



Available September, 2008

from Kunati Books

ISBN 978-1-60164-157-1

© 2008 Dave Donelson

All rights reserved

## Chapter 1

### Mai-Munene

Dr. Jaime Talon sliced into the boy's cheek where the corrupted flesh festered just below the eye. When he pierced the skin with the lancet, a thin, clear fluid dribbled from the incision. He applied a little pressure with the flat of the blade and was rewarded with a gush of viscous brown pus. The boy flinched each time the knife touched his face, but that was his only reaction. Jaime guessed he was no more than fourteen. He placed a gauze pad over the weeping incision and told the boy to hold it there while the wound drained. With antibiotics and constant attention, the infection could be kept out of the

boy's eye, he thought. The antibiotics would come from the clinic's nearly-empty medicine locker; Jaime didn't know who would attend to the dressing when the boy returned to the Lunda Libre guerillas who held him in the mopane forest of the Congo highlands.

"What is your name?" Jaime asked.

"Christophe," the boy answered. His voice was high and tight with tension. He cleared his throat, quietly, as though he were afraid to disturb Jaime's concentration. Jaime put the lancet down and smiled gently, hoping to calm the boy's fears.

"Would you like to stay here for a few days?" he asked. The boy shook his head slowly and looked down. "What if I give you food? Enough to take some back for the others?" Christophe shrugged but shook his head again, glancing furtively at the armed figure waiting for him near the trail at the edge of the forest. Even from a distance, Jaime could see the man's eyes constantly shifting from the boy to the road and back to the trail leading into the forest.

"You must stay at least for tonight so the wound can drain. I will speak to him. Stay here and do not remove the pad." Jaime locked his meager tray of surgical instruments inside a cabinet to remove temptation, then walked purposefully across the clearing to the gunman, keeping his hands out of his pockets and in full sight. He stopped a few feet away when the rebel shifted his weight from one foot to the other and casually pointed his rifle at Jaime's stomach. Jaime was not intimidated. "The boy will stay with me tonight," he declared firmly, trying to forestall any argument.

"No, *dakta bandia*," the man replied with a sneer.

Jaime ignored the insult. He had been called much worse than a sham doctor by many people, including his ex-wife, whom he deeply offended when he walked away from his career in New York to come to Africa.

“If you take him away now, he will become blind. He won’t be of much use to you then, will he?” Jaime demanded boldly. The man shrugged as if he didn’t care, but looked Jaime in the face to see if he was lying. Jaime pressed the slight advantage. “If you let him stay, I will give you some food to take back. You can stay with him in the breezeway and I will give you the supplies in the morning. Okay?” The rebel pondered the offer.

“I want ‘cillin,” the man said.

“Ampicillin? Do you have bloody shits?” Jaime asked, then thought to himself, of course you have bloody shits. You all have them.

“I want ‘cillin,” the man demanded again. He thrust his chin upward with defiance. He gave a slight nod toward the boy, offering his grudging cooperation, then shifted his automatic rifle from one hand to the other to remind Jaime he had the means to enforce the bargain.

“Okay, fine. He stays here and I’ll give you some ampicillin.” The deal closed, Jaime turned abruptly and walked back to the boy waiting on the veranda. The ampicillin won’t work on the shigellosis bacterium that’s causing all the dysentery in the area, he thought, but it’s all I’ve got and it’s all they’ll take anyway because they think it cures everything. Jaime had learned long ago that the psychology of practicing medicine in the Congo was as important as the mechanics of it. Most of his patients regarded him as just another *nganga*, a witch doctor; his salves and ointments and pills and potions just

another form of the traditional healer's herbs and feathers and powders ground from their ancestors' bones. Sometimes, he wasn't sure they were so wrong.

Jaime took the pus-soaked gauze away from the boy's face and told him to sit still while he deadened the skin with an injection of chlorprocaine and sewed a small drain into the wound to keep it open for the night. The boy didn't move while Jaime stitched just below his eye. He dusted the skin with antiseptic and covered it with clean gauze and taped it in place. Then he handed the boy two antibiotic capsules. He would give him another dose in the morning along with enough capsules to complete the course of medication on his own after he left.

"This ampicillin won't do much for your friends' bloody shits, but it should clear this mess up," he said. "Come with me." He took the boy into the breezeway between the two low buildings of the clinic and pointed to a bench near the back.

"You stay here tonight. If I had an empty bed, you could stay in the ward, but I don't. Your buddy can stay with you if he wants. I want to check on you later and give you some more medicine. Understand?" The boy nodded and sat on the bench made from rough planks resting across empty wooden crates. Jaime could surmise a great deal of the boy's story without having to ask. The infected mess on his face came from a brand burned into it by his captors, the Lunda Libre. The scabrous mark kept him from running away because it matched those worn by soldiers in the rebel army. If he were caught alone by rival insurgents or by the government authorities, he'd be immediately arrested or worse.

"Where are you from?" Jaime asked.

"Bumba"

“Then you are Chokwe?”

“Yes.”

“What happened when you were taken from your village?”

The boy didn’t answer. He just looked at the ground between his feet.

“It’s okay,” Jaime said soothingly. “Was anyone hurt?”

Christophe sucked in a sharp breath and stiffened his small body against his memories. “Everyone was hurt,” he said. He glanced quickly at Jaime to see if he had said too much, then looked back down at the ground. He still hurt inside from the things that had been done to him—as well as the things he had seen.

“What happened?” Jaime asked gently. He wasn’t curious about the tale; he had heard more than enough of them already. But telling it might incise the wound festering in the boy’s heart.

Once he started, Christophe talked softly but rapidly, as if he wanted to get the story over with. “The Lunda Libre came in the morning. It was so early no one had gone to the fields. We tried to run to the forest to hide, but there were too many of them and they shot us and chopped us and beat us with clubs. The noise and the smoke, it was horrible.

“I ran with *ma mere* and the baby but she fell. Her feet tangled in her *pagne* and I couldn’t pull her up. The soldiers grabbed me and held my arms. I tried to fight them but they made me look at her anyway. I could not stop them.

“One soldier yanked the baby from *ma mere* and threw him on the ground. When the baby cried, the big soldier kicked him like a football and he flew threw the air and bounced on the ground on the other side of the road and then he lay still.” His voice

became more agitated. “The other soldiers laughed. It was a big joke.” He lifted his head, staring at something in the distance Jaime couldn’t see.

“One man pulled *ma mere’s pagne* over her head. Another big soldier stomped on her until she stopped struggling. Then they all violated her, taking turns. One soldier kicked her between her legs before he stuck his thing into her. I tried to fight the soldiers holding me and yelled at them to stop hurting *ma mere* but they would not and one hit me in the stomach with his gun and I got sick on the ground. *Ma mere* screamed. Then the big soldier cut off her *sein* with his machete and then he violated her with the blade and then she died in the dirt. I could not help her because they held me too hard.” His head drooped. He took a deep, shuddering breath before he looked up.

“*C’est très triste,*” Jaime said solemnly. Christophe went on as if he had not heard him, as if he could not stop telling the story now, his voice falling lower and lower until it became little more than a husky whisper. Jaime could barely hear him.

“Then they dragged me to the other end of the village. There were two of us. Eduard and me. They took us to a man from my village tied up in the road. It was Maurice Lumbanga. He was on his knees and they told us to kill him. Eduard would not do it, so they smashed his head with a club. The big soldier gave me a machete so heavy I had to hold it with both hands. He made me cut Maurice Lumbanga with it.

“They shouted and pointed to Eduard and waved their weapons at me until I raised the blade and swung it at Maurice Lumbanga’s head. His skin split and I saw his white bone. He fell over but he did not die. He cried out to me but my ears would not hear him.

“I chopped again and again. The machete was too heavy. I hit his shoulder and a piece of his flesh flew off. I hit his head again but he would not die. The soldiers kept yelling louder and louder. When I swung the blade, they laughed and cheered. Then the big soldier took the machete away from me. He put his pistol in my hand and held my wrist to aim it. ‘Be a warrior’ he shouted at me. So I shot Maurice Lumbanga in the face and his head blew up and his blood ran into the ground. Maurice Lumbanga gave me a whistle one time, but they made me kill him.”

Christophe stopped talking and sat motionless on the bench, his head bent so low Jaime couldn’t see his eyes. The breezeway was hot; the late afternoon sun baked the tin roof and no air moved through to cool it. In the stillness, Jaime could hear the distant grind of the machinery at the mine and the soft panting of the boy.

“Rest here. It is over now,” Jaime said, although he knew that it was never truly over in the Congo. He gentled the boy with a light hand on his shoulder. “We will see what happens tomorrow.” He left Christophe sitting quietly in the breezeway and walked back into his simple office. The rebel had disappeared into the brush, but he would be back because the thugs always come back sooner or later. They inhabit every landscape, scurrying about beneath the surface of civilization in some places but rampaging right over it in others, like swarming cockroaches. Like here. Jaime had faced them before, even in America, forced to choose whether to fight them or to endure them many times before he escaped from the rough streets of Chicago to go to college. The right choice always seems clear to someone who doesn’t have to live with the consequences of the decision: villains must be defeated. But it is never as easy as that. What about the victims? Are you supposed to leave them dying by the side of the road while you pursue

their tormentors to get retribution in some kind of self-aggrandizing crusade? The real choice, the one that rips your guts, is between cleaning the blood off the wounds of the victims or abandoning them to their pain while you march off righteously to gun down their tormentors.

Jaime fought the boiling urge to go looking for Christophe's guard. In his youth, he would have waded in and pounded the smirk off the man's face. Instead, he closed his eyes and forced himself to take three deep breaths to clear his mind.

When the edge left his anger, he went to the medicine locker for a bottle of ampicillin to ransom Christophe's time at the clinic. The supplies were lower than usual. He thought about emptying the capsules and refilling them with sugar so he could save the real antibiotics for those patients who deserved them, but he couldn't bring himself to do that. Even though the ampicillin wouldn't cure the shigellosis that plagued nearly everybody in the region, it would help them ward off secondary infections and allow their bodies to better cope with the bacterium that caused the violent diarrhea. Jaime was a doctor who lived by his oath; he couldn't bring himself to do the wrong thing even in the right cause. He couldn't ignore a plea for help—even one that came wrapped in extortion.

Jaime's medicine locker, like the one that held sterile dressings and all the other supplies, was nearly empty. It was never completely full, but the relief aid meant to funnel through Moshe Messime's government had slowed to a trickle as more and more of it was diverted to the place where all the other resources in the country went, to the foreign bank accounts that would support the dictator's opulent lifestyle after he fled the country at the end of his regime, whenever that might be. Jaime's pleas for help had



drawn impassive shrugs from the bureaucrats at the Ministry of Health the last time he was there. Their own rich lives were crimped by the lack of aid funds they normally skimmed with impunity, so they had little sympathy for him. When the crooks have only each other to steal from, Jaime knew, times are desperate. The medicine cabinet was bare. He needed a new source of support and he needed it soon.

Running footsteps crunched in the breezeway. Jaime looked up just as the rebel gunman burst into the office and pinned him to the chair with the muzzle of his rifle. The rebel snatched the ampicillin from the desk and ran back out without a word. Jaime rushed to the door and saw the man dragging Christophe across the road toward the forest. “Wait!” he shouted after them. A low rumble mounted steadily in the distance. Christophe looked desperately over his shoulder. As he disappeared into the forest, his eyes flashed briefly with gratitude.

# # #

The rumble became three trucks full of soldiers that roared past the clinic on the single road that ran through Mai-Munene to the diamond mine by the river. The village was little more than a scattering of one- and two-room mud-and-wattle houses stretched along the side of the road opposite the fenced-off mine compound. A few of the huts had tin roofs, but most had thatch, which was considerably cheaper. The houses didn’t sit in neat, ordered rows like bucolic, picture-postcard English cottages, but rather in organic clusters separated by small garden plots and struggling corn fields. Across from the clinic, there was a village square of sorts, an empty place around a cluster of raffia palms where a handful of merchants set up a market every week.

Soldiers came and went, but this was more than the usual squad or two in a truck guarding the river. Curious, and unable to follow Christophe, Jaime followed them. As he walked rapidly up the dirt road, villagers peeked out cautiously to see what kind of threat the trucks full of soldiers presented. Since the mine opened near the end of the colonial era, the village had been assaulted by everyone from so-called freedom fighters to invading armies from Angola, as well as local tribal gangs eager to profit from the rich diamond deposits in the river bed. Living under near-constant threat of bloody destruction had made the people of Mai-Munene both resilient and careful. A few of them, seeing no immediate danger, joined Jaime and followed the trucks up the dusty road.

Jaime reached the mine gate just a minute after Pieter Jakobsen arrived. Pieter, his assistant, had been making a house call on a pregnant villager to administer some prenatal vitamins in person so the mother-to-be couldn't sell them to someone else, which was a temptation when he gave her more than a day's supply at a time.

"What's up?" Jaime asked as he joined Pieter at the gate.

"Don't know. A FIC convoy full of regular army goofs just pulled in. Doesn't look violent, but there's something going on."

The two men walked into the mine compound and were waved past the pole barrier by the guards. A handful of *Fédération Indépendance de Congo* soldiers milled around the trucks, displaying their guns like peacocks fanning their tail feathers before the women in the small crowd. A captain with fierce tribal tattoos across his cheeks eyed Jaime and Pieter intensely. A tall white man, muscular but going to fat, stood beside one

of the trucks talking to Joao de Santos, the mine manager. As Jaime and Pieter worked their way through the small crowd, de Santos waved them over.

“Dr. Talon, this is the most Reverend Thomas Alben, who represents the new owners of the mine,” de Santos announced grandly, displaying the obsequious talent that had ensured his job under several successive governments. “Reverend Alben, Dr. Talon is the proprietor of the clinic at Mai-Munene. Pieter Jakobsen is his assistant.”

“Call me Brother Tom,” the heavy man said as he offered Jaime a sweaty handshake. Road dust caked the creases of his wrist.

“You own the mine now?” Jaime asked.

“No, not hardly,” Alben chuckled. “I’m just a lowly missionary from the Church of the Angels. Our pastor, Gary Peterson, made an investment in the mine at the invitation of President Messime. That opened the doors for us, and I’m here to establish a mission for the church. I’m a miner of souls, if you will, not a miner of sparkly stones.” Alben smiled beatifically throughout his little speech. Jaime groaned inwardly at the forced metaphor.

“I’m surprised anyone would make such a risky investment,” Jaime said. “This mine must be a target in the sights of every warlord on the continent.”

“Things will be a little more stable in the future,” Alben smiled. “We have very strong support.”

“From whom?” Jaime asked.

“We’re Americans, you know,” Alben answered opaquely.

Before Jaime could ask another question, de Santos came to Alben’s rescue. “Brother Tom is going to reopen the school,” he told Jaime. Then he turned to the

missionary, who had removed his hat and was mopping his head with a large white handkerchief. “Would you like to see the building now?” he asked. Alben carefully smoothed his thin sandy hair over his head and replaced his wide-brimmed hat before he answered.

“What I’d like better would be a glass of something cold to drink and a place to sit down out of the sun,” he answered.

“Of course! You can tour the village after you have washed off the dust of the road,” said de Santos. “Come into the office and rest for a moment.”

“If you’ll excuse us, Dr. Talon?” the missionary said.

“Of course,” Jaime nodded.

“What the bloody hell is that all about?” Pieter asked when de Santos and Alben had gone inside the low concrete-block mine office and the onlookers began to straggle back to the village. Jaime and Pieter followed them.

“It’s hard to tell. Messime gave the mine to a preacher in Atlanta? There’s a snake in that woodpile someplace,” Jaime said.

“I smell CIA, don’t you?” Pieter said.

“Maybe. But Alben doesn’t look like a spook. He’s too out of shape. I’m curious about what he meant about ‘strong support.’ That sounds ominous.”

“The Second Coming, do you suppose?” said Pieter.

“I’m sure Brother Tom would be the first to know,” agreed Jaime.

A few of the villagers waved casually to them as they walked by. The excitement over for the time being, most people settled back into the shade of their houses to wait for

the heat of the day to pass. Children played in the dirt while their mothers sat in the doorways watching the two white men stroll by.

“This might be a good thing, you know,” Pieter offered.

“How so?”

“Well, my da always said there’s money flying loose whenever something gets bought or sold, so a bright fellow can grab some if he stays nearby and keeps his eyes open.”

Jaime chuckled at the vision of the gangly Pieter jumping around in a vortex of dollar bills, snatching at them as they swirled around his head. “Your da may be right,” he said. “But preachers are better known for raking money in than they are for giving it out, especially the ones who own diamond mines.”

“Might be worth a try, though,” Pieter insisted. “His money’s as green as the next man’s.” Pieter was a South African Jaime met during the Ebola outbreak at Kikwit. He was tall and angular, earning him the nickname *marabout dakta* from the children in the village because his long legs and nearly-white blonde hair greatly resembled a marabout stork. Pieter went into his quarters at the end of the clinic when they got there. “See you in a bit,” he said.

As he walked on toward the dispensary, Jaime peered across the road into the forest where Christophe had vanished. He wondered if he would ever see the boy again. The odds of the wound flaring up to destroy the boy’s eye were still not in his favor and Jaime thought about going after him, but he knew he’d never find the constantly-moving rebels in the maze of narrow foot paths and animal trails in the bush.

An old woman from the village, Kafutshi, was waiting for him in the breezeway. “*Bonjour, dakta,*” she said in a gravelly voice. “My granddaughter pricked her thumb. She cannot help me make my *nkisi*. Can you heal her?” The old woman dragged a young girl in a ragged yellow dress from behind her and thrust the girl’s hand toward Jaime. The girl hid her face with her free hand, but otherwise let the old woman manhandle her as she would. Her thumb was wrapped in a bit of dirty cloth.

“What is your name?” Jaime asked as he unwound the rag. The girl giggled but didn’t say anything.

“She is Celestine,” Kafutshi answered for her. “She is a good girl, although her head is empty. Her mother brings her from Mpala. She tends to her little brothers and helps me make the *nkisi*.” Jaime had seen the little rag dolls Kafutshi and the other women made from scraps of clothing that had been worn beyond wearing; very little went to waste in the village. At one time, similar figures were made to hold charms to invoke various spirits. Today, for the most part, they were simply craft goods made to earn a few pennies from passing traders. The people still believed in the spirits, but the dolls were a source of cash; they were a practical folk who needed income.

The girl’s thumb had reddened around a small puncture wound. Jaime was happy to see there were no lines of infection shooting toward the wrist and the pus was clear. He applied a topical antiseptic and wrapped it in a sterile bandage. “Keep this clean, but do not get it wet. Okay?” he said. The girl dropped her other hand from her face and nodded shyly. Her dark eyes were bright. Kafutshi handed Jaime a cloth doll.

“I have no money to pay you, but you can sell this *nkisi* when the trader comes,” the old woman said. Jaime thanked her and smiled at the little figure with its hemp hair and crudely sewn eyes.

“This *nkisi* looks like someone who needs a job,” he said to Celestine. “I think I will keep her here to guard my instruments.” Celestine giggled as he propped the cloth doll up on a shelf next to a cabinet.

Kafutshi cackled, “I think your head is as empty as this girl’s, *dakta*.”

# # #

The next day, Joao de Santos brought Alben around to the clinic on his tour of the tired village. They were accompanied by a squad of soldiers led by the scowling captain with the tribal scars, who looked like he was casing the village for a robbery as much as guarding it against rebel attack.

“Looking for a place to build a cathedral?” Jaime asked as he greeted them in the breezeway. The short, swarthy mine manager and the tall, corpulent missionary filled the small space, blocking the late afternoon breeze that was just beginning to rise. The soldiers milled around on the other side of the road.

“No, nothing like that,” Alben answered. “Joao was just telling me what fine work you do, Dr. Talon, and I wanted to see your facility for myself.” He looked around, taking in the two sparsely-furnished rooms on either side of the breezeway with a quick glance.

“This is it, what there is of it,” Jaime said. He gestured to his left. “This is the ward—all three beds worth. And this is the dispensary.” He pointed to his right. “That

cabinet is where we would store supplies if we had any. I sleep in the next room, at this end of the building. Pieter's room is on the other side of the ward." Alben looked into the ward where a man wiped his bed-ridden father's face with a damp cloth and two other villagers lay quietly staring at the ceiling. Jaime expected Alben to go in to offer some Christian comfort to them, but instead the missionary turned away and stepped into the dispensary. He surveyed the room, then picked up the *nkisi*, turning it over curiously in his thick hand. His damp fingers left a stain on the doll's breast.

"I've seen voodoo dolls like these in New Orleans. Do you practice a little juju on the side, doctor?" he asked with a smirk.

"I'm thinking about it," Jaime answered. "If I don't get money for medications pretty soon, juju may be all I have to work with. Actually, dolls like these used to be religious totems. Now, the village women make them to sell to the traders, who probably mark them up a thousand percent and sell them in the tourist markets."

"Interesting. How many of them do you think they turn out?" When Jaime shrugged, Alben changed the subject. "Who funds your clinic now?" he asked, very businesslike. For a minister, the man was highly interested in cash flows and balance sheets. Jaime explained that the clinic had been founded by Methodist missionaries who fled during the genocidal violence that swept the country before Messime came to power. Jaime re-opened it using World Health Organization money after the Ebola outbreak in Kikwit, where he had been sent as part of a team to fight the horrendous plague. Now, though, less and less WHO money was making its way through the filtering fingers at the capitol in Kinshasa, so he needed to find a new source of funding. Alben only half listened as he inspected the doll closely.



“Do you think your church would give us some financial support?” Jaime asked.

Alben tore his eyes off the doll and looked at Jaime. “Maybe,” he answered offhandedly. “Are you a Christian man?”

The question surprised Jaime. “Not exactly,” he answered honestly.

“But you’re not a Jew, are you? Talon doesn’t sound like a Jewish name.”

“No. I’m pretty neutral about the whole God thing,” Jaime said, trying to cut off any proselytizing. He was beginning to stiffen under the inquiry. Jaime had little patience for the personal questions, unrelated to treating patients, that potential donors and grant administrators always asked. It was as if they needed to own a little bit of you before they would let you see any of their money. That was one reason Jaime hadn’t fit well into the world of institutional medicine in New York.

“A man of science. That puts you above the fray, of course,” Alben smiled condescendingly. “Well, that’s a strike against you, but you never know. I wouldn’t count on it, though. The Church of the Angels is spread pretty thin right now expanding our mission in the Congo and elsewhere.”

“But there’s enough money to buy diamond mines?” Jaime asked pointedly.

“Those financial arrangements are rather complex, quite beyond your ken, I’m sure,” Alben snapped. His rebuff made Jaime bristle, but before he could pursue the subject, Alben put the doll on Jaime’s desk and took a step toward the door. He turned back with his hand on the door frame and smiled with his mouth, his eyes cold. “I hope we haven’t gotten off on the wrong foot, Dr. Talon. Mai-Munene is a small place and it would be in our best interests to get along.”

“Sure, why not?” Jaime said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice as Alben walked out the door. He picked up the doll and put it back on the shelf. The corn husks inside rustled in his fingers as if the doll were whispering, relieved to be out of the missionary’s sweaty grip.

## Chapter 2

### New York

Valerie Grey looked across the café table at David and wasn't sure she liked him very much right at that point in time. She loved him—at least she thought she did—but right then she was royally steamed at all television news executives as a group. Since David was the only representative of that loathsome species present at the moment, he was catching the brunt of her fury. It wasn't rational, she knew; he wasn't involved in the events of the morning, nor was he anything like most of the Ivy-League-anointed bean counters who masqueraded as television journalists in the managerial suite at the MBS network. But David was near at hand, so she took it out on him. She felt entitled to a little irrational rage since the over-promoted accountant who served as the president of the news division had just pissed on her career.

That was bad enough, but something else really fueled Valerie's anger. As mad as she was at the stuffed shirts in the managerial suite, she was absolutely furious with herself for the way she had been blindsided by the decision and even more so by her own totally ineffectual response. As Carter Wilson, the news division president, delivered the disappointing news in his nasally Greenwich voice that morning, Valerie's brain had simply gone numb. She listened, she heard what he said, she even understood it; she just couldn't respond to it. She sat there like a lump on the other side of his massive desk, her usually-ready wit immobilized by the unexpected blow. The mental impotence frustrated her while it happened; later, after the meeting, it infuriated her. Afterward, her head was

full of sharply barbed comebacks—but where were the cutting responses when she needed them?

The numbness enveloped her for some time after she left Wilson’s office. Valerie walked like a zombie to the elevator outside his suite and stared unseeingly at her distorted image on the brushed chrome wall as she rode down to her floor. If there was anyone in the elevator with her, she didn’t notice. As she walked through the newsroom, she didn’t return any of the greetings from the staff, leaving them exchanging wondering glances in her wake. She went to her office, closed the door, and sat down at her desk. The message light on her phone flashed insistently, so she automatically punched the button. David’s voice came through the speaker. “I’ll meet you for lunch at the Rock Center Café,” he said.

That’s when Valerie’s brain blared back to life like a radio left on during a power failure. She couldn’t turn it off now, and the longer it played, the angrier she became. For the rest of the morning, Wilson’s speech resounded over and over in her mind along with the razor-sharp replies she should have—but couldn’t—deliver at the time. I’ve had to make one of the toughest decisions of my career, he began, as if *she* should feel sorry for *him*. Did he really think his “anguish” could compare to hers when she found out her career was at a dead end? He assured her his decision wasn’t based on her reporting as an international correspondent, which was clearly excellent. Gee, thanks for the compliment, but I’d rather have the promotion, she wanted to say. He droned on. Her skills in front of the camera were superior, too, of course, and she was certainly a highly-regarded and well-appreciated member of the team, blah, blah, blah. If I’m so highly-regarded, Valerie imagined herself saying, why are you sticking a knife in my heart? But

she didn't say that, at least not then. The latest market research was the deciding factor, Wilson said. Good old market research, Valerie wanted to add now. It's the perfect fall guy: you get paid to make the decision, but you blame it on market research. She heard these words in her head now, but none of them came out of her mouth while Wilson blathered on.

At the end, the news division president struck a soul-crushing blow. Valerie had been passed over for the evening news anchor job in favor of Preston Henry, toothful host of the network's money machine, the morning show. Wilson delivered the decision, then sat there, imperturbable. Even now, Valerie had no sharp, witty response for that final twist of the knife. She had one for everything else, but not for that. What's wrong with me, she fumed.

As a reporter, Valerie Grey was ferocious. She never hesitated to ask a confrontational question, grinding away at the hard shell of official obfuscation until she found the truth. She was driven to be the best, unafraid, un-intimidatable, almost righteous in her quest for real answers. Valerie was respected as a pro's pro in the snarky, claw-your-way circle of top journalists. In her heart of hearts, though, Valerie's professional drive was the flipside of her personal insecurity. She used her drive to compensate for a well-suppressed belief that she didn't deserve success. Deep inside, Valerie knew she was just an insignificant little girl, and, unless she kept up a fierce front, someone, someday, was going to find out and send her back to Scranton where she belonged. That was why her impotence in the face of Wilson's decision so infuriated her: it confirmed that deeply-repressed self-image.

The ice skaters swirling in the bright sunlight at Rockefeller Center brought Valerie back to the present. She watched them glide silently by as she let some of her anger subside. After a few more seconds of blackly wondering where her life was going, she turned back to the table. She was still mad, but not as much at David now. It wasn't fair to turn him into collateral damage.

“So, what do you think I should do about losing the promotion?” she asked. She picked vaguely at the saffron risotto crab cake in front of her. She should have ordered a salad, but, with Wilson's words and her unsaid responses ringing in her ears as she examined the lunch menu, Valerie had ordered the rich, creamy risotto in a flurry of rebellion. Now, her stomach roiled by unspoken vitriol, she had no interest in it.

“You shouldn't make any decisions in this frame of mind,” David answered. He was an experienced journalist himself as well as a sharply analytic manager—an unusual amalgam. The combination gave David an exceptional ability to take a cloud of rumors and circumstances and distill them into facts pertinent to a decision. “Wait awhile. You still have two years left on your contract, don't you? There will be other anchor slots open between now and then. In fact, the timing could be good. I hear Kensington's talking about retiring from ABC after the election. You'll have a good shot.”

“Fat chance,” Valerie said disgustedly. “The market research dweebs will be completely in charge of all the network news divisions by then.”

David sighed in exasperation. “The suits in marketing have always meddled in television news—you know that. They're like cockroaches whispering in the king's ear. What matters is that you're still the best reporter in the business.” He gestured with his fork. “What's more, your contract will be up for renewal then and you'll be in position to

jump networks and take Kensington's job, which you aren't now. That will give you some serious leverage in the negotiations."

Valerie's brown eyes flashed a warning, the green flecks in the irises dancing with anger. Her eyes were one of her strongest features, but they sometimes got her in trouble by revealing her true feelings at inopportune times. "What makes you think ABC will want a journalist instead of a cover girl two years from now? Troglodytes run that joint just like they do MBS," she snapped.

"Not all of us troglodytes prefer cover girls," David protested defensively. His career as a journalist had led him into the second tier of management suites at MBS, with a good chance that he'd be in the top rank before he retired.

Valerie realized she had taken out her frustration on the innocent David—again. "I know," she apologized. "I'm sorry I lumped you in with the rest of the assholes." Then the anger bubbled back to the surface and she gave a very un-lady-like snort of dismissal. "But with all due respect to Barbara Walters, Connie Chung, and Katie Couric, I just find it ironic that the only time one of the networks hires a female anchor is when they're in last place."

"That's nonsense and you know it," David snapped. "Gender has nothing to do with this decision—or those. All of those women are respected broadcasters. Just like you."

David was right, as usual. Valerie had fought her share of battles against stereotyping early in her career, but she hadn't been faced with it lately, at least as far as she knew. When she first started looking for a job in broadcasting, her looks got her more than one offer to be a weather reporter, a job she characterized as being the

barometer bimbo. She turned them all down and kept sending audition tapes to stations around the country until she landed a reporter's job at a tiny television station in Elmira, New York. The news director who hired her made it a point to send her to cover lost puppy stories and the grand openings of local dress shops but it was hard to tell if the assignments were due to her sex or just because she was a rookie. She eventually got the chance to prove her mettle on more serious stories and, when a new rookie reporter joined the staff, Valerie was relieved of the rookie assignments. It didn't matter now; those days were behind her.

David gave up. He polished off the remains of the chop on his plate and sat back to look at Valerie, something he never grew tired of doing. Sun splashing from the skating rink brought out natural russet highlights in the dark hair framing her high, graceful cheekbones. Valerie's mouth always reminded him of Julia Roberts'—a little too wide for her otherwise classic features—but her teeth were perfect and she had a spectacular smile. David was several years older than Valerie, but the difference didn't bother her as much as it did him. "We need a break. Why don't we go to Cape Charles for the weekend?" he suggested. "Let's get away for a couple of days and I promise we'll find things to do besides talk about network politics."

A skater whipped around into an easy spin right next to their table and the effortless perfection of the figure finally broke Valerie's foul mood. She knew she was acting like a petulant child. It was her turn to sigh. "That sounds like a good idea. I obviously need some time away. And no work—I promise if you promise."

David smiled broadly. "I promise."



The tension in Valerie's shoulders drained away as she relaxed just thinking about a whole weekend without deadlines and office politics. David and Valerie met when he was a senior producer for MBS News and she was a fledgling reporter for the network's station in New York, where she had jumped eagerly after her stint in Elmira. Not long after she got to the city, she got a last-minute assignment to fill in for a network correspondent with whom David was working. One thing led to another as the planets aligned very nicely for them. By the time their relationship blossomed into something serious, she had moved to the network news division with a gold star next to her name and David was offered a high-profile job overseeing the network's news bureau in the nation's capitol—a probable precursor to running the entire news division. His promotion eliminated their problem with the company's fraternization rules since she no longer worked with him directly. Their long-distance romance wasn't difficult since shuttle flights between New York and Washington ran every hour and they had apartments in both places where they alternated weekends as often as their schedules allowed.

"I've got to go back to DC today," David added. "Will you be all right tonight?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Valerie answered. She wasn't, but there was no point whining about it now. At least she could look forward to the weekend in Cape Charles.

###

By the time Valerie got back to the office after lunch, unofficial word of Preston Henry's promotion had circulated throughout the building. More than one well-meaning coworker offered their condolences as she walked through the newsroom, making Valerie

want to shout back, “I just lost a promotion—I don’t have cancer!” But she didn’t. There was a memo on her desk from Carter Wilson calling a mid-afternoon staff meeting; Valerie assumed it would be the official announcement that Preston Henry was to be anointed. She would go, of course, and put on her best corporate face, but she didn’t have to enjoy it. Valerie had just wadded up the memo and tossed it into her wastebasket when Nancy Justine tapped on her door frame and stepped into the office. She angrily shook a copy of the memo in the air.

“Is this what I think it is?” she demanded.

Valerie nodded. “Sorry, I didn’t get a chance to tell you in person,” she said.

“Fuck that,” Nancy said, waving away Valerie’s apology. “What’s wrong with these people? How can they not give *you* this job? You earned it! And Pressed-Puss Henry, for God’s sake! That son-of-a-bitch is a blow-dried talking head! If he didn’t have a teleprompter, he couldn’t tell you what day it is. I bet he’s out there right now signing autographs for the interns.”

“Whoa, girl!” Valerie laughed. Nancy almost always cheered her up—especially when she expressed opinions Valerie couldn’t voice. Nancy and Valerie had been a team since Valerie moved to her first correspondent’s job in the network news division not long after she had been drafted to help David. The hardened producer sized Valerie up the first time she worked with her and liked the grit she saw in the younger, more photogenic version of herself. From then on, she made it her business to give Valerie every edge to get ahead in the cut-throat world of television journalism. As one of the best news dogs in the trade, she did what a truly great producer does: make good things happen for her boss. She researched stories to sort out the facts from the rumors, she cut

red tape wherever it got in the way, and she played her overstuffed Blackberry like a concert pianist, enabling Valerie to reach people who didn't want to be reached. She was Valerie's right hand, arm, and shoulder, and Valerie valued her even more than her real limb. Most of all, she valued her as a friend.

"So what are we going to do?" Nancy asked.

"We are going to go to the meeting and wish Preston the best of luck in his new position," Valerie answered with mock primness.

"No—really. What are we going to do? We can't let him get away with this. Let me load his makeup with cayenne pepper. He'll never know what hit him."

Valerie laughed again. "No, we're going to act like adults for a change."

"Aw, boss, you never let me have any fun." Nancy stopped to look at the memo in her hand. "Seriously, are you going to look for another job?"

Valerie grew somber. "No, the timing's not right for that. Besides, you win some, you lose some, you know?"

"Yeah, but you deserve better."

"Thanks, kiddo," Valerie smiled.

Nancy smiled back and looked closely at Valerie. She grew thoughtful. "What you need is a good story to work on—preferably one far, far away where the suits can't bother you."

Valerie liked that idea. "You're right," she said. "Any place in particular?"

Nancy thought for a minute, her mind rifling through the headlines and weighing the possibilities. "Russia's interesting these days. They can't decide whether to be a capitalist dictatorship or a democracy for the gangsters." She shook her head. "Nah—

too many phones. We need someplace remote. Antarctica, maybe?” She shivered and shook her head again. “It’s almost winter there now—way too cold.”

The more Nancy talked, the more she brightened up Valerie’s day. Valerie laughed. Then she remembered a story about an artillery attack on Kinshasa she’d seen on CNN that morning. “Things are heating up in the Congo,” she offered. “It’s been a while since we’ve been there. Maybe it’s about time for us to do a follow-up.”

“You’re right,” Nancy said. “There’s some meat on that bone, too.”

“Yes. From what I gather, Messime’s government is under attack from all over—inside and outside,” Valerie continued. “There’s plenty of news there. I think I can sell it to Wilson.”

“Good! I’ll start packing.”

Valerie laughed again. “Wait until after Preston’s announcement.”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot,” Nancy said. “I’ll see you at the meeting. I’ve got to go get my cayenne.”

###

Carter Wilson was easily sold on the idea of Valerie disappearing into the Congo for a few weeks. Having her away from the newsroom would put a damper on the gossip columnists who were already trying to make a story out of the rivalry between Valerie and Preston Henry. Despite Valerie’s perfectly professional denials, the rumor mongers would cast a pall over the network’s promotion campaign for the new anchorman. The tabloid reporters wouldn’t follow her to Africa. The Congo was legitimate news, too, and

Valerie was the obvious person to cover it since she'd been there when Moshe Messime first came to power. He gave her the green light to leave right away.

As Valerie was telling Nancy to pack for the Congo, she remembered her weekend with David. He'll understand, she told herself as she dialed his number. It wouldn't be the first time they'd had to change plans to accommodate an assignment. "Hi," she said when he picked up the phone. "We're going to have to make Cape Charles another weekend. I'm leaving for the Congo Friday."

"Damn!" he said. Valerie thought she heard something more than simple disappointment in his voice.

"I'm sorry, David, but it's a good story. I need to go before Carter changes his mind."

"I know, but there was something I wanted to talk to you about this weekend."

"What?" Valerie asked.

"Never mind. It will wait," he said.

"What? Tell me! Is something wrong?"

"No, no. Nothing like that." David's voice changed. "You go and work well," he said trying to sound supportive. "When are you coming back?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't think it will be more than a couple of weeks. It's not in the budget and you know how Carter is."

"Yes I do. We can talk when you come home."

Her mind off the Congo for a moment, Valerie thought she knew what David wanted to talk about. He was right; now was not the time.

David said, "Be safe, okay?"