

BLACK SPELL

“Once you go black it takes a miracle to go back!”

BY

J. MICHAEL

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PROLOGUE

Daniel Pullman woke up with a start and sat up brusquely, his heart pounding. It took him a few seconds to take stock of his new surroundings and to remember that he was not in his luxurious home in Washington D.C. or the palatial residence of his parents in Denver, but rather, was in a large sized and well-furnished hotel room deep in the heart of the African continent. The room was no different from that to be found in a five star hotel in any reasonably advanced country. It had a huge television set which he did not intend to turn on for the entire week that he planned to spend in the hotel. The bed was big and well made up and all the other trappings of the room were the same as those he was used to enjoying in cozy hotel rooms in Washington DC, New York, Paris; all the other major capitals of the world to which his sport carried him every year.

He got up slowly and walked over to the window, drew aside the window blind and looked out and down at a breathtaking scene of nature. The forest was lush, with a languid stream that flowed eastward until it disappeared in search of the rising sun. The sun itself was beginning to find its way out of the misty morning of what promised to be a bright, sunny day. He opened the window and inhaled deeply from the fresh unpolluted air that seemed to flow towards him out of the bucolic environment in which his hotel was situated.

He felt invigorated and at peace with himself and very far from the endless, unrelenting pressures from work and family that were beginning to drive him nuts. He had only a few days back, emerged victorious, once again, in his march towards the title his

father had craved for him since he was six: the greatest tennis player in the world. At the young age of twenty-eight he was close to achieving his father's dream. During the year he had triumphed at the Australian and French Opens, and Wimbledon, and he expected to easily do the same at the forthcoming US Open, which was about five weeks away. With a win at the US Open, he would have won the greatest number of Grand Slams, and he still had some sporting years ahead, during which he would no doubt consolidate his position in the history of professional tennis.

He loved tennis, was proud of his achievements and would not trade places for any other occupation. Yet he was glad to have escaped, for the first time, from the very hectic period of intense competitive sports that he had been enmeshed in since his teen years. He felt he had done the right thing by taking the long awaited break and he was determined, now more than ever, to spend the next one week cut off from civilization, if need be.

He looked back over the years and it seemed like it was only a few days ago that his parents had dropped him off for the very first time, at the Blue Ridge Sporting complex, to begin his tennis lessons, at the age of six. They had noticed that he seemed to love tennis, leaving everything he would be doing to stare fascinatedly at the TV whenever a tennis match happened to be on. His father had asked him if he would like to learn how to play tennis and he had squealed with joy as he nodded vigorously.

That was twenty two years ago. Twenty two years, during which his life was all about tennis, a sport for which his love and passion seemed to have no limits. To the consternation of his parents, particularly his mom, he had little interest in anything else

including his education. His mother had tried to steer him away from the game but fortunately for him his father was more perceptive and supported rather than discouraged him. Eventually his mother realized that he was born to play tennis and joined his father in supporting his calling. As he gazed absentmindedly at the unblemished African environment that stretched as far as his eyes could see he felt at peace with himself knowing that he had ended up not disappointing his parents and that he still had the passion, the strength and the skills to make them even more proud of their one and only child.

This was his first time in Africa, a continent that in his twenty-eight years of existence, he had never bothered to think about, much less visit. Sure he had now and again read something unflattering, about an African country, or seen some usually horrific images of ethnic massacres or brutal dictators. However, today the scene before him was so comforting that he had the feeling that he had, thanks to his adopted brother, made a fascinating discovery, to which he was likely to return once in a while.

The phone on the table by his bedside rang for a while but he ignored it as he stared into space. What, he asked himself, had he really achieved in life? The answer automatically came unbidden back to him. He had firmly established himself as the best tennis player in the world. He had rich parents but he had become enormously rich by his own efforts and that was extremely satisfying. By all measures of success he was at the top of the ladder and should be the happiest guy in the world. And yet the question kept coming back to him now and again: 'Is this it?' 'Much as I love tennis, must I go on year in and year out only living and breathing

tennis? Isn't there life after tennis?

The early morning comforting scene of nature, at its very best, was a far cry from the highly advanced but nightmarish US city environments in which all that he seemed to be doing from one day to the next was striving to stay at the top of his game; by fighting to win one trophy or the other with no time or setting to reflect on anything else but tennis. The view and stillness seemed to be suggesting that he needed to spend some time looking into how he could better live a more rounded and fulfilling life.

The phone by his bedside resumed its clanging and once again he let it ring until it stopped. Finally he walked slowly back to his bed, lay down on it and, staring at the ceiling, let his thoughts wander back to the financially rewarding but stressful life he had taken a break from. Had the hustle and bustle been worth it, he wondered? Must he continue to strive to be number one at any cost or should he not take an indefinite break and challenge himself with a completely different task that may be more fulfilling and beneficial to society?

CHAPTER 1

Daniel Pullman walked into the hotel ball room and a deafening cheer rose from the formally dressed crowd of about two dozen men and women that had been waiting for him. The crowd was clearly in a celebratory mood and the well decorated opulent ball room, in which they were gathered, was reflective of the wealthy status of the richly, or to some, stuffily dressed men and women who graced the hall. Equally well-dressed waiters, who had been gliding around the room offering drinks to the merry crowd, paused to stare with admiration at the new entrant.

Casually dressed in a dark polo shirt and light blue jeans and smiling broadly, Daniel, or Dan as everyone called him, acknowledged the cheers and waited for it to die down before briefly addressing the crowd. “Thank you Mom; Thank you Dad, Cindy, Joe, Linda, Roy and all of you who have kindly taken the time to share this happy moment with me. Your presence and encouragement throughout the tournament helped me greatly to stay focused and to put in my best.”

“With me it’s the other way round,” someone shouted from the back of the crowd. “I get terribly unfocused when dad and mom are around.”

The crowd laughed and Daniel responded. “Well in my case I grew up learning to focus on how to squeeze out the next dime from mom and dad. The habit has thankfully remained with me to this day.”

The crowd cheered and Dan added a few more words before moving on to hug his mom, dad, his fiancé Cindy, his adopted brother Joe and Joe’s girlfriend Linda. The crowd coalesced around him with pats on the back and warm words of congratulations. At six feet six Dan towered over quite a number of the people in the hall, including his father who had managed to get to six feet before

he stopped growing. Apart from his impressive height, Dan was noticeable for his wavy blond hair and strikingly blue eyes, which always seemed to have a pleasant twinkle.

In contrast to Dan, who seemed quite at ease in his black jeans and loose fitting polo shirt and who but for his fame and height could have passed unnoticed in any busy London street, his parents and most of the people in the room radiated wealth and privilege in their well ironed suits and ties. Cindy Thompson, medium height, slim and beautiful with long auburn hair, pale green eyes and flawless smooth skin wore a green, shimmering, body clinging dress and hung on possessively to Dan's arm as he moved around greeting the guests. Before long he had gravitated to Joe Digrazo, his childhood friend who became his adoptive brother and who was now his agent. Following adoption, Joe had added Pullman to his name. He squeezed Joe's arm and gave his girlfriend, Linda, a peck on the cheek.

At the relatively young age of 28, Dan had already become a legend in the world of tennis, by establishing an amazing record of not losing any game since he turned professional at the age of 17. His latest victory the day before was the third Open in which he had vanquished redoubtable opponents in straight sets without seeming to work up a sweat, and the entire world of tennis was betting on him to complete the Grand Slam with another crushing victory at the forthcoming US Open. With the US Open victory he would, according to the pundits, become the greatest tennis player to have amassed so many trophies at his age.

Trophies were however the farthest thing from Dan's mind as he caught up with Joe after cycling around the room. "How long do you think we'll be holed up in here?" he whispered, as Cindy strained to hear what he was saying to Joe.

Joe laughed. "I don't mean to frighten you but it can drag on for a bit longer. However don't forget Mom and Dad cut short their

vacation and came all the way to cheer you on. Relax and enjoy yourself.”

“God! Just feel like lying under a pool for a while and letting the water drain the stress outa me. I think I’m about to have a burnout and I really need to do something.”

Dan’s dad, the Great Honorable Stephen Pullman and his mom, Josephine Pullman, walked over to them and Dan’s dad punched Dan lightly on the shoulder. “Atta boy! We’re all proud of you son. Determination and hard work never fails to pay, as I’ve always told you since you were a baby.” Stephen was a big man with a booming voice while Josephine was small and lithe. Dan believed that he got his strength from his dad and his extraordinary speed from his mom.

“Thanks dad. I owe my success to you and mom.”

“More to me,” his father guffawed. “Your doting mom would have turned you into a cuddly wreck if I had not enforced army discipline.”

Joe laughed and Dan smiled and patted his mom. Everyone, including his dad, knew that the opposite was the case. Both his mom and Dad loved him fiercely, particularly as he was their only child. However, his dad was the softy that couldn’t say no, while his mom made sure that he couldn’t get away with the shenanigans that are second nature to most boys.

Cindy snuggled closer to Dan and stared at him adoringly. “You must be tired darling. This is likely to come to an end soon.” She raised her voice loud enough for Dan’s parents to hear and was pleased to see Dan’s dad sneak a look at his watch.

Before long, Dan saw his dad making it a point to thank each guest individually; which was a cue for them to call it a day and leave. The majority of them got the hint and left, after stopping to

once again congratulate Dan and warmly shake his hand or take a photograph with him. Another hour would pass before the party diehards were seen out of the room.

“Son, we shall be flying back to the Maldives tomorrow morning to complete our vacation,” Dan’s mom said. “How long do you intend to stay in London before getting back to the States?”

“About two to three days mom. I have to be back in the States soon to prepare for the New York Open. “How’s the Maldives?”

“It’s wonderful son. Beautiful Island, with beautiful people.”

His dad winked at Dan. “Really beautiful people.”

“Oh how nice,” Cindy said without much enthusiasm. “Where is it?”

“In Asia love,” Stephen replied. “It’s a South Asian island sitting squarely in the Indian Ocean.”

“We should go there someday,” Dan said to Cindy who beamed happily in return.

“Cindy and Linda will be heading back to the States tomorrow as Cindy has an exam to sit soon and Linda has to go back to work. I should also be flying back within the next two to three days. Hopefully I won’t need more time than that to pay courtesy calls to a few top sporting officials and make some endorsement shoots.”

“Well, have a lovely time you both and be careful.”

“Thanks mom,” Cindy and Dan chorused before Dan added: “Safe trip back to the Maldives.”

“And what about you Joe,” His adopted mom asked

lovingly. “Will you be going back with them to the States?”

“No mom. Not right away. I shall hang around with Dan and make sure he gets back to training very soon. We’ve got to get to work right away. The US Open is only a few weeks away; right around the corner.”

Dan hugged his dad and mom and the others did the same, following which they all walked out of the ball room and headed to the Pullmans’ chauffeured limousine that was parked right in front of the hotel’s ornate doors. Dan, Cindy, Joe and Linda watched quietly as the limousine pulled away and then tramped back into the hotel.

“Well Cindy darling. I guess you’re still leaving early tomorrow morning right?”

“Right Joe. My flight’s at 7am. Linda’s taking the 11am flight. Hanging on for a few more minutes I guess.”

Joe laughed and hugged her. “So I got to say good bye and safe trip darling. Will catch up with you in the States.” Dan hugged Linda and wished her a safe journey.

“Good night Dan, let’s talk as soon as we’re both back from the airport ok?” Joe said as he threw his arm over Linda’s shoulder and they both strolled towards the lift.

“Keep an eye on Dan, Joe.” Cindy called out after him.

“You bet I will.” Joe replied laughing.

Dan was in the hotel’s French restaurant the next afternoon when Joe got back from the airport. The big jug of diet coke in front of him had hardly been touched when Joe was escorted to his table, by a star struck waitress.

“Anything I can get for you sir,” the waitress asked Joe with her eyes resting adoringly on Dan.

“A pint of beer will do.”

“And for you Sir, anything else before you place your order?” she asked Dan with a mischievous smile.

Dan gave her his boyish and most charming smile in return. “Just a cup of black coffee will do for now.”

The waitress gave him what she hoped was her sexiest look and walked daintily away to get his order.

Their drinks served, the waitress hovered around until they placed their order, a medium rare T Bone steak for Joe and a club sandwich for Dan. Midway through their meal, Dan leaned back on his chair and yawned deeply. His eyes remained almost half closed as Joe began to talk excitedly about a new endorsement deal from a telecommunications company. A deal, he explained, that would see them raking in about five million dollars during the year.

Where Dan was tall and lean, Joe was of average height and fairly bulky with a fleshy face that seemed to expand as he stuffed food into his mouth. He had big fish like eyes that shone brightly whenever he talked on anything on which he had passion. Cutting lucrative deals with various sponsors were at the very top of his passion list.

Joe continued talking for a while and then stopped. He always prided himself on knowing Dan even much more than their parents did. The reason for his belief was simple. He had spent his entire childhood and adult life with Dan; growing up at home together; going to the same secondary school and university; getting involved in scraps and truancy and making their careers in the same sports; Dan as a professional tennis player and Joe as his agent.

Most people saw them as very close brothers, with quite a few wondering about their physical differences. The reality was that Dan was the only son of the Pullmans while Joe was from a foster

home, close to where Dan used to go for tennis lessons.

Dan always remembered how Joe first came into his life. Dan was then eight years old and had gone with his trainer to practice lawn tennis, which he liked very much, at the Frontline Sporting complex; an expensive well equipped multi-sport training center that catered for the cream of the society. As his trainer put him through a rigorous drill of first and backhand strokes, Dan noticed a scruffy looking boy pressed against the wire fence that enclosed the tennis court. He was staring wistfully at them. That was the third time over the past few days that he had noticed the boy who appeared to be about his own age, but turned out to be two years older, following his progress with big, bright longing eyes.

Dan played on for a few more minutes and then walked over to the fence. “Hi, how are you?” he asked with a smile. “Would you like to play?”

The boy nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. But I don’t know how to play.”

“I’ll teach you,” Dan said opening the fence gate to let him in. The trainer rushed over looking worried and made to send the boy out but Dan stopped him.

“Your parents won’t like this Dan,” he whispered furiously. “We don’t know him or where he comes from.”

The boy looked expectantly at Dan. “My name is Joe and I’m from the house over there,” he said pointing into the distance.

“You have a big house,” Dan said. “Are your parents’ home?”

“It’s a foster home,” the trainer whispered to Dan. “It’s a home for abandoned children or children who for one reason or the other have nowhere to call home.”

Joe waited patiently as the trainer talked into Dan's ear.

"I'm Dan and this is Mr. Thomas who is teaching me how to play."

"Nice to meet you Sir," Joe said gravely stretching his hand. Thomas and Dan shook his hand.

"Do they know where you are?" Thomas asked.

"Yes sir. They let me go out but I have to be back there before 6pm."

"Ok I'll tell you what," Thomas said looking at his watch. "It's now 4pm. I'll let Dan teach you over the next one hour some of the things he has learnt so far and then I'll take over while you run back home."

"Thank you sir," the two kids chorused as Joe ran excitedly to pick up one of Dan's racket.

The trainer walked over to take a seat under one of the awnings, curious to see how his hyperactive pupil would impart his tennis prowess to Joe, and wondering how to handle the new development; if Joe made it a habit of showing up in future. Should he tell Dan's parents about Joe? As he watched the two boys and saw the joy with which Dan tutored Joe and the passionate but bumbling manner in which Joe responded to his new found friend, he decided that Joe's presence may in fact help to boost Dan's motivation to learn and impress.

By the time Joe, looking sad, had to return to his home, Thomas had concluded that there would be no harm in allowing Joe to spend about thirty minutes with Dan each time he came to the court.

Joe came back to the court the next day, at exactly the same time as the day before and continued to show up subsequently each

time Dan was having his coaching lessons. Thomas did not mind coaching the two of them even though he had concluded within a very short period that Joe was not cut out for amateur or professional tennis. He also did not consider it necessary to bring the new arrangement to the notice of Dan's parents as he was not charging extra for coaching Dan's new friend.

That was how the relationship started and continued for a few more weeks before Dan casually mentioned to his parents, one Friday evening, over dinner, that he had a new friend who he would like to invite to the house, the next day, to play Nintendo with him.

Dan's dad stopped with his glass of beer in mid-air and gave a quick sidelong look at his wife. "One of your friends in school? Do we know him?"

"Don't think so Dad. He's in the Blackstone Providence home, not far from where I practice."

His parents looked at each other with consternation. Dan's parents were rich and solidly ensconced in the upper class bracket. Dan was in one of the most expensive schools in Denver and in addition to his school teachers, he had a phalanx of tutors in just about every subject and sport that he was grappling with. The Providence home was the last place they would like their son to hang around, not to talk of having a friend close enough to spend the Saturday with. Word around town was that some of the kids came from drug addicted homes and brought the drug addiction along with them.

The Pullman's had a tennis court at home and had considered hiring Thomas to train Dan at home, but Thomas had advised them to allow Dan to train in an environment where he would have the opportunity to observe and interact with other kids of his age that were also learning tennis; with the aim of ultimately turning professional.

His parents spent the next hour questioning him about Joe, while trying hard to hide their concerns. When Dan cleverly excused himself on the pretext of going to the toilet but stopped behind the door to listen to their conversation, they quickly weighed the risks and considered them to be controllable, as long as they kept a very watchful eye on the new development and asked the trainer to do the same. They reached their decision based on the fact that Dan was always chauffeured to the training ground and immediately ferried back home after his training sessions. Furthermore it would be Joe who would be coming to visit Dan and not the other way round. They resolved to keep a close eye on Joe whenever he came visiting.

Stephen decided, as additional precaution, to send one of his personal assistants to visit the Blackstone Providence Home. After having lengthy discussions with officials of the foster home, the assistant returned to inform them that Joe had been found, as a new born baby wrapped up and crying one early morning in front of the Blackstone Providence Home. He was taken into the home and named Joseph Digrazo, after the Italian cook that had discovered him. The officials assured the assistant that Joe, as they fondly called him, was one of the most well behaved intelligent boys in the home.

Their worries were subsequently short-lived. Joe turned out to be so well behaved that it didn't take long before it was Dan's parents who were looking forward to Joe keeping their only child company. They noticed that Dan was at his happiest when he was either playing with Joe or teaching him whatever he had learned in school. They also noticed that the two boys always looked sad when Joe had to return to his foster home.

One day while Dan was splashing about in his home pool with Joe, Dan's mom, who was sitting with her husband on the patio watching them, turned to her husband, her eyes glistening with what Stephen suspected to be tears that were being heroically held

back.

“Don’t they look happy? So young and so carefree. I’m glad Dan finally has the brother he’s been missing for so long.” Josephine said with a slight tremor in her voice.

Stephen looked up briefly from the report he was glancing through and answered absentmindedly. “I’m also glad we didn’t stop the relationship from blooming. They get along so well is as if they were siblings.”

“I just wondered if there was a way we could get them to stay and grow up together, even if they have to live apart. I look at Joe and it must be tough for him growing up all alone and not having a dad or a mom.”

Stephen let the comment pass, worrying in what direction Josephine was heading.

“What do you think?” she finally asked?

Stephen put aside his report. “We can continue to work with the Blackstone home to monitor and support Joe’s education and overall progress.”

Josephine watched the two boys thrashing around in the pool for a while as Stephen returned to his report and then carefully broached the idea of their adopting Joe; even if informally.

“I actually thought we could do a bit more than that, considering that....no let me be honest darling, I am hoping you would seriously consider and agree to our adopting Joe as the second child we tried so hard to get, without success.”

Stephen had come to like Joe a lot but adoption was for him an uncharted territory that he had not considered exploring. Even before Joe came into their lives the thought had once in a while crossed his mind but he had each time not been keen to take the

adoption leap.

“Let’s give it some thought darling. It’s something that’s not to be taken casually. We should sleep on it for a day or two.”

They let the matter pass undiscussed for a few days and then one evening, while they were in bed and just before Josephine could say goodnight, Stephen brought up the matter again.

“I’ve been thinking about the adoption. On its own it’s not a bad idea. We’ve always wanted a second child, to keep Dan company but it never happened and now we’ve moved on in years and it’s too late.”

“Sorry about that dear.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. We have a lovely son and that’s all that matters to me, to us. I have no fundamental problem with adopting Joe, but we need to give the matter further careful thought, as it would not be as simple as collecting him from the foster home and taking him over to our house.”

“I know,” Josephine replied snuggling closer to him. “There’s a detailed scrutiny process to which we would be subjected and statutory inconveniencies that may turn out to be quite irritating. But at the end of the day it boils down to taking the trouble to give an innocent soul the chance to live a happier and more fruitful life.”

“You have a point darling but“

The tremor returned to Josephine’s voice. “Sometimes I look at Dan and think of how much we love him and....and I shudder to think of him being the one that’s been cruelly abandoned by his parents, at the tender age that Joe was abandoned. What a tragic and soulless way to come into this world?” “Such wickedness,” she added with a quiet sob.

Stephen knew his wife's mind had been made up and that the subject would keep coming up until he accepted to adopt the boy or categorically rejected the idea. He loved his wife too much to take such a negative stand, but he was still not completely sure that he wanted them to adopt Joe.

Stephen wanted so much to please his wife but he did not become as rich as he was by making hasty decisions. He always looked at a problem from as many angles as possible before taking a final decision, which he would then go ahead to execute with gusto.

"I'll tell you what," he said firmly. "Let me take a few more days to have the adoption process and requirements researched fully and depending on what comes up, we can take a final decision."

"Thank you so much darling," Josephine murmured holding him tightly,

Over the following week Stephen looked diligently into the matter, seeking the advice of his lawyers and visiting the home himself to talk to the officials in charge. After giving the matter additional thought and discussing extensively the Pullmans finally settled on a compromise under which Joe was adopted in an informal manner, that left him still bearing his surname and technically living in the foster home, while in reality staying permanently with the Pullmans; to be sponsored by them through primary, secondary and university education.

It would take two more years before the formal adoption process would be completed and for Joe to become known as Joe Digrazo Pullman; with the Pullmans insisting on leaving his previous surname as his middle name, in honor of the Italian that found him.

While the two boys were inseparable, they both however had

different talents which became noticeable at a very early stage. Dan was average in mathematics and other subjects but outstanding in just about every sport that he turned his attention to. Joe, two years older, was on the other hand always first in class, excelling particularly in mathematics, finance and business administration, which he ended up majoring in. By the time Dan, under the insistence of his parents, had gone into the university to study Mass Communications he had already become a renowned Junior Lawn Tennis champion and turned professional. Joe followed the academic route as he was no good in sports. Although he could despite all the training from Dan and Thomas hardly swing a racket, he had a flair for business and it didn't take long for him to end up becoming Dan's agent and financial adviser. Their long standing closeness and Dan's absolute trust in him helped to turn the business relationship into a harmonious and mutually beneficial one.

Joe therefore knew something important was weighing heavily on his brother's mind when he noticed that Dan had hardly touched his coffee and the club sandwich that the waitress had tenderly placed before him. He did not seem to have heard a single word of what Joe had been telling him. His absent mindedness was so total that Joe couldn't help trying to find out what the matter was.

“What's eating you, boy? Joe asked putting down his fork. “You that tired or what?”

“I think I'm having what they call a burn out.”

“No kidding. But come to think about it, Dan, you haven't had a real break since we've been together, which is what?... about twenty years now?”

“Success comes with a heavy price. That's what my dad keeps telling me,” Dan said dully. “I really need a break Joe I really do.”

Joe tried to hide his surprise and the faint stirring of panic. “You sure do Dan. I think you should take off immediately after the US Open when....”

“I can’t wait until then. I need to get away for a while, away from the usual crowd and away from tennis. The whole circus is driving me nuts Joe. I really need a break now.”

“Ok Dan. That won’t be a problem. A few days in Spain or Lisbon with Cindi should”

“No,” Dan cut him off. “Definitely not with Cindi or Mom and Dad and not anywhere in Spain or Europe either. I want to stay out of the circus and particularly from the press for some time.”

“I think I know how you feel Dan. I sometimes wonder where you get the stamina and will power to compete in almost all the well-known tournaments, that’s what, sixty seven or so of them? The Grand Slam circuit is tough enough but then we have other important tournaments from the Brisbane International to the Davis Cup. From Spain to Qatar, you name it we’re there and winning but there’s a price to pay Dan. I’ve said it before and I’m saying it again, we have to skip a fairly large number of them.” Joe paused and when Dan said nothing, he continued. “This open, that open, they’ve got to take a toll one time or the other, even on a superman like you and”

“I’m no superman Joe, even though many people think I am. I’m just plain Dan, who doesn’t know when to stop competing and who is fortunate to have a long winning streak. But Superman or not, I’m just plain bushed and need a break.”

Joe closed his eyes and considered the new challenge for a minute. “A break, yes, but cut off from the world for a while? That would be tough,” he said rubbing his forehead. “You’re one of the most recognizable people in the world. The US, Asia, Europe and even Africa are all tied together through the World Wide Web.

There's no hiding place.”

“Surely there must be one very quiet place in this whole planet, in maybe Asia, where we can spend a few days, without being pried upon every second of the day and night or tailed everywhere we go.”

“Sure there is, but we have to think about it, ask around a while and do some planning to make sure we can pull it off.”

Dan said nothing more. He knew how resourceful Joe could be once confronted with a challenge, no matter how complex.

He didn't have to wait long before Joe slowly sat up and ran his fingers through his bushy hair. “Talking of burn-out I think I know a place that fits the bill.”

“I knew you would come up with the answer,” Dan said with a smile. “Where do you have in mind?”

“You remember when I had to take a two-week break, a few years ago? When I travelled to Africa and you were too busy to go with me?”

Dan nodded slowly. “I had wanted to go but Dad, and Mom especially, talked me out of it. How was it?”

“It was really great. As a getaway and as a return to nature in its most pristine state, nothing compares. You want to give it some serious thought, if you really want to stay away from the maddening crowd”.

“I've never been out there before,” Dan said doubtfully, “and from what I see, whenever I watch the news, the whole continent is always engulfed in one crisis or the other.”

“Fairly true. But Limbaki, where I spent two weeks, is one of the most peaceful countries in the world. It's a small quiet haven for tourists looking to bond with nature for a while. Pella, which is

some miles away from the capital city, reminds me of Paradise before the serpent got Eve and Adam chased away.”

Dan smiled for the first time since coming into the restaurant. “You seem to be quite familiar with Paradise?”

“I imagined that was how it could have been after I saw the breathtaking beauty of Pella. It’s a small town outside Jumi, the capital of Limbaki. You want to spend some time incognito, Pella’s it.”

“You sure that’s where we should be heading, or are you joking?”

“Damn sure, brother, I can’t think of anywhere else more peaceful and ideal as a hideaway.”

“Let’s sleep on it,” Dan said getting up. “Seems like somewhere I can have some peace for a while without being hounded by press and family. But how do we go about getting there and back without some nosy journalists on our tail?”

“Shouldn’t be too difficult, but as you said let’s sleep on it. I may dream of somewhere else overnight.”

That was how they left it for the next two days until Dan brought it up again over dinner. In the meantime, Joe had given it a lot of thought and the more he thought about the matter the more certain he was that he could pull it off, with the help of his large network of contacts. They discussed late into the night and agreed that Joe would make the arrangements and go along with Dan to Limbaki. They would fly to Limbaki’s capital, Jumi and continue immediately by road to Joe’s paradise, Pella, to spend one week before heading back to the States to prepare for the US Open.

Dan left Joe to figure out how they could make the trip without being recognized and followed by a trail of pursuing journalists. Joe got to work right away calling up close friends who

he requested to help them, on confidential basis, to obtain visas to Limbaki. He also turned to the same tourist agency that had arranged his trip to Limbaki to put up a program, again on a strictly confidential basis, for both of them.

CHAPTER 2

The arrangements were not as difficult to put in place as Dan had feared. It took just one day for Joe to put all the arrangements in place including getting them tourist visas to Limbaki. Dan was not surprised at the ease with which Joe had managed what in other hands could have dragged on for weeks. Time and again he had found himself in a tight spot and had to turn to Joe for help. Joe always came through and Dan had thus come to have absolute faith in his ability to deliver no matter how difficult or complex the challenge.

The real problem for Dan turned out to be how to go to Africa without getting his parents and Cindy into a panic mode that could lead them to come rushing after him. He resolved to deal with that problem himself, rather than passing it on to Joe.

A day before the departure he decided to call his mom and got her on her mobile as she was about to go to bed. “Hi mom, how are you both doing?”

“Getting along fairly well son, except for your dad who’s driving me nuts as usual.”

“What’s he up to this time?” Dan asked with a smile, remembering the silly fights between his parents over the years.

“He was shouting and angrily looking for his reading glasses when the darn thing was right there on his nose. Are you back to Washington?”

Dan laughed. “Not back yet mom. Joe and I plan to take a few days off before coming back to prepare for the US Open.”

“That’s long overdue. Where are you both headed?”

“I really don’t have the details but I guess it’s some little lovely town in Spain.”

“Spain. How lovely. Good for you both. I wish I could join you guys. I need a break from Dad.”

His dad came on the line. “Don’t listen to her son. Last time she took a break with her friend she just couldn’t stay away and rushed back only after two days.”

“That’s because you couldn’t find your way to the bedroom dad,” Dan teased.

His dad grunted. “Always taking sides with your mom right? Where’s Joe?”

“Gone to get some pizzas.”

“Well safe trip to you guys and stay in touch.”

“Thanks Dad and take good care of mom.”

“You bet.”

His mom came back on the line. “Don’t forget your vitamins and remember to avoid very cold room temperature. Keep an eye on Joe and try to keep him in line if he starts any of his pranks.”

Dan laughed. “No problem mom. I’ll do just that.”

“Safe trip son, stay in touch and give our love to Joe.”

“Thanks mom will do. Take care of dad.”

Dan cut the line and called Cindy. He took a deep breath and tried to make his voice sound as cheerful as possible. “Hi sweetheart, all set for the exams?”

“Should be plain sailing, except for philosophy. Just can’t get the hang of it. When are you due back?”

“In about a week darling. I have to dash off to Spain for a brief break. Will stay in touch.”

“Spain? Wish I could go with you,” Cindy said wistfully

“Don’t worry darling I’ll stay in touch and I’ll soon be back.”

“You’re still going with Joe, right?”

“Sure. He’ll keep me away from those crazy Spanish bulls.”

“Bulls you can take care of. It’s the señoritas I’m worried about.”

“No worries on that score. They don’t come anywhere close to you.”

Dan turned to Joe who was spread eagled on a sofa and grinning broadly. “That takes care of phase one. How do I end up breaking the African angle to them and how do I manage to keep the mobile silent?”

“As soon as we get to Limbaki, you have to send mom and dad as well as Cindy an email informing them of the change of plans from Spain to Africa. None of them has been to Africa, so the story is that internet works erratically and the phone hardly ever.”

“But why the switch to Africa?”

“Simple. The Spanish press was driving you crazy and the tourist agency strongly recommended Limbaki as a small very, very safe hideaway for total relaxation before the pressure of the forthcoming tournament. I’ll be assuring them of our safety on a daily basis, through the net.”

“I hope they don’t come running out there,” Dan replied apprehensively.

“I hope not. Now I have to take care of the Linda angle.”

The trip to Limbaki was not as long as Dan had imagined. It was not only much shorter; it was also smoother than he thought it

would be. He had dressed casually in black jeans, navy blue shirt, dark sunglasses and a stylish baseball cap. Joe wore a dark suit with no tie, dark glasses and a Greek Fisher man's cap.

Check in at the air Portugal desk was as early as 6.30am in the morning. They had taken the first flight to avoid running into as many people as possible and their plan worked. Registration went smoothly with only the lady at the airline check in desk taking a second look at Dan, after going through his passport. Dan was relieved to board the almost empty flight, without seeming to draw any unwanted attention to him or running into any nosy journalist.

The flight to Lisbon lasted for about two hours and thirty minutes. They had barely settled down in the first class lounge when the announcement to board the flight to Limbaki came over the loudspeaker.

“How long is the flight to Limbaki?” Dan asked as they walked towards the boarding gate.

“Roughly six hours or less if we have good strong winds behind us. Don't forget. You have been registered at the hotel in Pella as Tony Tedium. I am your elder brother John Tedium. I have made out IDs for registration purposes.”

Dan laughed. “I like the surname.”

“I'm glad you do. As you know I like telling the truth, particularly when no one gets hurt by my doing so.”

The weather turned out to be a bit rough but their flight touched down at the Jumi International airport at about 5.30pm. Dan looked at his watch and mentally recorded the fact that both Portugal and Limbaki were in the same time zone.

A short, dark, young man was waiting for them as they stepped out from the plane. He had John and Tony Tedium boldly written on the cardboard he was holding with both hands against

his chest and his round dark face broke into a welcoming smile when Joe waved at him.

“Welcome to Limbaki gentlemen,” he said as Joe and Dan followed him down the aisle towards customs.

“My name is Goodluck and it’s a pleasure to welcome you to our great country. First time here?”

“First for him, second for me. I was in Pella about three years ago but I stayed at the Olympian hotel and not at the Cavendish,” Joe answered. “Nice to meet you Goodluck. I take it arrangements are in place for us to continue to Pella as soon as we get out of here.”

“Sure,” Goodluck replied. “Immigration and customs won’t take long. We should be on our way to Pella very soon.”

Dan was pleasantly surprised to find that Jumi airport, though small, was neat and orderly. He also became quickly more relaxed on finding himself in the midst of very many other whites who were clearly there for vacation. The immigration and customs officials were polite and even appeared more efficient than some of the officers he had dwelt with in the states, particularly at JFK in New York.

“Not quite what you expect, from watching CNN,” Dan said, as they waited for their passports to be stamped. “The airport’s small but clean and orderly. The locals appear to be more relaxed and content than those of us in the States or Europe.”

“They don’t have super highways, millions of cars, monstrous palaces and Disney. But I suspect they’re much happier than we are, with all our wealth.”

“I’d rather be rich than poor though.”

“No question about that, Dan, but with the superrich the question is ‘what next’? What’s there to aspire to? A new twenty-seater jet? The latest Chopard? Tons of the most expensive_Beluga Caviar_or fois gras? Once in a while we have to step back and ask ourselves where it’s all heading.”

“That’s what this is all about Joe. I hope we find some answers in this paradise.”

The parking lot was not as well organized as the arrival hall. The scene looked chaotic as all the cars seemed to be trying to get out through the single exit at the same time. The blast of horns from shouting, angry drivers was deafening and a bit unnerving for Dan but he saw that against all expectations the cars managed to avoid each other at the very last minute and continued to make their way out of the parking lot, slowly but surely.

A brand new Mercedes Benz bus with a pleasant, clean uniformed driver behind the wheel was waiting for them at the far end of the parking lot. A slim pretty black girl in a blue executive suit and a Cavendish hotel tag, bearing the name Betty, pinned to her busty chest gave them a very welcoming smile as she ushered them into the bus. Several other white tourists were already seated in the bus by the time Dan and Joe clambered in and headed for the back seat. She waited for them to be seated and for their suitcases to be stowed away in the booth of the bus before getting in herself and signaling the bus driver to commence the journey. The driver eased the bus out of the airport’s busy parking lot and began the journey to Pella.

The weather was cool and breezy with the sun beginning to slowly give way to the approaching night. Once out of the parking lot, traffic in the vicinity of the airport became orderly and a bit heavy getting out of town, but the moment they battled their way onto the highway, the traffic petered out and the country side flashed by as they headed to Pella.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Limbaki. My name is Betty and it’s a real pleasure for me to point out some of the landmarks of our great country as we head to Pella, which has rightly been described as the most beautiful city in the world.”

The attention of the men and women in the bus turned politely to her as one of the men in the middle of the bus chuckled. “I’ll go along with most beautiful village miss. For city, you can’t beat Paris.”

“I’ll need to visit Paris to see for myself sir,” Betty said smoothly and resumed her well-rehearsed speech, which she delivered effortlessly in a smooth melodious voice. “The mountain to your left is called Mustaki Kovunku which means ‘mountain of peace’. It’s such a beautiful resting place, except for some wicked troublesome snakes that you have to watch out for now and again. We have free tours every weekend to the mountain and we can lend knee high booths free to those who might be worried about the snakes.”

Dan lay back against his seat and closed his eyes. “Quite interesting but I’d rather take a nap than look at the scenery.”

Joe chuckled. “Go ahead. For me the guide is the scenery. I wouldn’t mind her giving me a special guided tour of my room.”

Betty continued her spiel for another thirty minutes and then announced that they were already entering what she described as the renowned city of Pella. “Just ahead you can see the statue of a tall man, who is dressed as a warrior. His name is Pella. His Majesty Pella, the great emperor who ruled over the whole of Africa about 1,500 years ago, right from this beautiful city or village if you wish. We’re proud to be his heirs and for our city to be named after him.”

“What happened to his empire?” a man in the front of the bus asked, in an earnest but mocking tone that elicited hoots of laughter from some of the tourists.

Betty turned to the laughing group with a sweet smile. “I know. It sounds strange that this small city could have been the center of so much power many, many years ago. But we in Limbaki believe the story and that’s why you will find many men named Pella in Limbaki.”

“What happened to all the animals?” Another man asked. “I expected to be rubbing shoulders with lions or at least some wild cats.”

A lady answered before Betty could speak. “You’re in the wrong country, man. This is Limbaki not Kenya or Tanzania.”

Betty smiled happily. She loved tourists that were lively and showed some interest, either on what she was telling them about or on anything along the route.

Her worst days were those on which hardly any of the tourists bothered to even look at her as she went through her standard welcoming speech.

“You’re right madam,” she said light heartedly, “but the gentleman’s observation is very pertinent. It must seem strange, I’m sure, for some of you to be driving through a forest in Africa and not find even a bird flying overhead. In Limbaki we have a story for everything and there’s one behind the absence of lions and other wild animals.”

“They all got eaten up?” Someone volunteered with a chuckle.

“No. Far from it, sir. I think I still have a few minutes left to tell you, before we get to the hotel. As I mentioned earlier, Pella the Conqueror ruled the whole of Africa during his time. He was so powerful that even the animals bowed and trembled in fear whenever they came across him. The exception was a huge lion, named Kenyi, who paraded himself as the king of all the animals in

the kingdom of Limbaki.

During Pella's time the people mixed freely with the animals and could communicate with them in a special language which has since disappeared. Everything was fine until Kenyi made the mistake of announcing that he was not only the king of all the animals but also the king of every living being in Limbaki, including Pella the emperor. Pella was enraged and asked all the animals to denounce Kenyi, but they refused, and so Pella was forced to challenge Kenyi to a wrestling match, with the condition being that the loser would have to leave Limbaki along with all their supporters.

As you may all have guessed Pella handily defeated Kenyi, who was then forced to leave along with all other animals to guess where-----Kenya!" Some of the tourists laughed derisively and a few others clapped in mock applause.

The Cavendish hotel looked out of place in Pella, which Dan would later adjudge to be more of a small town rather than a city or village.

The town appeared at first glance to be lost in the middle of a thick lush forest, a few miles away from the Limbaki Atlantic shore coastline that the tourist agency described as being one of the most scenic in the world.

The town was imposingly sandwiched between two high hills, with flat tops, appropriately named Pella Table Hills 1 and 2 by the locals. Betty had informed them that the Atlantic Ocean could be seen from the top of both hills and that sightseeing tours and picnics to the Pella table hills were some of the many services obtainable at the hotel. All around the hills was nature at its most primeval state, but what usually took the breath away from anyone that came across the scene for the first time was the narrow clear stream that seemed to have come out of nowhere, to run right through the middle of the town, on its way to the Atlantic Ocean.

The white hotel manager was waiting for them at the entrance of the hotel, dressed in a stylish multi-colored African outfit. “Welcome to the Cavendish,” he said with a broad smile on his heavy set face as the tourists walked in. Dan guessed from his accent that he was French and turned out to be right.

“I’m Francois and it’s a pleasure to have all of you in our lovely palace. Please feel at home.”

Francois waited for the last tourist to get into the hotel and then gravitated towards Dan and Joe, who were seated on one of the sofas in the lobby, waiting for the others to get through their registration process.

“Hope you had a smooth flight?” He asked smiling broadly.

“Yes. Thanks,” Dan answered. “Nice place you have here.”

“We try to make it a home away from home, while giving you the best of nature. First time in Limbaki?”

“First for him, second for me,” Joe replied. “I was here a few years ago but it seems most of the staff have been changed. I enjoyed my stay,”

“You’re Right. We do have periodic rotation of staff, to ensure continuous top notch service. I think we can get you registered now.”

Francois escorted them to the reception and although he did not seem to recognize Dan as the great tennis player, Dan suspected he knew who he was but must have been warned to feign ignorance.

As both men were being checked in, he gave them a verbal rundown of the facilities in the hotel; Olympic size swimming pool, a top of the class gym and sporting centers including clay and hard tennis courts. The hotel also had a few shops for African artifacts

and a medium sized theater as well as a night club. Joe listened closely but Dan was only interested in being taken to his room, which turned out to be a suite on the tenth floor. He would have preferred a simple double room but Joe would not hear of it. He argued that a burn out was more likely to be cured faster in the type of luxurious, relaxing setting which both of them had been used to all their life.

As soon as Dan gave a generous tip to the beaming porter and eased him out of the room he put the 'Do not disturb' sign on the door, slowly walked into the large bedroom. Dan took off his shoes, all his clothes, and dropped with a deep sigh of relief on the king sized bed.

A few minutes later the phone on his bedside rang and he picked it up. It was Joe and he wanted to know what his program would be for the rest of the day. Dan told him that he had no intention of stepping out of the room for dinner or anything else. He would stay indoors and have room service before finally showering and going to bed. They agreed to meet for breakfast the next morning at about 8am.

Dan dropped the phone and reluctantly began the task he hated most; unpacking. He put away his clothes in the spacious wardrobe of the room, bunching and stuffing some in the drawers instead of hanging them as his mother used to insist he does. At the bottom of his large suitcase lay two top grade tennis rackets and three cases of tennis balls. He had argued against bringing them but Joe had insisted and finally prevailed on the grounds that he may get so bored that he may want to play with whoever he may find in Pella. Dan didn't think so but finally he relented and took them along. He placed the rackets and the tennis balls in one of the large wardrobe lockers and placed a pair of his shoes on the locker to remind him not to forget and leave the rackets in there on departure.

Waking up very early and usually with a start was a problem that Dan's mom had battled unsuccessfully to curb over the years. The fact that he had arrived from Europe rather tired the night before had no impact on the lifelong habit. As he lay on the bed reflecting on the hectic trajectory that had propelled him into seeking this idyllic hideaway, the phone by his bedside rang for a fourth time. He knew it would be Joe calling to remind him of breakfast at 8am and was tempted to ignore it once again but he knew that if he did, Joe was likely to come calling. Thus at the last minute he picked up the phone and sure enough it was Joe on the line. He told Joe to go ahead and that he would be joining him later at the restaurant. Reluctantly he got up from the bed and trudged over to the bathroom and stepped into the shower rather than the bathtub; another lifelong habit that his mom had failed to cure. He turned on the cold shower and let it shock him out of his lethargy before mixing it up with hot water.

Joe was his ebullient self at the restaurant, with his plate piled up high with food. "How do you find this joint? Hope you like it."

"Excellent. Much better than most of the overrated joints in the US and Europe. It's a great place Joe. Just what the doctor ordered."

Joe beamed. "Could be boring after a while but for short stays they don't come any better. And the staff is very well trained and friendly as you'll find out."

Dan picked at his fried eggs and bacon and concentrated more on his coffee. He got a few strange looks from some of the white tourists in the restaurant and after a while a white lady walked over to their table. She was in a smart khaki safari suit and had a warm smile on her kind looking face. Dan put her age at around early sixties.

"Hello Good morning Gentlemen", she said and then turned to Dan. Are you by any chance the great Daniel Pullman,

who just won the Wimbledon? I'm a great fan of yours."

Dan smiled. "Thanks ma'am. I hear that often and wish I were my twin brother. The name's Tony and I'll tell Dan how lucky he is to have a wonderful fan like you."

"Twin brother? Whoa. You both look terribly alike. And what a coincidence to meet you out here. I run the Africa Outreach Foundation and your brother has kindly signed on to headline our annual charity match after the US Open. It's so kind of him. Great help to the poor children of Africa."

Dan turned to Joe with a quizzical look and Joe gave him a barely perceptible confirmatory nod. Dan turned back to the lady with a smile. "That's good to hear. My brother's a kind hearted fellow. I'll tell him I had the pleasure of meeting you in Africa."

"Well nice to meet you. I hope you'll both be able to attend the match. Please tell your brother Gloria Winston says hi," she said moving away towards the pancakes.

"What's all that about a charity match?" Dan asked as soon as the lady was out of ear shot.

"I must have mentioned it to you. Not a big deal. It's a social responsibility gesture by one of our major clients, Jupiter Treadmills and it's a Sunday event about a week or two, I can't remember the exact date, after the US Open. You get to play a known or unknown player depending on who else they can net. It's in your contract."

"Not a problem. I was just surprised. Good news is I don't have to train for it," Dan said with a laugh.

Halfway through their breakfast a slim but busty chested nice looking black girl, that turned out to be Betty from the bus walked over to their table and gave Joe a hug. "Good morning love. Do you always get up that early?" She was in a blue flowery dress with

matching light blue earrings, broach and necklace.

Joe turned to Dan and winked. “Dan, you remember Betty. Betty Talisha, right? The specialist on tall stories! We met again in the club last night and boy can she dance. Tony is my younger brother and this’s his first time in Africa so I have to babysit him while we’re here,” he added with a laugh.

“Nice to meet you once again Betty,” Dan said shaking her hand and drawing a chair for her to seat down with them. “Joe is just a few months older than me but he makes a big play of being the wiser and more experienced older brother. I may end up being the one to take care of him.”

“I believe you,” she laughed. “We had real fun last night but I had to help him back to his room and put him to bed.”

“Betty works in a bank but moonlights as a tourist guide while on vacation, so we know who to turn to when we run out of cash,” Joe said.

Betty laughed. “Absolutely no problem with that; all major credit cards are accepted in Pella and I’m good at managing resources.”

“That was fast?” Dan said when Betty went to get a glass of orange juice. “You sure you know what you’re doing? You just saw her in the bus yesterday and met her later in the night, for crying out loud. I hope you brought along some condoms.”

“Oh, sure. I brought enough for both of us, just in case you feel”

“Count me out,” Dan interrupted categorically. “I came out here to rest Joe, not to run after black ass.”

Betty got back to the table and Dan could not help noticing that she had long lovely and shapely legs with which she moved

with so much grace. Much as he was not interested in female companionship while in Pella, he mentally gave his brother high marks for his ability to rapidly hook up gorgeous looking girls such as Betty and Linda.

The discussion turned to how well they could enjoy themselves while in Pella. Betty offered to take them out in the evening, to watch an artistic show in Pella's only cultural center, which according to Betty, was built through a donation by the Ford foundation, in a big modern village just outside Pella. Although he would have preferred to spend the day and night quietly, Dan decided at the last minute to accept the offer and they all agreed to meet at 7pm in the lobby, to be driven along with other guests to the venue of the event.

Dan decided to leave Joe and Betty alone and head back to his room. He felt that the suite would have been fully made up by the time he got there and he was surprised when he arrived and found the 'Makeup Room' card still hanging on the door, which was slightly ajar. He hesitated for a minute, unsure whether to turn back and return to the lobby until the cleaning was done or go into the room and wait.

Finally deciding to go in, rather than return all the way back to the lobby, he tapped gently on the door, walked in and stopped dead in his tracks.

A young, tall, neatly dressed maid with a duster in her hand and a bemused look on her face stared diffidently at him. She was simply put the most beautiful girl Dan had ever seen in his life. She had a striking unforgettable face, with evenly spaced facial contours tying together soft full lips, a slightly broad nose with little flaring ends and brown guileless eyes that seemed to see right through to his suddenly stiffening dick. She had the type of dark shining skin he had seen mostly on the women in Brazil

CHAPTER 3

Dan had over the years, come across stunningly beautiful girls; whites, blacks, Latinos, Asians, you name them, he had seen them all. His parents had always been thankful to the almighty Lord for giving them a son with such extraordinary discipline that he hardly ever looked twice at a girl, no matter how beautiful she was. The exception had been Cindy, who he had met at his 26th birthday party. He had been swept off his feet the moment he came face to face with her, as he went round the room thanking the guests for attending his birthday party. Everything about her was striking, the auburn hair long and lush, the green eyes captivating and the skin so smooth and inviting. She was of average height but carried herself so regally that she appeared to be much taller than she was. Dan wanted her right away but his rising celebrity status didn't seem to have any impact on her and she ignored him for almost the entire duration of the party.

She had been invited to the party by Joe's girlfriend, Linda Houston, who was one of her closest friends.

"Cindy is one of your biggest fans, Dan. She just couldn't stay away from the chance to see you up close," Linda said with a mischievous glint in her blue eyes.

Cindy made a face but gave Dan a sweet smile and stretched out her hand: "Nice to meet you Dan, and happy birthday."

"It's really a pleasure to meet you Cindy. Thanks for, for coming," Dan said trying to reign in his emotions as he shook her hand.

"Oh and congratulations for your great tennis exploits. My father is a tennis fanatic and swears you're the best in the world."

"I'm flattered. How I wish you were one too."

"I hope it's not too late to make amends," Cindy said looking

directly at him with a smile that Dan found both intriguing and very promising.

Dan lingered a few more minutes with them and had wanted the conversation to continue, but he felt that Cindy was beginning to lose interest and reluctantly decided to move on, after mentally telling himself that he had to get her at all cost.

It would take another series of encounters and about a year later before Dan could have the pleasure of a first kiss from Cindy. In the interim period he had gone to great lengths to woo her and had been continually rebuffed until he casually mentioned to his mom that he was enamored by a beautiful girl named Cindy.

His mom paused in her watching of a boring TV sitcom and turned to look at her son with keen interest.

She knew by keeping her ear to the ground, that Dan had once in a while dated or had flings with girls that he however never brought home or introduced to her or his dad. As he grew older she began to worry about why he didn't seem to be interested in having a steady girlfriend. She tried pairing him with some of the daughters of her friends, girls with the same social class and upbringing as Dan but none lasted more than a few weeks with Dan. In desperation she periodically broached the subject, each time in a light hearted manner and each time Dan fell back on the intense pressure of having to cope with his many tennis tournaments, as the reason why he was finding it difficult to settle down in a long term relationship.

The unexpected revelation by Dan was therefore very pleasant information, which she was already planning on telephoning to tell her husband, as soon as she would be through with Dan.

“Cindy who?” she asked

“Cindy Thompson. I hear her father is an oil magnate from Texas and that he owns the biggest helicopter manufacturing plant in California.”

“I’ve heard of him and I think your dad knows him. But how did you get to meet her?”

“At my 26th birthday party. She was brought to the party by Linda, who’s her very good friend.”

“How does she feel about a handsome superstar like you? She must be over the moon by now.”

“Not quite there yet. In fact the reality is that she’s playing hard to get, same game dad said you played until he swept you off your feet and you couldn’t resist him anymore.”

“You know how much your dad exaggerates, but let’s leave him out of this. What do you plan to do?”

“Absolutely nothing mom. I’ll just let matters take their natural course. She may not be the one for me.”

Dan’s mom did not share the same sentiment as her son. She went immediately to work, firstly to research the background and reputation of Cindy and secondly to find out all she could about her parents. The results she obtained on both counts were quite pleasing to her. Matters had progressed rapidly from that point on. It turned out that Dan’s dad was a friend of one of Cindy’s uncle through whom, under prodding from Dan’s mom, both families got together for dinner; first in Dan’s parents’ home and subsequently in that of Cindy’s parents. By the time Dan headed for Africa, things had turned around and Cindy was madly in love with him. Wedding arrangements were already being discussed by Dan and Cindy’s families.

Dan never imagined in his wildest dreams that he would one day be coming face to face with another woman that he would find

to be more attractive than Cindy. And to think that this would be in Africa of all places and that the girl in question would be an African hotel maid, in a simple drab uniform and no makeup whatsoever!

“I’m sorry sir,” the girl said breaking the spell of that brief enchanting moment. Her voice was tremulous and she looked a bit rattled “I’m almost through, just wiping the table and...”

“That’s ok,” Dan said quickly, surprised at his sudden wish for her to continue her job. He moved over and sat at the sofa and watched her as she meticulously wiped every inch of the table. She had a tight fitting, light blue uniform which highlighted well sculptured curves that made Dan’s heart beat a little bit faster than usual.

Suddenly he had a strong urge to talk. “What’s your name?”

“Letitia,” she answered, her face now creased with worry. “I started a bit late because...”

“Don’t worry about not finishing yet,” Dan interrupted, giving her a warm reassuring smile. “I’m just a bit bored and feel like chatting that’s all. I’m not in a rush, so you can take all the time you need.”

“Thank you very much sir,” Letitia replied with visible relief. “I just have the table left.”

“How long have you been working for this hotel?”

“About a year sir.”

“Do you like working here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Excuse my prying but are you well paid?”

“Certainly not sir,” Letitia replied without hesitation.

“Then why are you still doing this?”

Letitia smiled impishly and for the first time looked at ease. “I get to meet nice people like you sir.”

Dan laughed. “Smart answer. Do you get to meet that many?”

“Not really. You’re the first young one I’ve met sir. I’ve met a few nice but very old couples.”

Letitia finished wiping the table and picked up her basket of assorted cleansers. “I’m through sir. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,” she said moving towards the door.

Dan stood up and brought out a twenty dollar bill and gave it to her. “Thanks a lot. Will you be taking care of me during my stay in your hotel?”

“I hope so sir and thank you very much. You’re so kind.”

Dan saw her out the door and dropped onto the sofa, his mind in turmoil. He realized that he did not want her to leave and was shocked at the fact that he was already looking forward to seeing her the next day.

‘What the hell is going on with me?’ he silently asked himself. How could he suddenly be having a strong urge to see the African maid again only after spending such a short time with her, doing nothing but chatting, and especially when Cindy was out there waiting for him in the US, as well as a bevy of stunningly beautiful girls who were also out there yearning to spend the rest of their lives with him. He told himself that he was in Pella to recover from burn-out and not to start lusting after or getting infatuated with an African maid who, he had to admit, was extraordinarily beautiful.

He resisted the urge to turn on the television but got onto

his laptop and logged on through the hotel's internet portal. It took him quite a while and several drafts before he was satisfied with his note to Cindy and his parents, telling them that he had decided to spend a few days in a safe, quiet African country where he would not be hounded by the press. He sent off the mails and turned off his computer without attempting to find out what was happening in the world.

When Dan, later in the day, decided to take a walk around the hotel he was subconsciously hoping to run into Letitia. He walked into and out of the various shops in different parts of the hotel lobby, not really looking to buy anything. Tired of checking out the stores and window shopping he headed for the swimming pool, lay down on a lounge chair and ordered an alcohol free tall glass of assorted juices. Virtually all those splashing around or swimming in the big swimming pool were white tourists mainly from Europe. A few Asians that he suspected to be Chinese were also in the pool. He realized he was having some form of jet lag when he dozed off under the warm African sun and woke up about an hour later to find Joe by his side.

“Was looking for you all over the place,” Joe said grinning. “My mail has quite a number of people really worried out there in the states boy.”

“Cindy got in touch?”

“Cindy and our parents have been ringing all day. Your mobile has been switched off right?”

“Right but I'll call them later in the evening. Just don't feel like doing so for now.”

“I've assured them that all is well and nothing to worry about but you know what images Africa evokes out there. You really should call them soonest Dan.”

A Nordic looking girl in a sexy bikini walked over and hooked Joe's arm. "I've been looking for you all over, lover boy. Hi Mr. handsome, names Britney, what's yours?"

"Tony. I'm John's younger brother."

"Nice to meet you and sorry to take him away," she said dragging Joe away, who gave Dan a wink and said. "Will get you around 6.30pm for the show ok?"

Dan watched them walk away and decided to return to his room to take a nap before going out with Joe. He looked all around as he headed for his room and was disappointed not to see Letitia. As he opened his door and walked into his room he half expected to see her making up his bed but the room was empty and he felt a bit depressed as he undressed and dropped onto the bed. Something worrisome was happening to him and he was beginning to get really apprehensive at the direction his emotions were beginning to take. He told himself that it was impossible for him to have fallen in love at first sight and even rejected the idea of being infatuated. And yet he wanted so badly to see her again, to talk some more with her and possibly hold her for a while in his arms. This must be how it feels to be addicted he thought.

By the time Joe got back he found Dan, who had been unable to sleep, dressed in casual wear and all set to go. According to the pretty tour guide, Pella may have been, over hundreds of years ago, the center of the African universe. However the drive to the open square theater, which took about one hour, was through a nondescript town with mainly, single storied buildings, most of which appeared, in the poorly lit streets, to be old and rusty. Many of the roads were tarred but several ran into untarred ones with quite a good number of both the tarred and untarred roads having deep potholes that jarred the bones, as the bus ran over them on its way to the theater. Scattered among the modern houses were some mud houses with thatched roofs.

As the bus drove slowly into the outskirts of the town, the buildings gave way to a full bodied dark forest through which the bus chugged along at a much slower pace. Dan looked without much interest at the tall receding trees and wondered idly about how great the seat of power could have been during the time of Pella the emperor; if, that is, such a character ever existed.

By the time they got to the venue of the theater, there were already about three dozen white tourists and many villagers chatting, in groups, as they waited for the village troupe to set up their instruments and start the show. Bright moonlight and a few gas lamps illuminated the scene with calm cinematic beauty. Wooden benches were arranged in rows before the cemented clearing on which drums, flutes and other locally made musical instruments had been arranged. As the colorfully dressed musicians picked up their instruments, the crowd started taking their seats. Dan and Joe sat in the front row as the show began with instrumental rendition of the national anthem and a short welcoming speech by a short black man with a goatee beard.

The first part of the spectacle started with energetic drumming and percussions, followed by the rhythmic coordinated movements of five bare chested boys and one scantily clad young girl, whose attention they fought to get through a well-choreographed dance routine that had the audience cheering with appreciation.

As the cheering was rising to a crescendo, the girl pointedly rejected each of the suitors and rather walked into the crowd to select a pot-bellied white tourist who initially was shyly hesitant to follow her to the stage. Under prodding from his wife, he got onto the stage and got loud cheers as he danced with the girl, to the mock chagrin of the rejected boys.

The girl then urged the crowd to join them on the stage. By this time the crowd had fully warmed up to the drumming, catchy

music and stylish dancing and before long the stage was crowded, with most of the tourists dancing uninhibitedly. Joe was among them, with Betty clinging to him, but Dan preferred to sit back and watch the spectacle, amused at some of the awfully coordinated movements from some of the tourists.

“You don’t want to dance sir?”

Dan turned at the question and was stunned to see Letitia standing and smiling behind him. She was the last person he expected to see at the event, but what shocked him more was his reaction. His heart beat faster and he felt overwhelmingly excited to see her. She was in tighter fitting native attire that again brought out her attractive figure, in a sexy and almost racy manner. Dan found himself getting a hard on and could not understand what was happening to him.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” he said. “Are you not tired from working all day?”

“I knew you would be here,” she said with an intriguing smile on her soft beautiful lips. “I didn’t thank you enough for the big tip you gave me. I thought I should pay you back by dancing for you. Let’s go and dance sir,” she added taking his hand.

He followed her to the stage and was surprised at how quickly he got carried away, under the bright enthralling moon, by the trance like music and erotic embraces between Letitia and himself.