



YES WE CAN



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First Printing: February. 10. 2015

ISBN 978-1-329-89388-7

Yes We Can

Outnumbered overpowered and scared to death

Deeper I sink into unknown depth

My death, cannot pay her debt

A coward on my right

A rifle on my left

All we need is guts and a plan

Fear not friend, yes we can

YES WE CAN

Chapter 1

Fred Njagi slammed his white tumbler hard on the brown, smooth, wooden dressing table. He exhaled with relief when he felt the fiery gulp of Sky Vodka burn his stomach lining. A conspicuous high pitched tone drew his attention to his blinking smartphone resting on his pillow.

Jackie: *Where are U?*

Fred: In my room. *Wanna keep me company?*

Jackie: *On my way*

A mischievous grin crossed his face.

The golden mellow rays of the evening sun penetrated through the towering yellow thorny Acacia trees. A generation of young, middle -aged and senior Colombia monkeys chattered loudly as they constantly hopped from one branch to the next. Fred grabbed his towel, dashed to the bathroom for a quick cold shower then wore a short sleeved black Manchester United Jersey and beige khaki shorts. Anytime now, he said to himself as he glanced at his wristwatch.

A gentle knock on his door caused his heart to race with concealed excitement.

"Jackie, you look amazing in those shorts," he complemented her with a smile.

"Thanks Fred," she blushed.

"And a wonderful..." he drew an imaginary curve with his right slightly cupped palm and smiled naughtily.

"Idiot!" She slapped his shoulder and frowned at him.

Fred chuckled and Jackie followed him inside his room. She sat on the red and black *Maasai* coloured reading chair while Fred sat on the bed. He silently admired her brown, flawless and shapely legs. Her glossy braids were held back in a pony tail and her thin, black framed spectacles made her seem like a naughty librarian in a raunchy blue movie. Jackie had the body that was just right, and her chocolate skin tone drove Fred nuts. He reached into the

closet and took out his half full bottle of vodka along with two tumblers. Jackie watched him pour up and raised her eyebrows in disbelief when he handed her a drink.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I don't drink!”

“This isn't the office, lighten up a bit,” he taunted her.

Jacklyn Mogaka, the chief financial officer at Kilele Micro finance bank watched Fred sip and she frowned at him. If only he could get serious with life, she silently wished. Out of the entire male white collar staff in Kilele Micro Finance, Fred Njagi was the only man who sent electricity down her spine whenever they interacted inside the office. Fred was not as educated or as gracefully mannered as she was, but he had a natural irresistible charm that instantly made him likeable wherever whenever he was. He stood at an attractive 5ft 8 inches, chocolate complexion and had a small gap between his upper front incisors, visible whenever he had a fit of uncontrollable, hearty laughter.

“I'm so excited about the new financial amendments Mr. Kimani shared during the afternoon brief. Our customers will be excited once they hear the news,” she said to Fred.

He turned to her with his eyebrows raised quizzically, “What amendments?”

“Didn't you pay any attention when he said the board of directors is going to lower the borrowing rate by three percent and remove collateral requirements for special women and youth loans?”

Fred shook his head.

"Of course you didn't. You were too busy playing Angry birds," she rolled her eyes as a sign of frustration.

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” he defended himself.

Fred wished Jackie wasn't as uptight as a communist dictator. He hated it whenever his colleagues made fun of Jackie and referred to her as "the iron lady" but he never openly showed his distaste towards such juvenile behavior.

“I hope you can dance Jackie.”

“Why? I can dance.”

“Great. Tonight we're going to Nyeri and turn up all night.”

She was about to say No but something within her restrained her from uttering that word. A mixture of anxiety and excitement bubbled within her. Finally, Fred Njagi had asked her out even though it wasn't as tense and mind racing as she often imagined.

“What time will we be going?”

“Around nine or nine thirty. Don't worry, you'll be back in your room before your regular curfew,” he joked. “Let's take a walk.”

He rose from his bed and Jackie followed him. There was a concealed level of urgency inside Fred's thoughts because he had planned for this seminar cum team building for quite a while. It was the only solid chance he had of campaigning himself towards Jackie for the next three days.

I have to get lucky. I have to get Jackie, he promised himself.

A couple of young, wide eyed Colombia monkeys whizzed past them and leapt straight into the green trash cans mounted along the grey straight concrete path that led to the national park's reception, bar and restaurant. They spotted some of their colleagues paired up and leisurely strolling to the bar dressed in T-shirts, shorts and sandals. August was the best month to visit the Aberdare National Park since it was the return of summer after a three month extremely cold rainy season that religiously ran from May till July of every year.

They walked past the bar then took a left turn twenty meters ahead, near the jungle green pitched tents where tourists who preferred an authentic outdoor experience to air-conditioned, cozy hotel rooms. From a distance, they easily spotted a herd of light brown gazelles that stood indifferently save for a couple that lowered their heads to nibble on the fresh patch of grass. A herd of Zebra was slowly walking towards the horizon past an aged and often moody lone male buffalo. Fred's eyes popped with excitement at the sight of a full Johnny Walker 750 ML whiskey bottle carelessly placed at the entrance of a tent that was beside him. Without hesitation, he glanced around to confirm his safety and crouched but felt Jackie's hand on his left shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing?" She asked.

"Me and that bottle are just going to have a friendly chat, that's all. Besides, who are we to turn down priceless whiskey?"

"Don't you dare, Fred. We won't escape without drawing attention," she cautioned him, her eyes squinted sternly.

"Yes we can."

They followed a stony path that ascended up a small grassy mound and led them to the partially hidden, serene river bank with long sturdy trees running parallel on both sides. A black hornbill hovered above the trees as a host of bright yellow weaver birds chirped animatedly back and forth like angry politicians in a heated parliamentary debate.

"It's so beautiful, isn't it?" Jackie gasped.

Fred smiled and nodded in agreement. Now all he had to do was settle down under a tree and whisper sweet nothings in her pretty little ears. He stretched out his hand towards her and she reached out so that they walked hand in hand to a towering indigenous tree with a large and thick canopy. Fred's nose caught a distinct scent of burning marijuana and stopped. He raised his index finger towards his lips and cautiously proceeded so he could bust the weed smoker red handed in the act. He drew closer and closer then craned his neck to have a better view.

"Uh...let's just look for another tree," he turned back and led her in the opposite direction.

"Why? What is it? Let me see."

“Let’s go Jackie.”

“No, I have to see”, she pulled free from his grip and dashed towards the tree. Her eyes almost popped out of their orbital sockets.

“Martin!” She exclaimed.

Martin Okoth instantly withdrew his caressing hand from underneath as his companion frantically buttoned up her T-shirt. She had just caught him and Diana, the new Marketing intern in a compromising situation.

“I told you not to look Jackie,” Fred appeared. “I’m really sorry bro, this wasn't my idea,” He apologized to Martin, gesturing with an open palm as a sign of sincerity. "Let's go Jackie."

He turned to leave but Martin said, “Don’t bother. You can join us since you've already found out.”

"Are you sure?" Fred asked. His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“I just want that fine whiskey in your hand,” Martin nodded.

"No problem."

Diana Kamau was still overwhelmed with embarrassment and she barely faced Fred and Jackie, as they sat on the warm smooth rock next to the crystal clear flowing river. Her cheeks flared red and her voice was reduced to a faint high pitch. Fortunately, Martin the chubby chain cigarette smoker, had some plastic tumblers and a three quarter full 2 liter bottle of Sprite. A thin white trail of pungent smoke wafted lazily from the half smoked joint tossed on a floating leaf.

Fred served the drinks while Jackie the odd one out, stuck to her non alcoholic stand. She was the only one pursuing a Masters degree, an Executive MBA to be exact. Fred seemed content with his position as Marketing Executive, Martin served as a logistics planner but he recently joined Killed Micro finance six months ago. Diana , the slim, light skinned and loud mouthed Marketing intern joined Kilele two months ago in June. She was a third year Marketing student at Mount Kenya University.

When Diana finally came out from her shell, Fred and Jackie couldn't help staring at her bulging, squinty beetroot eyes. Fred knew Martin never smoked pot because he feared losing his sanity more than anything else on this Earth.

“Young lady, I hope you learned a lot today about the real corporate environment. A lot of graduates nowadays are so green concerning basic office operations,” Jackie remarked patronizingly. Diana's upper lip instantly contorted into a sneer. “I can teach you a lot Diana,” Jackie turned to her.

“No thanks. Your job already seems too boring for me to even bother,” The Marketing intern answered sarcastically then sipped more whiskey.

“Excuse me! Respect your superiors young lady! I am a valuable asset to this organization. Mr.Kimani knows that I am the best Chief Accountant and so should you.”

Tension crept in and hung above them. The two ladies exchanged disapproving glances while the men silently sipped from their tumblers. Diana and Jackie were like oil and water,

hardly compatible with each other. Diana despised Jackie for her constant boot licking and repelling superiority complex. Jackie on the other hand disliked the intern because in her superior, ever judging eyes, Diana was no more than a mediocre, slutty and loud mouthed nuisance who had no shot of success at ascending the competitive corporate ladder.

" Hey, let's take a walk. I want to see the elephants drinking at the trough," Fred suggested and slowly got up on his feet. The last thing he wanted was feral hostility watering down his pleasant warm buzz. They rose and walked further inside as they drank and poured up some more, following the river as it flowed further into the woods.

A red wooden sign that read "Bikes Ahead" prompted them to follow the sign. They stopped ten meters ahead at a row of mountain bikes chained to a horizontal steel rail. A dark pot bellied man, donning a faded black Safaricom cap, seemingly in his forties smiled at them as they approached him.

"Yes," he offered his rough palm for a handshake.

"Fine thank you sir. We want to take an evening ride, how much is it per bike?" Fred asked.

"Two hundred and fifty my brother."

"Awesome. Give each one of us a bike," Fred replied.

The average sized man smiled again, revealing a set of brown tobacco stained teeth as he unlocked the mountain bikes. Fred thanked him and placed a one thousand shillings note in his hardened palm.

Chapter 2

“Just tap the red button,” Diana instructed then hurried towards the protective roadside barrier. She smiled heartily like a model as Martin snapped away. It was a beautiful sight to behold as the breath taking moist green, hilly and vibrant scenery offered an amazing background to her photogenic, stunning beauty.

“Let’s take another one with Fred,” she grabbed Fred by his arm then smiled and placed her head on his shoulder. Mike took another photo and followed Diana silently as she scouted the road for more suitable camera friendly backgrounds. The sun disappeared and left a silhouette of the Aberdare ranges in place of the bright golden horizon. A full moon rose in the cloudless dark sky and illuminated brightly.

“What’s the time?” Martin asked.

“Twenty minutes past seven,” Fred replied.

“It’s getting late. Let's go back to the park,” Jackie said.

“Why should we?” Diana asked defiantly.

Jackie had a difficult time keeping up with her liquored up colleagues as they took endless photos until Diana's Blackberry flashed “Low battery!” Martin's eyes were glued to her curvy waist and long brown legs. She reached into her fanny pack and took out a red lighter plus a couple of cigarettes.

“Here,” she handed Martin a cigarette then flicked her lighter.

“What about me?” Fred waved his hands at her.

She smiled and reached for another cancer stick. Jackie cringed in disgust as she watched Fred exhale tobacco smoke and goof around with Diana. She shook her head and stomped off to her bicycle.

“I’m off,” she announced and hopped on the bicycle's seat.

Diana waited until Jackie turned in the opposite direction and raised her middle finger towards the Iron lady. An intoxicated Martin burst into laughter but Fred quickly rushed towards his crush.

" Hey! We came here together and we will return the same way," he asserted while maintaining a firm grip on her bike's rubber coated handle bars.

“No. I'd rather cycle back by myself than ruin your fun. Don't mind about me Fred,” she replied but she didn't mean it. She really wanted him to restrain her and assure her that he wanted her to stay.

"We better start moving. Martin, get your ass back on your bike," Fred ordered.

It was quite a unique and thrilling experience cycling under the bright moonlight. Small, bright clusters of incandescent yellow bulbs dotted the landscape on one side while the other was pitch dark save for the conspicuous silhouettes of tall forest trees.

A horrendous screech rent the air as they neared the forest.

"What is that?" Diana asked, terrified.

"Probably a predator that has caught up with its prey," Martin answered and chuckled nervously.

"Let's turn back and use the main road. It's not safe out here," The Iron lady cautioned.

"No way! That will take forever. Have you forgotten how hilly it is?" Martin protested.

"He's right. I would rather use a shortcut than spend the whole night cycling back to the park." Diana seconded Martin just to irk Jackie. They were only 3 Kilometers away from Aberdares National Park and so far they had covered two. Despite the brightness of the full moon, darkness dominated the forest and the wide dirt path they used when cycling from the park.

"Fred, we can't use the same path back. It's too risky," Jackie urged him.

"Yes we can!" Martin opposed her.

"Yes we can!" Diana chided in.

Fred looked up to the sky then turned his attention to the path that lay a stone throw away. Throughout the ride back to the park, he was pleasantly surprised when he realized he had no problem navigating on his bike while inebriated. Martin and Diana also cycled like a couple of power athletes despite their inebriation save for Diana's verbal diarrhea that drew unwanted attention from pedestrians. He turned to Jackie with an assuring smile and replied in a calm yet authoritative voice,

"Yes we can."

"Fine. Go ahead," she shrugged.

Fred led the way and the rest followed suit. He was glad the whiskey in his system kept him warm as he forged on. Fortunately for them, each bike had a dynamo powered headlight hence they had a better view of their way.

"Yeah baby!" Diana yelled enthusiastically as they rode down a small and slightly steep descent. She enjoyed the warm night breeze rapidly blowing against her numb face as they descended faster and faster. Fred gently squeezed his brakes at the foot of the slope to reduce his escalating kinetic energy and so did Martin and Diana however, Jackie whizzed past them.

Bang!

“Jackie! Jackie, are you all right?” Fred called out.

He quickly pedaled ahead but Jackie was nowhere in sight. Worry invaded his buzzed mind as he glanced left and right hoping to spot her. “Jackie! Jackie! Where are you?”

A second high pitched, hair raising shriek rent the air about ten meters away from them.

Fred reached into his pocket, took out his phone and called Jackie. His attention was drawn by Jackie's ringtone to a thicket way down from the left side of the path. Panic quickly set in as he frantically looked around hoping to find a way down the edge of the path to the thicket.

“Jackie! I'm coming to get you right now! Don't panic okay?” Fred loudly assured her yet he had no idea how to get down to her. Suddenly, they heard heavy thudding of hooves moving towards them. What they saw sent chills of fear down their spines, and the alcohol in their brains quickly vaporized. A huge Buffalo that appeared as large as an SUV was running full speed towards them.

Bang! Bang! A couple of deafening gunshots.

The large horned, enraged beast suddenly collapsed right in front of their eyes.

A pair of bright headlights emerged from the darkness about ten meters from where they froze in fear. They grew brighter and brighter as the unseen vehicle approached. Diana desperately clutched onto Martin's arm and hid behind him as the vehicle stopped and four men wielding rifles hopped out. Fred shielded his eyes from the headlights using his hands and did his best to remain calm as the unknown men walked towards them with their guns aimed.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” A tall burly man about 6 ft 2 inches wearing a jungle green combat cap with a deep voice demanded. He had a heavy *Kikuyu* accent and a white goatee.

“We don't want any trouble. We were cycling back to Aberdares National Park but one of my friends fell down off the path and into the thicket. We have to rescue her,” Fred answered.

“Really? You think I'm stupid?” The man retorted cynically. “All cyclists use the main road!”

“We were just looking for a shortcut my friend,” Fred replied.

The tall man walked towards Fred and landed a heavy slap on his face. “I am not your friend, you bloody fool!”

"Please...please don't kill us. You can take our money and phones but spare us!" Martin pleaded as the stone faced man approached him.

The man raised his AK-47 and forcefully thrust the muzzle inside trembling Martin's mouth.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?"

Beads of sweat rushed down Martin's face and his legs went from solid to a jelly like state.

"I swear...I swear... we...we... were just cycling back to the national park!" he cried.

"Lie down!" He ordered Martin and Diana. "Bring some rope and tie them up!"

Two men hurried towards Fred, Martin and Diana and followed their superior's order. They frog marched them towards the pickup and forced them into the back then carried the dead buffalo. It took tremendous effort from all four men to load the beefy bull into the back. Two men watched over the kill and unexpected trio of captives. They drove further up the wide ascending dirt path that snaked into the deeper, darker and terrifying bowels of the Aberdare forest. The man in charge received a phone call from one of his insiders, who happened to be a Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) game warden.

"The rangers are on patrol and they are heading this way. Make a U-turn and park somewhere where they won't see us," he instructed the driver.

"Yes sir."

The driver diverted off the dirt road and parked behind a tall, thick and thorny bush then switched off the headlights. It didn't take long before their ears picked up the sound of distant purring motor engines moving towards them. The game wardens made more patrols on this particular quadrant, the southern end of Aberdare National Park because of high poaching activity since there wasn't any electric fence to separate ruthless poachers from precious wildlife.

A heavy thudding of hooves coming from the driver's side instantly perked up their ears. A wave of fear coursed through Fred's limbs as the clattering grew louder and louder. To make matters worse, he couldn't see because the bush they hid in was too thick for the bright moonlight to penetrate through. Suddenly, there was a loud bang and the unexpected impact almost tipped the old Toyota Hilux pick up belly up.

A series of blood chilling growls and small shiny pairs of eyes surrounded the pickup and commotion ensued as a pride of hungry lions clawed and sank their long, sharp and vicious canines into the stuck buffalo. The fleeing Buffalo accidentally ran into the driver's door so hard that one of its huge thick horns penetrated the metal and ruptured the poor man's ribcage. The boss watched in horror as his driver jerked back and forth agonizingly. Blood spurted out uncontrollably through his mouth. The seat became wet as his gruesomely punctured right lung oozed bright red blood.

Diana screamed frantically when a curious lioness jumped into the back of the Hilux. One of the poachers fired his rifle twice in the air and the blood thirsty pride scampered off into the trees. He then hopped out and dashed to co-driver's door.

“Mwaura! Mwaura are you okay?” He shouted while banging the door with his fist.

The boss swung his door open and said, “I’m fine but Peter wasn't lucky. Get rid of that damn buffalo fast before the wardens find us!”

The loyal poacher had no choice but to break the door off its hinges since the buffalo's horn had sunk all the way through. He hurled his dead comrade off the seat and took charge behind the wheel. They saw bright yellow headlights approaching them fast. The Toyota instantly roared to life and sprang out of the thick thorny bush as the poachers fled for their lives. Mwaura’s poacher sped off south west towards the spot where Jackie fell off into the thicket. A couple of combat green land cruisers with rifle wielding game wardens perched at the back appeared just a few feet behind, leaving thick clouds of dust up in the air as they engaged in hot pursuit.

Determined to shake off their tail, the other poacher guarding the captives and buffalo carcass faced the KWS land cruisers and fired twice. The vehicle slowed down then accelerated towards them but Mwaura's driver made a sharp left and followed the dusty path that lead towards the Eastern quadrant.

“Come on! Come on!” Mwaura barked at his driver.

Bang! Bang! The rangers fired at the poacher's vehicle.

Mwaura's poacher cautiously lifted his head, while crouched then sprang to his feet and sprayed his bullets ruthlessly at the KWS Land Cruiser. He managed to shoot one of the wardens perched at the Land Cruiser's back in the chest and killed two wardens seated next to the driver. Despite the manpower loss, the determined KWS driver floored the accelerator and rammed into the poacher's pick up so hard that the skinny, dark skinned poacher almost fell off from the fast moving vehicle. His G3 rifle fell into the bushes due to the high impact.

Still determined to arrest the fast moving band of poachers, the KWS driver floored the gas pedal, ready to bump the pick up a second time.

A devilish idea popped inside the tall, skinny poacher's brain and he grabbed a hysterical Diana then without warning, he flung her right in front of the game warden's vehicle.

The heavy rotating front tires of the KWS Land Cruiser ran over her beautiful, model like, long brown legs. She screamed and writhed desperately in unimaginable pain as her splintered left Fibula pierced through her shin and her right leg was totally deformed into an awkward J - shape like bloody limb. Her agonizing cries and screams were drowned by a loud bang as a result of the second KWS Cruiser colliding with the first vehicle. The determined KWS driver's unexpected halt in the middle of the hot pursuit led to his counterpart ramming his vehicle since there was hardly any braking distance between the two vehicles.

The poachers sped off in victory as the wardens hopped out of their vehicles to aid poor Diana who was already unconscious since her brain shut down due to the intense magnitude of unbearable pain.

Chapter 3

A headache tormented Fred Njagi and it got worse due to the continuous bumping of his head against the cold, hard pick up floor. The speedy and bumpy ride was the source of his headache but what made it worse was the recent traumatizing memory of helplessly watching Diana get ran over by a one -tonne Land Cruiser. His chubby dark skinned colleague, Martin Okoth curled himself into fetal position and sobbed loudly, overwhelmed with their cold ruthless nightmare. The driver turned right after crossing a small colonial -Era Bridge above the Aberdare River then drove full speed ahead to the breach they used for illegal entry into the national park and escape from the KWS game wardens.

" *Nyamaza!*" (Shut up!") The tall, skinny and dark skinned poacher snapped at Martin as he kicked him.

The absence of fear in Fred's mind turned his thoughts towards home. His life seemed rosy and perfect to his office colleagues and some even silently envied him however, Fred was secretly struggling with a humiliating consequence that was about to rear its ugly head to the outside world. During the previous New year's eve celebrations, Fred did something he thought he could easily walk away from Scott free but, it caught up with him when he least expected. As the world partied to the dying kicks of 2010, Fred got lucky with a lass he had his lustful eye on for about two months. He watched her keenly every morning as he left for work and in the evening when he returned to his flat weary from work. Sometimes his mind wandered off from the office and drifted into a steamy fantasy world. He remembered how his heart raced with excitement and anticipation whenever he visualized his hands resting on her wide shapely hips and their loins enveloped together on his couch. Her young perky breasts were worth fighting for and so was every square inch of her body.

Despite her stunning beauty and his raging desires, Fred couldn't approach her just like any other lady. Cecilia Mueni was a lowly house maid. How would an urban bred, highly educated graduate with a prime white collar job look like in the eyes of his critical neighbours if he was seen flirting with a *mboch*? (Mboch means house maid in Sheng). That was the first time in his life he reached crossroads. It was a burden suppressing his secret desire so as not to upset the dogmatic cultural norms which dictated the scope of relationships between those of different classes. As days went by, his mind obsessed over her until he couldn't take it any longer.

One random evening, Fred Njagi encountered Cecilia as he was heading up the stairs to his flat. He said a polite "Hi" and she responded warmly to his greeting. Their interaction grew stronger as the days went by until they were no longer uneasy strangers in the presence of each other. In his eyes she wasn't a naive, country girl who was there to be seen and not to be heard. Fred saw her as a gorgeous woman whose only flaw was simply her poor background.

It took a brief phone call for Mueni to fake a stomach ache at 10:00PM in order to convince her aunt, an arrogant moody employer to let her rush to the chemist. Fred leapt with joy when he heard the highly anticipated knock on his door. Fred kept the whiskey flowing as they watched a movie. He made his intentions known when he placed his palm on her thigh. Cecilia gave him the green light by leaning on his chest. It was a night he would forever live to remember. Their

forbidden encounters increased with time however they played safe by acting as strangers in the presence of their neighbors. Their toe curling, lip biting, forbidden steamy bubble blew into smithereens on May 11 2011.

Cecilia was pregnant. Her aunt threatened to send her packing if she didn't expose the culprit responsible for her situation. Despite her arrogance, her aunt had her 20- year old niece's best interests at heart. She coerced Fred into agreeing to marry Cecilia or else he would face the courts. To make matters worse, his fiancé moved into his flat in July and their exposed and sneered upon relationship provided juicy gossip fodder among idle housewives.

They were out of the national park and untraceable. The driver expertly navigated the rocky paths that led to Mwaura's mansion perched at the top of an isolated hill. The notorious poacher enjoyed life's finer things inside his palatial residence that rested on two and a half acres and fenced with a high stone perimeter wall. Mwaura slaughtered buffalos in a makeshift slaughterhouse and sold the meat to a tight circle made up of unscrupulous butcheries' owners within Nyeri town. Apart from selling illegal game meat, the widely feared 42 year old poacher with a conspicuous white goatee supplied eighty to ninety percent of cannabis sativa within the town.

The driver reached for his phone so he could call one of the men to unlock the large grey steel gate. Mwaura and his driver froze in fear when two tall men in jungle green Kenya Forest Guard uniforms appeared from the nearby bushes, with G3 rifles aimed at them.

“What’s this?” Mwaura snarled as a cautious officer ordered the driver to step out with his hands raised.

“Hands up!”

Mwaura obeyed and gave room for the officer to do a quick search inside his pickup.

“Is it Opiyo who’s sent you to trouble me?” Mwaura turned to one of the forest guards.

The armed officer stared back defiantly but the veteran poacher reached for his phone to call the Forest Guard Chief Inspector. Just as he was scrolling for the Chief Inspector's number, one of the guards snatched Mwaura's phone.

“What the hell do you think you're doing? Return my phone!” Mwaura snapped. His nostrils flared up angrily. The defiant officer simply shoved Mwaura's phone into one of his pockets and pointed the rifle's barrel towards the incensed suspect.

“I am the one who is issuing orders, not you.”

Unknown to the Forest guards, the tall dark skinned poacher who kept an eye on Fred, Martin and the Buffalo carcass was crouched. He slowly drew out his 9 millimeter pistol, ready to plant a couple of bullets into their skulls.

“Where are you from and why are you travelling at this strange hour?” A forest guard asked Mwaura's driver.

His silent response. It earned him a couple of heavy backhands across his face.

The forest guard's comrade walked to the back of the pickup to have a look. Like a cheetah hiding in the tree, the poacher sprang up and fired but he only managed to graze the forest guard's left shoulder.

Despite his shoulder injury, the courageous forest guard grabbed the poacher's right hand and slammed him on the stony ground. The toppled poacher yelled in pain whenever the officer's well placed kicks connected with his bony ribcage. Satisfied he had neutralized the threat, the forest guard once again moved cautiously to inspect the suspicious cargo. Fred felt relieved when the forest guard untied the ropes binding his hands then helped the officer untie his terrified chubby friend, Martin.

"Where are you from?"

"We work for Kilele Micro finance bank but we came to Aberdares National Park for a seminar," Fred replied to the forest guard.

The other guard ordered Mwaura's driver to unlock the gate then grabbed the angered burly poacher and used him as a human shield as they stepped inside the compound. The mansion's porch light was on however it was dark and silent as Mwaura unlocked his front door. He felt the G3's cold muzzle on his neck as the forest guard stepped inside and ordered the man to turn on the lights.

"Sit on the floor!"

Mwaura, the injured poacher and his driver obeyed as one of the guards walked towards a large wooden shelf filled with books on wildlife. One by one, the forest guard tossed away the books as he searched for drugs, hidden stashes of money or illegal firearms. He walked towards the red velvet sofa and removed each cushion.

"Why don't we just talk instead of you wasting energy looking for my money?" Mwaura suggested.

The forest guard walked towards Mwaura and said, "We don't care what deal you had with Opiyo because he's no longer in charge of the forest. How many years do you think you and your men will get when I present that dead buffalo as evidence in court?"

"Well, I wasn't aware about the new changes in the forest guard. I have fifty thousand shillings in my upstairs office. One of you can take me there."

"Fifty thousand only?" One of the guards scoffed. "A hundred thousand is what we need to set you free or else you will each spend twenty five years in jail!"

Their stubbornness rubbed Mwaura the wrong way but there was little he could do. He gazed down thoughtfully as if the solution was printed inside the colourful red and black square patterns on his thick carpet.

"I don't have a hundred thousand lying around in my house. All I have is fifty thousand."

The two officers turned to each other then made a silent agreement. The one in charge turned to Mwaura and said, "Let's go to your office and remember I'm the one with the gun."

They left the living room and walked into a wide corridor with blue walls and framed photos hanging next to each other. Mwaura flicked on a switch and began walking up the wide terrazzo stairs with the alert officer right behind him. The notorious poacher turned right then reached for his keys to unlock the door in front of him. The forest guard kept a keen eye on the suspect as he went behind his sturdy black office desk, pulled out a drawer then removed a brown envelope.

"It's all here," Mwaura emptied the envelope on his desk for the skeptical forest guard.

"Put them back inside the envelope," the guard ordered as his eyes hovered over the scattered one thousand shillings denomination notes all over the desk and floor. Mwaura pretended to be gathering the notes near the officer's feet but he suddenly lunged forward with a right upper cut that landed squarely on the forest guard's chin toppling him down instantly.

The stunned guard fumbled as he tried to get a firm grip on his G3. Mwaura quickly reached for the small, heavy bronze elephant on his desk and struck it forcefully against the forest guard's head. Bright red spots of blood appeared on the wooden tiled floor just below the forest guard's bleeding head. Now that he had him where he wanted, Mwaura struck another powerful blow on his foe's forehead using the bronze elephant sculpture, busting him open a second time. The poor officer screamed in agony however the thick carpet and walls muted his cries of distress to his colleague downstairs.

"Come here you son of a bitch!" Mwaura growled as he locked in a triangular chokehold and strangled the life out of the bleeding forest guard. The poacher then took the officer's G3 rifle and stealthily crept down the stairs to rescue his men.

The unsuspecting forest guard still had his rifle trained at the driver and dark skinned poacher while Fred and Martin sat on the sofa. Mwaura breathed deeply then slowly but surely he braced himself against the wall, rifle clutched tightly in his hands and peeped again.

"Look out!" Fred pointed at the terrifying sight of an armed Mwaura.

The forest guard quickly pulled his rifle's safety pin and pressed the muzzle against the driver's temple. "Step out with your hands up or else I will kill your men!" He declared. The driver took advantage of the forest guard's distraction and grabbed the muzzle.

Bang! Bang!

Fortunately the stray bullets got stuck in the wooden ceiling as Mwaura's driver and the alarmed forest guard wrestled over control of the G3 rifle. A flash of bravery muted Fred's fears and anxiety. He quickly rose from the sofa, jumped on to the driver's back and delivered hard rights to the man's jaw. Overpowered and outnumbered, the battered driver stopped struggling and the forest guard restrained him using his handcuffs.

Bang!

A deafening gunshot reverberated inside the living room.

Blood mixed with soft, grayish matter spurted from the gruesome skull fracture above the forest guard's left eyebrow. Martin threw up at the vile and disgusting sight. The tall dark skinned poacher who watched over the buffalo carcass reached for the dead officer's G3 but Fred

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