital. He received the best treatment obviously because money was certainly not an issue. He was sure he would be back on his feet very soon.

Meanwhile, the Cheetah Girls were still hostages. After realizing that he had been betrayed by one of his closest buddies, he got so pissed and fired his entire security crew and hired new ones who were ex-military officers for extra security. He wanted to ensure that the remaining three girls would not escape. He was sure they were eventually going to be useful someday and he did not want to worry about three bratty teenage girls going to the police and yapping to them about his illegal business. Speaking of businesses, Mark’s business was going downhill very fast. With all the commotion about the Cheetah Girls and the fact that the United Arab Emirates’ government was becoming very strict and modernized in their search for illegal goods, most traffickers had taken a pause in this business to try and come up with better alternatives of sneaking the goods across the border rather than the obvious methods that they were used to because at this points those methods were very risky and it could be the difference between life and death if caught by the Dubai narcotics officers and their feisty dogs.

The Cheetah Girls could only pray that their friends were safe. They were worried about Kourtney especially because others like Trishna thought Zoe died a long time ago and that there was no reason of fooling themselves with her existence because they would end up heartbroken when the news of her death eventually reached them. The other members chose to cling on to their ray of hope. The new security team gave them venomous glances to indicate that they were under very strict supervision and to show that any sort of non-sense of any kind would be severely punished. The girls did not dare to cross paths with them, not even once. They were too scared.

1. ***JAILBREAK!***

Meanwhile in the prison, Zoe and Kourtney slept together in their cell for a week. They started getting used to life as a prisoner, all their duties and even the food they ate. They got used to literally everything. One night though, they had someone coming towards their cell. Finally, it was Marshal. They were very excited to see him. He told them that he had a taxi outside waiting to transport them out of the country. They were indeed very eager and excited. However, security was very tight so they had to be very sneaky with everything they did. Marshal quietly opened the door for them and they got out, and tip-toe towards the back. Marshal had turned off the surveillance cameras prior in order for them not to be traced. Luckily, he was the officer in charge of security that night. He took out another set of keys from his pocket and quietly opened the door. They found a man filled with tattoos all over both arms waiting for them in a Noah. He was Marshal’s friend and they fist-bumped before beginning their journey. Kourtney was indeed greatly surprised. “This man loves me deeply that he was able to give up his job for my sake? Maybe I should give him another chance,” she thought.

They quickly drove away from the building without looking behind. When they neared the gate, as if by magic, the gate swung open. Looks like the gateman was in on it too. Marshal had thought about everything. How clever! Next stop, the border! Zoe and Kourtney were very excited and grateful to Marshal. They stopped by the side of the road to get some street food. “I know you two must be famished. Jail food isn’t really healthy for beauty queens like you. Eat up,” he said as he handed them some hamburgers and a bottle of soda each. The girls ate greedily. It had been quite some time since they had a decent meal. After paying, they proceeded with the journey to the border.

They turned on the radio in order to eradicate the awkward silence in the car.

“Good morning locals and those tuning from across the world. Two criminals have just escaped from Nymph Juvenile Prison. The officer in charge of security tonight is also nowhere to be spotted and the police suspect that he could have assisted the two females in the jail break. The two females’ names are Zoe Maloba and Kalani Ricardo. The gateman who was in charge was also arrested and has further gone on to write a statement. The police are willing to offer twenty thousand pesos to anyone able to capture the two girls and ten thousand pesos to anyone able to capture the police officer who failed Mexico as a nation. The pictures will be posted and by tomorrow nearly every street will have the mug shots. This is Vanessa Sanchez wishing you a lovely evening. Good night Mexico.”

After the announcement the radio was turned off once more. No one was interested in saying anything throughout the rest of the journey. The girls must have been very tired because soon, they both drifted off to sleep. In her dream, Zoe dreamt that they had successfully crossed the border and that they were now on the Colombian side of the Darien Gap. She saw herself on board the plane Marshal had booked them from Colombia before further proceeding to Kenya. On the other hand, Kourtney dreamt that the Cheetah Girls had managed to escape and that they re-united with them in Kenya. She also dreamt that Mark and Chris had been sentenced to life imprisonment for all their crimes. Lastly, she dreamt that she had married Marshal and that they had started their very own families. Both pleasant dreams. But which one of them was actually gonna come true? Who knows?

They were woken up by a sudden halt of the car that sent them in a rapid front motion before finally settling down on their seats. “Wake up sleepy heads, we’ve arrived in Guatemala City. You guys have slept for more than six hours. Anyway, this is the place where we will be spending our night before beginning our journey tomorrow night,” Marshal said in an authoritative voice. The driver had stopped next to an old wooden house with graffiti on the wall. I could not see clearly what it read but I just assumed that it was a bad word. Besides, since when have graffiti artists ever done something nice to our planet? The girls were surprised. They thought they were supposed to go all the way up to Panama tonight. The truth is, both the girls used to score really low marks in Geography and none of them understood how far exactly Panama was from Mexico. Marshal explained to them that they were to go to three different countries before they could arrive in Panama. These countries were: Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. That would be after approximately two weeks.

“But Marshal, won’t it be wiser to leave tonight? Besides, you heard it yourself. The police officers are looking for us and they will probably close all borders by tomorrow morning,” Kourtney protested.

“My love listen, I need time to talk to some of my friends who can help us to safely cross the border. For now our biggest challenge is crossing the border to Honduras. I do not think I have a close friend in this country so that means we’ll have to book a hotel at Tegucigalpa, the capital. But now my main concern is how the heck we will cross that massive piece of land between Panama and Colombia. Standing at the border between North America and South America, the Darien Gap poses huge threats that if overlooked could lead to serious damage. First the Fer-de-lance pit viper which is one of the most poisonous snakes in the world. Scientists suggest that if the correct antidote is not given within ten minutes, you would be a goner. You may as well lie down and smoke a cigarette until you see dark. Next is the medically important Brazilian Wandering Spider. ‘Medically important’ is just a nice term for ‘you are gonna have a really bad day if this bites you’. So you see? It’s not a mission that you just wake up and decide one day that you want to go to the Darien Gap. I have a plan though. I’ve thought about this strategy very carefully in my head but I need time to carry it out. First of all I need all the necessary antidotes in case one of us is to be bitten. There is a ninety percent chance that that is gonna happen so you can’t even argue with me on that one. Next, I need a map cause I don’t know where the heck we are going. Of course I may have well opt to go for a guide but no one is willing to cross the border during this period. It is too dangerous. After those drug traffickers were caught and sentenced to life imprisonment, everybody has chickened out in any issue that has to do with the Darien Gap and so we will have to continue on foot on our own. Now do you understand why I need time to process all this and to ensure our journey is successful?” Marshal asked.

The two girls responded with a nod. Turning towards his driver he said, “You have been a faithful friend, Bob. I love how you cherished this wonderful gem of friendship and gave it your all so that we could arrive here safe and sound. I’ll never forget you, brother. I hope you will have all the things I sent you by tomorrow morning so that we can plan our journey well.” Bob nodded and shook his hand goodbye. They stood there, in front of the old house for some time as they watched him disappear into the darkness.

Marshal took a set of keys once more and opened the door. The girls were so surprised by the nature of the inside of the house. Unlike its ugly nature on the outside, inside the house was beautifully decorated with tiled floors and a flat-screen TV. There were two rooms: one for Marshal and another one for the girls. Their room was beautifully decorated in pink all over with two cozy beds. No sooner had they lay on the beds that they drifted off to sleep. They slept soundly knowing very well that the next day they would be one step closer to their motherland.

1. ***TENDER MEMORIES***

The next day, they were woken up by a cock-a-doodle-doo from a rooster nearby. Zoe was the first to wake up. She stared around at the room they had slept the previous night. It looked more beautiful than it had looked when they first arrived. As she took a better look at it, she noticed so many cute pink dolls on one side of the room. They looked like they belonged to a little child. On the table next to the bed, there were some dried up tea spills. On closer observation, she saw a picture which had been partially torn. It was a family portrait. As she observed keenly, she saw a man’s face on the photo together with a young dark skinned lady holding a baby who was probably two years old.

Zoe took the picture and hid it in her bra and jumped back on her bed as Kourtney woke up. Zoe pretended to be asleep as Kourtney got up to go wash her face and use the washroom. As Kourtney was still in the washroom, Zoe slipped into the living room where Marshal was seated on the dining room table waiting for the two girls to wake up so that they could have breakfast together. Zoe took out the picture and asked in the calmest voice possible, “Before Kourtney comes out here because I can clearly see a bright future between the two of you, I need you to tell me who this is and when this picture was taken. Do you have a family we don’t know about?”

Marshal took a deep breath, sipped his coffee and said, “Wow! Congratulations on invading my privacy Miss Maloba. That picture was taken a year ago. Let me tell you the story of my dark past. My story starts in 2018, four years ago when Kourtney arrived at Maggie’s Children’s Center. She was only thirteen years old then. I assume you know the story of the huge fireball that consumed their mansion and cars killing both her parents instantly. She was extremely lucky to be alive since she had gone to the movies with her then best friend, Emma Kerubo. When she arrived, she was shattered to pieces when the fire fighters broke the news of her parents’ death. Emma offered comfort for her friend then but she never returned to her even once to give her a shoulder to lean on and even now you may have noticed that Kourtney is never quick when it comes to making friends. It was a lesson learnt the hard way. Anyway, her relatives were quick to snatch all the title deeds belonging to her parents and she was left as poor as a church mouse. The will which was her only way out of this already dark situation was never found. Coincidence or did someone steal it to make sure that she never inherited anything of her dad’s? Realizing that everyone had deserted her, she turned to Maggie for help, a fellow worshipper in the church she used to go to with her parents when she was younger.

Maggie gladly welcomed her into her center for she knew her to be a very well behaved girl. Sadly though, the shackles and sorrows of life had already got to her. She was the second last member to join the Cheetah Girls the last being you in 2020. That meant that she also had to undergo the initiation ceremony. The initiation ceremony was more severe during her time than in your time. She had to get the tattoo of a cheetah on her right thigh, a minimum of six piercings on her body and she had to perform the pole dance in public. It was basically training on how to be a sex worker but she didn’t care. The desire was to be like the others and she was not gonna be stopped no matter what. She could not dodge the bullet that was headed her way. At the time, the Cheetah Girls were not very popular but after Kourtney’s famous pole dance, everybody started taking notice of this bad gang of girls. Kourtney got the nickname ‘The Stray Cat’. That is how she started building her self-esteem. She felt as though she was finally useful in life once more; it’s as if life had suddenly found its meaning out of this dark web of confusion.

Now, you are aware that before you arrived Destiny was Kourtney’s best friend I presume. This goes way back to 4th March, 2019 when the biggest teen party was being held at my neighbor’s house. The party was in the posh estate of Buruburu. My neighbor, Anita Adhiambo, was a huge fan of the Cheetah Girls so she invited them for the party. At the time, Maggie had not known just how bad these girls had become therefore she had no reason to prevent them from going. On arrival, the moment I set my eyes on Kourtney, it was love at first sight. Her gorgeous and sexy silk red dress exposing her beautiful curves were all the more satisfying to observe. She had the eyes of an angel and her pair of shoes were matching for the occasion. I asked her for a dance which she responded with a chuckle and took my hand. I wished the song would last forever so that we could never stop dancing but alas! My dreams didn’t last long.

It was time to cut the cake and sing happy birthday to the birthday girl. As we gathered around the cake, I felt an arm grab me and pushed me towards the wall where she proceeded to kiss me passionately. I thought it was Kourtney until I saw the ragged blue jeans and realized that it was Destiny. As soon as I pushed her away, I noticed the heart-broken look on Kourtney’s face and realized that she had seen us. I tried to explain things to her but she just slapped me and ran away tears cascading down her rosy cheeks. I tried my best to follow her and patch things up between us but my outfit got stuck on a lose nail and my friends had to help in pulling it out. The next day as I went to the center to try and smoothen things out, I found Kourtney talking to a young man across the fence. She introduced him to me as my replacement. I was left heart-broken and never returned to the center. That is when my dream to become and officer and arrest wrong-doers like Destiny started.

About the girl in the picture…well, that’s Anita. I proceeded to date her since I had given up on Kourtney. I did not love her though. I just dated her in an attempt to heal the wound inside my heart. As we dated, we had numerous intimate relationships that resulted in her getting pregnant with my daughter, Sasha. At first, I was willing to accept my parental responsibilities as a father but after discovering that she was polyamorous, I started to question the true father of the child. At the same time, my father got a green card to work in Mexico and so the whole family had to move there. Since I was almost turning eighteen, my father told me that I would start training to be a police officer like he had always wanted me to. I broke the news to Anita that I was not comfortable with her polyamorous nature and that I wanted to carry out a DNA test on the baby which she refused. She claimed that I was a coward who was just trying to flee from his parental responsibilities as a father which was not the case. Just like the Titanic, our relationship sank immediately after the sour exchange of words before my departure to Mexico.

I haven’t abandoned her though. I still keep in touch with her. I even wanted Sasha to come and stay with me in Mexico but after the recent outbreak of measles in my country, I rented this house in Guatemala instead. I even decorated her room with many toys but when I called Anita and told her about my plans, she refused my proposal and said that Guatemala was just as dangerous s Mexico if not more dangerous. The last news I got from her was that Sasha could now walk and say words like, “Baba” and “Mama” which is just incredible. She even sent me a picture of them on their trip to Mombasa. She has grown up to be very beautiful just like her mother. Anita informed me that she is now dating someone else and I am totally okay with that. As of now, I am still single but I am hoping that would change now that I’ve found the love of my life. Honestly Zoe, my heart still beats for Kourtney. You have personally witnessed my numerous attempts at the center in trying to convince her to take me back. You’ve got to help me convince her to take me back, will you, please?”

Zoe was still left in awe. She did not know all those facts about one of her closest friends? How? As much as she had seen Marshal numerous times at the center trying to talk to Kourtney, she never thought that there relationship lasted only for like less than five minutes. In fact, when she had asked Destiny about Marshal’s relationship with Kourtney, Destiny told her than Kourtney dumped him because she thought he was a sugar daddy only to realize that he was just a wretched fool who did not even have a job. That, according to Destiny was how the relationship went downhill. Before she could respond to this question someone asked, “Why didn’t you tell me about all this?” When they turned around, they saw Kourtney standing at the door. “Sh\*t! I thought you were in the washroom!” Zoe exclaimed. “I got out a while ago and started listening to your story. I’m surprised you never told me any of it Marshal, and here I was thinking you loved me,” Kourtney continued. “My love, you already had a man in your life then. I did not want to ruin your relationship. Darling, there will be no more secrets between us, I promise,” Marshal pleaded. He took her by the arm and led her towards the table to take breakfast as Zoe changed the topic. Kourtney eventually had to come to terms with everything that had happened prior. She forgave Marshal and the two began a happy healthy relationship there in Guatemala. Everybody was happy, or at least for now.

1. ***WE’VE STRUCK GOLD!***

“What’s this babe?” Kourtney asked pointing at a big stack of what looked like chapati that was on the table.

“Oh! That is just the local tortilla made up of corn flour to be eaten with a filling. It is the traditional ideal breakfast for all the inhabitants of Guatemala. You wanna try it?”

“Yes please,” Kourtney said as she put some on her plate.

“Judging from the way it looks, I would rather have some cereal, Marshal. You’ve got some?” Zoe asked.

“Yes, it’s right over there. Just help yourself to some,” Marshal said.

“Have you found someone to help us cross the border safely to Honduras Marshal?” Zoe asked as she took some milk to go with her cereal. It was Weetabix, her favorite cereal.

Marshal sighed and said, “I have gotten someone but we are not that close per say, in fact we are barely business partners and my relationship with him is weird.”

“More weird than going back to jail for trespassing? What do you mean when you say that that relationship is weird? Awkward or…?” Kourtney chipped in.

“His name is Brayo. Don’t let the name mislead you, he is genuinely a nice person. He is the man Anita is currently dating. After much persuasion from me, she decided to try and date one man at a time and I can tell you that it is indeed working. Since Anita’s parents travel to Honduras most of the time to help in combatting one of the country’s biggest challenge which is food insecurity, I figured that they may have contacts in the country. It was then that Anita told me that her boyfriend was currently in the country on a volunteering mission to vaccinate all the kids that were suffering from diabetes which is the second leading cause of death amongst Hondurans. Of course I could just call Brayo but the awkwardness of the situation is just unbearable for me to handle,” Marshal said.

“I know it’s hard for you Marshal, and I can literally imagine myself being in your position. I know I wouldn’t like it even a little bit. But now we have no option. You have to man up and try. He is our only hope of escape,” Zoe said trying to calm him down. She wanted to put her arms around him and give him a gentle pat on the back but the look she got from Kourtney issued the following threat: GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY MAN OR ELSE…

Marshal was staring into space before he suddenly stopped and said, “You guys are right. Besides, I spoke to Bob yesterday and he told me that all the borders in Mexico now have strict security. If we make a slip up and we are deported from here or even from Honduras back to Mexico, we could be looking at a life sentence. And frankly, I am not looking forward to that. I am only twenty one and you girls are only seventeen. It would mean all our lives would be ruined in just a twinkling of an eye. That is why I have decided that immediately after breakfast I am going to call Brayo.”

The girls were delighted with this annunciation. Although Marshal did not allow them to leave the house with the fear of perhaps getting flagged and arrested by immigration officers, they were still allowed to stare through the window at the beautiful city of Guatemala. The street was flooded with very beautiful and handsome people rushing to their jobs. They even saw school going children struggling to cross the very congested road and hopefully make it to school in one piece. The air was very clean and laughter filled the air. However, a few minutes later, the air was polluted with hooting of cars and shouts from conductors. Not to mention the pungent smell that came off the rear of unroadworthy vehicles. This was just but one of the many examples of what was leading to global warming. These exhaust fumes were everywhere they had been to: Nairobi, Las Vegas, Dubai, Tuxtla Gutierrez in Mexico where they were and now Guatemala City. What was wrong with the world? Why were people too lazy to conserve their environment? The girls promised themselves that if they made it back to Kenya safely, the first thing they would do is to start a group of teens to help create awareness about the dangers of environmental pollution and what it could do to the upcoming generation. “Our children will ask us, ‘Mom, before this huge calamity fell on the world, what did you do to prevent it?’” Zoe said sadly.

Marshal was in his room trying to contact Brayo.

“Hello, is this Brian Sulubu? This is Marshal Otieno speaking. I believe Anita told you I would contact soon,” Marshal started.

“Yes, brother man, how are you this fine morning?” Brayo replied.

“I am doing fine I hope you are too. I just called to ask you for a favor,” Marshal continued.

“What kind of favor, brother?” Brayo asked in a concerned voice.

“You see, my friends and I are stranded here in Guatemala. I helped them escape from prison back in Mexico where I used to work before we made a jail break and found ourselves in Guatemala City. The police are hot on our heels and they are making sure no stones are left unturned in Mexico so we cannot go back there any time soon. My plan was to go from Honduras all the way to Panama where we can use the Darien Gap to Colombia and finally take a flight to Kenya since I have numerous contacts in Colombia,” Marshal said then laughed and proceeded, “I know I have like five countries to cross but I have dreams. Please just help me. Do it for my sake, do it for love’s sake because I just found my Juliet and I want to marry her as soon as we touch-down in Kenya. Please help me, brother man.”

“Wow! Your story is actually very inspiring Marshal, but also very risky. Haven’t you ever heard of the saying that if you play with fire you get burned? What on earth were you getting yourself involved in? Even if you say love, personally I cannot use it as an excuse. You need to use your brains not your heart. But anyway what’s done is done. I have no option but to help you. Remember, I am only doing this for Sasha’s sake. I don’t want her to grow up without her biological father,” Brayo concluded.

“Thank you Brayo. Trust me if you were in my shoes I know you would do the same,” Marshal said with his cap at hand.

“Okay. I’ll give you a contact of a drug trafficker who is a personal friend of mine. Since he comes to contact with these immigration officers quite often, he knows basically everything about them. When they sleep, when they go for their meals and even which officer is on duty which night. I am sure he will be very helpful to you but also you have to pay him handsomely. I suggest you guys should be ready by tonight. Besides, like you said, the police are desperately trying to find you guys and it’s only a matter of time before they issue a search warrant on the neighboring countries as well. The sooner you get out of there, the better. Once you talk to him, you guys can agree on when to meet up, but I would suggest that you leave in the afternoon because there is less traffic then. It will take you about eight hours to arrive at one of the furthest point in Guatemala which is Esquipulas. Once there, you guys will have to wait until sunset. Jose knows exactly the coppers who’ll be on border patrol tonight and he knows all their weaknesses because the government is so f\*cked up that they can’t even employ responsible coppers. Then you’ll need a distraction before crossing the border. Easy peezy. The biggest challenge though is now the immigration officers on this side in my country. They guard that border as though they are guarding pots of gold man! I can’t help you beyond there. You’ll have to figure something out. Maybe Jose can help you,” Brayo said.

“Okay brother, thanks so much. You’ve been super helpful. I’ll call you when we make it to Honduras,” Marshal responded.

“Okay bye,” Brayo finished before hanging up.

Marshal called Zoe and Kourtney into his room. It was then that they had a deeper outlook of what his room looked like. It was painted blue with a nice small mat on the floor and numerous pillows on the bed. Marshal informed them about the plan, “It’s a risky one and some may call us crazy but we have no option. Are you guys in?”

“We’re in!” The girls responded in unison.

Marshal did not delay at all in calling Jose Martinez for he knew that the time was very critical. “Hello, this is Marshal Otieno, a friend of Brian Sulubu speaking. Is this Jose Martinez?” Marshal inquired.

“Yes dude, what do you want? I don’t got all day to waste on some freaking newbies in town,” was the harsh response he got from Jose.

“I need help please don’t hang up,” Marshal pleaded.

“Yeah, help. That is what they all say. Come on man, cut some slack. I’m giving you fifteen seconds to give me your definition of help then I’ll see,” Jose barked.

Marshal proceeded, “I need to get to Honduras by dawn. I’ve got two friends of mine. What will it take for you to help me cross the border?”

“Depends, how much are you paying?” Jose proceeded.

“I’ve got two hundred thousand Mexican pesos, are you in?” Marshal proceeded to ask the man.

“Oooh…international currency, truly tempting indeed. I thought you would just pay me using ordinary quetzal but this is totally unexpected. However, I am still not convinced. Could you add a little something to spice up the offer? Come on man, where is that cherry on top of the ice cream sundae?” Jose continued.

“Listen man, that’s all I have and you are my only option. Brian puts so much trust in you so you must be a good one. Help a brother out,” Marshal said.

“Okay, okay, no need to wet that pillow of yours with your petty tears. I’ll help you, just give me your location and I’ll come with my pick-up truck at exactly two in the afternoon. Oh and don’t forget to send the money using this line. I don’t do no work for nobody until I see the greens,” Jose concluded and ended the phone call.

Marshal immediately sent the money and informed Zoe and his girlfriend about the plan and they soon got packing. Well, actually they packed the food they would need for the trip since nobody had carried extra clothes. Actually, Zoe and Kourtney were wearing some of Marshal’s extra clothes that they had found in his house. They could not wear the Juvenile uniforms since that would just arouse suspicion. Okay I am not saying that two teens dressed in man’s clothing was any better because they looked like they were tomboys who had been abandoned at the side of the street but oh well, what alternative did they have? After packing every ‘edible’ food item as Zoe called it, she definitely did not want to pack tortillas. Not today.

They all sat on the sofa staring at the wall each caught in their own world of fantasy. They drank juice boxes since there was no food left in the house to be cooked or eaten. They had packed all the food for the treacherous journey that lay ahead. The juice boxes had been packed too but they eventually had to unpack them so that their stomachs would stop complaining.

After waiting for what seemed like forever, they heard a honk from outside. Maybe they could have just been confused because…surely guys how many cars do you think there are that honk like that in Guatemala City? What was so unique about this one individual honk? The car honked again and they now dashed outside to discover more. They saw a green pick-up truck with four wheels. A tall, well-built man got out from the truck and approached them. He wasn’t black like they were, but he looked like one of those actors the girls had seen on Zee World’s King of Hearts, Ravi Dubey. Some of you know him as Satya while others know him as Sid. The abs were visible from his T-Shirt and it made the girls drool with excitement. Marshal sighed, maybe he was cross, who knows?

The man reached where they were and asked them, “Who lives in this house?”

Marshal squinted his eye as if to try and say, “It is I master, what do you want?”

The man finally looked at Marshal, gave a chuckle and said, “Oh Marshal, is this really you? You are a fine looking young man. From our conversation in the phone I thought you were a little shorter and wimpier…hahaha.”

“Hey, that’s heightism towards short people,” Zoe said.

“Oh dear me, I’m sorry, ma’am. Pardon my manners. My name is Jose Martinez…uuh, I am Marshal’s business partner. What’s your name?” Jose inquired.

“I’m Zoe and this is my friend Kourtney. Are you by any chance the man who’s supposed to pick us up?” Zoe asked.

“Indeed. We better get going, we need approximately eight and a half hours to get to the border from here. I could have gotten here earlier but then….cursed this heavy traffic. I thought it would be over by now,” Jose said staring straight at Marshal.

They proceeded towards the vehicle. It was freshly painted and was sparkling marvelously. Jose opened the back seat door and Marshal and Kourtney went in holding arms. Jeez! One could think that this was their dinner date. The bag carrying food was put in the boot and Zoe sat in the shotgun. Jose, the driver, took the vehicle smoothly away. As they left, Zoe took the time to look at what had been their home for more two days. It was actually quite beautiful. It was not the best house she had seen in all her life, but it wasn’t ugly either. She found the words in graffiti quite meaningful indeed. It was sprayed in bold, “ABORTION IS A CRIME”. She could not agree more.

1. ***SURVIVING THE STORM***

After about twenty minutes of driving on the highway, the left the main road and took a small, narrow murram road. It got pretty dusty and soon all but one window was closed. The one window was left open for the purposes of fresh air only. The road itself had a lot of potholes. I don’t think there was ever a time that they were not flying into the air like a bunch of clowns in a circus. To think that that was going to be the journey up to the border between Guatemala and Honduras was just a nightmare for all of them. They could not sleep since the ride was too bumpy. They had to stay awake and witness this worst experience of a lifetime.

After the journey that lasted centuries was over, they came to a halt at a remote grassland. “Is this the border? It looks harmless,” Zoe said a grim of hope filling her.

“Yeah, on this side maybe. But on that side…not so much. Honduras immigration officers are always dedicated to protect their borders I don’t know why considering it ain’t no first world country but oh well, who am I to judge?” Jose said.

“So can we get past the border or not?” Kourtney barged in.

“We can, yes, I am sure of that, but I need to talk to my man on the other side to see if he is ready. Give me a minute,” Jose said.

“Your man? You didn’t talk about no man when I called you so what’s this about a man now?” Marshal asked his tone rising.

“You mean to tell me that Brian didn’t tell you nothing about no man. Oh well, it’s fine, I love to be the bearer of good news. When you told Brian that you wanted to cross the borders of about five countries, he said it was mission impossible. I mean come on man, be realistic. Peter Pan could not do that even if he wanted to. So, good news. Brian has arranged your flight from Honduras to Kenya. He is friends with someone who deals with the airline in question so you will not even be bothered by anyone. You will just be directed to your plane. That’s gold, man! Real gold! You’ve got a friend who cares about you so much, dude!” Jose said happily.

Marshal, Zoe and Kourtney could not believe their ears. What had they done to deserve such luck? Suddenly, the tired look on their faces quickly evaporated and was replaced by their radiant smiles. Indeed, the joy in their hearts knew no bounds. Their journey had not only been made easier but also shortened. God bless Brayo.

Their celebration was disrupted by a phone call for Jose. He hurriedly picked the call with the shout of, “Oh man, he’s calling! Quiet everyone…Hello? Is this Juan Lopez?”

He put the phone on loud speaker so that everybody in the vehicle could hear what they were saying.

“Hello, is this Jose Martin… or whatever. Brayo informed me that I was supposed to help you cross the border. Listen, the best time to do that in this side in my country is at 3am, because that is the time for their usual break. Can you make it to that time?” Lopez asked.

“Yes, I am sure we can and better yet it is also convenient in this side in Guatemala. Thanks a lot, bye,” Jose said.

“Bye.”

Jose hang up, looked at the guys and said, “Well, I hope y’all packed enough food for me. It’s the least you can do after being helped to cross the border don’t you think?”

Zoe felt a bit strange inside. Lopez’s voice seemed familiar. She pondered over whom it may belong to. “Maybe it’s someone I met at the children’s center. I had a lot of friends there. Maybe it’s one of them. Who knows? This life has many tricks you can never really be sure what to expect,” she wondered.

She finally came to a conclusion that it was no one important. It was just all in her head. “Indeed you are right. You deserve all the marbles in the world and much more after risking your own freedom and safety just to help us out. Thanks a lot, dear,” Zoe said.

‘Dear’? Okay now these two are really starting to get on my nerves! Is this a relationship blossoming or what? Who knows?

They took out the bag with all the foodstuffs and they started eating to their fill. Besides, they needed this energy to get past two sets of immigration officers unnoticed. The truck was filled with silence after the meal and they soon fell asleep. The guys were woken up late in the night by Jose’s loud voice, “Get up you bastards. It’s 3.10am. We’re missing it! Our one and only opportunity to a successful escape and yet we are gonna miss it like idiots. This is why I don’t do no favors for no one!” Before the other guys had a chance to react, Jose had already coughed the engine and they were in full speed. He went past the border as though it was nothing. The real danger was not even the fear that people would move from Guatemala to Honduras. Far from that, it was actually the other way round since thousands of migrants were trying to go to Mexico through Guatemala and eventually cross over to the United States of America, you know the greener pastures.

However, his Dwayne the Rock Johnson maneuvers when he was in The Red Notice bore no fruits at all because pretty soon the air was invaded with sirens from police cars that were hot on their heels. They did not want to imagine that this was to be their fate. Those motivational speakers in high school must have been lying when they said that determination leads to success. In their minds right now, they had a new picture which clearly stated that ‘Determination leads to agony and regret’.

However, that is why they had Jose Martinez, or as the locals would call him, ‘Man of War’ to lead them into victory of this battle that Kourtney and the other two knew for sure that it was a lost course. You could literally see the sweat droplets that had formed all around Jose’s forehead as he put the maximum speed and hoped that the tires would not give up on him now that he needed them the most. One could not clearly tell what was going on in his mind but it probably went something like this:

“What on earth did I get myself into?”

“All this for just international currency? Really dumb indeed. Looks like I’ve lost my game.”

“Is this game over for me? Will the world hear no more about the legendary Jose Martinez, The Man of War? No! Absolutely not! I cannot go down without a fight.”

All the while there were now three police cars. Seriously? Kourtney could not hold back her tears. She let them flow freely for this was certainly the last time she was going to be a free lady in her teen years. The next time would probably be in her mid-forties if the judge had any sort of mercy whatsoever for her and her friends. However, if the judge was as cruel as can be then probably she would never be free again because she was certain that she was gonna receive a life sentence after this scandal got out to the public. Zoe wanted to comfort her friend but there was only so much she could do.

“Jose, come on dude, there has got to be something that can help us out of this desperate situation. Anything. Do you have anything here we can use as a distraction to help us escape?” Zoe asked desperately.

“Yes, there’s a rifle under the back seat. It’s loaded,” Jose said in an authoritative but seemingly scared voice.

Zoe did not need any further instructions from that point. She knew exactly what to do.

“Marshal, get me that gun!” She instructed.

Marshal did not dare ask her any questions. He just saw the fiery look in her eyes and handed her the rifle. She lowered the window in the shotgun and aimed for the police car that was right on their tail. She shot and immediately the headlights went off and the vehicle came to a halt. Victory? Not quite…..actually, big mistake made by the seventeen year old. The other two vehicles that were hot on their heels fired back as a mechanism of self-defense. The sound of bullets could be head by the guys and this sent cold chills down their spines. One stray bullet hit Marshal on the arm. He wallowed in pain as Kourtney was still trying to absorb the shock.

“Any help, Jose? What do we do now? He is losing a lot of blood,” Zoe pleaded.

“I don’t know am I a doctor?” Jose shot back. But then after taking a couple of deep breaths he finally said, “There is a first aid kit underneath the same seat where the riffle was. Take it out and I think there is a pair of tweezers there. See if you can get the bullet out. Wrap the wound with the bandage so that he doesn’t lose a lot of blood. Man I do hope that those stupid lessons in the Home Science classes will pay off. Cause at this point, I’m out of options.”

Kourtney quickly took the first aid box and immediately saw the pair of tweezers. She had never pulled a bullet out before but for her lover’s sake she was willing to try. “Yes! I got it!” She said after a few attempts that were unsuccessful. She was delicately wrapping the bandage over his arm and she assured him that he will be alright. She then gave him a gentle kiss on the forehead.

“I’m glad someone’s lover is doing great but now is not the time for your honeymoon. We’re in serious trouble here. We’ll have to make a run for it. Seriously though I think we may have to ditch the truck!” Jose cried.

They were left with no alternative really because right in front of them was a road block that had been put there because the tarmac was still being fixed. The truck came to a sudden halt and all the doors were jerked open. The guys disappeared into the darkness. No one knew exactly where they were to go and so the strategy was just one, “FOLLOW JOSE!”

Even Marshal, although he was in so much pain from the bullet incident, managed to keep up with the pace. They ran not knowing the direction where they were going, not knowing if the police officers were still following them, not knowing if they would make it out alive, but just going.

1. ***BAD BLOOD***

After about an hour or so of running and walking, they came to an abandoned house. Inside the house everything was old, dirty and dark. Surprisingly, despite the house’s old nature, the light switches were still working. There were spider webs and cockroaches literally everywhere, but at least it provided protection from the cold of the night. Jose immediately took out a lighter and cigarette and started smoking.

“Do you really think that now is the correct time to be doing that?” Kourtney questioned.

“Hahaha. After what happened, don’t tell me what to do. This is all you guy’s fault,” he retorted.

“How exactly is this our fault? You also feel asleep, didn’t you? We all felt tired, didn’t we?” Zoe shouted back then proceeded, “You are also as equally responsible for this as we are. You also deserve some of the blame, not most of it but some of it. Besides, why were you so reckless in crossing the border?”

Jose got so furious, grabbed her by the neck and pushed her towards the wall then shouted, “Let this be the first and last time you ever talk to me like that you ungrateful pig. Just who do you think you are? I can break every single bone in your body right now if I wanted to!”

Zoe was struggling to breathe. Was this going to be another forgotten racism case like that of George Floyd? Surely she deserved better treatment from her so called ‘friend’. Kourtney saw the whole scenario moving from bad to worse and then said, “Guys please this is so unnecessary. Please leave her alone Jose. She is just a teenager and has no idea of what she is saying. Come on now, let her go. People will consider you a coward if you strangle a seventeen year old girl to death. I promise she will no more be up in your business. If you want to smoke, then smoke. But please, I beg you, do not harm her. At least for my sake. She is my only friend and I do not want to lose her.”

It was after this persuasion from Kourtney that he finally let go and continued with his cigarette. Zoe coughed for quite some time before she eventually got better. She had learnt to keep her mouth shut. Guatemalans were definitely not to be messed with. Message received!

The air was a bit tensed after the whole incident with Jose and Zoe.

“Come on guys we can’t stay like this. We can’t work as a team if you guys hate each other. Remember we are all in this mess together and we’ll come out of it together. Where’s the co-operation, the love and the unity which existed between all of us at the beginning of this journey?” Kourtney asked.

“It crashed and burned together with our only hope of freedom. Right now we are dead meat. We’ll probably be caught in no time. Legit though right now the only thing keeping me sane is this cigarette. All of y’all are dead to me,” Jose complained.

“Oh wow, look at Mr. Complainer. And the way I thought you were a tough guy. Looks like they were nothing but just illusions in my mind,” Zoe said as she gave a sigh.

“Could you tell your little friend here to pipe down before I give her another beating? Gosh! I didn’t know some women could be so unbearable. I am used to the beautiful females we had there in Guatemala, not like this cheap lousy bag of scum. A poor excuse of a woman. Never wanting to shut up and speaking trash all the time!” Jose said looking at the corner where Kourtney and Marshal were standing.

“Hey calm down man. Don’t let this little girl make you go off like that,” Marshal said trying to calm him down. He took a deep breath and just continued with his cigarette quietly. He was staring directly at the wall and one could tell that his mind was very far away. Who knows what he thought about? Maybe it was his girlfriend, family, friends or whoever it was that he considered useful in his life. One thing though, it was crystal clear from his expression that he was full of regret. Maybe this was a lot more than he had bargained for. The truth however, he had just got out of jail a few months ago. He did not want to go back to that rat infested dump any time sooner. The guys actually felt a little pity for him. They were not sure but it was as if a teardrop had fallen on his jeans. Zoe bravely walked over to him, squatted and gave him a hug then whispered, “I am sorry you are in this situation because of us”. He returned the hug. Truly, the guys learned that criminals have feelings too. They are also human just like you and I.

Dawn came earlier than expected. But to be honest, nobody had slept a wink that night. How could they when their sorry attempt at an escape had failed miserably? Not only that, they had also lost the truck. They had just hit a brick wall. They decided to take a brief tour of what had offered them protection from the cold the night before. They went from room to room. First, the kitchen. It had a large island at the center an there was a white bowl filled with some cereal, or was it oatmeal? The spider webs were all over the place. The tap still had running water though. The guys used it to wash their face and quench their thirst. The next room they arrived at was the toilet. It was pretty clean with a walk in shower next to it.

“Guys I think at this point I just need to take a shower,” Kourtney said.

“You don’t have any clean clothes to change into so it would not make much of a difference. You will still feel stinky, gross and smelly,” Zoe replied.

Jose led the way to the master bedroom. There was a pink duvet with pink flowers neatly covering the entire bed. But the pests didn’t give a damn about how pretty it looked. A part of it had already been torn off by mice, maybe termites as well. They were just about to leave and finally head to the other bedrooms when Marshal called out, “Guys what’s in that sac over there?”

“Which sac?” Kourtney asked.

“That one over there leaning on the wall. I wonder who put it there,” Marshal continued.

“Only one way to find out,” Jose said as he made a few strides towards the wall.

“Be careful dear,” Zoe called.

“Okay mom!” Jose said in a sarcastic voice. He rolled his eyes then proceeded to open the sac. “Wow, look at this guys,” he said as he poured the contents on the cold floor.

They were uniforms. Not just any uniforms, police uniforms. Actually, they were very identical to the ones won by the Honduras immigration officers as they tried to deny them access. They were navy blue in color with a touch of yellow.

“What does this mean?” Zoe asked in a frightened voice.

“What do you think it means dummy? Of course those officers must have used this place as their base for some time. Besides, how else would they have arrived here? Jeez! Any six to twelve year old could have figured that out on their own.”

Zoe kept quiet. She did not enjoy the way Jose was talking to them but she also did not want to stir up any conflict between them again so she just kept quiet. Besides, her neck was already paying the price for her foolishness earlier on. No more drama.

As she was still in her own world of questions pondering over her next course of action, Jose exclaimed, “Aha! Guys I think I have an idea of how we can escape from here. It’s risky but also full proof depending on how it is executed. Are you in?”

“Depends, tell us the plan first so that we see if it’s worth risking our freedom or if we should just surrender to the cops already and pray for the minimum sentence,” Kourtney replied in a rather strange voice. She felt overwhelmed and defeated by everything. Had the whole world suddenly turned against them? How bad were they that everything just seemed to turn their backs on them? She was close to cracking and Zoe knew it. She put her arm around her and told her that everything was going to be okay. But how?

“Well, Kourtney, I won’t tell you exactly what’s on my mind right now because I feel sorry for you. That’s the only reason I’ll hold it in for now. But trust me, giving up is not an option, never was and never will be. I would rather die trying than not try at all,” Jose said. Wow! For a criminal he seemed to have all the best pieces of advice. Those boring motivational speakers from school needed lessons from him. He then proceeded, “At this point I think my plan is the only shot we have at survival. I’m not trying to toot my own horn but trust me on this one, this plan is full proof. There are five police uniforms here. What if we dress as immigration officers and go undercover?”

Everybody paused then Zoe posed the question, “What good will that do? We are supposed to fly to Kenya. If we dress as coppers, how will we eventually get what we want? Won’t we be too busy ensuring migrants don’t illegally cross the border and head over to Guatemala? Or do you mind explaining your plan further?”

“Sure. The immigration officers work on three sides actually, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. This is just the team in Guatemala. You are right when you say that our jobs will be only to monitor the border but we will also be exposed to plenty of gadgets including a mobile phone. A mobile phone that can be used to call someone like Brayo who can help us out,” Jose said with a smile on his face.

His idea made sense but also seemed very crazy. If they were ever caught then that would definitely be their end. However, was here any room for debate really? Besides, did they really have a better alternative? If not, then they would have to go with Jose’s plan.

“How will we even arrive there? Where will we say we’ve come from?” Marshal asked.

“I’m sure we’ll think of something. I also think Jose’s plan is too reckless but what choice do we have?” Zoe asked.

“We could always turn ourselves in….and hopefully, our sentence will be reduced,” Kourtney added.

“Shut up woman! If you want to rot in jail for the rest of your life then you are free to leave. Go out right now and get arrested! Besides, it’s your funeral,” Jose yelled.

Kourtney left the room and slammed the door behind her. She went back to the living room. She had heard enough of Jose’s non-sense. She was certainly not going to be a part of that insane plan of theirs. Over her dead body! Zoe followed her closely behind to try and reason with her. How could she refuse this golden opportunity that had presented itself? Meanwhile, Marshal and Jose were left in the master bedroom still checking out those uniforms and picking the correct sizes.

“Zoe just please get out of here. I am really not in the mood to talk to you right now,” Kourtney said as she turned to face Zoe.

“I’ll leave as soon as you hear me out. Listen sweetie we have no choice in this case. Wouldn’t you rather try than give up before you make any attempts? Please think about it dear. Jose’s plan is gold and we can’t just flush it down the toilet the way you want us to. We need to be brave and work extra hard. Haven’t you ever read Mitchel Obama’s ‘Becoming’? Don’t you just admire her courage?” Zoe continued.

“You know that the only biography I’ve ever read was Oprah’s because I am a big fan of her talk show. But I see where you are headed with this…and you are right. It’s time I quit being a chicken and make an effort so that we can find a way to get out of this country safely. I’m in on the plan,” Kourtney finally said what Zoe had been waiting to hear all along.

She hugged her and shouted, “Thank you!”

The boys who were now already in the room at the time were very happy to receive the good news. They had already picked out their uniforms so Kourtney had just eased their work. They could not wait to arrive in Kenya. Even though they were all atheists, that evening, they did something much unexpected. They actually prayed and hoped that they would arrive in Kenya safely. They stared out the windows the whole day while scouring their surroundings and coming up with a plan for what they would do when it hit sunset and how they were gonna show up to the other coppers as immigration officers, their fake names and any other sort of questions that they could be asked.

“We could be asked for our cards………what do we do when that happens?” Kourtney asked.

“We’ll have to think of a fake story then. A mind-blowing story but not an unrealistic one though,” Marshal said.

“Yeah. Maybe something like we were playing cat and mouse with some immigrants but sadly, they were armed. They took away everything we had and left us out to die in the cold of night,” Zoe said.

“Smart plan youngster. I guess some of my smarts are rubbing off on you. Mmmh true Aquarius in action,” Jose said.

“Well then I guess that’s it. However they’ll react to it afterwards, we’ll know what to say then. But I guess Jose should be the one to speak. Besides Scorpios are the biggest liars the world has to offer,” Zoe said looking at Jose.

“Enough with attacking people’s zodiacs. Besides, some of us don’t even believe in that sh\*t. Right now the main question is, are we gonna carry the rifle or not?” Kourtney asked.

“I don’t think we should, so that they don’t see us as a threat,” Marshal said.

“But what if we’ll need to defend ourselves in case they don’t believe us? We’ll need a defense mechanism. The gun could act as a sort of distraction as some of us escape,” Zoe said.

“And who’s that ‘us’ you speak of. I’m pretty sure y’all will want me to be the guy with the rifle ready to fire at those jerks in case they attack. And what about y’all? Will you be the guys to leave me hanging? No man, I don’t do no favors for no one. I may be old but I also still have dreams. I’m not going to play hostage just so you bi\*ches can find an escape route and leave me to suffer alone in jail. It cannot work,” Jose roared in a hurtful voice as if he was about to cry.

“Fine then, we’ll leave the rifle but if the plan doesn’t work out, it’s off to jail for all of us,” Kourtney said then proceeded, “At least I’ll have the joy of telling you I told you so!”

“Well, it’s not like we have a choice dear,” Marshal pleaded with her.

The day went by so fast. They were extremely hungry. They scoured the house and finally found some expired mouldy bread. There’s a Swahili proverb that says, ‘Maskini hachagui’ meaning ‘the poor don’t choose’ and so they just ate the bread for the sake of filling their stomachs at least with something they could call food. When evening came, they decided to get ready to surrender to the coppers. They wore the uniforms, Zoe picked the rifle, got out of the room and locked the door. Surprisingly, the guys had managed to convince Jose into taking the rifle for a distraction and for protection. Zoe volunteered to handle the rifle so that he would not think that they were setting him up. For a man who was above eighteen, he was certainly being a baby about the whole arrest and going to jail thing. But who can blame him? I mean he had certainly seen demons in prison that no one knew of their existence. He was as sure as death that he was not going back to that life and back to that world. They had also found some boots in the same sac that had the uniforms, so they put them on. These boots helped a lot in the swampy area where the house was located. How hadn’t they noticed this swamp when they were coming? Probably because they were too busy fleeing for their lives.

They walked in the same direction they had used when they were coming. In the dry mud, you could almost see their footsteps. How had the entire police crew missed that? “Amateurs!” Jose thought and continued, “But at least it means we have a better shot at fooling them.” But what if he was mistaken? What if they had just given up their chase on purpose knowing full well it wasn’t worth it? Besides, what if they confused the police? Everybody passing through Honduras usually wanted to go to Guatemala, Mexico and finally, win the mega jackpot by arriving at the land flowing with milk and honey. The land where nothing bad happens right? Of course we are talking about the mother of all nations. The good old U.S of A. But what if the officers had not gone and were just waiting to give them an element of surprise?

All these questions crisscrossed Jose’s mind but sadly, they never came with answers that it only made him a slave to the question, “What if?” Suddenly, he stopped on his tracks.

“What’s wrong? Why did you stop?” Zoe asked.

“Look, Jose said pointing ahead. Look at that!” Jose whispered in a tremble.

Way ahead lay the same truck that the guys had used in their escape plan.

“That’s awesome! Now we don’t have to surrender to the coppers. We can just continue with our mission as though nothing just happened,” Kourtney said while wearing a vibrant smile.

“Tell your dear darling wife to stop thinking like a three year old girl Marshal! Tell her to have a brain for once. Kourtney darling, that right there is what we call a clear trap in front of your dang eyes! And you want us to do what? To play with it? Is it some sort of toy? Is it? Answer me!” Jose roared.

Kourtney lowered her head in shame. “Give her a break dude. She is just a little kid,” Marshal said while trying to comfort and caress Kourtney.

“Well if she’s just a little kid then why is she here? Shouldn’t she be in pre-school then? This is a place where people who have grown up can have the grown up conversations while the little kitties can go take a nap!” Jose clamped back. He was beyond petrified when he had seen the truck.

“Get a hold of yourself Jose and stop being rude. She didn’t mean any harm when she asked the question and now you’ve already given her three blows to the heart by your response. Please, just tell us how this problem can be solved. Should we go back?” Zoe asked.

“But what will happen if we go back? We’ll die to starvation. I’ll rather we just take the bull by its horns. Let’s continue moving forward and come what may,” Kourtney said as soon as she was done wiping her tears.

They went further ahead until they arrived at the vehicle. The tire was still punctured. Looks like nobody had touched the car since their fleeing. It had become a ghost car. They stood there for a while still looking at the vehicle when suddenly, the guys heard a loud shout from the back, “Who are you guys and what are you doing with that vehicle? Step aside and put your hands up!” The person roared in a voice that could awaken the dead.

They slowly turned around only to find two immigration officers waiting for them.

Jose whispered to Zoe, “Only one of them has a gun. Get ready to fire. Once they are dead, we can take their cards and the plan will go smoothly. Once they come to cuff us, hit the one without a gun and make him fall down as you shoot the other one. Easy peezy.”

“Easy peezy alright,” Zoe said in a sarcastic voice.

“Hey! What are you two whispering about?” One of the officers shouted.

“Nothing!” Jose retorted.

“Don’t tell me it ain’t nothing cause I clearly heard something,” he proceeded.

Jose kept quiet this time and waited for Zoe to make her move.

“Didn’t you hear my instructions all of y’all? I said hands in the air,” the second officer repeated his command.

The gang was forced to obey the order. When the officers were approaching them while preparing to cuff them, Jose used his foot to trip the officer with the gun. As soon as he was down he desperately tried to remove the AK-47 that was held over his right shoulder by a small strap similar to the one used to hold a guitar. The second officer immediately gave him a kick on the back that sent him rolling down and screaming like a child. The officer who was now on the floor held his gun in his arms and aimed for Jose’s head.

“Shoot him now bi\*ch!” Jose shouted.

Zoe immediately got hold of the gun and shot at the officer. He let out a blood-curdling scream that sent him rolling on the ground with pain. The second officer, on seeing the sad demise of his one and only friend attempted to make a run for it. Unfortunately, his plans were easier said than done. Zoe aimed and threatened to kill him if she did not give her his card. After that, he allowed him to run for his dear life?

“Fool! Why didn’t you kill him? Why didn’t you end his life there and then you coward?” Jose barked.

“Because, I am not cold blooded like some people I know. I don’t want human blood in my hands!” Zoe shouted back.

“Well what about the first person you killed then? Was that just mere coincidence or what? You’ve grown into a monster,” Kourtney cried.

“I had no choice then. Or would you rather we all rot in jail for the rest of our damned life? Y’all can’t blame me for that one,” Zoe said in a heartbroken voice then continued, “Do you think I like to kill? Do you think I enjoy it? No! These are some of the things that your circumstances make you do. It’s not a hobby.”

“To me it felt as if you were thirsty for his blood. Don’t play innocent, little Miss Barbie doll. Oh my gosh, is this what famous people do?” Kourtney proceeded with her allegations.

“Don’t you dare question my character Kourtney! I thought you were my friend but turns out you are always ready to point a finger any time something goes wrong you blood sucking mosquito!” Zoe shouted ready to take a swing at Kourtney.

For the first time, it was the boys turn to separate the two and prevent them from getting physical. But Zoe could not keep her mouth shut. She proceeded to insult Kourtney, “You are always searching for someone to pin the blame on every time something goes wrong. It is Jose and I who do everything, come up with every plan and take every risk for y’all cowards’ sake while what do you do? Flirt around with that poor excuse for a husband as if you are on vacation.”

“Keep your mouth shut you hoe! At least I wasn’t the one who was attracted to two middle-aged men old enough to be my father! So tell me Miss Gold-digger, whose kisses are better? Chris’ or Mark’s? Or maybe both you disgusting pig!” Kourtney yelled as she attempted to slap Zoe. Luckily, Marshal stopped her before it landed on Zoe’s right cheek.

“Girls honestly you need to calm the heck down. We don’t have time for some petty cat fights you hear me?” Jose said as the two girls sat down opposite each other.

After the atmosphere was a little bit cooled, Jose finally proceeded with what he wanted to say, “Listen Zoe, it was very brave of you to fight off those two officers. However, the reason I wanted you to kill the other one also is because now that he is free, he may warn the other officers to be alert of impostors coming dressed as one of them. However, I understand that you are just seventeen years old and murder is not something any normal teenager would think of.”

“I completely agree with Jose. But don’t think of it as being ungrateful. Trust me, the move you made back then, wow! I only see those kinds of moves in a Jackie Chan movie. Nowhere else. Thank you,” Marshal added.

“Wow, finally the passenger has spoken. You now I never hear your voice whenever we’re having one of these serious conversations so I just thought that maybe you are just a person in the back seat while I was the driver. Glad to see you are not just a little baby duckling after all,” Jose sarcastically scoffed.

“Hey! No more bad blood between us, okay?” Kourtney asked.

“Oh I’m sorry your majesty, I promise I will not disturb his highness any longer. I will certainly not disturb your husband any longer, pinkie swear,” Jose responded before letting out a rib-cracking laughter.

“That’s enough Mr. Martinez, let’s behave like adults now,” Zoe said seriously.

Jose was caught off guard. He was not used to anyone calling him by his sir name before. It made him feel awkward and a bit older. Zoe did not let him respond to it even though she knew it bothered him deeply. Instead, she proceeded to say, “Kourtney, my apologies to you. I should not have come at you like that because in reality, I am not perfect either. And Marshal, I should not have dragged you into my fight with Kourtney. I just felt defeated and thought you were easy prey. I’m sorry to the both of you.”

“It’s okay, I forgive you. You’ve been like a sister to me all this while,” Marshal said.

“Me too. You are an awesome person and I am definitely not going to let this one slip up destroy the beautiful friendship we once shared. You are indeed my loving sister,” Kourtney said with tears cascading down her rosy cheeks.

“Thank you,” Zoe concluded then while turning to Jose she said, “I also forgive your rotten attitude towards everyone. I know you can’t help it. But right now we desperately need your help. I know I screwed up big time but can we do anything to help the situation right now? Or is it game over? I mean I still have the cards for both coppers.”

“Mmmmh…it will be tough but we have to try. First, we need to go back to the border and turn ourselves in. We can play victim in this case. Obviously that copper that got away is gonna rat on us, but what if we beat him to it and we become the moles?” Jose said while drawing some marks on the dry sand using an old stick he had picked by the road side.

“Okay, as soon as y’all understand what he is trying to say could you please give me a teenage version of it?” Kourtney said as she looked at Zoe and Marshal.

“I’m saying we gotta pretend to be the victims yo, the duped man, and the superheroes in this movie yo. We go to the cops and tell them we have been robbed by some losers dressed in police uniforms, and they were armed yo, then we be like ‘we’ll help you catch them dudes’, since we know exactly how they look like man. Was that any better?” Jose said as he looked at Kourtney who was dying of laughter.

“Which language is that?” She asked as she gave a chuckle, “But it’s fine, I got the memo. Let’s go then.”

They quickly got up and headed in the direction of the border. They knew they were close since they had not gone that far with the car before their encounter with the so called men in blue.

1. ***BLAME THE GOVERNMENT?***

“I hate those coppers so much. Always pretending to be good to people when in reality they are just robbing us blind,” Jose said sadly as they were walking.

“Why are you mad at the coppers? They are just doing their jobs anyway,” Zoe said.

“Maybe some of them. But most are just dried up pieces of junk. Stupid bastards who don’t give a f\*ck about human dignity and human rights in the least,” Jose proceeded with his allegations.

“I agree with you. Back in Kenya, my country has never recovered from the detrimental effects of the 2007 elections. They say roughly 15 years later that everything has become better and that unity is once again reigning in my country but honestly speaking vitu kwa ground ni different,” Kourtney said.

“Translation please, you forgot that I don’t speak Swahili,” Jose interrupted.

“Oh sorry, it just means that things are different on the ground. My country has never been the same again after that massacre and violence,”

“But that was the politicians’ fault, and the fools that believed them, not the police. As an officer, I feel insulted. We risk so much to protect you, but you just think we are thieves, liars and rapists,” Marshal spoke.

“Because most of them are! I agree that the politicians all have this secret weapon or should I say curse because whenever they speak only poison comes out of their mouths! They love stirring drama between people I even wonder why they not script writers. I feel like their movies would be epic and they would all have this title, ‘SABOTAGE’! They are supposed to be good role models while they are out in public behaving like little kids and tarnishing the name of our country. Calling each other names like ‘Madoadoa’, ‘Mende’ and even ‘Watu wa kurusha mawe’. But the politicians during the election period were busy relaxing in their posh estates, but who was fighting with the people? Who killed thousands all in the name of ‘trying to control the riot’? One word- POLICE!” Kourtney said.

“It’s true what you are saying though, Kourtney. Some officers don’t even deserve that title cause they cause more harm than good really. However we should not be stereotypes and blame the entire police force just because of some messed up coppers. Some soldiers are actually nice. They risk their lives for the sake of their beloved nation. Take Ukraine for example. They’ve had this war with Russia for over three months and many of them have died but they’ve never thought about giving up. They are protecting their lands. Show a little gratitude,” Zoe said calmly to avoid provoking her friend.

“Well those are just the army. I’m talking about the common police and immigration officers. They are the worst. It’s like they are drained off all their emotions and their ability to be perfectly normal human beings,” Kourtney said and gave out a dry cough.

“Woah African witch, are you sure you don’t have Corona? You know it has been trending lately and it’s looking for a teen witch like you to possess,” Jose said and let out a rib-breaking laughter.

“Not funny,” Kourtney retorted unamused, “Besides Covid died a long time ago. When it came everybody was so excited that some people were even wearing double masks. But now? Even those coppers didn’t have any masks. As soon as the government lifted the curfew rule and wearing of masks became optional, people have since ditched wearing masks completely. When I was in the U.S Covid had reached its peak and everyone thought that the end times were near. Lol! Teens like me still didn’t wear masks. I’ve stayed in the U.S for more than a year and I can say the teens are rebellious as heck.”

“But remember Covid killed my brother in Hong Kong, so we can’t say it doesn’t exist. That is why I am planning to get the AstraZeneca vaccine as soon as we arrive home. I did online when I was still in Dubai and found out that it has already reached Africa,” Zoe said.

“Stop being a stupid ass b\*tch dummy. You have just said that the vaccines are already in Africa. According to scientists, vaccine development is a long, complex process often lasting ten to fifteen years. That’s how long anyone has to wait for a vaccine to be tested and proven to be accurate. But this time? How come the countries in the west have been so generous to you? How come the vaccines have been so quickly manufactured that we even have a variety? There is the Moderna vaccine, AstraZeneca, Johnsons and Johnsons and even the Pfizer vaccine? Does that make sense to you in your tiny teeny brain? This is fake! In short, there are only two possible explanations. The first one is that it is a depopulation vaccine. They’ve done it before so that makes me sure that they can do it again. Do you remember the measles vaccine that US scientists working in the Amazon used to kill hundreds of Indians? They were used to kill so many Asians and Africans when in fact the wife of the person responsible for that vaccine has three kids if you know what I’m saying. But of course they are untouchable, the so called rich people. According to them the world was growing too fast and especially in Asia and Africa, and they were afraid that we would outnumber them. The second option and probably the most likely is that they ‘think’ they have the vaccine. They are not sure of it though that is why they are using Africans as guinea pigs. Those bastards are probably like, “Let’s see if it works on them first. If it does, it is safe to be used but if it doesn’t, then we are very lucky we didn’t use it ourselves.” You see, the African continent is suffering all because it is a third world continent,” Jose spoke boldly and seriously while staring straight into Zoe’s eyes.

“You know it’s that mentality that makes me realize why we are still a third world continent and even your own country Jose is still third world. Whenever you don’t receive help from someone, you claim that they hate you and that they are being racists but whenever you do, you claim that they are just using you to make themselves look good in the eyes of the public. It is exactly that mentality that makes me believe Africa will not even be close to being called a first world continent any time soon,” Zoe said.

“Well I can live with that. I don’t need the title anyways. I’m proud to be African,” Kourtney said.

“I am also proud but we have to accept that we’ve failed as citizens to recognize the love that non-Africans show to the continent,” Zoe proceeded.

“You have failed my dear. But I have not lost anything. I will certainly not be duped by people who claim to love me only to be used as a guinea pig,” Kourtney said and the discussion came to an end.

“Look,” Marshal said as he pointed towards the distance, “The border!”

“Get ready guys,” Jose ordered, “It’s show time.”

1. ***IMPOSTORS***

They walked slowly towards the coppers as if they were exhausted. This was all part of the plan. The officers immediately noticed them and one of them yelled, “Hey you! Stop right there!” They immediately halted as though they were some kind of automated robots following the instruction of their manufacturer. They were super nervous and breathing heavily but they did not want to show it. Two officers went to have a look at them more keenly while the other remained behind to continue inspecting the border. They knew that very soon a group of migrants would arrive at the border wishing to cross over to Guatemala in an attempt to arrive at the one and only U.S of A.

“Sup y’all, I’m Officer Antonio and he’s Rodrigo,” an officer said as they showed them their cards, “Who are you guys and what are you doing here on the border between these two spectacular countries?”

“Well hello officers. It is a pleasure to meet you. We actually really require your help. We are new immigration officers sent here by the government. We were attacked on the way by some goons who posed themselves as coppers and stopped us next to the main road. They forced us to get out of the car even after we told them we were in a hurry. Once we got out, the one officer who had a gun pointed it out to my colleague’s head and threatened to blow her brains out. While trying to save her, my college here got shot and that’s how he got that wound in his hand. Miraculously, we managed to survive and they did not cause us much harm. However, they succeeded in getting the girls’ cards. They wanted ours as well but we fought back viciously,” Jose said in a seemingly depressed voice.

“Can we see those so called cards? You’ve been talking about them for quite some time now,” Officer Rodrigo said.

“Sure thing officers,” Jose said as he and Marshal handed over their cards.

“I don’t even know what’s funnier. The fact that you think we were born yesterday or the fact that you are so stupid that you didn’t even notice your faces are not in the damned card itself!” Officer Rodrigo said.

“Man, have a little soft spot, let us explain,” Jose pleaded.

“Save your so called explanation for the judge! Y’all are nothing but impostors. And the fact that you thought we were so stupid that you did not even make an attempt to make your story believable. I am so disgusted! Gosh!” Turning over to Officer Antonio he said, “Wait with them here I am calling the others here right now.”

“Chill dude, give them a break,” Officer Antonio said.

“A break? When I was taking this job I took a vow to my country to always protect it and defend it against any impostors. Impostors that can harm and damage our country,” Officer Rodrigo continued.

“Jeez man, why are you this harsh? We are not even planning to stay here for long though. We just need to get back to Africa. Our families are over there. You have a family too so take heart,” Zoe said.

“Listen man, we have to talk about this for some time. Come, we need a bit of privacy. Let’s go over there,” Officer Antonio said as he pointed behind a very large thicket. The officers who were managing the border looked at the two officers curiously. Then their eyes turned towards the guys.

“Curses! How could we forget such a simple thing as checking the photos in the cards?” Marshal asked.

“Because ‘we’ weren’t involved in the whole plan anyways,” Jose retorted.

“Come on guys, this is not the time for arguing. We will draw unnecessary attention to ourselves,” Kourtney spoke.

“Okay boss lady,” Jose said in a sarcastic voice. He took a deep breath then said, “I wonder what they are talking about. Are they with us or against us?”

“I would say against us judging from the way that Rodrigo guy was talking about his so called beloved country,” Kourtney said.

“Why do you always have to be the negative one in the story?” Zoe asked.

“Sssssh…..Here they come,” Marshal said as he pointed to the thicket where the two men were smiling in a rather casual way.

“So, how much are you paying us to keep our mouths shut?” Officer Rodrigo asked.

Wow! They did not expect that from an officer who just a few minutes ago had been declaring his loyalty to his country. Perhaps it had finally dawned on him that there was nothing to protect really.

“We don’t have any money on us right now. But we have a friend here who can send you all the cash you please,” Marshal said referring to Brayo.

“Good, we want ten thousand lempiras each,” Officer Rodrigo said.

“But of course,” Marshal concluded, “It will be delivered. Just help us out.”  
This all goes back to the government and specifically, the sector in charge of the police, The National Police of Honduras. If they were being paid fairly and the government was strict on the way they carried out their duties, they would certainly have known better than to accept bribes from impostors. But good news, at least the guys were one step closer though. However, they had to be on full alert. Ever since they were young, their parents trained them to always stay away from coppers, and that they were nothing but stupid and heartless people who were given special training on how to oppress the weak and the vulnerable in the society.

“What took you guys so long?” An officer asked Officer Antonio.

“Well they had to show us their cards, give us full details about themselves and tell us their story about how they landed here,” Officer Antonio said.

“Well, do you mind shedding some light on their story?” The same officer asked now facing Officer Rodrigo.

“Don’t bother your precious little head with that. All you need to know is that they are one of us. Sadly though, they were attacked by some fraudsters in police uniform on the road as they were coming here. But all you need to know is that they are going to stay with us for now,” answered Officer Rodrigo.

“Phew! For a second there I thought we were going to have trouble, but if you are one of us, allow me to say, welcome to the Honduras Guatemala border officers,” the officer said as he shook their hands.

“What are your names by the way?” the officer asked.

“Santiago Roberto,” answered Jose.

“I’m Rafael Salvador,” Marshal said.

“Rosalia Marsela,” Zoe followed.

“Isabela Gonzella,” Kourtney said last.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” The officer said.

They stayed at the border until sunset then Officer Antonio and Officer Rodrigo approached them and Officer Antonio said, “Do you guys want to go meet some of our younger friends still in camp? It’s not far from here. You guys can stay there for some time. Don’t worry, we’ll handle the guys in case they ask questions about your whereabouts.”

“But we thought we would stay with you guys,” Jose asked knowing very well they would be safer with their so called ‘friends’.

“Nah….I’m off duty till tomorrow morning and so is my colleague over here,” Antonio said as he pointed to Rodrigo.

“Yes dudes, and besides, our wives would not be happy if we brought along uninvited guests. Unless you want us to split you up and each take two of you to our places which I’m sure you won’t appreciate,” Officer Rodrigo said.

“Can we just borrow your phone and we’ll tell our friend to come pick us up with your money?” Marshal said.

“Sure thing dude, but if he’s in Tegucigalpa then getting to the border I sure to take some time, but enough of me spitting on your biscuit,” Officer Antonio said and handed Marshal the phone. Surprisingly, the guy who was always index one in high school because he was a mathematical guru had crammed Brayo’s number already. Genius! Wow! Kourtney, who had never thought she needed Math anywhere in her life had been proven wrong!

“Hello Brian, this is Marshal,” he said.

“I thought he said his name was Rafael Salvador,” Officer Antonio whispered.

“Ssssh! He’s on the phone,” replied Jose, “And by the way his full name is Rafael Marshal Salvador, so there you have it.”

“Brian, we had some hiccups and now we are stranded at the Honduras-Guatemala border disguised as some coppers. Some two officers already unmasked us and they know the game we’re playing. They are asking for ten thousand lempiras each to keep their mouth in check. Can you help us out?” Marshal continued.

The phone was not on loudspeaker as it usually was because of the presence of extra ‘friends’. One could only guess the answers Brayo was giving.

Marshal proceeded with the conversation, “Aaah! That will be so helpful. Thanks so much bro!” He finally hung up when he was done.

“So, what did he say?” Zoe asked excitedly.

“He said he is still in Tegucigalpa and cannot make it here on time but his friend Lopez is near the border. Oh! And by the way officers, he is sending twenty thousand lempiras on this phone so you’ll find your own way to divide it equally,” Marshal broke the news.

Both parties were very happy and excited. The guys because they would soon be out of danger in the delicate arms of Lopez and the officers because they would get all their money. Just then, Officer Antonio’s phone beeped. It was the two hundred thousand lempiras carefully settling themselves into his account.

“Hey Officer Isabela, don’t you have a place to stay for the night? Or is a pretty girl like you just gonna freeze to death in this night’s cold?” An officer called out from a distance.

“Who’s Isabela again?” Kourtney asked.

“It’s you!” The guys all responded in unison.

Before she could answer the officer proceeded with his flattery, “A pretty girl like you can’t be left exposed to the cold. It could be bad for your health. And I for one cannot bear to see this precious soul suffering from these life threatening hazards like pneumonia or just a common cold.”

“And who told you she needs your jacket?” Marshal roared.

“Gosh Officer Rafael! I’m sorry. I didn’t know the two of you were involved,” the officer said and walked away feeling rather embarrassed.

“It’s okay Officer Rafael, calm down. Help will be here soon and we will be out of this mess,” Zoe said trying to reassure him.

“Thank you so much Office Rosalia. I really appreciate that,” he said as he gave her a gentle pat on the back.

They stayed quiet for some time each of them wondering how life will be when Lopez arrived. Brighter or dimmer? The officers on the other hand were busy bickering over the method Antonio would use to send half of the money to Rodrigo and when he would do it.

“I don’t trust you man. Knowing you, you probably want to keep all the money for yourself. For your selfish gain. I don’t know if it was the right decision to send the money to your phone really. They should have used a smartphone like mine. Your phone is so outdated and old-fashioned that’s it’s probably not even capable of holding that large sum of money. Oh my goodness what were they thinking! Giving twenty thousand lempiras to an amateur phone like yours.”

After which Officer Antonio would respond thusly, “Amateur phone? Oh! It’s that dried up piece of metal that you are holding in your hands which makes you call my phone amateur eeh? I will teach you a lesson! I will certainly not send you the cash then. Besides, my phone is too amateurish to know how to send money to other phones.”

As much as they were amusing and truly entertaining the guys, all they wanted to do was get out of the country. Luckily, their prayers were answered and after about thirty minutes, a car hooted and stopped next to them. The other officers who were patrolling the border stopped and aimed at the vehicle with their rifle thinking that it’s probably another group of migrants as it often is. The person driving the car got up with his hands in the air as a sign that he came in peace. He was dressed in white with a white mask that covered his face and left only his eyes open to see his surroundings.

“Are you training to be Marshmello dude?” Jose finally asked after a long moment of silence as they were scrutinizing his outfit.

“Haha, nice one dude? And you? Are you training to be Simon Cowell or what? Why can’t you just keep your negative comments to yourself like a good judge?” He responded.

“Your voice seems very familiar. Have we met at Maggie’s center or something?” Zoe asked.

“Maggie? Who’s Maggie?” He responded.

“Officer Rosalia, enough! I don’t think we know this guy. I would have certainly recognized any man with a poor fashion sense such as this one. Trust me, he knows nothing about us or our past, okay?” Kourtney said.

“I’m Lopez and Brian informed me that I would pick Marshal and three of his friends, Zo…..” he was cut short by Jose who did not want him to reveal his true identity.

“Aaah yes, Officer Rafael Marshal, Officer Rosalia, Officer Isabela and I were the ones you were supposed to pick,” Jose said.

Lopez, who had probably gotten the memo by then asked Jose, “And you’re?”

Jose gave a nervous chuckle and said, “I am Officer Santiago. How could you forget that I was also among the people that you were supposed to pick?”

“Oh silly me. Tiny brain, well then let’s hit the road,” Lopez said.

“Sure thing!” Marshal said as they headed to the vehicle.

“It was a pleasure doing business with you,” Officer Rodrigo said as he waved goodbye.

The other officers approached the two. “Who was that and why are the officers leaving very soon? It’s not yet time to depart,” one said.

“Give them a break guys, they are just newbies. I am sure they’ll be here tomorrow very early in the morning,” Officer Antonio said knowing very well that he was lying.

In the vehicle, the guys were starting to get a little comfortable with Lopez.

“You have no idea how you saved us back there, thanks a lot man,” Marshal said.

“Don’t mention it, any friend of Brayo’s is a friend of mine,” he said as they left the main road.

“Why are we diverting? I thought we were heading straight to the airport,” Zoe asked.

“Nah…all the flights had been booked up to tomorrow morning. Your flight will therefore depart in the evening. For now, I am taking you to my house so that you at least fill your stomach with something before we do the final leg of the journey tomorrow. I hope that’s okay,” Lopez said.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Honestly, I’m famished,” Kourtney said.

“You are always famished and look, you already weigh the size of a fat pig. I think you should be worried about your health. Obesity is a real problem in the world and trust me, it kills,” Jose said in his usual harsh manner.

They had been driving for about five minutes when suddenly the car came to a halt next to a giant mansion with graffiti painted on the wall.

“What’s with these North American countries and graffiti everywhere? Don’t y’all find it disturbing?” Zoe asked.

“Well it says ‘MONEY IS POWER’ so I kinda agree with it. Cause our whole journey we’ve just been asked for money from all directions,” Kourtney said.

1. ***OUT OF THE WOODS?***

They got out of the vehicle and Lopez opened the front door. Inside, the house was very beautiful with well painted blue walls and portraits of all the wealthy men in the world, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and even Bill Gates was there.

“Wow! I see you are a huge fan of money dude?” Marshal said.

“Indeed, and one day, maybe my picture will also be there,” Lopez said.

“Amina,” Zoe responded. It was the Swahili way of saying, ‘may it be so’.

“So now that you’ve got to know me more, do you mind telling me your real names?” Lopez asked.

“I’m Marshal,” Marshal said as he chuckled, “But you already know me.”

“Aaah! The funny one!” Lopez said.

“My name is Jose,” Jose replied.

“Oh! The rude one,” Lopez teased.

“Yup, he is very rude,” Kourtney said, “And I am Kourtney, and this is my friend Zoe.”

“Oh I see, and who asked you to be the spokesman for Zoe?” Lopez asked.

Kourtney was surprised. “Excuse me?” She said.

“You heard me. Even when you were working for Mark you still used to talk too much. Can’t you keep your mouth shut for a second?” Lopez asked then he removed his mask and the girls were left speechless.

“Chris!” They shouted.

“Surprise! Surprise!” He said with an evil glare on his face.

“What on earth is this demon doing here?” Zoe yelled.

“Who?” Marshal and Jose asked in confusion as they had never seen Chris before.

“This skeleton over here?” Zoe screamed.

“Skeleton? Weren’t you the one calling me baby, darling and honey a few months ago? Or did you forget how head over heels you were in love with me? You were easy prey then. But I guess you’ve grown smarter now,” Chris said as he gave a chuckle.

“Who’s this guy b\*tch?” Jose asked Kourtney.

“This is the man who made all our lives a living nightmare and sent us to prison once we found out about his evil deeds and threatened to rat him out! He even wanted a relationship with Zoe even though he was old enough to be his father! Disgusting pedophile!” Kourtney answered in anger.

Chris walked to the kitchen next to the fruit basket ignoring all that the girls were saying about him and focusing on his ‘precious’ fruits, or was there something else that he was looking at?  
“Wow dude, you know men like you make me feel disgusted. This is such an embarrassment to all the men of this world. Why would a rich man like you do such a disgusting act? Do you even sleep well at night knowing that you just ruined the life of an innocent, little girl? Doesn’t that bother your conscious?” Jose asked boldly.

“Tame your tongue young man, and don’t provoke me. It is that tongue of yours that will lead to your downfall,” Chris answered back undisturbed by his comments.

“Y’all rich men are just the same. Taking advantage of little girls then throwing them away like toilet paper,” Jose continued.

“Stay out of this young man. You have no idea whom you are talking to,” Chris warned.

“What’s the matter you pedophile? Can’t handle the truth? It burns, right?” Jose continued.

Chris didn’t say anything this time. He just turned around and aimed for Jose’s belly with the kitchen knife that had been next to the fruit basket all along. Luckily, Jose missed but unfortunately, he stabbed his upper arm. Jose wallowed in pain.

“Jose! No!” Zoe cried.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks as she watched him take slow breaths while in pain as he was trying to get up.

“I’ll kill you because of this!” Zoe yelled while facing Chris.

“I’d like to see you try,” He said as he walked over the bleeding Jose and headed for the living room.

Kourtney was so mad at Chris after witnessing everything that she decided to take a big piece of wood that had been leaning idly against the wall of the kitchen. She rushed ahead and grabbed it. Chris, who thought that she had probably gone to assist her hurting friend did not even look back. Big mistake! Kourtney gave him a blow at the back of the head. He dropped his knife and fell down in pain. He slowly touched the back of his head with his palm where it came back with stains of blood. He looked at Kourtney sadly with eyes full of remorse and then fell on the floor unconscious.

“Is he dead?” Kourtney asked feeling scared. She did not want blood in her hands no matter how wicked the person was.

“Let me come see,” Marshal replied as he headed her way.

He took Chris’ arm and checked for the pulse then the heartbeat. “Nah, we still got a pulse. The heart is slower than usual but I’m positive he’ll pull through,” he said.

“Good! We need him still alive so that we can bring an end to this mess,” Zoe said.

Jose could finally sit down on his butt again. Zoe checked around and saw the kitchen cloth on the kitchen island and she rushed to grab it. She sprinkled a little water from the sink on it and proceeded to clean Jose’s wound.

“My love don’t worry, you are gonna be okay,” she whispered.

“You know I’m ten years older than you right?” Jose whispered back. “Besides, I’m badass but you are a precious little soul. Trust me, you and I are not the perfect match.”

“Why? Don’t you know that age is just a number?” Shouted Kourtney.

“And don’t you know that jail is just a room? I could get arrested for this,” Jose replied.

“The government is just trying to scare you. But honestly speaking, I think these two make the perfect couple,” said Marshal.

The two were rather embarrassed to find out that their friends had been listening to their ‘secret’ and ‘private’ conversation, but there were no regrets. Besides, what did they have to hide? The question though is how on earth did Zoe fall in love with a man who once tried to strangle her? Did she want to fight for this so called love? What about the age difference? Who knows, though? All I can say is in Kenya it’s either muoane au muachane, hii story ya fighting for it kwani wee ni Maumau?

Jose finally broke the awkward silence that followed, “So what are your plans with Chris?”

“We’ve played hostage for too long. I’m thinking it’s his time to play hostage,” Zoe said.

“But why on earth did he bring us here? What’s his plan? How does he know Brayo and why did he disguise himself as Lopez?” Marshal asked.

“Listen man, stop asking us stupid questions that you know we know nothing about or we’ll be forced to give you sarcastic answers that we know you know nothing about!” Jose retorted.

“Wow! Even on the sickbed you still have a rotten attitude. I wonder who broke you,” Marshal replied rather angrily.

Just then, they heard a phone call. It was coming from Chris’ pants. The guys quickly rushed to where Chris was laying and Marshal grabbed his phone. He recognized the number that was calling. It was Brayo. He answered it but did not speak.

“So, did you get rid of all those jerks for me?” Brayo asked.

The guys could not believe their ears. The friend who had assisted them for all this while had turned out to be their greatest foe. They continued listening to the jaw-dropping speech.

“Can you believe that after dumping his pathetic baby on Anita, that idiot Marshal thinks that I’ll be the one to play the role of ‘father the baby’? Not to mention Anita has spoiled that baby so much. Anything she sees, she likes or she wants she gets it. Ala! Is she Ariana? I’m so done with that kid and there’s nothing I can do about it since I love Anita so much. I blame Marshal for all my problems and that’s why I insist that you must destroy him. At least then my conscious will be at peace,” Brayo said then he laughed.

The guys and especially Marshal were boiling with fury. How could he stab them in the back like that? Why couldn’t he just say that he did not want to help them instead of pretending to be on their side only to break their hearts into a thousand pieces? That was low, even for a jealous boyfriend like him.

“Hello? Hello, is anyone there?” He continued, “Chris, can you hear me?”

Marshal immediately hung up.

“Why did you do that dummy?” Jose asked.

“Oh I’m sorry, did you want me to tell them we just killed Chris and we’ve unmasked his true motives?” Marshal asked sarcastically.

“What will we do now?” Kourtney asked.

“I have an idea. About Brayo, forget about that fool. Marshal, I hope you are now aware that all Brayo’s are just the same. I think that we could hold Chris hostage and ask Mark to free the Cheetah Girls, Kourtney,” Zoe said.

“Who the heck is Mark and who would give themselves such a dumb name like the ‘Cheetah Girls’? Is there a ‘Rhino Squad’ too? I’m confused,” Jose said.

“I’ll explain everything later when we’ll be going to bed but now, all we need to do is tie that guy up. There’s a rope over there,” Zoe said as she pointed to a brown rope that was lying on the floor in the corridor.

“Wow, this house is just like a magical wonderland. You ask for something and you immediately receive it in less than a minute,” Kourtney said as she went on to grab the rope.

“You know, it’s kinda ironic how a police officer is playing criminal right now,” Marshal said as he tied Chris with the ropes and moved his unconscious, heavy body to a corner in the living room.

“Then maybe you should leave it to the expert kidnappers like me,” Jose said then added, “And make sure he doesn’t escape rookie. I’m coming to supervise the work when you are done.”

“Yes boss,” Marshal said as he rolled his eyes.

“Wait Jose, you never told us you were a kidnapper,” Zoe said.

“Oh yes I am. I was born in Venezuela. It’s only recently that I moved to Guatemala. Life in Venezuela was not easy at all. The only way you could make quick money was to be a criminal. The prices of some random stuffs like toilet paper there was just insane. In fact, the military used to be awarded with toilet paper. It was that expensive and was only for the well to do families. While growing up I had a small business there of making drones but after the attempted murder of President Nicolas Maduro, when he was addressing the Bolivarian National Guard on 4th August 2018, he decided to ban all drones from flying. That meant the death of my only source of income. I decided to turn to a life of crime. I did a little bit of everything: drugs, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, romance scamming online and even killing people for money, you know like hitmen. I spent my life always fleeing from the coppers. I gave up my life of crime after this woman I had corned online got evicted from her own house and became a street urchin. That touched me so much that I vowed never to scam anybody online ever again. I then decided to move to Guatemala where life was not any better. I realized that a secret to making good money there was drugs and also helping migrants who wished to cross over to greener pastures like the USA. But after being caught by the US immigration officers once and being sentenced to jail for eight months, I can’t bear to spend my life in jail again. It’s simply too horrible, even for me,” Jose concluded.

“Oh my goodness, so do you have any legal rights in Guatemala currently? As in are you a citizen there or what?” Zoe asked.

“Not really,” Jose said and continued, “But Guatemala ain’t like these first world countries with billions of skyscrapers and a million amusement parks. It ain’t like they are gonna ask you for your documents on a daily basis.”

“Wow, and you survived. Moral of the story?” Marshal asked.

“Never give up,” Kourtney answered then said, “Lets got to bed.”

“Doesn’t someone need to keep an eye on Chris? Or maybe if Brayo calls again,” Zoe said.

“I’ll do it. I wasn’t gonna sleep peacefully anyway knowing that there’s a hostage in the house,” Marshal said, “And besides, the person supposed to call us is apparently my ‘friend’. I need to be awake to hear what that bastard has to say first hand.”

“Okay, then. I won’t argue with that logic because honestly, I need my beauty sleep. Good night honey,” Kourtney said and walked towards the stairs.

“Good night love,” Marshal replied.

“Don’t fall asleep on the job, okay rookie?” Jose added.

“Trust me guys, I am a cop so this isn’t my first time watching criminals,” Marshal assured.

“Well, I walked past a sleeping copper one day in an attempt to escape,” Jose said.

“Then clearly you failed,” said Zoe.

“Nah….I wouldn’t really call it a fail. I mean, the surveillance cameras saw me, not the coppers, so I could have easily gotten away with it,” Jose answered then turned to Marshal, “But really man, don’t screw us on this one. Keep your eyes peeled, and we’ll sleep with one eye open just in case of anything.”

“And that’s a guarantee,” Zoe said then she headed to the stairs. There were three bedrooms in the house. Since Chris and Marshal had already helped themselves to the cold living-room floor, all these other bedrooms were left non-occupied. Kourtney had already taken over the master bedroom, obviously. How else was she supposed to get her beauty sleep?

The room on the left had a blue background inside so Jose took it over while Zoe settled herself in the room on the right with the pink. The rooms were fabulous; of course they had to be. Their owner was a multi-millionaire tycoon who thought he owned the universe.

Zoe immediately took off her police boots and lay on the bed to have some shut-eye. She slept and snored throughout the night until she was woken up in the middle of the night by what most of us are woken up by really, our bladder. Her bladder was full and she needed to head to tinkle town for some time. Since Kourtney was the person occupying the master bedroom, it was no use waking her up since she slept like a log.

She decided to head down and use the visitors’ washrooms downstairs. As she was walking out, she suddenly noticed that Jose’s room still had lights. Without even knocking, she slowly turned the knob. Gosh! I thought someone like Jose would even double-check just to ensure that the doors were locked and his security was in check because it looks like he didn’t give a damn.

Zoe found him looking at a very beautiful glittery charm bracelet. There were many charms hanging on it including a love sign, wedding rings, a key and even a baby. It was a golden bracelet and was very pretty indeed.

“What are you doing?” Zoe asked.

“Woah, you caught me off guard. You scared me,” Jose responded panting heavily.

“I didn’t know thugs get scared,” Zoe continued.

“We are human too!” Jose replied.

“What is that in your hands?” Zoe proceeded to ask.

“It’s a baby diaper,” Jose said in his usual sarcastic voice.

Zoe, who was already used to those rude answers of his kept quiet for some time before finally asking, “What are you doing with that bracelet? Who does it belong to?”

She could see that Jose had started to hesitate. The tension that filled the air was just intense.

“And why do you care?” Jose finally asked.

“Because I truly care about you, whether you believe me or not. And I don’t want to hear lies from you so start talking!” Zoe commanded.

She headed over to his bed where he was sitting and sat next to him then said, “Tell me, please.”

“Okay, this belongs to my godmother in Guatemala. She is the one that took me in when I was just a helpless immigrant. She often warned me that my life of drugs and other crimes would result in serious consequences but sadly all her pleas fell on deaf ears. She always wanted a good life for me. A life full of happiness, to find a good wife and to have adorable children together. That’s why she gave me this bracelet to represent my life. There are six charms in this bracelet. There is a key which is the first charm. The key opens the heart which is the next charm. That’s why it is shaped like a love. The third charms are the rings which represent the marriage between me and my future wife. The fourth charm is a bottle of wine which symbolizes the celebration during the marriage and even after because of life as a married couple and all its joy. The fifth charm is a baby to symbolize the fruits of our marriage and the sixth charm is a coffin for our final lap in life. She wanted me to give this to my wife,” Jose said as he looked straight into her eyes. They were twinkling. Without even saying another word he took her hand and put the bracelet on her wrist.

“It fits you perfectly, and I think it looks gorgeous on you,” Jose said. For once he wasn’t insulting anyone or doing anything mean or hurtful. It was as if a new side of Jose had just been born. A new side that was only revealed to Zoe and nobody else. She was the secret key that had unlocked that new side. She looked at his eyes and there she saw a man filled with determination, love and happiness all at the same time. He just needed someone to help him unlock his inner self. Someone like Zoe.

“What does this mean Jose? Be frank with me,” Zoe said.

“Think about it for some time before you tell me anything. But just know that I love you so much,” he said as he held her hands.

She trembled. She immediately stood up and headed for the door. She stood there while holding the knob for some time and then she said, “I love you too, Jose. I always have.”

She left the room and did not even go back downstairs to use the washrooms anymore. For some reason, she wasn’t pressed anymore. She could not believe what had just transpired in the few number of minutes that she had left. She stared at the beautiful bracelet on her wrist. But was she ready to take up the role of being a wife? Besides, she was only seventeen. What about her education? “Where do the boundaries of what the heart wants end and the sea of common sense begins?” She asked no one in particular.

She was in a dilemma. She started murmuring to herself, “What do I do? I love this man with all my heart, but he is ten years older than me. Will this marriage truly work? And what about our social differences? I was once a celebrity and he was once a drug smuggler? What will we tell our kids? That mommy fell in love with daddy as he was trying to strangle her against the wall? How will they react to that? What about my education? Will I just give it all up for the sake of love and married life?”

Zoe had a hard time sleeping that night. Questions about whether or not to accept Jose’s marriage proposal kept her awake all night. She was better off going to join Marshal in keeping an eye on that scum-bag Chris. But she couldn’t. She knew he would ask her too many questions about why she was not asleep.

1. ***A GAME OF CHESS: CHECKMATE!***

The next day, the guys went downstairs only to find Marshal preparing pancakes for everyone. He was engaged in a conversation with Chris! What could they be talking about? Could they be plotting something against the guys?

“Look who got up today at six in the morning, literally an hour ago. He didn’t even bother screaming. When I asked him why he said that this house is sound proof,” Marshal said as he turned the pancakes in the pan.

“And what was he telling you before we got in?” Kourtney asked.

“He wanted me to join his side and betray you guys,” Marshal said then proceeded, “Then I asked him for how much then he said one million dollars! Wow! He is a tycoon indeed.”

“Well I’m glad our friendship is for sale,” Kourtney said.

“Come on now. All of y’all know I was only pulling his leg. Don’t y’all trust me?” Marshal asked.

“I’m sorry Marshal, but right now it’s hard to know who’s lying and who’s telling the truth. Some good people can turn out to be bad and the bad people can actually turn out to be good,” Zoe said as she looked at Jose who looked away. Wow! This is exactly how Indian dramas look like. Especially when Zain Imam has to leave his girlfriend whether in Fire and Ice or My Identity. It always goes down like this:

Zain Imam: My love, I can’t stay away from you because my heart beats for you.

Jasmin Bhasin: I love you so much. Never stay away.

Zain Imam: Sadly though, I got a transfer to work in Mumbai for a couple of weeks.

Jasmin Bhasin: (Super shocked. Shocked in black and white. Shocked at a ninety degree angle. Shocked upside down. Falls on the ground because of shocked fever but before she falls, Zain Imam who was standing at the gate a hundred miles from where she was all that while jumps in mid-air and walks in thin air, arrives where she is, throws himself forward with his arms stretched out, catches her as she is just about to land on the ground and then they pause for seven million seconds to look at how great the other person’s eye shadow was applied.)

“Just settle down for breakfast. I promise you, I will not lie to your faces only to betray you like some people we know,” he said as he stared at Chris.

“By the way, did that loser Brayo ever call last night?” Jose asked.

“Not really. He’s been silent all through,” Marshal responded as he put two pancakes on his plate.

“Who’s gonna feed that one over there?” Kourtney asked as she pointed towards Chris.

“Nobody, okay? I don’t want those hands of yours anywhere near my face,” Chris said.

“Oh look, we are trying to be nice but the dummy just won’t stop talking. Listen, we are literally trying to be nice but you are not making it a piece of cake as I had hoped. Stay hungry then! Frankly, I don’t care if you starve to death!” Kourtney roared.

“Come down Kourt,” Zoe said as he put a pancake on her plate.

“By the way, where did you get that bracelet from Zoe? You didn’t have it when we were coming,” Kourtney asked.

Zoe hesitated and Jose got really alarmed. They did not want their relationship to get out until they knew exactly what they wanted to do. Gosh! This love was way complicated than the love between Abhi and Pragya from Twist of Fate.

“Ummh, I found it in a drawer in my room last night and I decided to put it on because it was super cute,” Zoe finally said.

“Indeed. It looks so adorable. I wish I had found one just like that one,” Kourtney replied.

“By the way, how are we gonna get out of here, guys. We can’t stay here forever can we?” Jose asked in an attempt to stop the conversation that was clearly bothering him.

“Finish your breakfast first then I’ll tell y’all,” Zoe replied.

The rest of the breakfast was eaten quietly as Chris began humming to a certain song about Love not War, probably Jason Derulo’s. What was his plan with that? Did he think the girls could forget everything that happened fifteen months ago when they joined Mark’s Company? And what about a year ago when they moved to the United States? Nine months ago when they heard the news of their best friends’ death, six months ago when Zoe took over the leadership from Destiny? Five months ago when she alerted the Cheetah Girls of the impending danger. Four months ago when she was arrested. She served her sentence for three months before being accompanied by her friend. Finally, two weeks ago when the escaped from prison and now they were in Honduras? How could they forget all that? No, it was simply mission impossible.

When they had finished their breakfast, Zoe took the others to the other room and Chris waited for judgment day to come. It was not so good being at the other end of the stick. I wonder though, what had been his plan after bringing the girls and their friends to stay at that house though? Serenade them or what? His plan was a flop from the very beginning. His winning streak was slowly fading away, and he could nothing to stop it from doing so.

He was taken off his land of imagination or perhaps his land of deep thought by some footsteps headed his way. What was their plan with him? Would they finally destroy him or what? The author of all their problems? It was now their turn to say, Checkmate!

“Well, if it isn’t the little rat hole who decided to taste some of my flesh with a carving knife,” Jose said.

“For the record it was a kitchen knife and I had warned you prior,” Chris said.

“Oh, really?” Jose continued, “Take that!” He immediately gave him a kick on the belly that sent him rolling on the ground in pain as blood oozed from the side of his mouth.

“Stop that, Jose. That wasn’t part of the plan!” Kourtney yelled.

“I’ll bring a rag,” Zoe said as she ran to the kitchen and grabbed a red rag that was next to the sink. She came and started wiping off the blood from his mouth.

“You gotta learn to control that temper of yours man,” Marshal said.

“Fine then, I’m sorry. And that’s something I rarely say so don’t get used to it,” Jose responded.

“Let’s just get on with the plan,” Zoe ordered.

Marshal took Chris’ phone and started recording. Zoe said, “Hey Mark, I hope you still remember me. The innocent girl you took from the center and lied to so many times about wealth and fame. I was vulnerable and played to your tunes. But that was only because I was so focused on clearing my name and being that perfect celebrity girl again. But you know what? It doesn’t matter. If the world wants to think of me as a goon, then let them. Anyways, let’s cut to the chase. The reason I am sending you is because I have your friend hostage. I am aware that you may say that you don’t care about him because they is some bad blood between you two. Before you make that rookie mistake, just remember that this man can cause you a lot of damage if he goes to jail alone. I know for a fact that he won’t go downhill alone. He will drag everybody with him including you! So for your own sake, if you want to see him alive, you better give in to our demands. First, we want you to send us a video of you releasing the Cheetah Girls and them on the plane back to Kenya and secondly, we need your help to get us out of this country. Call us with your final answer.”

Marshal cut the camera and immediately sent the video to Mark.

“I know for sure that that disgusting old crook won’t call,” Chris said.

“Why not? Is he not your friend?” Zoe asked.

“We were never friends you fool! We were only business partners, but we are not even that anymore,” Chris answered.

“Why not?” Kourtney asked.

“Because Mark forgot the first rule that the Professor gave in Season 1 Episode 1 in Money Heist, “Don’t mix business and love”. It will simply explode. I recently found out that he was making out with my ex-wife, Teresa.” Chris said.

“Yikes. That’s so disgusting, and against the bro code,” Marshal chipped in.

“Whatever, it’s his loss anyway. That girl is a snake can she can literally do anything for money. I’m sure he’s the one regretting messing with fire whose flames were too hot for literally anyone to handle,” Chris concluded.

The guys spent a better part of their day watching TV. It was actually time for the 2022 Oscars and Will Smith was giving them all the drama they needed.

“The way he slapped Chris Rock is exactly how I should slap all my problems away,” Jose said as he chuckled.

“Actually that was so unprofessional. I’m surprised with the Smith family,” Kourtney said.

“As a performer myself, I must say kudos to Chris Rock for staying on that stage and remaining as calm as he could be,” Zoe said.

“I know right? I would have given him another slap there and then,” Marshal said.

“Too bad the world is going to forget about it in about twenty seconds. That’s how rich people work. It’s a sad world,” Kourtney said.

“Nah…this is comedy gold! I see it breaking the internet,” Jose said.

They were interrupted by the sound of Chris’ phone vibrating. Marshal picked up the phone to find out who it was. He suddenly stopped, shocked.

“Who is it? Mark or Brayo?” Zoe asked.

Marshal hesitated for some time. He could not get his mouth to say the words that he wanted to say. Instead, he just continued staring at them like a zombie. Zoe grabbed the phone and the others huddled around her. What they saw was indeed astonishing. Susan had been placed on an electric chair and her hand, legs and literally everything else that could be tied had been tied. After being electrocuted numerous times with screams that could awaken the dead, there was another man who had covered his face with a scarf. He was holding a very huge sword. He took Susan’s hand and started to cut her index finger off. The poor girl screamed as loud as she could but that did not help her case. Her friends could not watch that part. They closed their eyes. Even Marshal and Jose were having a hard time watching it. The video ended when her index finger had fallen on the floor and she had gone unconscious because she was exhausted and in too much pain. Mark then showed himself for the first time, picked up the finger and said, “This is just the appetizer round. If you don’t want to see the entre round, you better release Chris as soon as you stop crying on behalf of your dear friend.”

“This is unacceptable! Let’s behead Chris right now and send him a picture of his head,” Jose got up angrily heading for Chris, who was by then paralyzed in fear. He was not aware that his business partner was capable of something as extreme as that one. Maybe the grasshopper had finally learnt something from the master. However, Zoe managed to stop him, “Listen, if we kill him we will actually be doing Mark a favor because he will have nobody to testify against him. Nobody who is aware of all his evil deeds. And in case he was emotionally attached to Chris which I doubt, then it means he will harm the Cheetah Girls even more. And I can’t do that to my friends. We have to find another way.”

“But what other way is there? We are running out of time,” Kourtney said, “Can you imagine the fear he must have instilled in the precious little souls? I can’t handle this sad truth, Zoe.”

Zoe left the living room and went upstairs. The gang followed her closely.

Chris called out, “Can I have some water please?”

“You can drink your sweat for all we care,” Jose said as they proceeded with their journey up the stairs. In her room, the gang found Zoe on the floor staring into space. They went over to where she was and at down beside her. No one wanted to say anything because no one really had what to say. No one had an option or even a clue about how they could stop Mark.

Evening flew by so fast. The gang had not even noticed that the sun had begun to set until the sound of cutlery falling was heard.

“Oh no! We forgot to check on Chris,” Kourtney cried.

“We gotta go and see what that idiot is up to,” Jose responded.

Back downstairs, they were shocked to find all the cutlery on the floor and Chris had somehow managed to free himself. He was now holding a huge kitchen knife. In fact, it was the same kitchen knife that he had used to stab Jose. Jose whose memories were as fresh as a daisy told the others to step back as he was dangerous.

“How did you manage to free yourself?” Zoe asked with a puzzled look on her face.

“Well, my dear baby, I simply asked your friends here for a glass of water as soon as you had gone upstairs, but sadly, they told me to drink my sweat,” Chris said sarcastically, “But you see, I was very thirsty so I struggled my way up and tried to get a glass of water for myself. I had no ill motives, I promise, hahaha. Anyways, I realized that I was all tied up so I couldn’t get a glass for myself without first freeing my hands. That is when I saw the kitchen knife and recalled some good memories with it. So, I freed myself and took my glass of water. Unfortunately this clumsy soul managed to knock over the cutlery while putting the glass back.”

“Put that knife down!” Marshal yelled as he took a step forward.

“Stay back officer dude! Or did you forget what happened to your sweet friend here last time when he tried to play superhero?” Chris said then proceeded, “Leave that to the real stars like Spiderman. In this game of chess, I call the shots!”

“Well then, what do you want?” Zoe asked.

“I want all of you to back down as we escape,” Chris replied.

“No way! It’s four against one. You might be the king in this game of chess, but don’t forget that it is always the pawns on the opponents side that usually trap the king. Besides, after all the trouble you caused do you seriously think that we are gonna let you go so easily?” Jose said.

Realizing that indeed he made a valid point, Chris dashed for the door. In an attempt to stop him, Marshal also headed for the door but he was pierced on his left cheek. Chris then dropped the knife down and ran for the main road. The other guys, after being assured of Marshal’s safety and after him informing them that it was just a minor injury and that he would get better soon, decided to go after Chris. They increased their pace as they kept an eye on the fleeing bastard. He got onto the main road and continued with his Sonic the Hedgehog fast pace. The next sound they heard was a loud honking followed by Chris’ screams and boom! The man was dead. Some pedestrians stopped to have a look at him. Blood was trickling from his forehead and his eyes were popped out. One of the pedestrians went to confirm whether his pulse and heartbeat were still okay. He did not say anything. He just shook his head sadly. The gang had mixed reactions. On one hand, they were disappointed that the only proof they had against Mark was dead and lying on the side of the road and again they felt sorry for Chris.

“No one ever deserves to die,” Zoe said as the others nodded.

They left the place and headed home to their ailing Marshal. All that was on their mind was one, “We need to get out of here!” They knew very well that a rich guy like Mark had informers all around the world. It was only a matter of time then he would receive the new of Chris’ death. Not only would he make the Cheetah Girls’ lives a living nightmare but it would also mean that their lives would be at stake. If Mark found out that Chris died in Honduras and at the precise location, then trapping them and eventually eliminating them from the face of the world would be a piece of cake.

When they opened the front door to the mansion, they found Marshal cleaning his wound in the kitchen sink. When he saw them he asked, “He managed to get away didn’t he?”

“Yes and no,” Kourtney said.

“What does that mean? Where is he?” Marshal proceeded to ask questions.

“He got hit by a truck on the main road as he was fleeing from us. They have confirmed that he is dead,” Zoe answered.

“Oh no! That’s terrible,” Marshal said. He genuinely felt sorry for Chris. He seemed like a man with a lot of humorous anecdotes which would make all of them crack their ribs while laughing.

That night, Zoe and Kourtney shared the same room as Jose and Marshal slept in their own rooms.

“You know somehow I feel like that gender discrimination thing is still there,” Kourtney said as they got into their room.

“Why is that?” Zoe asked.

“Because, why do we have to share a room and the boys each get their own room? Why can’t it be the other way around?” Kourtney proceeded to complain.

“Because, unlike us, those two don’t like each other. Please, just shut up and get some shut-eye. We have to evacuate this house first thing in the morning,” Zoe said.

“Wait what? For reals? Why didn’t you tell anyone about this plan of yours?” Kourtney asked.

“I’ll tell them soon. No need to worry. I’m pretty sure Mark will search for us after the death of his ‘best friend’. We need to save our skin,” Zoe said and turned off the lights. Kourtney did not even bother to protest. It was necessary for them to get some good sleep in order to wake up feeling refreshed for the treacherous journey ahead if they were to continue with Zoe’s plan.

1. ***SITUATION: CRITICAL!***

The following morning, Kourtney was woken up by Marshal banging the door. “Kourtney! Kourtney! Wake up!” He yelled.

Kourtney and Zoe woke up feeling as confused as they could be.

“What’s got him so excited early in the morning?” Zoe asked.

“Let me go and see,” Kourtney said as she opened the door.

Marshal did not even bother with the morning greetings. He just held his phone up to her ear and said, “It’s for you! It’s for you! She says her name is Trishna from the Cheetah Girls.”

Kourtney was left in shock. What could Trishna want? Was she also being threatened by Mark? Was her life in any sort of danger? She stammered, “He…he…hello? Who’s….who’s…this?”

“Kourtney, it’s me Trishna. I’ve missed you so much. I have some wonderful news for you,” Trishna said in an excited voice.

“What news?” Kourtney asked.

“We have managed to escape luvs. That butler who helped you escape helped us also. After Susan’s finger had been cut off, Mark ordered one of his men to take her to the hospital. Fortunately, the doctor who attended to her is the same butler who helped you escape! After leaving Mark’s company, he went on to pursue his dreams of being a doctor. He was actually a graduate who had studied even up to the PHD level. The only problem was that he did not have any money so that’s why he ever decided to team up with Mark in the first place. As soon as he got his pay, he immediately opened up his own private hospital which is now booming due to the expert medical treatment that the locals are receiving. When he saw Susan, he immediately recognized her from the Cheetah Girls and offered to help her. Sadly, Susan’s finger could not be saved but he helped us out by calling the police. He also had Chris’ number since he had been working for Mark for so long and he is that is how I managed to call you. The police arrived but unfortunately, Mark got away. Luckily, they managed to free us and now we are all doing great and we are being prepared to be deported back to Kenya,” Trishna said.

“That’s good to hear. I am so happy for all of you,” Kourtney said tearfully.

“But I have one more thing to tell you. Actually, I would not have called you because I did not even know that you were with Zoe. It was because of Mark that we all became aware. He told us that you and Zoe had held Chris captive and that’s why he wanted to teach you two a lesson by harming one of your own friend so that you experience how it feels when the shoe is on the other foot. The news about Chris’ death came immediately before the police arrived. He had sworn to look for you everywhere and anywhere you could possibly hide. He swore not to leave any stone unturned and he had already sent his men in Honduras to search the area next to where the body was found. You have to leave that place now my friend. You just have to,” Tishna concluded.

“Thank you so much for telling me this. I love you guys so much,” Kourtney said.

“We love you too,” Trishna said and hung up.

By now tears were rolling down her cheeks and Marshal offered to comfort her. Jose had also already woken up and was just staring at them wondering what had gone amiss.

“Trouble in paradise? What’s all this about?” Jose asked.

“Yes Kourtney, who was that?” Zoe asked.

After about five minutes when all the sobbing was over, Kourtney finally said, “Zoe, that was Trishna,” while looking at the others who had no clue who Trishna was she said, “Trishna is our friend from the Cheetah Girls and she just informed me that they have been rescued by the police but unfortunately Mark still managed to escape. She told me that they would be on their flight back to Kenya and that Susan has received the medical treatment that she needs. She also told me that we are in deep trouble because before his hideout was busted by the police, Mark told them that he sent some of his men to search for us and to make sure that we stay out of his way. We gotta get out of here.”

“Gosh! This is big news,” Marshal said.

“We have to leave now!” Zoe said.

“Could we at least get some breakfast first? I’m starving,” Jose said.

“You can grab some apples from the fruit basket and put it in the car. For now, we have to leave,” Kourtney said as they rushed downstairs. They quickly got out as Jose carried the entire fruit basket and put it in the backseat next to Marshal and Kourtney. Jose was the driver and Zoe was in the shotgun as usual. He coughed the engine and they got onto the main road pretty soon. They drove as fast as they could. Zoe turned on the radio. Maybe there would be some updates that would help them where they were.

The news caster spoke, “Good evening everybody. There has been a man who was knocked over yesterday near the Honduras-Guatemala border. Police officers are yet to identify the victim. These are one of the many cases of road accidents that are announced but locals still don’t want to follow the basic laws of road safety, look both ways before you cross the street. On a related note, a house nearby which is suspected to belong to the victim is up in flames as we speak. The fire fighters are desperately trying to put out the massive fire. Police still don’t know what caused the fire or if the death of the victim was an accident or intentional. Moving on to some political news….”

Zoe quickly turned off the radio. No one was interested in listening to some Honduras politics anyway.

Zoe turned and said, “Did you hear that? It means we got away just on time.”

“Yes, but it also means that they are hot on our heels,” Jose added.

The guys were extremely nervous especially now that they knew that Mark had his goons after them. They drove for more than four hours without stopping. They were surprised to know that Honduras was just like Guatemala. Past the border, there were no immigration officers. This offered a sense of relief as they had no documentation whatsoever. After their fruit supply had been depleted, they knew they had to get food using other means. They stopped at a nearby restaurant but they had no money on them.

When they went to the drive-thru, they attempted to get food on credit.

Jose: What’s up my man, could you please get us some fries?

Waiter: Sure man, by what means are you paying?

Jose: I don’t have any money on me at this point yet.

Waiter: So, credit card?

Jose: No. I don’t have that either.

Waiter: Well then, there are some nice half-chewed fries pre-heated by the sun in the bins back over there. So you can just help yourself to some street food.

Jose: Come on man, don’t be like that.

Waiter: Next! Please!

Turning over to the guys in the back, Jose said, “Dudes, we’re screwed. This guy isn’t giving us anything on credit.”

Kourtney was very upset on hearing the news and decided to talk to the waiter. Maybe she could somehow manage to change his mind. Jose lowered the backseat window and Kourtney popped her head out.

Kourtney: Hey, what’s the deal with you? Why can’t you just give us some fries?

Waiter: Listen here, girly. I ain’t your mama to give you free food and…

The waiter suddenly stopped talking as soon as he saw Kourtney.

Waiter: Wow! Is it really you?

Kourtney: Ibrahim! Wow! What are you doing here?

Zoe: Who’s that, Kourt?

Kourtney: When I came searching for you in Dubai, he was the one who took me to Chris’ hotel.

Zoe: Wow really?

Kourtney: Yes, but what are you doing here, Ibrahim?

Ibrahim: Listen up guys, you are holding up the line. Why don’t you go the other side and wait for a bit then in about five minutes I will be with you guys when it’s time for my break.

Jose: Sure thing man.

Jose went over to the parking lot and waited for Ibrahim. The hotel was rather big compared to what they were expecting. It was tidy and everything just seemed perfect. One could have easily mistaken it for one of the KFC restaurants in the first world countries. After about six minutes, Ibrahim came to where their vehicle was and the gang got out of the car to talk to him.

Ibrahim: Kourtney, do you mind introducing me to your friends?

Kourtney: Sure, this girl is my friend Zoe, the dark one is my boyfriend Marshal and the other one is my other ‘friend’ Jose.

Ibrahim: And do they work for the military or something? Why are they dressed in police uniform? Even you?

Kourtney: It’s a long story. But we need to get a flight back to Kenya. Can you help us out in any way?

Ibrahim: Maybe I can help. You see, my boss here is also the manager of a certain airline company. Although a private company and it’s not very active.

Jose: That’s perfect. Does he have a private jet or anything that can be of great benefit to us?

Ibrahim: I was once told by a colleague that he has his own private jet but I am not sure. Maybe if I talk to him…

Zoe: Please do. We’ll help you beg him.

Ibrahim: Obviously he’ll be suspicious of you guys though. And he’ll also need some money from you guys.

Marshal: Now that’s where the problem lies. We have no money right now. Unless you can help us out man. Come on please, we are desperate.

Ibrahim: I can do a favor for you guys. I can tell my boss not to pay me my salary for this month for that one small favor but I’ll need some compensation from you guys.

Zoe: What compensation?

Ibrahim: I want that lovely bracelet on your hand. It looks like it’s worth a lot and I wonder just how much the locals here will be willing to pay for it.

Zoe looked at Jose in surprise. She completely had no idea what to do. Would she just accept to sell the bracelet that Jose almost considered a sacred thing in his life? A reminder of the only member of his family that he truly cared about? Would she do it? Jose immediately got alarmed and said, “Absolutely not! She will not sell her bracelet!”

Kourtney looked at Jose with a puzzled face and said, “And who are you to decide whether she should sell the bracelet or not? Is it yours?”

Zoe, while trying to save the situation lied that the bracelet belonged to her great grandmother and that selling it would make her so sad.

“Well then, I guess we have no deal then,” Ibrahim said and began to walk away.

“Come on dude, have some mercy! I thought we were friends!” Kourtney yelled then turning to Zoe she said, “And you, what’s your problem? I thought you had common sense! What’s so important about a worthless piece of junk that you picked from Chris’ house? It’s not like that’s real gold even. And even if it was real gold, so what? Nothing is worth our freedom at this point. Literally we’ve been flagged in every single country and yet you still don’t want to offer us an escape route? We can’t go back to America because Mark’s goons are all over the place looking for us. In Dubai, Fatuma and her people are definitely not leaving any stones unturned, in Mexico, the police are hot on our heels, we can’t cross the border back to Guatemala because security is too tight and Mark’s goons are here in Honduras trying desperately to find us. What do we do now? How do we save our skin without that bracelet?”

Zoe kept quiet for a while and said, “Maybe we could go beg the manager on our own. From the way Ibrahim was speaking, it seems like the manager is inside the building.”

“But there are probably a lot of people in there. How do we know who is the manager and who is just an ordinary tax collector?” Marshal asked.

As they were still pondering over this, they saw a man dressed in a black tuxedo entering a very expensive Lamborghini as he was accompanied by his two body guards.

“Excuse me sir! Excuse me sir!” Kourtney rushed to the vehicle. Her friends’ frantic efforts to stop her failed as she continued after the now confused man who had just been interrupted from a very serious phone call that had been undergoing for about five minutes.

“Young lady, who are you?” He said with a strong British accent. The gang could tell that he was not from around.

“Sir, we just need five minutes of your time, please,” Kourtney continued as she directed him to get out of the car.

“Young lady, you do not even deserve ten micro-seconds of my time. I am a very busy man. I don’t have time for your college drama really,” the man said.

“Wow, he is very proud,” Marshal said.

“Well, what can I say young man? I was taught to be wise and to be aware of the world’s greatest rule and quote, ‘In a selfish world, the selfish succeed’,” he said as he faced Marshal and made him become aware that he had heard what he said prior.

“Please, sir. Just two minutes, then we’ll be off your back,” Zoe promised.

“Fine then. What do you peasants want?” The man asked.

“First of all an apology for calling us peasants,” Jose replied.

“I’ll apologize as soon as I call security on you,” the man shot back.

“There’s no need for that. We’re leaving soon. But we just have one question, are you the manager of this restaurant?” Kourtney asked.

“Yes, why? Do you guys want to arrest me?” The manager asked.

“No. We are dressed like this for a completely different reason. But do you have your own private airlines company?” Zoe asked.

“Yeah, what do you weirdoes want with me?” The manager asked.

“Nothing really, we were just humbly requesting if we could use your private jet to help us reach home,” Marshal asked.

The manager laughed sarcastically. Actually, it was a broken laugh that seemed more of a prolonged cough. He then said, “You kids are funnier than my step-brother’s bank account. You really think that I would help four strangers dressed in police uniform? And what if it is a trap by the police? You guys will leave me to walk on hot lava alone. Not a chance!”

Their hearts sank. This was game over for them. How will they get out of Honduras now? Will they manage to do so before being captured by Mark’s goons? At that point, there chance of survival had been narrowed down to 5%. Before the manager got into his car, a teenage girl of about fourteen years old, probably his daughter called out, “Dad! You promised we would go shopping together. Where are you going now? And who are these guys you are with? Are they the police? Is this about your illegitimate business again? I told you to stop trafficking!”

“Keep your mouth shut Paloma. You will one day lead to my doom. This is all my fault for deciding to take you to private school! They’ve clearly spoilt you guys! You would have been in boarding school right now and off my back! Learn to tame your tongue!” The manager shouted. So it was indeed his daughter. The girl looked at the four guys dressed in police uniform and exclaimed, “Zoe!”

The others looked at Zoe with a rather puzzled face. Jose asked Zoe, “Who’s this chick?” Zoe was also as confused as the rest. “I don’t know her,” she responded.

“Pammy dear, how do you know this girl? Have you met her before?” The manager asked as he pointed at Zoe.

“Well, no. But I am such a huge fan of her music. Dad, you remember that time that I stayed in Kenya for two weeks on a camping trip with my friends right?” Paloma asked her father.

The manager responded, “Yes dear, but when and where did you meet this girl?”

“Dad, I never met her. You see, it was actually organized by my school that we should meet up with another school from Kenya so that we see the differences in the education system between Kenya and Honduras. There, we met new friends who introduced us to teen stars in their country. Of course Zoe was only thirteen at the time but her music videos were very popular among the teens in her country. My favorite song of hers was ‘Rumors’. Even after coming back to Honduras I was still very obsessed with her songs and I even subscribed to her YouTube channel. I was surprised though because about two years ago, she deleted all her accounts on social media and I never heard about her again,” Paloma said and then turned to Zoe and asked, “Why did you delete your social media accounts? Were you tired of fame?”

Zoe just gave a chuckle and said, “It’s a very long story my dear. But now I am in serious trouble and I need your dad’s help to get out of this mess.”

“Of course, I am your number one fan and I will make sure that dad helps you,” Paloma said.

“No Pammy. Stay out of this. I don’t want you to get involved in stuff you don’t know. You are just a kid,” the manager said.

“Dad! This girl has been my role model since I was very young and she has helped a lot of people with her music. Why don’t you want to help her? What crime has she committed?” Paloma protested.

“She has not committed a single crime. It’s just that I don’t trust her!” The manager roared.

“But I trust her. She is the only celebrity that I have seen without any serious scandals on social media. You have to help her!” Paloma continued. The guys were happy about this. They knew that Paloma was the key they needed to unlock the manager’s heart and help them get out of the country.

Zoe played victim in this case, “Even when I left social media, it was because most people kept questioning my character. Today, Mr. Manager, you are doing the exact same thing.” Turning to Paloma she said, “It’s no use trying to convince him. He just doesn’t understand the society these days. He always questions teenagers because he has this mentality in his mind that all of us are bad and we are up to something evil. It’s okay.”

Paloma said with tears in her eyes, “No, it’s not okay. Dad, what Zoe is saying is absolutely true. The public these days always question teenagers’ characters. They think that we have no idea what we are doing and we’ll just walk directly into a pit. You question Zoe’s character but I’m sure mom would not have.”

As soon as she mentioned the word ‘mom’ Paloma knew immediately that she had won the argument. Her father could not stand her mentioning the name of his deceased wife. He did not want his only child to feel like she was not getting all the love she needed ever since her mother’s death. He eventually said that he would help the guys.

“Which country would you guys like to go to?” He asked Zoe.

“Nairobi in Kenya,” Zoe responded without hesitation.

“Okay, hop in my car and I’ll take you to where my private jet is,” the manager said.

“Thanks a lot Mr. Manager,” Kourtney said.

“Wait,” Paloma said, “Before y’all go can I have a selfie with you Zoe?”

“Sure thing,” Zoe said as Paloma took out her phone. After the selfie, Zoe bid Paloma good bye as one of her father’s body guard took her to another vehicle to take her home. Zoe could not thank her enough for all that she had done for them.

The manager and the guys arrived at the airport in silence.

“There is the plane you will use. Consider this a favor for my sweet child. She has gone through a lot after the death of her mom two years ago. She’s still healing,” the manager said.

“We’re sorry to hear that. 2020 was just a bad year for everybody in general,” Marshal said.

“Thanks man. Now let’s go to the jet. I already texted my pilots and they’ll be here pretty soon,” the manager said.

The guys got on the jet and sat down. They could not imagine that after just a couple of minutes, they would be on their flight back to Kenya. Mr. Manager told them that they would land in another private airport belonging to his friend in Kenya to avoid any confrontations with the cops as they explained that they did not have their passports. After about twenty minutes of offering gratitude to Mr. Manager, the pilots finally arrived and Mr. Manager bid them goodbye.

As the first officer said, “Ladies and gentlemen, our flight is about to depart. Destination, Nairobi in Kenya. Please secure your seatbelts,” things got very emotional in the cabin. They had finally won the battle they had fought for so long. The flight took about fifteen hours before they finally arrived in Kenya. Even though they had not been offered anything during the flight, they were not famished, just happy to be home!

1. ***BACK TO MY ROOTS!***

When they touched down at the private airport, they were welcomed by a beautiful young woman by the name Kate. She was so friendly to them and offered them some refreshments. It was nice and very pleasant to smell the cool pleasant Kenyan air once more. Even Jose who had never been to Kenya was amazed by the wonderful people, culture and wildlife. It literally seemed like a dream vacation for him. Kate, who had the Uber app that was one of Kenya’s widely used app due to its splendid services immediately asked for a taxi and within minutes, the driver was at the airport. Zoe gave the address of Maggie’s Center which was the very first thing that she had mastered as soon as she got there. Kate gave them some money to pay the driver as soon as they had arrived at their destination. They could not be more grateful.

When they arrived at the Children’s, the girls were feeling a bit anxious inside. They were afraid that Maggie would tell them the one thing that they feared the most, “I told you so!” They delayed a bit in getting out of the car. It was only after the driver told them that his services were needed somewhere else did they finally get out of the vehicle. Jose walked in front of them as though he was the sole owner of the place and rang the doorbell to Maggie’s house which was right next to the boarding station. They could see some foster kids staring at them and wondering why the military had come to the Children’s Center. Were some of them about to be recruited to become soldiers? The thought of that happening sent a mixed feeling of excitement and fear down the spine of the kids probably aged between nine and fourteen years. Some of the older kids said, “This is super exciting! Soldiers earn a lot every month and with all that money I can buy a farm and new things that I have always wanted.” However, the younger kids dreaded and said, “My parents were killed during war by a soldier. They are bad people and I ever want to be like them.”

This commotion continued until they noticed the four pairs of eyes staring at them which prompted them to shut up. The younger kids stuck close together although the guys did not know why. Maybe it was a defense mechanism so that the ‘police’ would not take them by force. After about two minutes of awkward silence, Maggie finally opened the door to her house. She was shocked beyond words at the sight of her two kids who ran away two years ago. She could not control her tears so she just let them flow freely. She hugged Marshal too because even though she had not known him for long, his face was familiar and she knew that he had somehow helped the girls in their escape plan. All the four were shedding tears of joy. Even Jose who rarely showed any emotions whatsoever was seen wiping a tear from his left cheek.

“I thought soldiers never cried,” one foster kid asked.

“These must be trainees then,” the other foster kid replied, “Probably they’ve come to terrorize our lives here at the center as they practice to terrorize the lives of the public in a couple of years to come.”

After the emotional ‘I love you’ and ‘I missed you’ and even ‘You were right all along’ was over, Maggie finally turned to Jose and asked, “And who’s this?”

“He is our close friend, Jose Martinez. He is the one who helped us when we were almost caught and he taught us how to survive in the world,” Zoe said.

“Thank you so much Mr. Martinez. If it wasn’t for you, I don’t even know where all these precious souls would have been,” Maggie said as she faced Jose.

“Don’t mention it ma’am. The pleasure is all mine because these people have treated me better than my own family ever could. It was awesome meeting them,” Jose said as he shocked his friends. Did he just say three whole sentences without insulting anyone? Certainly he was changing for the better.

“Maggie, why are you taking so long? Who’s that?” A familiar voice said from inside the house.

“Zoe and Kourtney, come in and meet your friends who also made it back safe and sound,” Maggie said.

The guys went inside only to be welcomed by the beautiful faces of the Cheetah Girls. They were all beaming with excitement. Trishna was seated on a rocking-chair. Lucy and Susan were seated on the same sparkling white sofa set. They all stood up and hugged Zoe and Kourtney tearfully then finally shook the hands of the boys as they were introduced to them. Of course everybody knew Marshal but he had grown so much and was hardly recognizable. On the other hand the Latin-American dude was a complete stranger to the Cheetah Girls so some introductions were necessary.

They spent the better part of the afternoon telling each other stories about their experiences and how they had finally arrived there. Zoe and Kourtney were surprised to learn that the Cheetah Girls had just arrived two days prior and that Maggie was the one who had gone to pick them at the airport. Maggie quickly took out some old clothing that some Samaritans had donated to the Children’s Center. Since some of them were over-sized, they easily fit them. After they each took a shower, Maggie brought out a nice meal for them. It was Jose’s first time eating Mukimo and Matoke but he certainly enjoyed the meal. True Kenyan delicacy!

Later that night while watching the Aljazeera news, they discovered that Fatuma had been arrested. The news caster said that all her secret businesses including a brothel she owned with her friend Isabela Osvaldo had also been shut down because it was an illegitimate business. They girls screamed with happiness. The long arm of the law had finally caught up with its offenders. They were supper excited that justice had finally been served.

Since Maggie’s house wasn’t that grand like Chris’, she only had her bedroom and a guest bedroom. Marshal and Jose went to sleep in the guest bedroom as the girls laid a mat down on the living room floor and slept together as they did two years ago. At dawn the next day, Maggie announced that immediately after breakfast, they would go on a trip to Nairobi National Park to see some wildlife. The girls were so thrilled, especially Zoe.

“It’s always been my dream to go to Nairobi National Park. I meant to go when I was a celebrity but it’s just that I never had the time. And even so, my manager would never have allowed me. She always wanted me to stay cooped up in my room as I practiced my music. Sometimes I’m just glad that the world forgot all about my fame because I couldn’t handle the pressure any more. I was just too miserable,” Zoe said.

“I thought so, which is why I did not say no when Jose came and suggested the whole idea,” Maggie said.

Jose? What on earth did he have in mind? She remembered telling him about her love for wildlife but only for a brief moment? What on earth did he have in mind? Zoe wondered but she could not come up with a conclusion. Just then, the doorbell rang and a voice shouted, “Delivery for Jose Martinez.”

“Yes,” Maggie said as she went to open the door. She tipped the man and brought the small shopping bag to Jose as she looked at him weirdly. Marshal also gave a cheeky chuckle. What were these guys up to? The shopping bag itself was so tiny that it was just a wonder what it contained inside. Jose quickly took the bag feeling rather shy.

“Okay then, you girls freshen up and we’ll go,” Maggie said.

The girls did not take long to get ready. All they had to do was scour around the huge bag of clothes that had been given as donations and see what fits. After about thirty minutes, they sat down to have breakfast of tea, sweet potatoes and cassava and they finally set off on their journey. The girls finally had a chance of looking back at the beautiful streets of Nairobi; all the hawkers in the street, the graffiti on the walls and the breathtaking sky scrapers. It was great to be back to their roots.

At the national park, they saw many different types of animals. They were especially interested in the big five: the elephant, kaffir buffalo leopard lion and the rhino. They saw all of them apart from the lion. Jose wanted them to see that one last since it was Zoe’s favorite. They had a meal at the hotel that was in there. They were given fish, ugali and some salad on the side. Afterwards, they enjoyed some refreshing cocktail sponsored by Maggie. When it was finally time to see the lions, the girls led the way as Jose and Maggie followed closely behind while whispering and laughing softly.

As soon as Zoe saw the lion, she was so excited that she almost got emotional. Then all of a sudden, it roared right in her presence. The roar of the lion had a very powerful and beautiful impact on her.

“I brought you here because you unlocked the key to my soul. I have never seen any lady as powerful as you are. You are as powerful as this lion over here. Whenever I gaze upon your eyes every other emotion is taken away and everything is replaced by true love. The love to be by your side till death do us part. When everyone else only saw my dark side, you unlocked my heart and found my light. And this inner light is craving to see your face every single day of my life,” a voice said from behind.

Zoe was completely taken aback by this. She turned around only to find Jose on his knees. He continued, “Zoe Maloba, I’m completely in love with you. Will you make me complete by agreeing to be my wife till death do us part?”

Zoe could not control her emotions and neither could the Cheetah Girls. This had caught them all by surprise but what really astonished them was her response, “I do. I love you so much Jose.” He put the ring on her finger and got up to hug the tearful girl.

Meanwhile, that was not all, Marshal who had excused himself to us the washrooms earlier on showed up while playing the guitar. He was singing to a popular song by Johnny Orlando and Kenzie Ziegler ‘What If’:

“What if I said, I know, you know, what if I told you I like you

We stay, we go, what if I told you I like you

I know, you know, what if I told you I like you

We stay, we go, what if I told you I like you”

He then approached Kourtney and also got down on his knee and proposed. Kourtney was super excited and immediately said, “Yes! Yes! I do.”

The afternoon was spent with so much joy after the proposals.

“At least now we know why they were so nervous in the morning,” Susan said,   
“But anyways, how romantic of you guys to surprise them like that. That was completely unexpected.”

Zoe and Kourtney got married to the boys as soon as they turned eighteen. Zoe decided to be a counsellor and lived with Jose in Nakuru as he waited to get his Kenyan citizenship. Kourtney on the other hand decided to move to Ayais with her husband because she had this passion to live in her husband’s community. She loved living in Ayais and she chose Ndobo where she settled with her husband. The other members in Cheetah Girls also went their separate ways. Susan went on to become a doctor, while Trishna became a fashion designer and moved to Paris where she believed that all the latest trends in fashion were. Lucy decided that her biggest desire was to catch liars like Mark and Chris so she joined Marshal in the Security industry and she couldn’t be any happier.

NOT THE END!!!

1. ***THE BITTER PILL***

Kourtney and Marshal welcomed their first child and decided to name her Nia which is a Swahili word for ‘aim’. They ‘aimed’ to create awareness about fraudsters all around the world who had the ‘aim’ of making teenagers’ lives a living nightmare. This wonderful gift united them for the first fifteen years of their marriage.

One day, when Marshal was on his usual patrols, he was informed that there was a prisoner in Achwanyi Prison who had just escaped. He was to join the other officers in an attempt to catch him. He immediately got into his police car and drove at a supersonic speed. The criminal himself was on foot and on realizing that it was a dead end and that there was no way he could flee decided to surrender. It was a smart choice after all.

As soon as Marshal got out of his car with his hand-cuffs ready to arrest the law-breaker, he heard three loud gunshots. He then looked down only to see blood oozing from his belly. He turned around to see his attacker. In front of him was non-other than Mark, holding a pistol. He looked at him, gave an evil smirk and said, “Hey, police hero, I have a new mission. To make your wife’s life a living nightmare!” He said and he spat on his face. Marshal only had enough time to be shocked as he fell to the ground with a thud and remained still. Mark gave him a few kicks on the belly to make sure that he was dead. When he did not respond, he knew that his mission had been successful.

When the other officers who were supposed to help him catch the criminal arrived, there was very little they could do. The prisoner had also escaped and so they just assumed that he shot Marshal as he was trying to escape, but little did they know the whole story went back to an enemy that he had more than sixteen years ago. Mark had to make sure that he had the last laugh. The police officers took the corpse to his house where Kourtney was met by the lifeless body of her husband. She let out an ear-piercing scream and fell on the floor unconscious. She was woken up by Nia and her numerous questions, “Mummy, mummy, wake up! Mummy wake up and tell me what happened to daddy? Who shot him and why was he shot? Daddy would never hurt a fly so why did he have to die? Mummy, you know that daddy was a good person, wasn’t he? Why did the murderer do this to us?”

Kourtney could only respond to Nia’s questions with more cries. To be honest, their family had been through a lot, especially Nia. She had performed so highly in her primary education and had been called to one of the best high schools in the country, Mabo High School in Nairobi. It was a very prestigious school and everybody who went there was guaranteed of an A. It was a respected school far and wide. The president and the school principal were close buddies. All in all, every single Kenyan including Nia had wished to go to that school. She worked her fingers to the bone all with the hope of a better life ahead. Eventually, all her hard work bore fruits. She was called to Mabo High School and she was truly honored to be among the chosen few.

Every one of her parents’ friends commended her parents for raising a paragon of perfection like her. This was a school which was the cream de la cream of the country, all the good grades, the prominent names came from that school. It truly had its own brand and everyone was aware of it. Everybody believed it would be better off if it was just turned to be an international school because it did not deserve the title of just an average public school. It was simply too uncommon for that. No wonder the fees were just off the charts. Everyone who managed to get an admission to that institution was either a book worm, Miss Smarty pants or just someone with a lot of ‘connections’. By connections of course I mean the greens since nothing in this world ever came on a silver platter. Every person born with a silver spoon in his mouth knew that they automatically had a direct entry to the much desired schools. Although it was unfair for the children of ordinary peasants and town sweepers.

Their children could at times score exemplary well but be denied access to the institution just because the school was full. Full of what though? Spoilt rich kids whose wealthy parents had bribed the administration so that they could get an admission to the institution. But what could they do? They simply did not have enough money to go to a lawyer. And even if they did, the lawyers in the country knew all too well than to debate with anybody driving a Ferrari and so they would be off the hook. The files stacked at the bottom of a very heavy pile never to be removed again.

Her first time going to the institution, she already felt a bit strange inside. Her family were not as wealthy as most of these people seemed to be. They decided to hire a taxi to cover the ‘shame’ of not having a car when it seemed like everybody had one; and not just any car. The car of the latest brand. The minute her feet touched the school ground she felt as though the demons were whispering in her mind, “This is not a place of your class. Go back to those pig stys you call schools back in your village.”

The social stratification was evident even from the administration. You could hear someone whispering from the corner, “That is the daughter of so and so, come over here and have a seat my darling. The cateress will bring you some cold refreshing soda.” Soda? Nia wasn’t even offered a glass of water let alone a place to rest her bottom. The structures were as big as they had always been told but at the time it was just an anticlimax of what they had expected. They were old, very old. It looked like there were no changes whatsoever made to the houses that the white man had constructed years ago. Perhaps the paint work that had been done in one of the houses. The one that they allowed the parents to see. Nia bid her parents goodbye as she was directed to her house. She was expecting to see some sophisticated……………………………………………………………….. cubes like the ones her village friends dreamt about but to her dismay, they all slept in one hall like a packet of sardines…………………………………………………………..

She cannot say that it was all bad though, for the beds were comfortable but it was ridiculously overcrowded. The closets had to be shared with two or even three people. There was no personal space for literally anything. It was so `uncomfortable that searching for a hairpin in the heap of clothes would be like searching for a needle in a hay stack. She always thought that duties were for little and pathetic village schools like the one that she had come from. She thought that a prominent school such as the one that she was in, the workers did everything: cleaning the house, the toilets and the school compound. She was shocked when she was woken up from her dreamland by a heavy tribal accent, “Wewe musichana bado umerara!” She shot out of bed only to be met by the cruel eyes of the house matron glaring at her and lamenting loudly wondering why she had delayed in waking up. The insults she received were heartbreaking although she could not utter a word because the rule in that school was simple, “No talking back to an elder” even if they accuse you of murder.

She quickly apologized to the old woman who shrugged her apologies aside and got back to her insults. Before going to class, Nia had a lot of duties to be performed in the house including scrubbing her bed side with soapy water then clean water and then baths. In baths, basically she was to scrub the bath tiles until she could see her own reflection. Woe to the person who prohibited the use of gloves saying that it would create a boundary between the rich and the poor claiming that the poor who did not have any money to purchase the gloves would feel bad. Really? The only thing that made her feel bad was the fact that she was touching a fellow girl’s period blood and pubic hair without any form of protection. She could not imagine that those were the same hands that she was going to use to butter her bread in the dining hall. Yes, they were provided with butter for their bread. However the butter was not very delicious after imagining that those were the same hands that a few minutes ago, you had used in unclogging the flooded sink, and that meant touching people’s spit with your bare hands! The drainage system in the ‘best school in the country’ was so pathetic that sinks clogging was no surprise to the students. It only meant torture to whoever was on bath duty that week. That meant the poor kids. Besides, the rich kids could easily come with a letter from one of their relatives, a prestigious doctor saying that they could not handle cold water. That meant two things: No bath duty and hot water for them as Nia and her friends shivered in the freezing cold. One had to take the duty bucket and start pouring out the water that was clogging the sink. Water that fellow students had used in brushing their teeth. A mixture of spit and germs, without any gloves! What bullsh\*t!

The meals however were edible but not really of the best quality. Nia could count a day or two where she had found a housefly in her food. What about the time that they were served with spoilt chicken and half of the students went to the sanatorium? What happen to that case where some parents filed a complaint against the school accusing them of food poisoning? Why did the police suddenly go silent? Simple. When you are a big school such as Mabo High School, you can get away with any crime. Besides, the police just need ‘kitu kidogo’ to bring the case to a close. Kitu kidogo that her school had. Basically, Mabo High School was untouchable.

The banning of sticky notes never came as a surprise to Nia. She saw it coming a mile away. Most students used it to express their sorrows and disappointments to the school administration. The school refused to accept corrections and instead decided to turn down the students by banning the means they used most to express their grief, the sticky notes. Next to be banned was water bottles. This was understandable since most students used them to sneak alcohol. Nia actually had her first taste of alcohol during initiation night in Mabo High School. Initiation night was the most dreaded time of all for any newbie. Their school was located next to the forest; a forest that was also attached to a cemetery. During the third Friday of the first month up to early the second month, the newbies were taken to the cemetery and forced to pray to the founder of the school who had apparently been buried there and forced to drink alcohol. It went on from house to house. When it was Nia’s turn, she had been caught unawares and was unable to protest. All she had to do was to comply with the demands of the older students.

Whether the administration knew what went on when it was sound asleep or not was unknown to the newbies. All they were told was that, “It’s part of tradition”. To hell with them and their traditions.

Nia had gone through a lot in that ‘prestigious’ institution including friends who negatively influenced her. In all their washrooms were pornographic material with the phrases: ‘If you haven’t tried it, you are missing out’ and ‘don’t be a coward and try it now!’ Students all wanted to prove their ‘coolness’ to the other friends in class. After every holiday break, all Nia heard was a girl whispering to her friends at the back row, “It happened last week. Best moment of my life!” Her friends would then squeal and giggle mischievously. It was actually the fastest way to earn respect in class. Instead of purchasing stationery like the outside world thought, the girls would purchase condoms and actually sneak out to go have ‘fun’ with their local boyfriends in town. They would be back at around 3.30am. Don’t be fooled to think that there were no CCTV cameras around the school. The idea is simple and just too shocking to believe, they are just for show. The cameras that the white man put there over eighty years ago were still the ones being used. Pathetic! Meanwhile every games time they saw a big tray of cakes headed for the administration block to commend them for their good service, while the students waited for their ‘healthy’ and ‘it’s a balanced diet’ githeri.

The girls, well most of them did not get pregnant as they used protection or even pills in rare cases, but there is one incident about a girl who attempted to get an abortion with the help of the school nurse. The school president eventually snitched on her and the girl got an expulsion but the story was kept undercover. Besides, why tarnish the reputation of such a ‘brilliant’ school? Didn’t the press know that these were the brains of the country? That’s when the school got a wakeup call and decided to do a thorough inspection. An inspection that eventually led to Nia being suspended for a month. She had cut herself because of the pressure from all sides, her parents and their demand for better results since she was in the ‘best’ school, her peers to try alcohol more and get a boyfriend. Of cause instead of letting her anger out on herself she could have done what most girls did. Carry her brother’s photo and pretend that he was her boyfriend. The only problem with that though was that she had no brother.

It was during this short holiday at home that her father passed on. Kourtney could not imagine what she was going to do without the support of Marshal. She was just a mere housewife and the society did not expect anything from her rather than to cook and have babies. She knew that Nia would definitely not go back to Mabo High School. She did not have enough money to cater for the unbelievable fees. Nia was rather happy because all that burden on her had been lifted. She had never told her mom about the struggles she faced in school. She never thought her mother would understand anyways. They were both looking at the school from very different perspectives. Kourtney who had heard about all the praises and all the good names given to the institution and then Nia, the person who had witnessed it all in that ‘death trap’. She cannot say that it was all bad though. She knew that she would certainly miss all her friends, the food and the swimming lessons. Those were the only things that kept her going in school.

As the traditions demanded, after two weeks, Marshal was put to rest. Only Marshal’s relatives and friends attended the wedding since the Cheetah Girls were too far away and she had completely lost contact with them. Maggie, on the other hand, sent her condolences. She was sincerely sorry for the loss of her child’s husband. When it was Nia’s turn to say her final remarks, she gave a speech:

“My mother has always told me that the human kind is very unpredictable and I have clearly seen that after the death of the person I loved dearly. Most of you referred to him as Mr. Marshal Otieno, but to me, I called him daddy, and he called me princess. What hurts the most is the many traditions and rituals that we were forced to follow. First of all, mommy went to visit one of her best friends after the incident and she was utterly shocked to see her. Apparently, according to traditions, the bereaved is the one who is supposed to be visited and that she is not allowed to visit anybody else. Next, despite knowing that mommy had nothing to do with the murder of daddy, she was still forced to do a cleansing ceremony. Lastly, uncle came to our house yesterday and demanded for the title deed to our house. Apparently, since mommy does not have a male heir, uncle is supposed to take over daddy’s household. What about us? What will we be left with? Will we live from hand to mouth like a dog?”

Nia had started to cry. The pain and brutal truth that she was now an orphan and her mother was a widow in a society which despised widows and orphans so much had finally hit her. But the crowd that she was presenting to did not give a damn about her safety and wellbeing. As soon as she finished her speech and the casket was lowered, everybody left them stranded in the compound, never to return again. That was the beginning of a struggle for them.

Their uncle came and threw them out of the place they had known to be ‘home’ for many years and brought one of his many wives to stay there. They were tossed on the street like dogs. They were not used to that kind of life and so it was really hard for them to cope at first, but eventually, they got the hang of things. Kourtney would go to work every day as a domestic laborer and at least got enough money to buy some rice and beans for her and her daughter. As for where they slept, the bus station offered adequate protection from the rain and so it was fair deal. Nia, however, did not make any task easy for her mother. As she had completely lost all hope in life and came to a conclusion that she would eventually end up working as a stripper, she went ahead with the other street children and began living the lives of criminals. They sniffed glue and practiced pick-pocketing all day long. There were a number of times that she had been caught and was nearly killed by the angry mob that had already placed a tire around her. However, the tearful cries of her mother saved her. Regardless of all that, she still went along with her life of drugs and crime. She seemed to enjoy things the way they were.

One lovely Saturday morning, she saw an advertisement of talent wanted. There would be auditions at Aheri Gradens for different talents: Singing, dancing, public speaking, spoken word, poetry and even modelling. She was tempted to go for some time. She had been very good when it came to spoken word and in the few months that she spent in high school, she had performed twice. However, crowds only meant more judgmental eyes. She was aware that her tattered clothes were not the ideal dressing code for a town teen. That’s why she avoided streets with many people. No one wanted to be stared at as though she was a corpse which had suddenly come back to life. The thought however came back when she saw that auditioning was free. ‘Free’ meant that spoilt rich kids were less likely to come. They were the most judgmental of all and she was certainly not in the mood for a confrontation, especially after the beating she had received last week after pickpocketing a pregnant woman.

In the afternoon, she tried to make her hair well and begged her mother to go with her since what she was about to present involved her as well. Kourtney was at first reluctant to leave her domestic duties but she finally gave in in the end. They arrived an hour late when the auditions were almost concluding, however, after making a late entry, they were allowed to audition.

People stared at her wondering what a street urchin had come to do in a talent show. One of the men standing there shouted, “I thought their only talent was sniffing glue!” The others roared with laughter but Nia brushed them all aside. She had to focus on what she was doing.

Finally, she was given the microphone and said, “Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Today I have a very serious thing to say about a very important topic that people have been brushing aside but it’s of great concern to all the women and children out there. I have brought my mom along to help me present it.”

“Wow! Even dummies can speak English, what a miracle!” Another man from the crowd yelled and laughed.

Nia responded, “Sure I can. But for this spoken word, I am going to use English and Kiswahili. This is what I call, ‘Scars of the Afflicted’.”

Everybody kept quiet as Nia began:

“Life ilichange vile dad alituleft  
Lakini kwa streets watu hawakuget  
Walitujudge na kutuangalia vibaya  
Ila hakuna kibaya chenye tulifanya  
Kwa sababu tu mom hana bwana  
Life ikawa unbearable leo kuliko jana.

Nami nikawa half yatima  
Tukiishi from hand to mouth  
All my plans started going south  
Cause I had no one to call father  
Huku tulikuwa tukivuta sigara  
Na wengine wetu wanacelebrate Riara  
They didn’t care about the street urchins  
Even though we kept begging.

Gradually mafriends walianza kutuavoid  
Perhaps walidhani kifo ni contagious  
But I can’t blame them for being cautious  
Besides, why not?  
Makarau walituchapa, the so called criminals  
Lakini hatungewapepa, because escape was minimal.

Lakini it’s not our fault, why doesn’t the society care?  
Walai this treatment we are getting is unfair  
Mawidows kwa streets wanasuffer, the only hope ni kuhawk  
But the government is only interested in politics, what a joke  
Instead of warming us with encouraging chats  
We were marked and treated like outcasts  
Instead of showering us with kisses  
They treated us like bitches  
I have a vision  
It’s not an illusion  
Ajali haina kinga  
So don’t point a finger.

Celebrate us, your sisters  
Cover all our blisters  
We don’t want to be scars  
We wanna shine as bright as the stars  
Do you remember me?  
I am that child whom you see at the market  
But instead of being celebrated  
I am being tolerated.

After finishing the presentation, thunderous claps rented the air. Everybody present was astonished that such a brilliant spoken word could be presented by a mere street urchin. Immediately after the applause, a man dressed in a navy blue tuxedo and a pair of well-polished white shoes approached Nia and Kourtney and said, “Wow! Ma’am, do you know just how talented your little girl is? This kind of talent deserves to be in East Africa’s Got Talent. She should be seated next to those rich onscreen celebrities. It is shocking to imagine that such wonderful and realistic words came from a fourteen year old. How?”

Nia was delighted and said, “Thanks a lot, Sir. But this fourteen year old wasn’t looking for fame. I just wanted to spread my message loud and clear. Why do widows and orphans get all the hate over something which is beyond their control?”

“Indeed a sad world my dear, but don’t bother about such issues right now. Besides, we have much more important issues to attend to like to look for food and clean water,” Kourtney said.

“Why? Haven’t you heard about Pastor Maloba?” The man asked Kourtney.

“Who’s that?” Kourtney replied.

“Oh yes, my street friends were telling me about her. But doesn’t she stay in Nakuru? How on earth will we get there?” Nia asked.

“I’ll happily take you there. Consider this a sign of gratitude for your daughter as she made this talent show truly memorable. Pastor Maloba has a ranch in Nakuru where she keeps all the homeless, poor and even the sick. I am sure she can help you,” the man said and walked away.

As the show ended, all the top performers were awarded with a check of five thousand Kenya shillings. Nia had been the first runners-up, after a gymnast who proved that indeed she had no bones in her body by doing the snake dance. After all the speeches had been given, the man drove Kourtney and Nia to Nakuru. It was a complete contrast of what they had back home. Back at home, they only had one ‘decent’ round-about. The others looked like trash. Nia always asked her mother while the locals kept voting in leaders that did not do anything to improve the country rather than to engage themselves in corrupt activities. Meanwhile the politicians kept pushing them to vote for ‘their’ own people. Alright then! ‘Their’ own people had stolen all the money they had in order to send all their kids abroad. What about in the political sector? Well, all the politicians nominated were either his relatives or friends. Woe to you if you were not related to him at all! And you could not say any negative word about them. Otherwise all their fans would descend on you like a true traitor to the community and stone you to death.

1. ***WHAT HAS CHRISTIANITY EVER DONE FOR US?***

It took them about five hours to arrive in Nakuru and the ranch was indeed so huge. There was a big church at the center with the cross sign on top. There were some flickering lights in the church and they immediately knew that someone was in. The man led the way as Kourtney followed closely then Nia.

“Mummy, look! We have visitors!” A kid said as soon as she saw Kourtney and the rest.

The pastor who had lowered her head in prayer took her rosary and without looking at the visitors first said, “Peace be with you! What brings you to the house of the Lord?”

“Child of God, we humbly come to you pleading for your help,” the man said in a lowered tone.

“No! In the house of my Father no one pleads for anything. For he has given us everything for free,” the pastor said as she turned around to face them.

She almost dropped her rosary when she saw them. “Kourtney!” She yelled.

It was then that Kourtney realized that the woman dressed up in a white robe was really her friend back in the days, Zoe.

She quickly walked over to where they were and hugged Kourtney so tight. There were a few minutes of tears as each of them said in their own hearts, “I am alive my dear friend.”

“May the Lord of Israel be praised. How have you been my dear friend?” Zoe asked.

“You know this girl, pastor? This is a street family that I brought to you for some assistance,” the man said.

“Street family? What does he mean Kourt?” Zoe asked.

“It’s a long and painful story my friend. But to shorten it up, let me just say that I lost the love of my life Marshal, he was shot by a prisoner who was trying to escape. My relatives took everything from me and so I had to live the life of a dog,” Kourtney said with a broken voice.

“It’s so sad to hear that my friend. And who’s this beauty over here?” Zoe asked as she stared at Nia.

“My name is Nia, her daughter,” Nia introduced herself.

“Wow! You look very beautiful and you are identical to your mom very much,” Zoe said then proceeded, “Please take her to be with the other kids. I need to talk to her mother a little more about the past. And take Tatiana too.”

The man in the tuxedo took Nia and Tatiana (the girl who was with Zoe when they arrived).

“Is that your child?” Kourtney asked.

“Yes, but not my own. I adopted her when she was very young,” Zoe said.

“Do you have any kids of your own? And how is Jose doing?” Kourtney proceeded to ask.

“Jose is doing great. He already got his citizenship and he is now a bank manager. Of course we have some small fights here and there but don’t all marriages? Umm….about the kids, we have two of our own, one who’s fourteen like your girl. His name is Paul and then a girl who’s ten years old, Jewel, and finally Tatiana who’s five,” Zoe responded.

“Wow! I’m glad to see that. I only have Nia and she’s my world. But there’s one problem,” Kourtney proceeded.

“What problem is that my friend?” Zoe asked.

Kourtney exhaled sharply and said, “She’s hard on drugs!”

“Oh no! May the Lord have mercy. Don’t worry, we can send her to a rehabilitation center,” Zoe said holding her friends hands to calm her down.

“You really think that will work?” Kourtney asked.

“Certainly. The Lord will not lead us astray,” Zoe said.

Kourtney looked around the place and asked, “Who is this ‘Lord’ you speak of and why did you decide to become a priest of all things?”

Zoe laughed for some time and said, “The Lord is He who loves us. He who was willing to give up His own son for our sake. He who walks ahead of us and favors the righteous. He who is a friend to sinners and listens to them whenever they call upon His name. All I had to do was to repent and leave the rest to Him. He gave me inner peace when I was still feeling the guilt of everything wrong that I had done.”

“That’s bullsh\*t! If He is really the God of love that everybody claims He is, then why do I suffer when I have done nothing wrong. Where was this so called God when my husband was being shot to the ground? Where was this so called God when Susan’s finger was being chopped off? And most importantly, where was this ‘gracious God’ when we were being tossed to the streets like dogs? Where was he? Asleep? Perhaps gone on a business trip somewhere?” Kourtney exploded.

“Calm down my sister. I understand how you feel, but you have to understand that there is a reason for everything. Proverbs 3:5 says, ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding’. My friend, His ways are not our ways so you cannot understand why certain things that we do not want to happen do. Listen, have you ever sat down and just thought about the existence of God deeply? Let me give you a few examples of things we can relate to.

First, I know God was present when He saved me from the cruel hands of Chris when he wanted to kill me. I knew God was present when I did not work as a stripper or a prostitute in Isabela’s brothel. God was there when Marshal came to help us escape from jail and He brought Jose into our lives to help us cross the border. He brought Nia into your life to bring you the courage and strength to move on. Knowing you, you probably would have committed suicide right now if you didn’t have Nia to take care of. God made all this possible so that you would eventually meet up with me and we could start off from where we left things in the past. God loves you, Kourtney. He just needs you to do the same.”

“I know all that, my friend. But sometimes it really does feel as though God has forgotten about me,” Kourtney continued.

“He hasn’t and He never will. That’s just what the devil wants you to think. Be strong okay? Now let us pray,” Zoe said. In that short prayer, Kourtney felt as though all the burden that she had inside had been lifted and that she was new again. Kourtney asked Zoe to baptize her there and then. Afterwards, Zoe gave her her very own Bible and a rosary which she said that she’ll use to teach her how to pray later on.

“For now, just go to sleep and we’ll go to the rehabilitation center tomorrow and see whether Nia can be admitted, okay? Good night?” Zoe said as she gave Kourtney a bear hug.

“Good night my friend, thank you so much.”

The next day, after waking up, Nia and Kourtney went over to the dining room. They found food already at the table waiting for their arrival. They had been taken to a different house to sleep. Zoe figured that they needed their privacy after a long journey so she did not want them to stay with the other families although they could see them from a distance. Just then, Zoe, Jose and their three children knocked and Kourtney opened the door. She was indeed excited to see them. The kids were also friendly to Nia.

“How are you doing old friend,” Jose asked.

“Old friend? Not dummy, b\*tch or bastard anymore?” Kourtney asked then laughed.

“Mind your language. The children are here,” Zoe said.

Jose laughed and said, “I’ve turned a new leaf, old friend. I am no longer the rude man you knew me to be. My wife has changed me for the better.”

“That’s great to hear,” Kourtney said and proceeded with her meal.

Zoe told Kourtney that they would be leaving with the whole family during the afternoon on an errand. Nia was curious to find out where they were going on such short notice but no one seemed to pay any attention to any of her concerns. They were all too busy planning what to wear. Besides, they did not want her to be aware of any of their plans anyways. She might try to run away when they all just wanted to help her.

1. ***GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?***

Later, after finishing the meal, the make-up artist was called to give Kourtney and Nia a make-over. They had a huge struggle since Nia’s hair was unmanageable. She had not combed it for quite a long time so it was almost impossible to handle it. However, afterhours of trial and error, they finally found an outfit that made her glow. Kourtney on the other hand looked like a teenager once they were done with her. After all the work and petty fights over which dresses matched with which eye shadow, they were finally ready at 2pm.

They whole family got into Zoe’s van and just as they were about to leave for the Rehabilitation Center, Jose said, “Wait, my love, I need to load the gun first.”

“Okay dear,” Zoe said.

“You guys still carry guns wherever you go? I thought we were past that,” Kourtney said.

“We don’t really use it. But ever since I decided to become a priest, I received hate from all directions. People said that it was a backward religion and that I was trying to confuse people. Since then, I’ve received constant death threats. I don’t always need a gun but I’ve always felt that in case there was a scenario in which I needed to defend my family, I would not hesitate to pull out the gun and fire. But thanks be to God that such a scenario has never occurred,” Zoe said.

“And we hope it stays that way,” Kourtney added.

As they were on the way to the center, it started raining cats and dogs. The road became even more slippery the further they went. They were not even halfway there yet and there was no gas station where they could take a break as they waited for the heavy downpour to cease. Jose was clearly having a hard time controlling the wheel. Thank God there were no other cars on the road at the time, otherwise he was as sure as death that he would have caused a very serious accident.

The rains slowed down a bit and suddenly, they saw something from a distance. It was another car approaching! Jose slowed down a bit and moved his car more to his lane. However, the car which was supposed to use the other lane suddenly switched to his lane and stopped right in front of him. Jose abruptly stepped on the breaks and said, “Oh my! This guy is driving like a maniac!”

He got out of the car and he was sure he was going to have one of the most heated arguments with the driver from the other vehicle.

“Hey! What’s your problem dude?” Jose asked as he headed to the other car. Zoe, Kourtney and all the children got out of the vehicle. The other driver indeed took his time in getting out of the car. When he finally did, he left the guys tongue-tied.

“I’m here on a mission. To ruin all your lives!” Mark said with an evil smirk on his face.

“What’s your problem dude? Why won’t you leave us alone?” Zoe asked.

“Quiet, you baby snatcher!” Mark yelled.

“Baby snatcher? What on earth are you talking about?” Zoe asked.

Mark walked to where they were and said, “Six years ago, my girlfriend gave birth to a bouncing baby girl, but unfortunately, the doctors said that my baby had died. Turns out that Teresa had blackmailed the doctors into lying about my baby’s health status. She did this as revenge because she thought that I was responsible for Chris’ murder. She called me two years later to tell me that she had taken my baby and sent her to an orphanage in Kenya just so that I would suffer. Up until a year ago, I was here hunting for my baby girl only to find out that you witch, Zoe Maloba! You are the one who has my child and you decided to name her Tatiana! I missed all those bonding years with my daughter because of you! My girlfriend got depressed after the loss of her first born and drank poison. I swore on her grave that I will not rest until I brought all of those criminals who had a hand in my baby’s kidnapping to justice. I already took care of Teresa Mendoza! As we are speaking now, her body is lying stone cold somewhere in the cemetery. And now it’s your turn to pay!”

Kourtney suddenly yelled, “What do you want from us for Pete’s sake? Can’t you just bury the hatchet? If my husband was here he would have made sure that you paid for all your crimes!”

Mark scoffed, “Ha! I love the way you are so naïve. I am the one who killed your beloved husband, Marshall. His presence was not needed in this world.”

“How dare you! I can’t believe that you killed my father. What evil did he ever do to you old monster?” Nia said as she headed for him but Kourtney restrained her and said, “Don’t waste your energy my child. Men like him are not even worthy of receiving your hate.”

“Yeah Kourtney dear, teach your daughter a life lesson or two,” then while pointing at Nia he said, “And you, if you know what’s best for you, you better stay out of my turf!”

Mark then quickly grabbed Jewel. It was still raining heavily and he had murder written all over his face. He took out a gun and pointed it to her head, “Now I will blow all her brains out, right in front of your very eyes!”

“Wait! I have all the legal documents that prove that Tatiana is not adopted. They are in my van. May I go and get them please?” Jose asked.

“Hurry!” Mark roared.

Zoe was confused. Which documents was he talking about? But she prayed to God that nothing bad would happen to Jewel and Tatiana. She had come to love her so much. Maybe even more than her own children! She could not bear the thought of losing her just like that.

Jose finally came back. “I don’t see any documents,” Mark said. Before he could say another thing, Jose took out the gun that he had sneaked in his back pocket and pointed it at Tatiana. He looked at Mark with eyes full of rage and said, “If you do anything to my daughter, then I will harm your daughter!”

“What do you want then? A head for a head?” Mark asked.

“Deal!” Jose responded.

The rain then poured exceedingly and some ice could be seen falling to the ground. Suddenly, there was a flash of lighting followed by a very loud sound. No one knew whether it was Jewel who had been killed, Tatiana or if it was just the thunder.

1. ***A REBIRTH***

“She told me she wanted to see him before we left,” Zoe told Jose.

“You say ‘him’ as if he is still alive,” Jose said as he poured her some black coffee and gave it to her as she continued to read her newspaper. They were in the living room.

“Sorry for barging in on your conversation unexpectedly mommy and Jose but I believe my father still lives with me, even if it is just in spirit form. From the cemetery I could feel the connection. Even though we have never had that father daughter bonding experience, it was as if he was calling out my name. He is watching over me. I believe my dad was not a bad person and there’s always a reason for everything. There’s a reason why he did what he did. I do not believe that death was the best punishment for him. He should have been put behind bars….maybe even spend his whole life rotting behind bars. Yes! Life imprisonment. But death? No that’s simply too cold, even for a murderer.” Tatiana said in a lowered tone.

“Shut up mademoiselle! Do you realize that your sister could have died if not for the heroic action of your aunt?” Jose roared.

“Oh please…spare me the lecture Jose, but Kourtney didn’t do anything heroic. The fact that my dad’s gun ran out of bullets was not because of her!” Tatiana yelled.

“Yes, and it was immediately after Kourtney, that witch, pulled Jewel from dad’s arms that Jose, this monster over here fired and killed my beloved father!” Tatiana continued with her protest.

“He is a dangerous man. He would be a danger to us all if I had allowed him to live. You don’t know him well my daughter. If you did, you would be thanking me right now. Trust me my child. That man is very conniving,” Jose said trying to calm her down.

“Don’t call me your daughter! I don’t have your blood flowing through my veins!” Turning to Zoe she said, “Mother, you know how it feels to be a parent. How do you think my father felt having lost his child for so many years? And now that he had finally found his next of kin, he was brutally and mercilessly murdered by the one you confidently hold his arm and claim that he is your love!”

Zoe could not hold her silence back any longer, “Yes, I am a mother. But I was a friend first. And I witnessed one of my best friend’s index finger being chopped off by your father. Did I do anything about it? No! Because I thought that if I was as far away from him as possible, he would leave me alone and my friends and family would be protected. But clearly Mark is not the type of man to bury the hatchet easily. He came back into my life, after more than ten years. I thought he had changed his ways. He wanted to harm my own flesh and blood. Only this time, I wasn’t just going to stand in the side lines and look pretty. I was also going to fight back. That is why I am not remorseful about whatever happened with Mark. He deserved it.”

“I am so sorry to hear about that mother. Maybe finding out about my other family has been too overwhelming for me. Which is why I am not thinking straight,” Tatiana said after some long and awkward silence.

“Then I suggest we all take a break. A family vacation or something. You always say you would love to visit France. We can go to Paris and check out the Eiffel Tower, enjoy the French cuisine and culture. It will be a way of relaxing somehow,” Jose suggested.

“I will have to give your suggestion a hard pass Jose. I was doing some online research about my father. Turns out the police have been tracking him for quite some time. They managed to get some details about him like his dead wife, widowed mother and the nanny who raised him from when he was still a young boy. With your permission mother, I would like to go to Boston in USA where Google says they live and ask them a few questions. I want to know how he was as a child, who were his mentors and what kind of a student he was at school. Was he just a nut head from the very beginning or did something happen in his life that caused this drastic change in character?” Tatiana asked.

“That’s insane my dear. It’s just like attempting to walk barefoot in hot larva! Besides, why can’t you just get their contacts and talk on the phone?” Zoe asked.

“Because it won’t be the same experience. I want to walk the streets that my dad did every day to school. I want to retrace his steps. Maybe that way my eyes will open wider and I’ll see the truth. I need to find out how and why things took a toll for the worst,” Tatiana replied.

“So, you want to get inside the mind of a serial killer, huh? Serial killers are not made, they are born” Jose said sarcastically. Tatiana did not respond.

“Are you sure about this love?” Zoe asked seriously.

“Yes mom. Book me a flight for Boston, I’ll be leaving in two days’ time. I love you guys so much. But I need to take this drastic step. I am hungry for the truth.” Tatiana said and hugged them both…tightly.

Before they could say another word, she had left the room and was headed for the kitchen to start preparing diner. “Maybe this is the last meal I’ll ever have with mom and Jose. Let me make it special,” she thought.

~THE END~

***A GLANCE AT THE STARS***

I’ve mentioned a couple of stars in this book. Some of you may know them while some of you may not know them. Oh well, here is a list in case you haven’t heard of any of them and what they do:

1. Tokyo and Rio- These were characters in the famous movie series ‘Money Heist’. Go watch it on Netflix!
2. Queen Elizabeth- I think she was the first queen of England. Not sure though.
3. Ariana Grande- she is a pop star and is famous for her music videos and even her role on Nickelodeon as ‘Cat Valentine’.
4. Jessie J- A musician and actress with a lot of hit songs like ‘Flashlight’ and ‘Masterpiece’.
5. Demi Lovato- A famous musician and actress with a lot of hit songs including ‘Heart Attack’, ‘Echame la Culpa’ and ‘Commander in Chief’.
6. Ben Carson- The best neurosurgeon the world has ever known.
7. Ravi Dubey- a Zee World Actor who played the role of ‘Sid’ and ‘Satya’ in the hit TV series ‘King of Hearts’.
8. Dwayne the Rock Johnson- No stranger to the wrestling and acting industry as he blows all the marbles in ‘The Red Notice’.
9. George Floyd- an African who was brutally murdered in the hands of white cops prompting the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement.
10. Mitchel Obama- Former first lady of the United States of America.
11. Oprah Winfrey- famous for her talk show.
12. Jackie Chan- a writer and actor mostly famous in these Chinese movies.
13. Marshmello- a musician famous for his catchy songs like ‘Happier’.
14. Simon Cowell- the most honest judge in America’s Got Talent.
15. Jeff Bezos- stinking rich personality and ranks first in the list of the richest people in the world.
16. Bill Gates- insanely rich and one of the richest men in the world and also the founder of ‘Microsoft’.
17. Mark Zuckerberg- Credited with the discovery of Facebook and extremely rich.
18. President Nicolas Maduro- The president of Venezuela.
19. Zain Imam- Known mainly for his character as ‘Yuvraj’ in Zee World’s ‘Fire and Ice’.
20. Jasmin Bhasin- Known mainly for her lead role as ‘Twinkle’ in Zee World’s ‘Fire and Ice’.
21. Abhi and Pragya- Known for their lead roles in one of Zee World’s best dramas, ‘Twist of Fate’.
22. Jason Derulo- a musician with an incredible voice and a lot of hit songs like ‘Love not War’ and ‘Savage Love’.
23. Will Smith- a Hollywood actor who’s very popular.
24. Chris Rock- a Hollywood comedian who is much loved by fans.
25. Spiderman- a famous Hollywood movie and actor.
26. Sonic the Hedgehog- a very popular animation.
27. Johnny Orlando- a teen singer and social music star famous for his catchy songs like ‘What If’.
28. Kenzie Ziegler- a teen singer and social music star famous for her catchy songs like ‘Breathe’, ‘Nothing on Us’ and ‘Teamwork’.