The Negotiators

Alfred Galandi

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Dedication

To my children, William Semu Gabona and Christine Kirabo Kaita.

To my family, friends, and colleagues whose support and encouragement have contributed to this work.

To the readers who give these stories their time and attention.

And to everyone who continues to value the written word.

Alfred Galandi

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The Negotiators

CHAPTER ONE

Pierre Bagonza staggered a couple of hundred meters, still unsure of his bearings — but he knew he had to get out of there. His vision swam, his eyes gritty and bleary. Only now did he realize he'd ended up in a seedy part of town. A few steps further, he passed a group of homeless people sleeping by the roadside, their cardboard boxes serving as bed, blanket, and shelter all at once.

Not far off, outside a lock-up shop, a fight had broken out. A young man lay slumped against the wall, clobbered with a beer bottle to the back of the head. A deep cut threaded down to the nape of his neck, bleeding profusely. Just across the road, sex workers hollered at passers-by. Pierre blended in perfectly.

He paused, peered into a dimly lit shanty— *Kafunda* — then slipped inside and took a seat on the blind side of the makeshift counter. He didn't want to draw attention. His disheveled appearance, blood-stained shirt cuffs, and split lip worked in his favour; he might as well have walked straight out of a bar brawl. Around here, that seemed common enough.

Shuffling through his pockets, he pulled out a ten-thousand-shilling note and a half-empty packet of cigarettes. He placed the note on the counter and ordered a quarter bottle of Uganda *Waragi.* While waiting, he lit a cigarette and took a long, hard drag.

Pierre had begun the previous day in his own bed in the upscale suburb of Muyenga. Just before dawn, he'd driven to his audit firm, Meridian Audit Group, to review invoices and reports — ensuring the documents aligned. One financial

statement, however, perturbed him. It stood out like a sore thumb.

On the surface, it seemed accurate, complete, and consistent —except for the figures involved. At first, he'd dismissed the anomalies as typos. But on closer scrutiny, he realized he didn't have all the facts.

He'd made numerous calls and sent countless emails trying to gather missing information, but his newest client — Bedrock Advisory, a firm — hadn't responded. For a company with such heavy financial muscle, it was strange he'd never heard of them until just a few days ago.

He'd have to return to the office later. Right now, he was running late for a mid-morning coffee meeting with his lawyer, Tony Sabiiti, and his cousin, Robin Mujuni, at Java's, a popular café in Kampala's central business district.

CHAPTER TWO.

Arriving at the café with thirty minutes to spare, Pierre took a seat alone and sipped a cappuccino as he waited. He checked his watch, an anniversary gift from his estranged wife. Sabiiti was running late. A stickler for punctuality, Pierre wondered what could be holding him up.

As for Mujuni, his time management was appalling. Pierre wondered just how late he'd be this time. Even when the meeting was for his own benefit — and he'd been the one to ambush Pierre — Mujuni still took his time.

Earlier that morning, as Pierre eased out of his driveway, Robin Mujuni had called. There was urgency in his voice as he requested a meeting, and Pierre had directed him to Café Java's for a mid-morning coffee.

He ordered a second cappuccino. Sitting alone, twirling his steaming mug, he heard a familiar chuckle and turned toward

the entrance. It was Mujuni on the phone, laughing so hard his shoulders shook. Whatever his correspondent had said must have been hilarious.

Robin Mujuni slid into the seat opposite Pierre and nodded a greeting. When he finally hung up, he flashed a perfect set of teeth.

"Been here long?" he asked.

"Not really. Cappuccino, café latte, or espresso?"

"Espresso, thank you."

Pierre signaled the waitress, who appeared at his side within seconds to take the order.

"So, what have you been up to lately? Nothing shady, I hope," Pierre asked.

Mujuni chuckled, wearing his most charming smile.

"Come on, Pierre. I closed that chapter of my life. I'm retired." He studied his cousin's face. Pierre really hoped so. Robin Mujuni had a very colorful past.

"Sandra sends her regards. I passed by her place on my way here, returning her laptop. It had crashed, and I helped retrieve some of her data." He paused, then added,

"She said to check the rear seat of your car. She thinks one of your daughters might have dropped her tiara there."

Pierre made a mental note to check the car later.

"So, what can I do for you? It sounded urgent over the phone."

"I'm in a bit of trouble, Pierre. Something from my past is back to haunt me. Literally."

"What do you mean, 'a bit of trouble'? What's this about? Does it have anything to do with your last misdemeanor—the carjacking, I mean?"

The waitress arrived with their coffee. They fell silent as she set the tray down. Pierre smiled and mouthed a *"Thank you"* as she retreated.

"No, not at all. I served my time. That chapter's closed too," Mujuni replied. Once the waitress was out of earshot, he continued, "Some of my former associates believe that while I was incarcerated, I may have let slip some confidential information that cost them a tidy sum."

"And did you?" Pierre asked.

"I might have dropped a hint or two in the right direction."

"And dropping those hints meant you'd profit in some way?"

"I actually did. Little did I know sharing that information would cost them that much money. Now they want me to pay them back what they'd forecast to earn—plus twenty percent interest."

"Humor me," Pierre said. When Mujuni stayed quiet, he added, "You're not going into details with me, I presume?"

"No, I'm not. The less you know, the safer it is for you. Besides, it wouldn't help. These are dangerous people." Mujuni paused for several seconds.

"Which brings me to why I'm here." He hesitated slightly before continuing,

"I'm being followed. Hounded, more like it. And I have no one else to turn to. I urgently need a loan—and with my record… well, let's just say my options are limited."

"You have a knack for terrible timing. I'm doing so badly right now, I'm on the waiting end myself. You can hang in there a little longer, can't you? How much are we talking about, anyway?"

Pierre hoped Mujuni had honestly quit his life of crime. Over the last two years, his cousin had painstakingly tried to

repair his reputation and rebuild his image. When Mujuni smiled now, Pierre detected a measure of pain behind it. The request seemed genuine.

"Sabiiti will be joining us soon," Pierre added. "It probably concerns an assignment for me. I think someone needs a go-between. Some clients pay half my fee upfront. Let's see how that goes. Who knows—you just might be in luck."

That seemed to placate Mujuni.

"You still haven't told me how much we're talking about."

"Anything with seven figures will help. Eight will be adequate," Mujuni said, still smiling.

"Eight figures! Jesus, Mujuni! Just how much are you in for with these people?"

"Twelve million, plus interest."

"Wow. 'A bit of trouble,' you said. I don't have that kind of money. Are you sure you don't want to tell me what this information you passed on was about?" Pierre probed.

Mujuni looked uncomfortable, a lopsided grin plastered on his face. "Sorry, Pierre. I can't."

Pierre stared at his cousin for a long moment. "I guess I'm not going to make any headway on this one. I might as well drop it."

"Good. About this middleman assignment—is there anything I could help with? Running errands or something?"

"If there's anything I think you can help with, I'll let you know. However, regarding the amount you're requesting, I could come up with only a quarter—at most, half. And it might take a while. It's on the high side."

Pierre decided he'd meet him halfway. He couldn't afford to keep enabling Mujuni. Besides, if Mujuni knew the money

was coming from him, it wouldn't even feel like a loan. He'd lent Mujuni money more than twice before—money he'd never gotten back. He did some quick thinking.

"There is another way—a temporary measure, of sorts. But it can only help if you follow the conditions to the dot. Otherwise, you could end up with a worse debt problem than you have now."

"What's the other way?" Mujuni asked, anxious.

"There's a friend of mine—a loan shark with very fair interest rates. He doesn't bleed you as badly as the rest. Perhaps I could talk to him, see if he could lend you, say, half of what you're requesting. You come up with the other half."

"A loan shark?" Mujuni asked, somewhat surprised.

"Yes, a loan shark. But you'd have to come up with some security, seeing as you don't have a permanent job yet." Pierre paused, then added, "I could try talking my friend into an

interest-free loan. He owes me a couple of favors—who knows, we just might get lucky."

"What would I stake?" Mujuni asked.

"I'm sure you'll come up with something."

Mujuni was quiet for a while. *"Fair enough. Thank you."*

"Don't thank me. It's not a done deal yet."

Mujuni gave him a curious look. *"Hypothetically speaking, do you think Tick-Tock's scam could be pulled off here? In Uganda, I mean."*

"Tick-Tock?" Pierre asked, surprised.

"Yes, Tick-Tock. From that Myron Greene story you told me a couple of months ago."

"The maharaja and his gold-laden old watch?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"Mujuni—" Pierre started, but Mujuni cut him off before he could finish.

“I’m not replicating that con. I’m retired, remember?”

“Then why the hell would you ask such a question?”

“Out of curiosity,” Mujuni replied.

Pierre had once read a story featuring a character named Tick-Tock Tamil, who dealt in the business of greed. He’d shared it with Mujuni, who had been captivated by the tale.

CHAPTER THREE.

Pierre's story centered on a character named Tick-Tock Tamil, who duped his marks into believing they were cheating him out of an authentically engraved gold watch. It was heavy enough to appear solid gold. The watch was supposedly inscribed by the Viceroy of India—a figure of immense importance during Tick-Tock's era, 1936 to 1942, roughly equivalent to a Duke in England. The action unfolded in London.

But the 'engraving' wasn't engraving at all—it was stamped. The face looked hand-painted but was actually printed on special paper. Tick-Tock added small bits of lead here and there to give it weight. He also had an associate with a proprietary electroplating method: he spread the gold so thinly that if someone kept the watch in their pocket for a week or two,

it would wear right through. Tick-Tock used just half an ounce of gold per hundred watches and moved about a dozen a week.

The con had already been replicated in Kampala. Pierre now wondered whether Mujuni's question; *'Could Tick-Tock's scam work in Uganda?'* was a veiled threat, meant to pressure him into offering a loan quickly, or if Mujuni was genuinely curious. Pierre cared about Robin Mujuni and worried he could easily slip back into a life of crime.

From what Pierre had heard, potential marks were targeted at hangouts frequented by expatriates and the young, urbane working class. Trendy spots like the Irish Pub, Bubbles O'Leary, Just Kicking, and Fat Boys were favorites. The conman always dressed to the nines, sharp, in a tailored suit with an Italian label, his face as open as a church and as honest as truth.

On his wrist, he wore the watch: heavy enough to seem solid gold. On its back, in what appeared to be fine engraving, was inscribed:

To His Royal Highness, from a Loyal Friend.

Beneath that, a single name: **Gaddafi**.

In the Kampala version, the conmen used copper cores. They did their electroplating in Katwe, on the outskirts of the city, spreading the gold so thinly that they used just one ounce per hundred watches. They invoked Gaddafi's name because, at the time, he was arguably the richest sitting African president—and he had been visibly smitten with Uganda, particularly the Toro Kingdom. He showered the Toro Queen Mother and the young King Oyo with gifts; the new palace in Fort Portal stood as clear evidence of that affection.

Apparently, these watches fetched between 100,000 and 150,000 Ugandan shillings per week from an initial investment of just 55,000 shillings.

The conman would patiently study his mark from a vantage point across the bar, watching him grow increasingly inebriated, confident that sooner or later, the mark would visit the men's restroom. He'd wait a minute or two before following, then 'accidentally' bump into his quarry. Hurriedly and fervently apologizing, he'd step back and, in feigned surprise, strike up a conversation—slurring his words just enough to seem sloshed.

The exchange typically went like this:

"Uhm, are you not Felix Katuramu?"

"No," the mark would likely say. *"I'm afraid I'm not."*

"Oh, I'm sorry. There's such an extraordinary resemblance—but I suppose you're accustomed to being mistaken for him. I know the young brother. I used to work at

the Toro Palace as a personal aide to King Oyo." He'd pause, then add, "Extraordinary resemblance, I tell you." At that point, he'd glance at his watch and say, "Damn, I'm running late. What time is it?"

"Half past midnight," the mark might answer.

The conman would laugh.

"Once more, this watch has the correct time. I'm surprised." Slurring slightly, sounding every inch drunk, he'd continue:

"Gaddafi gave it to King Oyo on his fifteenth birthday. There's a touching inscription on the back. Let me show you."

He'd remove the watch from his wrist and display the inscription: *To His Royal Highness, from a Loyal Friend. GADDAFI.*

"So Oyo gave it to you?" the mark, slightly skeptical, might ask.

"No. Hell no. He's quite sentimental about gifts. He wouldn't part with something given to him." Then, with a charming smile:

"It went a few minutes off a couple of months after Oyo's fifteenth birthday. He gave it to me to correct—part of my duties as a personal attendant, you see. And I did correct it." He'd pause for effect.

"It kept good time for a couple of months, then lost time again—always by a few minutes. But the young King is a stickler for punctuality. He cautioned me not to return it until I'd had a professional take a look. Until then, I was to lock it away among his personal effects." Another pause.

"I'd planned to have a professional examine it the next day, but got lost in a maze of other tasks and totally forgot about it—until I was wrongfully accused of having designs on Princess Komuntale and was fired. As I packed my personal effects to

leave the Palace, I came across this watch again. I'd totally forgotten about it. I nicked it."

The conman might then wistfully study his reflection in the lavatory mirror.

"It was fun working there," he'd say, followed by a short pause.

"Anyhow, a former workmate has brought me out on the town and has started looking suspiciously at this watch—like he recalls it was a gift to Oyo. Perhaps you noticed him at the counter?"

"No. Not really."

"I've just had a bright idea," the seemingly drunk conman would say.

"Why don't I give it to you to keep for me—for a short time—until my workmate goes home? I'm sure he's about to

leave. Then I'll come and get it from you as I head out. Because, well, I'm still getting drunk."

His mark would likely protest, apprehensive; but by then, the conman would have thrust the watch into his hands. If the mark took the bait, as many patrons were wont to do, the con was on.

Once the mark made his final, feeble protest, the conman struck. He'd suggest that if it would make the mark feel more secure, he could hand over anywhere from 100,000 to 150,000 Ugandan shillings —as if he were staking the gold watch — and then refund the money when he picked it up in an hour or two.

Caught between greed and flattery, the mark would agree. They'd exchange fake phone numbers and part ways, both beating hasty retreats. The victim, believing he'd outsmarted the hunter, would disappear quickly, only to realize too late that he'd been the prey all along.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Robin Mujuni was a recovering confidence man prone to relapse, especially given the enablers he kept for company. It was still early days: five months to be precise since his release from Luzira Prison.

Two years earlier, he had trailed an unsuspecting African American tourist for two weeks, studying her movements. He had ascertained that twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, she shopped at Nakasero Market in downtown Kampala.

On Tuesdays, she was escorted by a male companion. Mujuni assumed he was Ugandan, having eavesdropped on him bargaining for a price reduction while buying tomatoes in fluent

Luganda. On Fridays, however, she shopped alone. On both days, she always arrived at the market between 12:00 and 1:00 p.m.

On this particular Friday, Mujuni stood in front of *Jerome's Hardware Store*, elegantly dressed as usual and seemingly deep in a phone conversation. Occasionally, he stole glances at a silver gray Mercedes Benz S Class parked at the curb. The American woman had already entered the market, a hired bag boy in tow. Mujuni shifted on his heels, biding his time. It was 12:30 p.m.

Forty minutes later, the woman emerged, her bag boy laden with fresh food and fruit. Mujuni ended his call and watched as she unlocked the driver's door, then popped the boot for the boy to offload her purchases. She paid him, and he hurried off.

As she turned back to open the driver's door, Mujuni, calm and confident, approached and tapped her left shoulder with his

right hand. When she turned to see who had touched her, he struck her hard across the face with the back of the same hand. She fell to the ground, dazed, the car keys still loosely clutched in her right hand.

A crowd quickly gathered: curious passersby, kiosk owners, shopkeepers, and stallholders all converged on the scene.

Mujuni stepped back and looked down at the woman with disdain. Then he spoke, his voice rising slowly until he was shouting:

"Naku gambye ki?"

(See back of the book for translation to English.)

The lady, stunned, simply stared.

"Naku gambye ki?" he repeated.

She looked on in disbelief.

“Nakuwadde Ipsum. Nenkuwa ne Harrier. Oli mukazi wange, nkwagala nyo, naye nakugambye todamu ku kwata ku Benzi yange!”

Standing six feet four inches tall, with an athletic build and impeccably dressed, Mujuni cut an imposing figure. The American heaved herself into a sitting position and opened her mouth to speak, but Mujuni struck her again, harder this time, sending her sprawling to the ground.

A gentleman from the crowd stepped forward to intervene. Mujuni spun around to face this self appointed arbitrator.

“Bwemba njogera ne mukazi wange, tobiyingiramu!” he yelled.

“Gwe osasula bye tokozessa ewaka?” he added, turning his wrath on the man.

Realizing he might be stepping into a domestic dispute, the gentleman’s confidence faltered.

Before Mujuni began shouting in Luganda, many in the crowd had been ready to intervene, but the phrase *"Oli mukazi wange" (You are my wife)* gave them pause.

Mujuni stepped forward and squatted in front of the woman.

"Tujja bimalirizza e'wakka."

He reached out and snatched the car keys from her hand. She tried to protest and was rewarded with an even harder slap that sent her sprawling again.

The gentleman lunged forward, grabbing Mujuni by the scruff of his collar and yanking him to his feet. Like a boxer, Mujuni had learned to react on instinct. In reflex, he drove his left elbow hard into the man's ribs. The gentleman grunted and fell back, clutching his chest.

Mujuni calmly strode to the Mercedes, slid into the driver's seat, and sped off.

As the car turned the bend toward Kampala Road, the crowd surged forward. Several men volunteered to help.

"Nyabo, sorry, musajja wo yeyisiza bwaatyo. Kasta mujja bimalirizza waaka."

("Madam, sorry, your husband behaved badly. But you will settle this at home.")

The American woman had finally found her voice and was screaming hysterically. She had not understood a single word her tormentor had said, nor what her sympathizers were saying.

"Why? I have never seen that man before in my life!" was all she could muster, in heavily accented English.

As Mujuni sped past Uganda House, he rammed into a Toyota Prado bearing a government number plate, UG 1674E, that had pulled onto the road from Parliamentary Avenue. His heist ended in an abrupt, anticlimactic crash.

He tried to abandon the vehicle and flee the scene, but the government car's driver, with help from accident witnesses, apprehended him on the spot.

Robin Mujuni was dragged to the nearest police station, Kampala Central Police Station. And as fate would have it, the American woman also arrived to report the theft of her vehicle.

Mujuni's forty days of freedom had run out.

CHAPTER FIVE.

Three cappuccinos and two espressos later, Tony Sabiiti walked into Café Java's and joined Pierre and Robin Mujuni.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting." Sabiiti said, hastily greeting Pierre and Mujuni. Sabiiti asked after Pierre's family, Mujuni was still single. Pierre shrugged and said Sandra and the girls were fine, he'd seen them the previous weekend.

Pierre was thinking to himself that if only he had learned to pick his marital battles then perhaps he wouldn't be in his current predicament. Sandra had yet again insisted on the divorce but he was not going to sign the divorce papers.

Sabiiti turned to Mujuni, handling him some documents and politely requested if he could be kind enough to check

across the road if there was any Photocopier. Robin Mujuni knew that was his cue to give Pierre and Sabiiti some Privacy. He took his leave.

"I got a call early yesterday morning, 8am to be Precise." Tony Sabiiti said.

"From who?" Pierre Bagonza asked

"It involves a hefty sum," Sabiiti said and paused.

"You have not told me who called, how much?" Pierre asked.

"Eight hundred thousand,"

"That is terrible."

"Dollars." Sabiiti clarified.

"Now that sounds much better. Who called?"

"He did not say, and I bet the number is untraceable. But he said he'd heard of our outfit through a mutual friend."

"Who?" Pierre inquired again.

"He did not say."

"What did he say then?"

"He was rather vague until we got down to the question of money."

"That usually gets people perky." Pierre said. Sabiiti grinned at that.

The outfit that Tony Sabiiti referred to was a side business of mediation that they did outside of their professional careers. They acted as a go-between, negotiators, and took on a rather unique and interesting kind of clientele. They operated by word of mouth, a satisfied client informing a friend in a similar predicament.

Sometimes, a worthy candidate was approached and propositioned. The rich – and two insurance companies thus far – came when they wanted to ransom something that had been stolen from them, usually something that they were rather found

of, or at least accustomed to having around, like perhaps a diamond necklace.

Sometimes, it was the thieves themselves who made the initial contact with Tony Sabiiti. It was through Sabiiti that go-between assignments got to Pierre Bagonza. And they had picked up over the years. Sabiiti got ten percent of Pierre's ten percent upon completion of an assignment. If it involved a sum of eight hundred thousand, Pierre would get eighty thousand and Sabiiti eight thousand.

"Why is he paying in dollars?" Pierre asked.

"I talked him into it," Sabiiti answered, before adding

"Have I mentioned that a deposit of fifteen percent of your total fee has been paid, and is non refundable?"

"If you were a babe I would have married you." Pierre said smiling, his admiration for Tony Sabiiti's ability as a skilled negotiator rising several notches higher.

"So what is this about?" Pierre asked.

"Apparently, a package, its contents of which I'm ignorant of and our client is unwilling to discuss, was stolen. The thieves are willing to sell it back for eight hundred thousand dollars. The owner is willing to engage your services as a go-between for the usual ten percent." Sabiiti paused and signaled a waitress before continuing.

"Since he is paying a non-refundable fifteen percent of your fee upfront, we agreed that you sort out your own personal expenses."

"That's fair enough." Pierre said, before asking,

"What do you think could be in the package?"

"Incriminating documents, scandalous photos or videos, an expensive work of art, classified information, evidence to murder or heavy fraud, who knows?" Sabiiti replied,

"Whatever it holds does not concern us. We play our part and deliver the package to its owner, our client." He added.

Pierre was quiet for a while before thinking out loud,

"The actual market value of whatever it is we are to retrieve must be triple or even quadruples what he is offering us. And he does not want the police involved, no?"

"Correct. However, it might be that whoever stole the package has threatened to destroy, expose or divulge the contents – depending – if the Police are brought in."

"What else?" Pierre pressed on.

"Well, you have a meeting with one of his people scheduled for 8:00pm at La Foret in Muyenga." Sabiiti replied,

"He will find you, just make sure you are there on time." He added, as a waitress came to clear their table,

"Just like you kept time this morning?" Pierre countered.

Sabiiti grinned sheepishly as he cleared the bill. There was no

objection from Pierre who returned his wallet back to his pocket. Mujuni had returned with the photocopied documents and handed them over to Sabiiti, who looked through them.

Pierre Bagonza excused himself, promising to bring Tony Sabiiti up to speed later that evening and Robin Mujuni up to date later in the week.

CHAPTER SIX.

Holden International Bank of Grenada and Prudent International Bank of Nauru had defrauded thousands of unsuspecting investors of millions of dollars through fake bank and insurance investments in one of the biggest banking swindles of all time.

Aided and abetted by a corrupt government, Daniel Cullen lured hundreds of innocent investors to place their savings in a bank that guaranteed interest of up to 250 percent per annum on deposits. He promised their money would quickly appreciate in secret offshore accounts, well beyond the reach of revenue hungry government authorities.

The son of a Baptist preacher, Daniel had grown up in the church. He claimed that his bank "had a vision." With evangelical zeal, he preached the gospel of his bank, playing upon religious and charitable sentiments.

Grenada and Nauru were territories with low taxes and poor bank supervision. Banking secrecy allowed money to be stashed away and completely hidden. This enabled individuals and corporations from all over the world to exploit the possibility of tax evasion and money laundering.

Daniel Cullen sat hunched over a thick, brown, leather ledger, meticulously going through its pages from 11:00 p.m. the previous night. It was now fast approaching dawn.

In Nauru, a notorious offshore center in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, all Daniel Cullen needed to set up his own bank, Prudent International Bank, was 25,000 US dollars. And he had enjoyed little, and sometimes no, regulation. Prudent International Bank joined more than 400 banks there that operated from the same government mail box.

In 1998 alone, according to the Russian central bank, 70 billion dollars, approximately 46 billion pounds, vanished, never to be seen again.

Three weeks earlier, the commercial court of Uganda had granted an adjournment to the liquidator of Holden International Bank of Grenada to enable further research into the bank's move to sue its former chief executive, Daniel Cullen. Daniel, together with a government official of Grenada, the country's chief regulator, who had been complicit in the fraud, was facing 147 counts of conspiracy, fraud, and money laundering.

He rubbed his sore eyes and pushed back his chair as he rose and walked toward the large, arched windows. He drew the curtains and looked out across the neighboring Ggaba Beach, watching as the sun began to rise. He was safe, at least for now. Uganda had no extradition treaty with the United States of America. It had been such a close call, his escape from Grenada.

He had fled Grenada with local authorities hot on his heels, making his escape from that island one night on a Cuban submarine bound for Havana, then flying on from there to Uganda. As premeditation or coincidence would have it, Uganda had no extradition treaty with the United States of America.

Shrewd, calculative, and intense, Daniel Cullen was the former chief executive officer of two offshore banks: Holden International Bank of Grenada and Prudent International Bank of Nauru, both island nations.

The banks catered to depositors from all over the globe: America, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, the People's Republic of China, British Virgin Islands, Antigua and Barbados, and St Kitts and Nevis.

After more than five years of investigation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation confirmed massive fraud at the two

banks. Since the majority of the depositors were American, the American government claimed jurisdiction.

It mirrored what happened on Montserrat in the late 1980s, when approximately 300 “paper” banks, established with phantom capital, defrauded foreign clients of millions of dollars before eventually being closed down by the UK police in 1989 to 1990.

Daniel’s pitch had been so good that tens of millions of dollars soon began to flow into the banks, even when his operations were only a few months old.

Most investors were trying to hide money from their countries’ tax men and thus would be reluctant to complain to the police in case it simply vanished.

He had set up his operations in tiny, impoverished island nations run by officials willing to rewrite their banking laws to attract new sources of revenue.

Of the 82 tax jurisdictions around the world, there were 4,800 licensed banks in these centers controlling 21 trillion dollars (14 trillion pounds) in assets. 18.5 trillion dollars of this was held in tax havens.

Daniel Cullen had taken up citizenship in Grenada and then embarked on setting up a dummy stock brokerage firm, Infinite Brokerage Services Inc., to exclusively facilitate the first trading shares on a sham stock exchange, Global Investors Stock Exchange, set up by one of his close business associates.

Holden International Bank of Grenada had then registered 182 different telephone and fax numbers with Cable and Wireless in Grenada, which were being used by various entities claiming to be independent of the bank.

A sham insurance company that claimed to insure all investors on the Global Investors Stock Exchange was also set up.

When a local daily in Grenada pointed accusatory fingers against the entities associated with Holden International Bank of Grenada, the country's chief regulator, one Dean Letterman, swore an affidavit in favor of the bank, the sham stock exchange, and the phantom insurer.

Daniel Cullen had known all along that ultimately the scheme would collapse, but he had not expected it to do so this fast. His success depended on the ability to recruit more and more investors. Since there were only a limited number of people in a "community," it was bound to fall apart at some point.

He thought about the Greek crisis and the damage that wealthy private individuals, usually with something to hide, who salt away money in tax havens can cause to an economy. A familiar quote crossed his mind:

“The collapse of public finance is largely down to the consequences of allowing tax evasion by wealthy people to become endemic.”

There was a creak somewhere behind him, and he turned just in time to see the doorknob to his study being turned. He immediately remembered that he had company. Hurriedly walking over to his desk, he picked up the thick, brown, leather bound ledger and locked it in the third drawer of his cabinet.

As if on cue, the door opened, and there stood such a sight for sore eyes. Clad only in a C string, the buxom girl strode seductively toward him.

He had met her at a charity event where she had ushered the previous afternoon. She was a necessary distraction. They all were.

CHAPTER SEVEN.

Pierre got to *La Foret* thirty minutes before the appointed time and headed straight for the poolside bar. He ordered himself a cold *club* beer as he looked around the poolside, taking in a few couples engrossed in chit-chat. There was a group of four gentlemen seated secluded at a table in the farthest corner from the pool. He stared at them for a while trying to elicit some reaction without much success.

He refocused his attention to a guy that had just walked out of the changing room. He still got no reaction there. Pierre took a swig of his pint and resigned himself to waiting, keeping his eyes trained at the entrance to the pool area.

Half an hour past the appointed time, Pierre Bagonza wondered whether he had heard Tony Sabiiti right. The restaurant section of the establishment was closed for refurbishment and whoever came in had to walk passed the pool.

So Pierre was pretty sure he'd heard Sabiiti wrong and mixed up the time or his contact was around but still sizing him up or the deal had folded.

As he whipped out his phone to call Sabiiti to find out if there was any development on his front, a rather nerdy looking type stumbled – he'd seemingly appeared from nowhere – and knocked it out of his hand, spilling Pierre's drink too in the process. Pierre bent and picked up his phone, irritated.

As he dug a handkerchief out of his jeans back pocket to dab spill off his beige blazer, the nerd insisted on buying him another drink, effusively apologizing for his clumsiness.

"You ought to watch where you are going." Pierre reprimanded him.

"I'm terribly sorry sir. I did not see the hosepipe lying on the floor. With the renovations going on someone must have forgotten it lying about."

"Forget about it, it's nothing." Pierre said calming down. The barman came round the counter to clean up the spill on the tiled floor. The nerdy looking guy passed him a twenty thousand shillings note and ordered another drink for Pierre. Deftly the barman cleared up the mess and served Pierre Bagonza with another beer. Taking up the bar stool next to Pierre, the nerd ordered himself a beer too.

On the large flat screen television set next to the display counter, the champions league final between Juventus and Barcelona was about to start. They watched in silence, the mess of a few minutes before forgotten. As Suarez matched onto the pitch the nerd spoke,

"He looks really hungry," he paused, smiling, before adding,

"From the way he is looking at Carlos Teves and Patrice Evra, his hunger is surely not only for a win," he laughed aloud

at his own joke. Pierre kept a poker face. He reached for his phone and dialed Sabiiti's number. It rang incessantly but Tony Sabiiti did not pick up.

"Is that yours?" the nerd asked Pierre, pointing at something that looked like a diary lying on the tiled floor. As Pierre Bagonza looked down at the object, the nerd stealthily spiked his drink.

"No it's not." Pierre answered, picking it up and placing it on the counter, just in front of the barman. On the television set, Suarez made his second attempt on goal, curving the ball just inches off the goal post, nearly giving the barman a heart attack. He'd placed a one hundred thousand shillings bet on a goal-less first half, which was more than he could actually afford.

A short while later a phone rung, it was the nerd's. He spoke for less than a minute before hanging up.

"I have to miss the first half, family emergency. Enjoy the game." The nerd said and gulped down his beer before left. It was 9:15pm, one hour and fifteen minutes past the appointment time.

Pierre Bagonza requested for an ashtray and lit a cigarette. He'd taken only two drags when he experienced a sudden onset of awful cramps, then nausea and then euphoria. The euphoria lasted for a few minutes, before being followed by a brief spell of paranoia and then a not so short one aggression.

He flipped over the counter desk and attacked the barman, going for his jugular. He throttled him as he pushed him back, smashing into the counter display deck. The whole deck came crushing down hard, breaking numerous whiskeys, brandy, gin, and wine bottles of the expensive variety.

It took the intervention of some of the patrons and a bouncer to subdue him, but not before a proper beat down that left him with a burst lip, torn shirt and bruises all over his body.

Being a patron of the establishment, the coppers were not called on him. However, he was thoroughly frisked and a substantial amount relieved of him to partially cover for the damage he'd caused and his car keys were also arrested. Mercifully Pierre was spared with twenty thousand to transport himself back home. He was then hauled off the premises by a bouncer.

In a dazed state, Pierre Bagonza had wandered away from *La foret*, heading in no particular direction, the drug slowly wearing off until he came to, in a seedy part of Kampala.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

Pierre gulped what little remained of his Uganda *waragi.* He turned to the woman behind the make-shift counter and inquired from her about the area.

"Mama Brown." She said, giving him a toothless smile.

"Not the name of the bar." Pierre said, before switching to Luganda,

"Kyembuza, kitundu kino bajjiyita ki?"

She laughed at his adulterated Luganda and then replied, *"Kikubamutwe."*

This literally means, *'It hits the head'.* The area is just off Kabalagala road, which snakes up to Muyenga, less than a kilometer away. Pierre got a vague idea on his location. He'd heard tales about the area.

"Oku'tuka ku Capital pub ngovuddewano, mpiittte wa? Si wala?"

Pierre was familiar with *'Sin City'*, a name regulars of Kabalagala's night scene had baptized it with, which was supposedly a five minute walk away from Kikubamutwe. So some of the tales had implied. And less than twenty minutes away from his residence. If he got to capital pub, he'd be home in a jiffy. The woman gave him another toothless smile, "*Neda sebo, kumpi nyo. Just mumaaso ga kizimbe ekyo*." She said, pointing at another shack.

"Webaale nyo nyabo. Balance?"

She gave him his change but it was short by two thousand shillings. Pierre kept looking at her. She kept on smiling as she added him one thousand shillings – still one thousand shillings short. He took it and walked out of the *kafunda.*

As he stepped out, he tried to make sense of the last few hours happenings. He was certain that he had been drugged. His mind drifted to the client and dwelled there for a while. What

would the client gain by drugging him? But then again he'd handled several clients before and it could as well have been any of them – a dissatisfied client perhaps. It could even have been the thieves.

If it was the thieves, then this had been a test to find out if they could trust him. Obviously they knew the aftermath of whatever drug they had spiked his drink with and were counting on him going bonkers and probably assaulting someone, anyone at *La foret*. They had probably assumed the coppers would be called on Pierre and he'd end up in jail. When the drug wore off and he was being interrogated, would Pierre keep his cool or would he lose his head and blab about the negotiating assignment?

"I'm negotiating the return of stolen property."

"What property?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know what you are negotiating for?"

"No. I don't know yet, but that is beside the point."

"What point?"

"Afande, you are putting words in my Mouth"

"Putting words in your Mouth? Okay, who are you negotiating with?"

"With the thieves."

"So now you negotiate with thieves."

"No! I mean yes…"

"You don't know what you are negotiating for, you don't know who you are negotiating for, but you are negotiating with thieves. Have I got that right?"

"I, uhm yes. I mean no…"

No, that probably would not go well. If it was the thieves, had he passed their test although he had not been arrested or should he expect another nasty test? As he mulled over this, his

phone vibrated in his shirt pocket, startling him. He fished it out, noticing that he'd missed thirteen phone calls from Sabiiti, before answering

"Why the hell didn't you take my calls?" Sabiiti almost shouted.

"I am taking your call now, am I not?" Pierre replied calmly

"What happened?"

"I'm still trying to piece it together myself."

"What do you mean you are still trying to piece it together?" Sabiiti was now almost yelling, hardly able to contain his anger,

"I've been trying to reach you for more than two hours and all you can say is you are still trying to piece it together!"

"Chief, calm down, I tried reaching you at 8:30pm but you didn't pick up." Pierre paused, then added,

"What's with the foul mood?" Amused at Sabiiti's irritability. There was silence on Sabiiti's end of the line.

"Well, it was ruse." Pierre said. And then he went on to fill Sabiiti in on what had happened. The spiked drink had him out of his senses for close to four hours.

He eavesdropped on a *boda-boda* cyclist who had parked at the mouth of the murram road that led into kikubamutwe and was yelling at someone he was 'phone-cating' with about how late it was and yet the other party had promised to be there by midnight. So it was already past midnight.

"What do you suppose should be our next line of action?" Sabiiti queried.

"Our next line of action is to wait. Wait and see who contacts us first."

"Sorry I bit your head off…"

"No hard feelings. I really need to catch some shut-eye, I will keep you updated." Pierre Bagonza said before abruptly hanging up.

The *boda-boda* chap was still on phone. Pierre walked up to him and stared. It was probably his disheveled look, his stare was ignored, not the reaction he had hoped to elicit.

"Muyenga sente mekka?" He asked the *boda-boda* guy. The chap mumbled something inaudible into his phone and hang up. He turned to Pierre,

"Mutwalo."

"Ndina Nkumi tanno. Oja kundeka kumpi wano, ku Kironde road. Tojja kugenda paaka tank hill." Pierre responded. The chap just looked at him, like he had not heard a word Pierre had said.

Pierre Bagonza walked on. Hardly had he taken eight steps than,

"Jangu tugende," the *boda-boda* chap had shouted.

It was not long before Pierre was home. He would have to pass by *La foret* before mid-day to sort out his damages and pick up his car.

CHAPTER NINE.

The alarm went off at 11:30am rousing Pierre Bagonza from his uncomfortable sleep. Ever since Sandra and the girls, thirteen year old Tyra Assimwe and Six year old Tamara Tushabe, moved out of the house, he'd hardly had a good night's sleep.

Groggy, he forced himself up and took a long cold shower. He then put together a quick breakfast of omelet, toast bread, bananas and coffee. Three pots of coffee to be exact. He yawned, thinking to himself this solitary existence did not suit him.

Still experiencing light ripples of cramps, he scrolled through his phone book, stopping at the name Dr. Duncan Niima. Duncan was an old boy of his, during his secondary school ordinary level. They had been close and kept in touch even after school. He had not seen Duncan in six years though,

not since he had escorted Sandra for her last antenatal appointment just before she had given birth to his little princess, Tamara Tushabe.

He spent all of ten minutes catching up on whatever gossip they still had in common.

"So what can I do for you? Are you making an appointment for the clinic?" Dr. Niima asked. He ran a thriving clinic at Uganda house, right in the heart of Kampala.

"No, not really. Somebody spiked my drink the other day."

"What happened?"

"Cramps, then nausea followed by a terrific high. Euphoria, really. Then paranoia and aggression quickly followed."

"You weren't drinking a lot, were you?"

"It was my second beer all day."

"Did you notice any taste?"

"It might have tasted a little bitter," Pierre said thinking back, *"but I'm not sure."*

"How much do you smoke now?"

"Two packs a day."

"Christ! What can you taste?"

"Salt. I can taste salt."

"Well, I can tell you what it could have been although I can't be certain."

"Of course."

"Morphine."

"Would that do it?"

"I think a few milligrams might do it and you might not notice if the taste buds are ruined, as yours seem to be." Dr. Niima said before asking,

"Did you like it?"

"What?"

"The euphoria."

"Sure," Pierre said *"It felt damn good."*

"I was afraid you would say that." Dr. Niima said. They said their goodbyes and hang up.

Pierre reflected briefly on his talk with the good doctor. Had Dr. Niima insinuated concern about his drinking or was he just imagining things. Although he wore shades more often than necessary lately, to hide his blood shot eyes, his cognition was super. He was not anxious and he was not depressed. If he was not in high spirits, it had to do with Sandra walking out on him with his two little girls. But he thought of the long term effects of his lifestyle more since he separated with his soon to be ex-wife. On the other hand, it seemed like a lot to give up.

What had started out as casual recreational use had grown to regular use, until now that he had incorporated it into his

usual routine. He was not yet reliant on alcohol for physical or psychological function, but he was getting frighteningly close.

He seemed to have a stash of alcohol near him at all times. At the office he always had a bottle or two of Uganda *waragi* locked away his in cabinet or in of the office drawers. However, while at the firm, he only partook after office hours.

One of his employees, a recovering alcoholic, regularly attended Alcoholic Anonymous meetings at Christ the King church on Tuesdays along.

But first he had to get rid of all the alcohol around him. He walked to the fridge and opened the door. Ten 'sweating' *club* beers seemed to stare back at him.

He made a mental appraisal of all the nooks in the house that he had stashed liquor. He had a lot of work to do. Pulling out a cold *club* beer from the fridge, he opened it and walked back to the living room.

Comfortably settling down on the sofa set, he took his first sip. It tasted wonderful.

CHAPTER TEN.

Morphine. Who could easily access morphine and how hard was it to trace the source of his particular dose, Pierre Bagonza wondered. He had a pretty good description of who had spiked his drink, and he was certain his unfortunate episode was linked to the mysterious, new client.

He had a feeling he and the nerd would meet again. As he pondered this, his thoughts drifted off to Sandra – Sandra Turyamureeba.

Theirs had been a whirlwind romance. Her bubbly personality had him smitten right from their first meeting and in less than six months, he had put a ring on it. He roused from his reverie and dialed her number. She answered almost immediately.

"Good morning Sandy. How are you?"

"Bonjour Pierre. Good afternoon."

"Oh, it's already afternoon. Time flies. How are you and the girls, the course?" Sandra had applied for study leave from work and gone back to school to pursue a Masters degree in public health management.

"We are good. Which reminds me, I think Tamara forgot her tiara in the back seat of your car."

"Tamara forgot, or you forgot?"

Silence on Sandra's end then,

"Did you call to patronize me?" she said. Their relationship was strained and they walked on eggshells around each other,

"Sorry. Not my intention. Just checking up on you and the girls, are they nearby?"

"Dorothy took them over to her place, less distraction for me as I do some reading." Sandra said. Dorothy, Sandra's sister,

lived just two blocks away from Sandra at the Buganda road flats.

"Oh, you will send them my love. I'll call again later in the evening."

"Don't call too late, or when you are tipsy. I won't wake them up."

"Sure, sure, I'll call early. Sandy," a pause, then

"Sandy, I believe we can work through this. For better or for worse, remember?"

"We've been through this before. You really hurt me, what you did is unforgivable and I'll never look at you the same way. Please just sign the papers." Sandra said before hanging up.

Pierre remained holding the phone, tightening his grip. They had been neither the happiest nor the unhappiest couple. They had their ups and downs just like any other relationship

does. Pierre had believed he and Sandra would be together forever.

Problems began the day Bridget, Sandra's friend, entered into their lives. The Bagonza's had known Bridget for four years and Pierre had been overwhelmed by a sense of familiarity with her, almost as though he already knew her, right from the start. Bridget's beauty, striking style, wit, and intelligence drew Pierre in.

He had thought of her constantly and dreamed of her with alarming frequency. Bridget, however, didn't seem overly impressed with him. She was also, apparently happily married. The fact that he was too, or thought he was seemed irrelevant.

Sandra and Bridget were not actually that different. They had similar personalities and even looked alike. Pierre had not stopped liking Sandra. He was deeply drawn to both women.

The solution had been simple, he cut off all contact with Bridget and avoided situations where they might run into each other. People, the Bagonza's friends, assumed he disliked her.

Thinking about Bridget made him feel guilty, which, absurdly, made him resent Sandra – and made him feel even guiltier. Something was clearly wrong with his marriage. Nothing he did alleviated his shame, nor did it enhance the marriage he was trying to protect.

Pierre used to have passionate fights with Sandra over the things they disagreed on – careers, money. Overtime, though, they stopped arguing. Fights that lasted hours or days condensed themselves into brutal one-line battles. Instead of facing their conflicts, they ignored them and hoped they would go away. Pierre's attraction was more than physical. He told no one, not even his closest friend.

After two years, Pierre could no longer suppress his feelings for Bridget. He was compelled, despite all logical sense, to reach out to her.

Bridget Karamagi, being an administrator with the registrar of companies, it wasn't difficult for Pierre to find a legitimate reason to contact Bridget – looking up more information on one of the companies that his firm was auditing. From that point on, they corresponded, the more Pierre digressed from work related issues. It wasn't too long before he broached on the subject of his feelings, subtly, to Bridget. She was quick to pick on it and asked him what he thought he was doing.

Pierre Bagonza apologized and told her he didn't know what he was doing. He told her that he hadn't told Sandra about what was going on with him. Bridget told him that she too hadn't spoken to her husband about their correspondence.

Bridget Karamagi had been receiving anonymous emails from a secret admirer – emails that really touched her, that spoke to her. She asked him if he was her secret admirer, and he confirmed it.

The leap to physical infidelity happened one time when Sandra was going out of town for a week. When Bridget arrived at Hotel Africana to meet Pierre, they laughed and embraced awkwardly. She pushed into him with such force that he had to brace himself. The chemistry was unimaginable. He could smell the sweetness of her skin and hair, feel the wetness of her breath against his neck and the warmth of her breasts against his chest.

They consummated their infidelity that day and carried it on for close to two years before Sandra caught them at it.

At the time of Pierre's infidelity, Pierre and Sandra were experiencing tension in their marriage. Pierre Bagonza had

withdrawn a large sum of money from their joint savings account to finance a business deal he'd hoped would bring back massive returns. And unfortunately for him, the deal had flopped terribly.

The bone of contention was not about Pierre withdrawing money from their joint account. The issue was with Pierre not telling her about it. He only came clean after the fact. After losing the money.

He had apologized and promised her it was only a hitch in a business transaction that would be rectified in a few Months. But then the Months had stretched into a year and it became a sore point in their relationship. If they were not arguing or quarreling then they were giving each other the silent treatment. This was when Pierre sought comfort in Bridget Karamagi.

Bridget was fun. She was a good listener and was often available to offer a leaning shoulder when Pierre had a tiff with the missus.

Sandra Turyamureeba had suspected Pierre of infidelity for some time. She did not confront Pierre. She instead steadily cultivated evidence of his infidelity by going through his phone messages, regularly, taking note of his inconsistencies in what he would say and hiring a private investigator to follow him. It finally paid off.

One Saturday evening, a month and a couple of days after she had hired a private investigator, he called her with directions to Nyondo Pub on Entebbe road. By the time she reached the Pub, her eyes were red and puffy from crying. She called the private investigator from the parking lot of the pub and he directed her to the parasol, where he had a vantage point of a

vehicle on display. A *mark ll, Grande, 1998 model*. He had been there for just over an hour and a half.

Pierre Bagonza had arrived at Nyondo Pub fifteen minutes after the private investigator and was joined by Bridget another Quarter of an hour later. They had not wasted time at the pub, hardly touching their drinks. Pierre had cleared the bill and they had walked hand in hand to a lodge at the back of the pub.

That nights M.C announced that it was time for the competition to begin. Every evening the Pub held a competition for one of their patrons to drive away in a brand new *mark ll, Grande, 1998 Model*.

All one had to do was to drink ten beers, of a brand of their choice, without taking a leak, going for a short call, until the last one was finished. The competition was open between 8:00pm to 12:00am.

The gimmick had been running for close to eight years with no one winning. As the private investigator contemplated giving it a short, Sandra Turyamureeba materialized at his table.

After bringing her up to speed, they sat in uncomfortable silence for a while as Sandra gathered up the courage to storm the lodge. It took all of thirty minutes, a thousand murderous thoughts crossing her cranium. Then just as they rose to storm the lodge, Pierre emerged from the corridor leading to the lodging facility, a glowing Bridget Karamagi in tow. Sandra Bagonza had just confirmed her worst fear. And it ripped her heart out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

Michael Benet was getting tired of running into walls. Whenever he seemed to be making progress with his investigation, he got stone walled. A former cop with the Oregon police department, Michael Benet's interest in the Holden International Bank of Grenada case was personal. His sixty four year old mother was one of the victims of the collapse of Holden International Bank of Grenada.

She lost nearly all her life's savings in the offshore investment scam. Michael had been amassing data for three years on Holden International Bank of Grenada. The more walls he ran into, the more he ploughed on. He was relentless.

An interesting development had occurred the previous week. He had received an anonymous tip pointing him in the direction of where some of Holden International Bank of Grenada's documents had been hidden.

The tipster took it a notch further and sent him copies of the said documents that claimed to prove that billions in assets of the bank were actually real.

Additionally, names of those who knew of and were involved in the removal, transference and conversion of the Holden International Bank of Grenada's *'large asset instrument'* document portfolio packages, were emailed to him. Michael urgently needed to verify this information.

Without the financial and political muscle of an international task force, and going up against a financial Goliath, a behemoth that Holden International Bank of Grenada and Daniel Cullen were, and that had perplexed international law enforcement for more than four years, Michael Benet acknowledged he was susceptible to being both misled and misinformed.

He took every lead with a pinch of salt. The assets themselves created a United States national security alert that attracted government spooks into the picture.

During his investigation, Michael Benet, now a private investigator had learned that two lead foreign government agents had gone rogue. Their names appeared on the list of those involved in the secret removal of Holden International Bank of Grenada's bank documents.

He was not surprised that after three years of his investigation, he was coming up with a different conclusion from those that had been on the same case for almost twice as much time.

There was a major hiccup in the way the investigation was being carried out. The United States justice department just rounded up all the paper work and personal property of those they suspected, but never found the smoking gun.

Sifting through the gigantean mass of data that he had collected in the over 20,000 hours put in, in his search for proof, evidence pointed to other individuals than those threatened with life sentences. Documents had disappeared giving it the appearance the bank was no more than a fraud. Yet there were really billions of dollars in assets attached to Holden International Bank of Grenada, but were secretly removed.

Daniel Cullen took a casual evening walk from his residence in _Ggaba through the local trading centre heading on towards Kansanga, only stopping to buy himself a *rolex* – a Ugandan delicacy comprising two or more eggs, tomatoes, cabbage, spices and optionally minced meat and fries, all rolled up in a chapatti – which he munched as he walked on.

He was inconspicuous in his grey tracksuit and blue flip-flops. He had grown a stub and looked nothing like the billionaire that he was.

He enjoyed these evening walks. He thought more clearly on his evening walks. Daniel recalled the letter that he had written to Dean Letterman, the chief regulator of Grenada, informing him that Holden International Bank of Grenada had made a net profit of sixty billion dollars in its first year of operation in an effort to assuage concerns about the bank.

In hindsight, perhaps he had been too ambitious with that figure. However, after a one on one talk with Dean Letterman, just shortly after sending the letter, Dean guaranteed the government of Grenada's acceptance of the figure as genuine and the government made no attempt to close down the bank.

The letter had been in response to one that Dean Letterman had written to the bank seeking answers to a number of allegations that Mr. Daniel Cullen was running a ponzi scheme, an illegal pyramid scheme and a money laundering facility.

A smile flitted across his thin lips when he remembered Dean Letterman's first email in response to his letter, inquiring if the sixty billion was a typo.

He stopped at a roadside kiosk and took a seat on one of the white plastic chairs placed under a mango tree. A young lad brought him a bottle of *Rwenzori* mineral water. He had been stopping at this very kiosk for the last three weeks.

Mail fraud, wire fraud, money laundering and forfeiture. The looming charges run a mile in his mind. He could read the headlines; *'International US fugitive nabbed.', 'Ex-CEO of billion dollar offshore bank on the run.'* Apparently he was a threat to national security. And it worried him that his trusted associate had suddenly gone silent.

Prudent International Bank's depositors had been absorbed by Holden International Bank of Grenada one year before cracks begun to appear in the offshore banks façade.

Six months after that Daniel Cullen resigned from being the Chief Executive Officer of Holden International Bank of Grenada.

Holden International Bank of Grenada was then placed into court ordered liquidation, a liquidation process that was still ongoing, conducted by the Grenada courts appointed liquidator, Price Waterhouse Coopers' Albert .B. Garcia.

Albert .B. Garcia, after confirmation of Daniel Cullen's presence in the pearl of Africa, Uganda, had retained the prestigious Kampala law firm, Thonobi, Muwonge and company advocates in Uganda and had been pursuing Daniel in Uganda with various court initiatives.

CHAPTER TWELVE.

Ntango Brian, a croupier at the Mayfair casino watched Atiba Nicholas gamble. Atiba was making more losses than wins. Ntango knew it would not be long before he was approached by Atiba, who had already run up a debt with him of six hundred thousand Ugandan shillings, in just the last two evenings.

A regular at the casino, so far he had been good for the money, paying back at an interest rate of 20% in a couple of

days. Still, as a matter of principle, Ntango never lent anything over six hundred thousand Ugandan shillings.

Atiba Nicholas did a lot of things well; he cooked well enough to be a chef, he painted well - in fact, he was an accomplished artist, he was a good photographer and an aspiring author.

But one thing that Atiba couldn't do was gamble. The more badly he played, the more he had to. The more he must. He simply could not stop. He was a compulsive gambler, a degenerate gambler.

Atiba had known a few compulsive gamblers who had lost everything and he worried that he was on the same path. But he was desperate for that big break, he couldn't help himself. Over the years he had seen a few colossal jackpots and the more jackpots he witnessed the more ruined he became.

He had quit his white collar job after winning three Months salary worth at the poker table. It had not been long though, before the house won back almost every last dime he had won. And it had taken less than two weeks.

After being thoroughly thrashed at seven card stud poker, Atiba angrily threw his cards on the table and stormed off to the terrace. He had started well, suckering in his opponents betting on Kings full, but then he became excited and begun betting extravagantly on nothing and getting caught many time over.

He stood at the terrace having a smoke, pondering his financial woes. He was still lost in thought when an elegantly threaded gentleman, dressed in a tailored to fit suit on top of a blue stripped shirt with a white collar and golden cuffs approached him and requested for a light.

"I have tried cutting down but I'm coming to accept that I am a lost cause." The gentleman said exhaling smoke.

"I'm up a pack a day," Atiba said, "It has been a stressful month for me."

"The wife, the casino or both?" the gentleman inquired smiling.

"The casino mostly," Atiba answered, cracking up the gentleman.

"So what do you do for a living?" The gentleman asked, turning to look directly at Atiba. Atiba was frazzled by the question but kept a straight face.

"I beg your pardon?" he inquired.

"I asked what you do for a living." The gentleman repeated. Atiba wanted to reply 'Everything, I'm a jack of all trades,' but then he said,

"I am an artist. You?"

"A business man."

"What kind of business are you into?"

The gentleman, Daniel Cullen's minion, was silent for a short spell. And then he answered

"Procurement."

Another frustrated gambler joined them on the terrace but stood alone at a distance.

"I'm having an art exhibition in a couple of weeks at Afri-Art gallery," Atiba volunteered, *"perhaps you could pass by and procure some art work."*

"I just might do that. Is that the art gallery somewhere along parliamentary avenue?"

"Yes it is. It is just opposite the head offices of Kampala City Council Authority."

"Is this going to be the first art exhibition you are holding?"

"It actually is," Atiba informed him, wracking his brain for how he could access more gambling money, *"How could you tell?"*

"I couldn't, just a hunch. It is funny, I have a client based in Oregon in the US that is flying over in a few weeks. He is crazy about African art. It would be nice if he actually attended an exhibition of African art while he is down here."

"That would be super. The more, the merrier." Atiba said, still thinking of how he could convince the croupier, Ntango Brian, to lend him more money. He had tried borrowing above Ntango's six hundred thousand shilling limit once before, but then his efforts had come had been futile.

"It's been nice talking to you, mister…"

"Atiba. Nicholas Atiba. And you are…?"

"Donald Ikote. My friends call me Don," the gentleman said as he took Atiba's hand and shook it firmly,

"I should be off now," he added, as he walked away and left his acquaintance to his thoughts. As Donald Ikote exited the casino

"I have made initial contact with our mutual friend, the host, and I think it went well." He said without further explanation. Daniels response was brief,

"So our other mutual friend can move on to phase two. Go ahead and place the call." And he hung up.

If anyone was listening in on their conversation, they would be hard pressed figuring out the details of what had just been discussed. The level of cautiousness now bordered on paranoia.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

To the laws of which nation is a bank's Chief executive liable to operate in accordance to? To the laws of the nation or state granting the banking license? Or to the laws of every nation from which the bank's depositors may come? Does Japan claim jurisdiction over the managing director of standard chartered bank in Kampala for acts he does while in Kampala?

If so, then the standard chartered bank managing director would be well advised to read up on Japanese laws and on laws of every nation from which his bank has depositors. This would

include Rwanda, Burundi, The Democratic republic of Congo, Canada, the United Kingdom and a host of other nations.

These and more questions swarmed Daniel Cullen. His Holden International Bank of Grenada used a practice of advertising, not unlike many other banks in the US – but those other banks did not have their officials thrown into federal prison for the same. Besides, it is perfectly legal for Canadians and Americans to send their money offshore as long as the money legitimately came by.

For over a decade, governments had fought to scare people into keeping their money in domestic economies rather than placing it outside. Trillions had gone into offshore accounts.

Daniel Cullen could argue that the bank's net income of billions of dollars within only two years of starting operation was the product of a secret part of the banking system that other banks keep hidden from their balance sheets. It was no ponzi

scheme. It was just a bank that chose to report accurately on its balance sheet on those matters that other banks long ago decided to keep on an *'off ledger'* basis.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

The man scrolled down his smart phone and googled for information on the upcoming art exhibition at Afri-Art gallery in Kampala, Uganda. Donald Ikote had contacted him and passed on an urgent message. He had reached the busy intersection at Connecticut Avenue, in the posh Kaloroma section of Washington D.C. He was sure that he was being watched.

For some time now, he had felt a second shadow always lurking behind him wherever he went. Even at home, he got the eeery feeling that people he could not see shared his personal

space. He could swear his home was bugged. He found what he was looking for,

AFRI-ART GALLERY UNVEILS ATIBA NICHOLAS

IN HIS FIRST EVER EXHIBITION.

8TH JUNE 2004

ENTRANCE: FREE.

The man had thought this through, he would comply and send Donald what he had requested for, Up to a point at least. He could not just give up all the documents. He needed some insurance for himself. The way things had played out so far, he had to prepare for the worst case scenario.

A number of suspects had been rounded up, but he was still a free man. That meant the feds had nothing on him, yet. This could turn out either way – he might be able to get away with it, he might be arrested. It would not be long before he found out.

The advert indicated that the exhibition would take place two weeks from then. He had contacted the gallery as soon as he had heard from Donald and was able to get some basic information on Atiba Nicholas, including an email address.

Hallo Nicholas,

I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am a client and close friend to Mr. Donald Ikote, a gentleman you acquainted yourself with recently. Donald is aware of my passion for African art and was quick to inform me of your upcoming exhibition at the Afri-Art gallery.

I will be in Uganda by the end of the week and will definitely attend the exhibition. However, I would like to make a humble request. I have a private collection of art paintings that I have gathered over the years and a few that I painted myself, some of which I would like to display.

I know it's your big day and it might be too much to ask, but I'll request anyway. Would you mind sharing gallery space that day, for a few of my paintings?

Of course I would contribute to the fee the gallery would require, or if you are not offended, cater for the entire fee.

I would also guarantee the purchase of no less than five of your most expensive paintings on display that day. I anxiously await your response. James Doe.

The man signed off with a fictitious name. Atiba's response was almost immediate and it was affirmative –

'It would be an honor having you grace the exhibition with your presence and display of your paintings. What day do you arrive? We need to meet to discuss the necessary arrangements.'

–

He had been almost certain of Atiba's response. In his experience, monetary inducement rarely failed.

Months earlier, the man had commissioned a professional artist to make twelve paintings for him. All but one of the paintings were to be done on subjects of the artists choice. One painting however, he insisted must be of a cherub. And he had visited the artist's gallery only twice. The last time being after the paintings was completed. This was before all hell broke loose at Holden International Bank of Grenada.

At the time the man visited the artist's gallery, he was certain then that no one was following him. No one had a reason to yet. Dressed casually smart and carrying a duffel bag, the man had walked around the empty art gallery, the artist showing around and explaining the different art pieces on display. He appreciated the various works, including the ones he had commissioned, and especially his painting of a cherub.

He had then made an awkward request. He'd requested for some time alone in the gallery. The well imbursed artist asked no questions and obediently obliged, shutting the door on his way out.

The man had removed his tools and some documents from his duffel bag and gotten down to work. He picked up the painting of the cherub and carefully placed it on a table, upside down. He had then proceeded to carefully conceal the documents within the painting.

Forty five minutes later he had emerged from the confines of the gallery to make one last request of the artist,

"It might be a while before I collect my paintings," the man had told the artist, as he dug into his duffel bag and retrieved two envelopes,

"This contains a key and the location of a drop-box you will access to obtain the address to which you will send my

paintings," he said, handing the artist the lighter one of the two envelopes.

"This will cover both the freight charges and yourself," he had added, handing over to the artist an enormous envelope.

That had been months ago. Now as he prepared to play closing role in this real life drama, he worried how the last scenes would play out. His closing role, that is unless he got arrested.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

Sandra Bagonza had gone through a roller coaster of emotions after Pierre's infidelity. She was angry, angry that after all she had offered him, he had still strayed. Angry that he had the audacity to abuse the special bond that they had. Angry at herself for not seeing the signs of discord in their relationship.

Angry at herself for failing in her marriage. Perhaps she was to blame for Pierre's infidelity. She had thought long and hard about it but only became more confused.

She panicked at the prospect of a life without him, but the betrayal had been too big for her to take him back. It was all very confusing, emotionally. Shame lingered because she feared she might have messed up somehow, that she might have done something to push him away, into the arms of another woman.

There were times she looked inside and realized there was nothing. That she felt nothing. As she discussed this with her friends, who had turned up in droves to console her, she realized that it was actually a psychological mechanism that kicks in during periods of shock.

Pierre's phone call had stirred up a surprising emotion – possessiveness. The separation had actually caused an increase

in attraction, she wanted him back, and she longed to pull him closer. Sandra's emotions were in turmoil.

She thought about their daughters, thirteen year old Tyra Assimwe and six year old Tamara Tushabe. Their girls were very young and still needed their father as they grew up. The girls adored their dad. Should she take him back for the sake of the children? She really missed him.

Sandra thought of all the good qualities Pierre possessed; he was very hard working, but not so much that he forgot about his family. He was full of life, full of fun and surprises. Good surprises.

A real charmer when he wanted to be. He also had a romantic side to him. Hardly a month went by without him bringing her flowers or perhaps a beautiful pair of shoes.

Sandra taunted herself some more. At some point before Pierre's infidelity he had begun drinking a lot more. She should have noticed that something was amiss, terribly amiss.

He had been apprehended at least thrice by the *'kawunyemu'* boys, arrested for driving under the influence. And all these times had been in a space of less than two months. She had brought it up with him, but only lightly, more of a pat on the hand. She had not really thought much of his drinking until after he cheated on her. Why would she?

It did not seem to be affecting his work. In fact, he had two jobs. He did not neglect the family and she had not had or heard of any embarrassing public episodes with him because of his drinking. And she could not remember any private either. He was a high functioning alcoholic. But still she should have noticed that he was teetering on the edge.

Whether or not she got back with Pierre Bagonza, Sandra would have to help Pierre address his demons before his life spiraled out of control. She had to, for the sake of the children.

Pierre's job as a negotiator cum go-between was another thorn in Sandra's side. Pierre and Tony took this thing a bit too far, not that it was not bringing in good money, but he seemed not to know when and where to draw the line.

Some of the cases that he took on were borderline suicide. There was a reason police forces existed. He was not trained to go after armed criminals. He was a certified auditor.

Pierre needed to scale back. He was too old to be playing cops and robbers. Her daughters still needed their father.

Another nagging thought kept recurring in her mind. Was Bridget Karamagi the only one he had slept with or were their other women?

How many other women and how many other times had her husband been unfaithful? She had not felt the need for an H.I.V test the last couple of years because she had grown to love and trust her husband completely. And then she was dealt this blow.

She decided that she would take an H.I.V test to ascertain her status. The sooner she did this, the better. She made a mental note take one over the next couple of days.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

Atiba had been dizzy with excitement ever since he received an email from James Doe, a client to the gentleman that he had acquainted himself with at the Mayfair casino.

The price tags that he had attached to his paintings were liable to change. With an offer of guaranteed pay on five of his most expensive paintings, he would be a fool not to adjust upwards his paintings price tags. His impending windfall could not have come at a better time.

Atiba had not thought of Donald Ikote again after their initial meeting. He had met all sorts of people at the casino and they had rarely followed through with appointments. He was not sure if this was the case with only him.

And then he had received the email from James Doe. He was grateful that he had been pushed to hold the exhibition. He had almost not gone through with holding it, just like he usually did not complete what he started.

He would start something with gusto, but as he approached the finish line he would burn out. He was lots of talent, just not enough oomph. Had it not been for his elder brothers persistent prodding, he would not be looking forward to his first art exhibition.

Procurement. That's what Donald Ikote had told him he did for a living. Donald had more than come through on his promise to attend the art exhibition, he had shared a prize client. He was a keeper. Atiba Nicholas decided that he was going to become a praise singer if that is what it would take to forge a friendship with the gentleman, Donald Ikote.

Art gallery space, tick. Post-card sized art cards, tick. Exhibition mailing list, tick. He had sent cards out to everyone on the list and everyone else he could think of. He had also sent cards to regional galleries and the media. They would notice art

cards more than one of hundreds of press releases that they received on a daily basis.

Press release, tick. It had included his statement and some information about him. He had also invited specific writers to the opening. Gallery plan, tick. He knew exactly how he was going to hang his work, James Doe's paintings inclusive.

The previous weekend, he had met James Doe and they had discussed the final arrangements for the exhibition. James was not what he had expected. For some reason, Atiba had expected a younger man – James appeared to be in his early fifties. They had met at the Fairway hotel where James had taken up residence for the duration of his stay in Uganda.

He had walked to the reception and inquired after a James Doe and was directed to the hotel lobby where he found a man decked out in a blue t-shirt, tweeded shorts and African craft sandals, reading a local daily, The Daily Monitor.

"Mister Doe. James Doe?" Atiba asked tentatively extending his hand towards the man.

"That depends on who is asking." The man said, *"Atiba, Nicholas Atiba?"*

They shared a light laugh and the man shook Atiba's hand.

"So I finally get to meet the maestro," the man said.

"You are far too generous with your with your compliments. How have you found your stay in Uganda so far?"

"Hospitable, hospitable, hospitable. The people are sunny and friendly, always willing to give a helping hand," the man replied,

"How are the final preparations for the big day going?" He went on, giving Atiba a charming smile. His startling blue eyes hidden behind brown contact lenses and his thick blond hair dyed black.

"I have covered almost everything. Except hanging up your paintings and clearing the balance of the fees the gallery charges for use of its space." Atiba replied.

"How much are we talking about, the total package? I insist I return the courtesy and pick the entire fee." The man told Atiba.

This was going to be much easier than he had anticipated, Atiba thought. While James Doe thought – *'he has not shown any sign of recognition. Either I nothing like the photo of me in the newspapers or I have done a really good job with the disguise.'*

"The gallery is charging us 2000,000 Ugandan shillings for the space. I also hired a few hands to help with the hanging and set up, which comes to a round figure of about 20,000,000 Ugandan shillings."

"About?"

"Yeah, miscellaneous costs. Unforeseen costs could crop up." Atiba replied, tensing up a bit. James noticed.

"Well it really doesn't matter. Would 22,000 dollars be sufficient? I'm assuming that is about 60 Million Ugandan shillings at the current forex exchange rate." James said. Atiba suppressed a smile, [Based on the rates at the time 2009-2010]

"That would about cover it" he replied. Of course it would cover it. It was more than sufficient. He had inflated the charges, more than doubled them in fact. While James Doe thought,

'The little prick is pulling a fast one over me. He must think that I'm an idiot. Of course I crosschecked what the gallery would charge!' Aloud he said,

"Then that is settled. The paintings will be delivered to the gallery before Wednesday." That is what his associate had assured him.

"I'll only be a minute. Let me pick the money." James said and rose to leave for his hotel room.

Alone in the hotel room, Daniel Cullen reviewed his acting. He had impersonated James Doe, a fictitious character conjured up in his associates mind. His associate, far off in Kaloroma, Washington D.C never had any intention of coming to Africa, let alone Uganda.

He checked himself out in the mirror. The disguise seemed to be which he carefully placed in an envelope that he pocketed before closing the suitcase. Shutting his room door, he returned to the lobby to join Atiba Nicholas.

"I hope I did not take forever." Daniel said, taking a seat. He was now more confident that Atiba would not realize who he was. He was confident that the artist believed he was James Doe.

"No. Not really. That was pretty quick." Atiba said.

'Boot licker!' Daniel thought. Aloud he said,

"This is the 22,000 dollars. I hope it can cover all the costs. However, one very important detail that I had almost skipped, the cherub painting has already been purchased by Donald Ikote. He fell in love with it the moment he saw it the time he flew over to Oregon on business," Daniel paused looking at Atiba, trying to imagine what he was thinking.

"I might be a couple of minutes late for the opening of the exhibition, I have an important business meeting that same day, but of course I will attend. I wouldn't miss the world for it. My friend, Donald, is stellar with his time management. He will hold fort until I get there." Daniel added, still smiling.

"Your works will be in capable hands," Atiba said, smiling back.

"I wish we could chat longer but unfortunately I have another engagement in the next half hour. So Saturday it is?" Daniel Cullen said standing up to leave.

"Saturday it is." Atiba replied.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

Pierre's phone rang again, and for the seventh time he pressed the silent button, and let it ring on. The screen showed the name *'Delilah'* . It was Bridget Karamagi, the forbidden fruit that had gotten him into trouble. She had been calling him frequently lately, but he had nothing more to say to her. He thought he had made that clear the day he ended the affair, but she wasn't letting up.

Bridget had laid down some ground rules at the beginning of their fling, and one of them was that it was a purely sexual relationship with no strings attached – Whatever she meant by that – and yet now she was bordering on stalking him. His phone rang again and he was about to press the silent button when he realized that it was Tony calling. He picked the call

"Hallo, how are you holding up, do you need to see a doctor?" Tony asked as soon as Pierre picked up.

"No, I am fine. I had a chat with Dr. Niima, the effects of the morphine have worn off." Pierre answered.

"Morphine?"

"According to Dr. Niima, my drink was laced with morphine."

"Wow!"

"Yeah. Anyhow, any developments?"

"Yes, there is one, but I'm not sure you should go anywhere when you are still woozy. I could pitch in for you."

"I'm fine. I gather they called you again."

"I received a call from them a short while ago. The man sounded remorseful and genuinely sorry for your incident," Tony said.

"Why all the theatrics?" Pierre asked.

"A test run to see if you could be trusted to keep a secret. He was waiting to see if you would let your mouth run riot to the cops." Tony replied. Pierre laughed before saying,

"I wish I could run a test on him too. What else did he say?"

"He wants us to meet him with tomorrow. The both of us."

"Is he going to carry out a test run on you too?" Pierre asked.

"I really hope not. We really don't have much of a choice. Hazards of our trade." Tony replied.

"At what time and where?"

"Let me see," Tony said reading from a scrap of paper that he had jotted on, "At a residence on princess Anne Drive, in Kololo, plot 18. He has invited us to lunch."

"How fitting. First he laces my drink, and now he wants to finish me off with poison. This guy clearly has his agenda in order."

"Pierre, let's see this thing through. Just think of your 10%."

"My spirits are already up just thinking of it. Can you pick me up tomorrow?"

"No problem. Are you still woozy or did something happen to your car?" Tony inquired.

"The latter. But we'll get into that tomorrow. Have yourself a pleasant evening." Pierre said and hang up.

Tony Sabiiti picked Pierre up at noon the following day giving an allowance of an hour to beat traffic. Schools had just re-opened for another school term and the traffic jam was bound to terrible.

"Good afternoon, feeling up to the task? Not that I doubt your abilities but after your little incident…"

"Good afternoon Tony, stop fussing, you are neither my mother nor my wife."

"Suit yourself." They drove in Silence for a while before Tony asked,

"Has Sandra changed her mind?"

"It's a work in progress. I believe I am getting there, she wants me to meet her this Friday at Christ the king church at 1:00pm. I thought that interesting, why a Friday at 1:00pm, why not a Sunday. Is there any mass on Fridays at 1:00pm at Christ the church?" Pierre asked. Tony immediately figured out what Sandra was up to, but he didn't let Pierre in on the secret. He just shook his head and said,

"I'm not sure, but I don't think so."

Surprisingly, the traffic was not as bad as Tony and anticipated it to be. They were almost at plot 18, Princess Anne Drive in Kololo. He turned up the volume on the car radio,

Kankuganye – by Radio and Weasel was playing. He turned up the volume.

At plot 18, they had hardly parked than the motorized iron gates glided open and they drove in.

A group of young men were tending to a swimming pool in the shape of the letter D. Tony parked the car as Pierre looked out his window and saw a familiar face. The gentleman seated at the balcony was the nerd that had spiked his drink at *La foret.*

The gentleman smartly clad in a dark grey suit and a crisp white shirt with no tie stood up and walked towards them,

"You are most welcome. I hope the place wasn't too difficult to find," he said. Pierre stared at him. He had lost the spectacles that he had worn the day he encountered him.

"Mister Bagonza, my apologies for what happened at La foret, a necessary measure to ensure secrecy. It is quite a

sensitive matter you see," the gentleman went on, a sheepish smile plastered on his face. He turned to face Tony,

"The astute learned friend, it is a pleasure to finally meet you in person."

"The pleasure is all mine." Tony said.

"Please may we step in and make ourselves comfortable," the gentleman said ushering his guests in. They went around the side of the house to the pool. Pierre counted four armed body guards – two at the gate and two doing rounds.

At the poolside, a platter of fruits was set out. A young lady brought out a silver pitcher of mango Juice while another young lady followed with three crystal glasses.

After they had made themselves comfortable, the gentleman officially introduced himself.

“I am Ikote. Donald Ikote. A liaison between you and your employer, a very private individual I must say,” he looked from Pierre to Tony and then continued,

“You were hired to retrieve an art painting that has not yet been stolen.”

“What do you mean, is the client, our client, planning on getting himself robbed, is this some kind of insurance fraud?” Tony inquired. Donald was quiet for a short while as he thought this through. Insurance fraud for paintings actually wouldn’t be a bad idea.

“No it is not any kind of fraud. It is just that my boss, your client, is a very cautious man. He does not like to leave any loose ends. The painting in question is of immense value to him and he doesn’t want to take any chances. So he decided to hire the best duo to recover it in case of any such eventuality.”

"And when does he suspect this painting will be stolen, any ideas?" Pierre asked. The gentleman smiled wryly,

"He wouldn't know of course. This is just a precautionary measure."

"Any changes or alterations to our fee, a revision upward I presume, considering your little experiment on mister Pierre Bagonza." Tony said.

"Again, I'm terribly sorry. I was just following through on instructions. But I will be sure to pass on the request."

"Do you have anything to do with Meridian Audit Group" Pierre asked Ikote, his mind racing to the material misstatements. Whether they were caused by fraud or genuine error, he still wasn't sure.

"Yes that's us. My employer was considering taking on your audit firm for a different project, but then it took a nose dive. That's the reason you kept getting contradicting financial

statements. But who knows, things might take a turn up and your audit firm is back in business."

Bull dung! Pierre thought. It was probably a means to keep tabs on him that they realized wasn't going to hold and they abruptly cut communication with his firm.

"There is an art exhibition taking place this weekend, starts Friday," Donald was saying. Friday, Pierre had an appointment with Sandra this Friday and there was no way he was going to miss it.

"I assume we have to attend the event?" Pierre asked.

"You assume right. It is taking place at Afri-Art gallery,"

"What time does it start?" Pierre asked cutting Ikote short.

"2:00pm," Ikote replied. Pierre exchanged a quick glance with Tony.

"Please keep time. Any questions?" Ikote asked.

"Will our mysterious client be in attendance?" Tony asked.

"Will we get to see this particular art piece of immense value?" Pierre asked too.

"I'm not sure if my employer will attend, but yes, you will get to have a look at the 'painting of immense value', any more questions?" Ikote asked, looking from Pierre to Tony. They both remained silent.

"Then that's settled, I am famished, let's get in and have a real meal." Ikote said while standing up and ushering them into the house where a lunch buffet had been served. The two young ladies that had served them fruit and juice retreated to a corner as the trio entered the dining area.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

'*UBER HERITAGE*', the exhibition was themed. The artist was celebrating African heritage with his paintings, sculptures and masks. He walked around the gallery, anxious about what the turn up would be. His sculptures depicted various sub-themes; some were frightening, others portrayed fertility.

His masks on display were of a chief, a god, a slave and a witch. Some of his art pieces were art for art's sake. Time check was 2:30pm.

A handful of people streaked into the gallery. There was no sight of Mister James Doe. He had said that he would be a couple of minutes late. But his friend, the gentleman, Donald Ikote had not shown face either, yet.

James had said that Ikote was stellar with his time keeping. It was clocking forty five minute since the exhibition opened,

Donald Ikote was surely displaying some stellar time keeping. He checked his watch again just as a fresh batch of art enthusiasts entered into the gallery. He was walking over to them when he spotted Donald Ikote a short distance off. He sighed with relief.

Pierre Bagonza got to Christ the king Church at 12:45pm. He had picked his car only that morning. He parked and scoured the church compound looking for Sandra's light blue vitz. There was no sign of it. Getting out of his car, he walked towards the masterfully done sculpture of Jesus Christ that graced the church's front court yard. There was still no sign of Sandra. He pulled out his phone from his pocket and was about to call her when it vibrated, it was Sandra calling.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo…" all he heard was static. It was a bad connection. He moved around a little until she was clearer.

"Hallo Pierre, where are you? I hope you will be able to make it. I am at the church waiting for you."

"Hallo Sandra, I'm already at the church, I don't see your vehicle."

"You are already here, that's great. I didn't drive today, a friend dropped me off. Pierre, just walk to the back of the church and come up the stairs to the third floor, room four. The meeting is about to start." Sandra said before she hung up.

Meeting, what kind of meeting was Sandra going on about? He walked round to the back of the church and took a flight of stairs up to the third floor. He then walked up to room four and knocked on the door.

"Come in," chorused a number of voices. Opening the door, he set his eyes on a group of about thirty or more individuals, both male and female, seated on chairs arranged in a circular form.

He was quick to spot where Sandra was seated. To her left was a chair on which she had placed her large hand bag, he figured to keep the chair for him. On her right was a burly, clean shaven, bespectacled man. Pierre walked around the group and sat on the chair that had carried his wife's handbag. Then one by one, the individuals began introducing themselves.

"My names are Eddy Muhumuza and I am an alcoholic," To this the group chorused back

"Hey Eddy." Then Eddy's neighbor went next,

"My name is Simon Opira and I am a recovering drug addict," and the group chorused back,

"Hey Simon," The group chorused back. Seated next to Simon was a young lady. She introduced herself,

"I am Cotilda Namuwenge and I am a rampaging alcoholic," to which the group laughed before chorusing back,

“Hey Cotilda,” Soon it was Pierre’s turn and the whole group turned to look at him.

“My name is Pierre,” Pierre said. The group kept looking at him, Sandra inclusive, for a short while, half expecting him to say something about his addiction but Pierre added nothing more. Realizing that he wasn’t going to anything more, they chorused back,

“Hey Pierre.” Then next came Sandra,

“My names are Sandra Bagonza, a wife to Pierre, and I am here in a supportive role.” And again the group chorused back

“Hey Sandra.” When the last person was done introducing himself, one of the group members read from what they called the Big Book.

It was a thick volume with the words Alcoholics Anonymous written on its cover and it contained numerous personal stories on recovering alcoholics. After reading one of

the stories from the book, the group discussed their personal experiences in relation to what had just been read.

It was a sobering moment for Pierre. A lot of what was discussed either directly or indirectly affected him. After one hour the meeting came to an end with a short inspirational prayer,

"Lord, Grant us the Serenity to accept the things we cannot change,

The Courage to change the things we can,

And the Wisdom to know the different. Amen"

A few of the group members stuck around making small talk. On the wall was a banner that read 'The 12 Steps to Recovery,' and went on to explain each step. Pierre Bagonza had just attended his Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

It was a few minutes passed 2:00pm, Pierre was running late the art exhibition. He turned to face his wife,

"That was quite refreshing," he said.

"I'm glad to hear that. For a moment there I was afraid you were going to walk out."

"I had promised to come, had I not? How are Tamara and Tyra, you left them at Dorothy's?"

"The girls are okay, they send their love." Pierre would do anything to get his family back together, he hoped that Sandra's attendance of the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with him was a step towards reconciliation.

"When is the next meeting, next Friday?" Pierre inquired. If it would get Sandra to spend more time with him, he would attend ten meetings a day all week.

"There is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting here from 1:00-2:00pm every Tuesdays and Fridays. I will not be able to attend all the meetings with you, but I am praying that you will

religiously attend. These meetings have helped thousands of people beat their addictions." Sandra said.

Pierre was quiet, it was a bummer that Sandra couldn't come along to all the meetings with him. But the fact that she was going out of her way to rein in his drinking was a positive gesture.

It gave him hope that maybe one day would forgive him and take him back. He would return the gesture and attend at least one of the weekly meetings, anything to better his situation with the wife.

"I am quite busy, but will make it to at least one of weekly meetings," he said, and then wistfully he added,

"Does this mean that the divorce is off the table?"

Sandra looked at him long and hard. The silence was uncomfortable. When she finally replied, she had shifted from her hard line stance. It was no longer a given that the divorce must happen.

"I'm still thinking about it. I have not come to a concrete decision," she said. Her phone rang saving him from another bout of awkward silence. Sandra answered the call and spoke

animatedly to her correspondent and then clasped the phone and addressed Pierre,

"My friend is here, I have quite a number of errands to run before I pick up the girls. We'll talk again soon, I'm sure your busy schedule calls too." Sandra said as she walked out of the room, Pierre following, only a few steps behind her.

Sandra walked to a black Range Rover sport that had parked in front of his Harrier. It was then that he noticed that her friend was male and not anyone that she had introduced him to before.

A surge of jealousy jolted through him. He would have to deal with it later, he was running late for an art exhibition. It was a good thing Afri-Art gallery was just around the corner, he would not have to drive there. It was a five minutes' walk down the road.

CHAPTER NINETEEN.

Tony Sabiiti listened attentively as the artist explained to the group of art enthusiasts what the abstract painting portrayed. He had been the second person to walk into the exhibition hall, a few minutes to the opening. As he wondered if it was the painting that Donald's boss valued so highly, the artist moved on to another painting.

Tony expected Pierre to walk in any minute now, the Alcoholic Anonymous meetings lasted only an hour. He knew about the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings because he had a brother battling the same affliction. He was curious as to what Pierre's reaction had been walking into a room full of recovering alcoholics, strangers at that.

Outside the gallery, Collin Yobo pulled up the truck that had a large sticker that said *'FLASH MOVERS LTD.'* He picked up the itinerary report book from the dash board and flipped through it.

There were numerous entries by a one Timothy Piwang, Probably one of the chaps tied up at the house, Collin thought. He flipped another page, coming to the day's itinerary.

The book indicated that a James Doe was the last client for the day, which would make this his last run for the day. The previous client had been registered as Mayokia Joan. The 'Landlords' play had been ingenious.

Only two hours earlier, Collin and two other henchmen had waited patiently in a rented house in Makindye. The property had been leased under the name Mayokia Joan—an alias the Landlord used from time to time—for a three-month term. Miss Mayokia had hired *Flash Movers Ltd* to help her move her household items into "her" new home.

The truck had driven into the compound, and one of the henchmen had closed the gate behind it. Collin and his crew then overpowered the two occupants of the vehicle and tied them up. Meanwhile, Collin Yobo took on the role of truck driver and drove on to the next assignment: the next phase of the Landlord's operation, the art exhibition at Afri-art Gallery.

The rest of his crew remained on guard duty at the house. Collin turned on the radio and went through the channels, stopping at 88.2 Sanyu FM. *"Deuces"* by Chris Brown was playing. He turned up the volume. All he had to do now was wait.

Pierre Bagonza walked into Afri-art Gallery and took a minute to scan the crowd. He saw Donald Ikote and Tony Sabiiti standing in a corner in front of a painting of a cherub.

The rest of the crowd was scattered about, viewing the other art pieces on display and making small talk with the artist, who kept stealing glances at Donald. Pierre walked over to the cherub painting.

"I take it this is the precious package I've heard so much about," Pierre said. Sabiiti and Ikote turned to face the speaker.

"It's about time you showed up. Sabiiti here was getting worried," Ikote said, smiling at Pierre.

"He's pulling your leg. Nothing of the sort happened. You know I have the utmost confidence in you, Pierre," Tony quickly interjected before Donald Ikote could say any more. "How did it go with Sandra?" he added, addressing Pierre.

"Not even in my wildest dreams would I have guessed what kind of meeting I was going to. It was a step in the right direction, is all I can say," Pierre replied.

"Care to share, gentlemen?" Ikote inquired in a hush-hush tone.

"It's a long story," Pierre answered, which made Ikote laugh out loud. Jazz music played at a low tempo — just apt for an art exhibition.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Sabiiti said to no one in particular, focusing his attention back on the painting. Pierre studied it. It truly was a beautiful piece. "Just how much, in monetary terms, does 'immense value' equate to?" he asked Ikote.

"Millions of dollars, I'd say."

"Millions of dollars indeed," Tony Sabiiti said, laughing sarcastically.

"True beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, does it not?" Donald Ikote said as the three of them looked at the painting, analyzing it, searching for details they might have missed before.

"In your first communication to us, you said a package had been stolen from you. Then a few days ago, you told us that actually the painting had not been stolen yet—implying that the package, the painting, is still in your possession. Does that mean you own the gallery, and some of the paintings are yours or your employer's?" Tony Sabiiti inquired.

"Why would he risk putting out, exhibiting something of immense value and personal attachment? Why draw public attention to it? He might just reel in the wrong crowd — thieves," Pierre said.

"We do not own, co-own, or part-own the gallery. It's just that some of the pieces on display have already been bought by my boss, the cherub painting included," Ikote answered.

"Why go through so much trouble with the exhibition instead of just snapping up the damn thing directly from the artist? He surely looks like he needs the money," Tony Sabiiti said, turning to look at Atiba Nicholas, who was walking toward them.

"Unless the painting was with another party, and the only way your employer could access it was under the guise of the exhibition. No?" Pierre said. Donald remained quiet.

"I'm not going to inquire how it found its way here, but I'm sure it had quite an interesting journey," Pierre added as Atiba joined them.

"Donald!" he beamed. *"I'm so glad to see you. Enjoying yourself, I hope."*

"I'm having a swell time, thank you. This is Pierre Bagonza, and this is Tony Sabiiti, colleagues of mine," Donald Ikote said, making the introductions. *"And this is the delectable artist, Atiba Nicholas, our host for the evening."*

"It's nice to meet you," Atiba said, shaking Pierre's and then Tony's hand.

"The pleasure is all ours," Tony replied.

"A tour of the gallery?" Atiba offered.

"Please," Donald Ikote replied, as the artist led the trio to the other art pieces.

"The cherub nestled in the corner we've just been in is mine, you know," Donald said to Atiba as they walked, double-checking, just in case.

"Yes, of course. Mister James Doe made that very clear. It is one of a kind."

"Yes, indeed it is," Ikote replied. You just have no idea, he thought to himself.

Daniel Cullen intentionally made his entrance into the gallery late. He had spent the last hour at Design Agenda, a restaurant neighboring the gallery, reading updates on his case from both local and international press on his iPad.

He spotted his minion almost immediately and made a beeline for him, fighting the urge to first walk over to the painting with

his documents. Donald Ikote was in company with the artist and two individuals Daniel did not know. He joined them.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said to the group.

"Mister James Doe, I'm glad you could make it," Atiba said, literally hugging Daniel. *"Everybody, this is James Doe, the buyer of the piece on display here today,"* Atiba added.

"Donald," Daniel said, nodding courteously at Donald Ikote. Donald nodded back, keeping up the façade. Again, Ikote introduced Pierre Bagonza and Tony Sabiiti. The turnout had gradually increased until the gallery was bursting at the seams. Although the big turnout did not necessarily mean a sellout for the artist.

"I have to mix and mingle with the crowd. I'll leave you to your own devices," Atiba said, and he went to talk to an aging white couple that was admiring one of the sculptures depicting fertility.

"Pierre here is an auditor with his own firm, while Tony is an astute lawyer," Ikote further introduced the duo.

"Mister James Doe here is an international businessman for whom I procure goods from time to time," Donald Ikote added. Daniel was only half listening.

"Donald, could I see you briefly, in private?" he said.

"Gentlemen, it was a pleasure meeting you," he addressed Pierre and Tony before walking toward the cherub painting, his ace card. Donald Ikote quickly followed.

"The boss, perhaps?" Tony said.

"I don't think so. Someone up the chain, but not the final man."

"What makes you say that?" Tony asked.

"Nothing in particular. Just a hunch."

"You've been wrong before, and this might just be one of those times. I'd put my money on this fella, James Doe," Tony said. Pierre shrugged.

When Donald Ikote and Daniel Cullen were alone in the corner where the cherub painting hung, Daniel let Donald in on his anxiety.

"The paintings—you followed them right from the airport to the gallery, no?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. Your associate used DHL for courier," Donald said.

"Were there any stopovers at all on the way from the airport?" Daniel asked.

As illogical as it might seem, Daniel had hoped they had driven directly to the gallery. Of course, his cargo was no more precious to the company than the next client's.

"Apart from passing by one of their offices, no," Donald answered.

"What about at the gallery? I believe you've had it watched from the time the paintings arrived."

"Yes, I have. We've had 24-hour surveillance of the premises. I personally supervised. Nothing suspicious happened," Donald said.

Daniel was still edgy. He looked longingly at his cherub. He could hardly wait to rip it open.

Collin Yobo turned down the volume on the truck stereo. His phone was vibrating. It was Landlord calling. As he answered the call, he looked out his window and almost did not recognize his boss. Landlord had dressed so out of character.

Clad in charcoal-black trousers and an African-print shirt, he had dressed appropriately for the function. Collin almost always saw him in jeans and T-shirts. This was so unlike Landlord.

"The exhibition has come to an end. Get ready to move."

The paintings. Collin had been holed up in the vehicle for hours, occasionally stepping out to stretch his limbs. His day's mission would soon be coming to an end. Successfully, he would like to think.

He had communicated with his crew, who were still holding fort at Miss Mayokia's house, about an hour earlier. They had intercepted a call from Flash Movers Ltd head office to Piwang Timothy, probably looking for an update. His men had not picked up but instead texted back:

> *"Truck had a mechanical breakdown, but got to the last venue on time. Still waiting for the exhibition to come to a close."*

The response was swift:

"Ok. Fill in the field report book on return."

So far, they had not had any hiccups. He stepped out of the driver's cabin and walked to open the back door of the truck.

Landlord had enjoyed himself in spite of not understanding most of the art on display. This was the first such event he had ever attended. *I should get out and attend these events more often,* Landlord thought to himself. He thought of Robin Mujuni and recalled their last meeting.

It had been years since he had last seen Robin Mujuni, and then, out of the blue, Mujuni had walked into his den with a proposal he couldn't refuse. Although Robin had cost him a tidy sum — which was the reason for his disappearance — if what he had said was true, and if this deal panned out, then Mujuni would have absolved himself. In fact, he would have more than cleared his debt.

Robin had approached him with a vague idea of what he thought was about to happen. At first, he was grasping at straws, but he seemed pretty sure that whatever his cousin was mixed up in was worth tens of millions of shillings, at least.

CHAPTER TWENTY.

Pierre Bagonza walked into Afri-art Gallery and took a moment to scan the crowd. He spotted Donald Ikote and Tony Sabiiti standing in a corner in front of a painting of a cherub. The rest of the guests were scattered around the gallery, admiring the other pieces on display and making small talk with the artist, who kept stealing glances at Donald.

Pierre walked over to the cherub painting.

"I take it this is the precious package I've heard so much about," Pierre said.

Sabiiti and Ikote turned to face him.

"It's about time you showed up. Sabiiti here was beginning to worry," Ikote said with a smile.

"He's pulling your leg. Nothing of the sort happened. You know I have the utmost confidence in you, Pierre," Tony quickly interjected before Donald could say anything else. "How did it go with Sandra?" he added.

"Not even in my wildest dreams would I have guessed what kind of meeting I was walking into. It was a step in the right direction, is all I can say," Pierre replied.

"Care to share, gentlemen?" Ikote asked in a conspiratorial tone.

"It's a long story," Pierre said.

His response made Ikote laugh out loud. Soft jazz played in the background, perfectly suited to the atmosphere of an art exhibition.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Sabiiti said, addressing no one in particular as he turned his attention back to the painting.

Pierre studied it. It truly was a beautiful piece.

"Just how much, in monetary terms, does 'immense value' amount to?" he asked Ikote.

"Millions of dollars, I'd say," Ikote replied.

"Millions of dollars indeed," Tony said with a sarcastic laugh.

"True beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, does it not?" Ikote said.

The three men continued studying the painting, searching for details they might have missed before.

"In your first communication with us, you said a package had been stolen from you. Then, a few days ago, you told us that the painting had not actually been stolen yet. That suggests the package, meaning the painting, is still in your possession. Does that mean you own the gallery, or that some of the paintings belong to you or your employer?" Tony asked.

"Why would he risk exhibiting something of immense value and personal importance? Why draw public attention to it? He might attract the wrong kind of people, such as thieves," Pierre added.

"We do not own, co-own, or part-own the gallery. It is simply that some of the pieces on display have already been bought by my boss, including the cherub painting," Ikote explained.

"Why go through all the trouble of organizing an exhibition instead of buying the painting directly from the artist? He certainly looks as though he needs the money," Tony said, turning toward Atiba Nicholas, who was approaching them.

"Unless the painting belonged to someone else and the only way your employer could access it was under the guise of the exhibition. Is that not possible?" Pierre asked.

Donald remained silent.

"I'm not going to ask how it found its way here, but I'm sure it had quite an interesting journey," Pierre added as Atiba joined them.

"Donald," Atiba said, beaming. "I'm so glad to see you. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I'm having a wonderful time, thank you. This is Pierre Bagonza, and this is Tony Sabiiti, colleagues of mine," Donald said, making the introductions.

"And this is the artist, the maestro Atiba Nicholas, our host for the evening."

"It's nice to meet you," Atiba said, shaking Pierre's hand and then Tony's.

"The pleasure is all ours," Tony replied.

"Would you care for a tour of the gallery?" Atiba asked.

"Please," Donald replied.

The artist led the three men toward the other pieces on display.

"The cherub painting in the corner where we were standing is mine, you know," Donald said to Atiba as they walked. He sounded as though he were seeking confirmation.

"Yes, of course. Mister James Doe made that very clear. It is one of a kind."

"Yes, indeed it is," Ikote replied.

'You have no idea', he thought to himself.

Daniel Cullen had deliberately made his entrance into the gallery late. He had spent the previous hour at Design Agenda, a restaurant next door, reading updates about his case in the local and international media on his iPad.

He spotted his minion almost immediately and made a beeline for him, resisting the urge to approach the painting.

Donald Ikote was standing with the artist and two men Daniel did not recognize. Daniel joined them.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said.

"Mr. James Doe, I'm glad you could make it," Atiba said, embracing Daniel.

"Everyone, this is James Doe, the better artist on display here today," he added.

“Donald,” Daniel said, nodding courteously to Ikote.

Ikote nodded back, maintaining the façade. He then introduced Pierre Bagonza and Tony Sabiiti. The crowd had gradually grown until the gallery was bursting at the seams, though a large turnout did not necessarily mean the artist would sell out.

“I have to mingle with the crowd. I’ll leave you to your own devices,” Atiba said before moving over to speak with an elderly white couple admiring a fertility sculpture.

“Pierre is an auditor with his own firm, while Tony is an astute lawyer,” Ikote explained.

“Mr. James Doe is an international businessman for whom I procure goods from time to time,” he added.

Daniel was only half listening.

“Donald, could I see you briefly in private?” he said. Then, turning to Pierre and Tony, he added,

“Gentlemen, it was a pleasure meeting you.”

He walked toward the cherub painting — his ace card — and Donald Ikote quickly followed.

“The boss, perhaps?” Tony said.

“I don’t think so. Someone higher up the chain, but not the final man.”

“What makes you say that?” Tony asked.

“Nothing in particular. Just a hunch.”

"You've been wrong before, and this might be one of those times. I'd put my money on this fellow, James Doe," Tony said.

Pierre shrugged.

"What does it matter, anyway, as long as we're paid?"

Once Daniel and Donald were alone beside the cherub painting, Daniel confided his concern.

"The paintings—you followed them from the airport to the gallery, right?" he asked.

"Yes. Your associate used DHL as the courier," Donald replied.

"Were there any stopovers—any at all—between the airport and the gallery?" Daniel asked.

"Besides stopping at one of their offices, no," Donald answered.

As illogical as it might seem, Daniel had hoped they had driven directly to the gallery. Of course his cargo was no more precious to the company than the next client's.

"What about at the gallery, I believe you have had it watched from the time the paintings arrived."

"Yes I have. We have had 24 hour surveillance of the premises. I personally supervised, nothing suspicious happened." Donald said. Daniel was still edgy. He looked longingly at his cherub. He could hardly wait to rip it open.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE.

Collin Yobo turned down the volume of the truck stereo, his phone was vibrating. It was Landlord calling. As he answered the call, he looked out his window and almost did not recognize his boss. Landlord had dressed so out of character, clad in a charcoal black trouser and an African print shirt, he had dressed appropriately for the function. Collin almost always saw him in jeans and t-shirts, this was so unlike Landlord.

"The exhibition has come to an end, get ready to move. The paintings will be brought out soon." Landlord said and turned to head back to the gallery.

Collin had been holed up in the vehicle for hours, only stepping out occasionally to stretch his limbs.

His day's mission would soon be coming to an end. Successfully, he would like to think. He had communicated to his crew that was still holding forte at Miss Mayokia's house about an hour earlier. They had intercepted a call from *FLASH MOVERS LTD* head office to Piwang Timothy, probably looking for an update. His men had not picked up but instead texted back.

'Truck had a mechanical breakdown, but got to the last venue on time. Still waiting for the exhibition to come to a close.'

The response was swift,

‘Ok. Fill in the field report book on return.’

So far they had not had any hiccup. He stepped out of the drivers’ cabin and walked to open the back door of the truck.

Landlord had enjoyed himself in spite of not understanding most of the art on display. This was the first such event that he had ever attended. *‘I should get out and attend these events more often’,* Landlord thought to himself. He thought of Robin Mujuni and recalled their last meeting.

It had been years since he had last seen Robin Mujuni and then out of the blue, Mujuni had walked into his den with a proposal he couldn’t refuse. Although Robin had cost him a tidy sum, which was the reason for his disappearance, if what he had said was true, if this deal panned out, then Mujuni would have absolved himself. In fact, he would have more than cleared his debt.

Robin had approached him with a vague idea of what he thought was about to happen. At first he was grasping at straws, but he seemed pretty sure that whatever his cousin was mixed up in was worth tens of millions of shillings, at least.

Rather than having his head, literally, he heard him out. Landlord paused, as though he was thinking

“Whatever that package is, we had better get our hands on it soonest.”

"You had mentioned something about cargo." Robin said.

"Mr. Sly hit the airport and escorted a D.H.L courier van back to Kampala. He has also had the Afri-Art gallery under surveillance since then. This makes me believe Friday, the exhibition day is the best day for us to make our move." Landlord replied.

"You have just said the place is under constant surveillance, not to mention the gallery's own security. And this fellow, Mr. Sly, you call him, seems to have had some training or is in the intelligence circles you assume. Are we not out of our depths, how the hell do you expect to pull this off?"

"Not to worry my friend, we just might be in luck, Mr. Sly was followed to FLASH MOVERS LTD, a moving company where he made a booking for the exhibition day, Friday."

"How did you get to know the details of his booking, isn't the information confidential?" Robin Asked.

"Come on Robin, all I had to do was pretend that I was with him. Shortly after he had left the offices I confidently strode in

and asked to make a clarification on his booking. It was like I was confirming that the timing was right."

"And how does that help our cause?"

"The exhibition starts at 2:00pm in the afternoon. So after I left, I sent one of my men to make a booking for the same day but for the morning. That way I will be able to commandeer the track when it gets to my rented premises. Whatever Mr. Sly has plans to move, I will be the one transporting. And he will not be any wiser."

That had been a couple of days ago. It was now time to see how well his plan could be executed.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO.

The six men walked out of the gallery, carefully carrying three paintings. Collin quickly set up the four legged ladder for them at the back of the truck. They climbed into the back and gently placed the works of art down before heading back into the gallery for more. Collin stood by the ladder as the gallery hands made two more such trips.

Soon after that, the gentleman whose photograph landlord had shown him walked up to him. He gave Collin a curt nod and then instructed Collin to follow a dark red Ipsum that was parked on the opposite side of the road. The gentleman then signaled to a man seated in the Ipsum, beckoning him over. They talked briefly before the gentleman walked back into the gallery and the man walked to the Ipsum that was to be the lead car.

As Collin set off he picked up his phone and dialed a number. It was time for the final phase of his mission. As soon as his colleague answered, Collin gave the instructions.

"We are just leaving the gallery now. It might take us between 30 to 50 minutes to get there. Don't take him before or near the airstrip, there is a unit of soldiers keeping guard there.

Do not take him near any boda- boda stage either. A few meters to the gate would be appropriate, it is a lonely stretch. And make it swift."

As he pulled out of his parking slot and drove behind the dark red Ipsum, Collin placed another call.

"Hello… yes, have your men in position just in case he takes your route instead of going by the airstrip." And he hung up and concentrated on the task at hand, driving. Collin believed he had covered all his bases.

Back in the gallery, Atiba was giving a small speech, thanking his guests for having spared their valuable time to grace his function. He thanked Mr. James Doe for making the evening possible and for having been the better artist on display. To this there was hushed laughter all around and a few shouts of *"Who is he?"* all in good jest.

Atiba looked around the room and when he spotted Mr. Doe, his benefactor shook his head.

"For this evening Mr. James Doe would rather be a John Doe." Atiba said, cracking up the crowd again.

Pierre and Tony walked towards Donald Ikote, who seemed to be briefing James Doe on something. They stood at the exit to the gallery.

"The dynamic duo delivers again, everything seems to have gone better than planned." Donald said, addressing Pierre and Tony who had joined them. James Doe wore a puzzled look.

"We did nothing at all. Perhaps you worried too much. We will still collect our retainer though." Tony said.

"No worries my friends, you will be paid the full amount that was agreed on." Donald replied and then turned to James Doe and said,

"Some insurance business I have going with these gentlemen."

James just nodded. Pierre was not sure if James was putting on an act or he was genuinely ignorant of their arrangement with Donald.

"Shall we meet at my office or your residence Donald? To tie up the loose ends of this…thing." Pierre asked.

The artist had pulled James aside and was chatting away animatedly.

"So what is next on your calendar?" James Doe asked Atiba.

"I am going to take a break, a short holiday. I think the event has been a success, thanks in no small measure to you."

"That is not entirely true, you must have put in some donkey hours setting up the whole thing." James said,

"I was spoilt for choice on which five paintings to pick, they were all good, so the price tags helped me out. I've come to learn that beautiful things don't come cheap." He added, flashing his charming smile.

"That is very true. I'm stepping into the accounts office to iron out a few issues pertaining to the event, Care to join me?"

"James Doe at your service," James said and followed the artist to the accounts office.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE.

As the dark red Ipsum went passed Kololo airstrip and made a turn to the right, Collin, through his rear view mirror saw two *boda-boda* motor cyclists pulling up his tail. They each carried a lone passenger who wore a baggy jacket. He could not see their faces because they all wore helmets.

He made another bend to the left this time as he followed the Ipsum's lead. When he looked at his rear view mirror again, a third *boda-boda* had materialized this one had no passenger and just rode passed both the truck and the lead car.

There were no other vehicles on the road and it was tempting to alter the plan and hit the Ipsum right there and then. But Landlord was a stickler for procedure and any alteration to the original plan without his approval would attract punishment. Whether the alteration produced results or not would not matter.

They passed a kiosk with a Pepsi Cola advertisement plastered all over it. A young lady was closing up and retiring for the day as a bored looking *boda-boda* cyclist parked just next to the kiosk. Collin saw his face and noted that he was not part of his crew.

A few hundred meters to Donald Ikote's residence the dark red Ipsum slowed down finally grinding to a halt. Collin pulled up and braked behind the lead car. A garbage truck seemed to have broken down in the middle of the road and the driver was out looking at something under the truck.

Two men exited the rear seats of the Ipsum. Collin had not been able to see through the tinted windows of the car and could not tell exactly how many occupants were in the vehicle.

As the two men approached the garbage truck, the two *boda-boda* cyclists that had trailed them shot forward. The man looking under the garbage truck picked up an **AK** 47 from underneath the truck and stood up leveling it at the two men.

The *boda-bodas* parked on either side of the road and their passengers alighted removing guns that they had concealed in their baggy jackets.

As the driver of the Ipsum retrieved an automatic pistol from the dash board, Collin pistol whipped the car window and pointed it at him, ordering him out of the car. The three men were huddled together and made to kneel down, hands raised above their heads before one of the *boda-boda* riders disarmed

them and bound their hands and legs tightly together (*Kandoya* style). Their mouths were also taped firmly.

The other *boda-boda* riders and the rest of the crew stood alert, training their weapons at the captives as they were led to the back of the garbage truck and shoved in.

Collin Yobo took the driver's seat in the *FLASH MOVERS* vehicle and spirited away the paintings. The garbage truck was driven in the opposite direction, back towards the city center via the airstrip, with the two *boda-boda's* escorting from the rear and the passenger-less *boda-boda* at the front leading the way. All this had happened in less than 10 minutes. And in less than 30 minutes from the time the paintings left Afri-art gallery.

Donald Ikote had been calling his head of security for 10 minutes now with no response. He tried reaching the other two men that had gone along in the lead car with the same result. He sensed that something had gone wrong. He was frantic by the time he called home and inquired from his housemaid if any of the paintings had been delivered. He was replied in the negative.

Donald debated on whether to break the bad news to Daniel right then, but then decided against it. It had only been half an

hour. Perhaps the truck broke down, there were a myriad of possible mechanical problems that could have caused the truck to make a stopover. He would have to first confirm his worst fear before he called it in. However the fact that his phone calls went unanswered tagged at his heart strings.

"Daniel, everything fine in there?" Donald asked, catching up with James Doe as he exited the accounts office.

"Everything is perfect," Daniel said, He was in extremely good spirits. Donald could not bring himself to tell him yet.

"Is there anything else still holding us here?" Daniel asked. He was anxious and couldn't wait to have possession of the documents. He had to go through them to be sure that he had all of them. That he had everything.

"I suggest that I bring the paintings over to your place discreetly later. We should not let down our guard now at the last minute." Donald said, trying to buy himself some time, although this seemed to be a futile effort. Daniel wanted to leave with him he knew. He was worried that Daniel would throw all caution to the wind and insist on leaving with him for his residence immediately.

"You are probably right," Daniel said after thinking it through for a minute, "However, later should mean at some point today, you do understand the gravity of my predicament, don't you?"

"Of course, of course. I will be at yours in an hour, two at most. I should follow up on my boys and see that everything is running smoothly. See you soon." Donald said as he tried to extract himself. Resignedly, Daniel Cullen nodded.

"I should get home too. So I should expect you in an hour or so," he repeated, almost shouting after Donald as he walked away.

"Sure thing," Donald Ikote shouted back.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR.

"So I was right after all," The man said. He was at the gym having a work out, *"Otherwise you wouldn't be calling me."*

"The painting has been stolen." Donald told him.

"I figured as much. How did they know which painting to take?"

"They didn't, they took all of them."

"How did they pull it off, I thought you were on top of it. You knew what was at stake."

"I'm just piecing it together myself. I've had constant surveillance on the paintings ever since they arrived. Even the transportation from the gallery to my residence was under heavy guard," Donald Ikote said. Although in hindsight, three men with light fire arms really was not heavy guard. Still, he was not going to make himself look bad.

"Any ransom demands made yet?"

"Not yet."

This bothered the man. If ransom demands were not made then that could only mean that the feds were involved, their ultimate goal being to bring Daniel Cullen to book, not money. As if reading his mind Donald said,

"It has only been a couple of hours, I expect that a demand will be made soon. I should make the call I've been dreading"

"Daniel does not know yet?"

"No. I had to first confirm before I put him through unnecessary stress."

"Cover all your bases I always say. It's a good thing we have the negotiators on board. I presume you discussed nothing of our arrangement with Daniel."

"Daniel is in the dark on this one. I personally recruited them. Pierre is an accountant with the knack for finding lost property and his side kick, Tony, is a lawyer. They are the best money can buy around these parts."

"I bet you wonder why I insisted that you keep Daniel in the dark on this," the man asked. Donald was quiet.

"Well, Daniel is already under enough pressure as it is. He is also a cautiousness freak, the smaller his 'family' the more relaxed he is. I didn't want to bother him with every small detail." The man went on.

"I Understand." Donald replied.

"Does their fee go up now that an actual theft has occurred?"

"Not necessarily." Donald said, *"But perhaps to motivate them further, we could throw in something extra for their daily expenses."*

"You had better make that call now. Keep me posted?" The man said and ended the call. Donald drummed his fingers rhythmically on his couch. He was alone in his living room. His house maid had retired for the day. Outside, his security detail patrolled the compound. He picked up the phone and dialed the number.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE.

The flashily dressed staff made for a spectacle as did the various games with their wheels, balls and cards. Atiba Nicholas debated with himself whether to start at the poker table, his usual haunt, or at the American roulette wheel. He had had more luck at the roulette table the last time he was here. He decided to start there.

The exhibition had been a success bigger than he had ever anticipated. Atiba Nicholas had made some good money.

"Glad to see you back." Ntango Brian, the croupier at the roulette table said, jolting Atiba from his thoughts. He had snack up on him from behind. Atiba wheeled around to face him.

"Ntango, my favorite croupier, how is your evening going."

"It would be better if all my debtors settled their outstanding bills." Ntango replied.

Of course, Atiba thought. How could it have skipped his mind? He had been too excited to think of everything. It did not matter now, he had enough money on him.

"Sure," he said, dipping into his leather satchel and pulling out some Ugandan shilling notes,

"How much are you shaking me?"

"Seven hundred and twenty thousand Ugandan shillings only" Ntango said, staring at the fat satchel. Atiba counted fifteen crisp notes of fifty thousand shillings and handed them over.

"Happy gambling," Ntango said *"remember I am always at your service."* And he scurried off as his supervisor approached.

An American roulette wheel is divided into 38 numbered slots. 18 of them red and 18 of them black, alternating every slot. Plus two uncolored slots, 0 and 00. Every time the croupier spins the wheel, the ball has a 1 in 38 chance of coming to rest in any one slot. The number has exactly the same chance of being the winning number on each spin, or even on the last ten or one hundred spins.

Since each spin is independent of the last, the odds of any three numbers coming up one after the other are 1 out of 38 multiplied by 1 out of 38 multiplied by 1 out of 38. Perhaps this time he should bet on a color, red or black, rather than a number, the last 25 spins had produced outcomes of red. Using that logic, he decided that black is sure to come up next or soon. He placed five consecutive bets of 200,000 shillings and held his breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX.

Daniel Cullen was restless. It had been more than three hours since he got home and still there was no sign of Donald Ikote. He stopped pacing up and down and sat at his desk. Pouring himself some scotch, he looked at his phone. It did not ring.

There a knock on the door. Finally, he thought. Daniel called out, *"come in, the door is open,"* the study room door swung open and his butler stepped in.

"Sir, Gideon has shown in three guests. Mr. Ikote and two gentlemen that I'm not familiar with. They are downstairs in the living room."

"Could it be part of the security detail?" Daniel asked

"No sir, I do not think so, unless they are new recruits...and they are not dressed the part."

"Thank you. I'll be down shortly." Daniel said and dismissed him. He poured himself another glass of scotch and gulped it down. He never had anyone over at his house that he had not specifically invited. He felt a wave of trepidation wash over him. He could not fathom why Donald would abuse his courtesy and invite strangers into his house. Something was

terribly wrong. He stood up and walked out of his study room, locking the door firmly.

Downstairs, he was surprised to see the two fellows that Donald had introduced as colleagues he had procurement ventures with. Donald wore a solemn look.

"Donald ...," he said, looking inquisitively at him. Donald Ikote looked for the right words to use but none came to him.

"There is no easy way to say this," he said and paused, looking at the grim expression on Daniel's face.

"The paintings have been stolen." He said and waited for Daniel to say something. To rant, to shout at him, but he got nothing, just the same grim face.

"They, my men must have been attacked somewhere after the air strip, but before reaching my house. A suspicious looking garbage truck was sighted in the neighborhood."

"Who saw this suspicious looking garbage truck?" Daniel finally spoke.

"I have done some primary investigation around my neighborhood. A young lady with a kiosk a couple of hundred meters from my place said she saw a garbage truck that had

broken down not far from her kiosk," Donald said, twirling his moustache. He did that a lot when he was tense. He went on.

"It was grounded in the middle of the road for hours. Then also a boda-boda cyclist that operates a few meters away from my gate saw the garbage truck. It was grey in color and weather beaten."

"Plate number?" Daniel asked.

"Nothing yet. No one seemed to give it much attention," Donald replied, adding *"Except that the boda-boda cyclist said that something about the garbage truck driver struck him as odd. The kind of shoes that he wore were more of office shoes and looked expensive."*

"Anything else you're working with to find my paintings?" Daniel asked. Donald turned to look at Pierre and Tony who had listened in on the conversation the whole time. He wondered how Daniel would take it that these strangers were indirectly in his employ and he had not known about it. Moreover that Daniel Ikote, his obedient minion had kept it a secret from him.

"Your associate overseas has hired the services of the gentlemen here, Pierre Bagonza and Tony Sabiiti, you met them

briefly at the exhibition." Donald said. Daniel looked from Pierre to Tony, finally fixing his gaze back on Donald.

"What would an accountant and a lawyer do to help my situation now?" Daniel asked sarcastically.

"Pierre and Tony are negotiators cum private investigators. They came highly recommended."

"What I do not understand is that the paintings were stolen only a few hours ago and already we have these two so called experts on board, in our employ, how?"

"They have been in our employ the whole time ever since the paintings got here, courtesy of your associate overseas."

"And you, my employee, my hatchet man, deemed it fit to keep this information from me." Daniel said. Donald shifted uneasily in his seat.

"I didn't want to bother you with details of an arrangement that might have never come into operation. You already had enough issues of importance on your plate." Donald replied.

Daniel's expression turned grimmer, if that was even possible.

"It will not be that hard tracking down the garbage truck. We already have a description of what it looks like, the

condition it is in. From that a number of deductions can be made, for instance there are not that many garbage collection companies. If we……" Pierre was saying when Daniel cut him short.

"It could have been panel beaten to look that way. Was it a private garbage collection truck or it belongs to one of the registered companies? There are too many assumptions. I don't like it." Daniel yelled. Tony was jotting something down in is notebook.

"What of your men, the ones that escorted the paintings, what do they say?" Daniel asked.

"There is no sign of them yet. I'm fearful for the worst. There would be no need to hold them hostage, really."

"You cannot be sure they are not tied to the whole thing." Daniel said. Donald was about to refute the allegation but thought better of it. This was no time to further ruffle his charge."

"It is still early days, let's not jump to any rush conclusions as yet. Give us time to do what you are paying us for." Pierre said. To which Daniel had some choice words before Tony interjected.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here, calm down. We need to keep steady nerves to get through this." Tony said. They were quiet for some time. Each one lost in their own thoughts.

"There is a slight adjustment to your service fee, a motivator of sorts. Your daily expenses money has been doubled." Donald said. Tony smiled to that.

"It is late, if that is all we should be on our way," Pierre said standing up.

"I'll deliver the money to your office, first thing tomorrow morning," Daniel said as he stood up and begun pacing up and down the living room. He was in a foul mood and understandably so. He continued pacing as Donald walked Pierre and Tony to the door.

"Do you think my associate had anything to do with this?" Daniel asked when Donald got back.

"He has as much at stake to lose if that information fell into the wrong hands, but what would it hurt him to blackmail me for a small fortune if he thought I would never get to know it is him behind the theft?" Daniel added.

"It is all still a puzzle at the moment." Donald said settling back into the chair, *"I highly doubt that my men were involved in this. They are loyal and have been with me forever."*

Daniel did not reply to that. He steered clear of that line of conversation. Until he had solid evidence indicating otherwise, everyone was a suspect.

"A black mailer would not worry me that much at this point," Daniel said, almost talking to himself, *"what scares the sh*t out of me is that the feds may be behind all this"* Daniel said.

"I doubt that the feds had anything to do with it. What would they need my men for? The mover's truck, FLASH MOVERS, and its driver and crew are also missing. I checked with their offices, the truck did not return. None of it fits the feds M.O." Donald said. Daniel laughed.

"What do you know of the F.B.I's methods of operation?" he asked. Donald kept quiet.

"Charles!" Daniel shouted. The butler appeared,

"Get us some scotch. Donald here looks like he could use some."

“Make that one. I should get going too. I need to wake up early, keep a clear head.” Donald said.

“Then a party for one it is. Bring it to the study room,” Daniel said to Charles.

Then addressing Donald,

“you had better get this sorted out before we all get burned.” And he climbed up the stairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN.

At the same time that Donald Ikote left Daniel Cullen's residence, his henchmen were being bundled out of the garbage truck. They were not alone at the back of the truck. The driver of the garbage truck that had been hijacked only three hours to the exhibition was tied up with them too.

The truck had parked at a stone quarry in Bukasa, Muyenga. At that time of the night there was no one around. They were brought out of the truck and undressed except for their underwear. Their arms and legs still bound, the four of them were secured to a metallic pole in the lone building on the premises. The garbage truck was then driven to the back of the building and abandoned.

As the prisoners begged and prayed for their lives, Collin's crew retreated and boarded a Saloon vehicle that had been parked at the side to the entrance.

"Life should be spared." had been Landlord's instruction. And they followed it to the letter.

"I take it that the operation as a success." Landlord said.

"Everything went according to plan. No hitch at all. We moved like clockwork."

"And the movers truck, what did you do with it?"

"After we switched the paintings to your vehicle, which I dumped at a night car park in Mutungo, we had a quick check on the house that you rented under the alias of Mayokia. Nothing was amiss, the FLASH MOVER'S employees were still put. No blood was shed." Collin replied.

They were at Landlord's residence, seated on plastic chairs in his compound, although it was fast approaching 1:00am. Three dogs run playfully around the compound.

"You have done well my boy, so far," Landlord said, *"tomorrow we make our demands."*

"Today boss," Collin corrected him,

"It is after midnight."

Landlord laughed and Collin joined in.

Donald Ikote was at Meridian Audit Group by 8:00am. The offices were still closed, so he remained in his car, waiting for Pierre. Thirty minutes later, Pierre arrived. As he parked, he spotted Donald's car. Mr. Ikote looked like he had not slept at

all. Pierre locked his car and walked towards Donald, who remained seated in his vehicle.

"Good morning," Pierre said.

"Good morning," Donald replied. He was jittery and cursed that the paintings had disappeared on his watch. He handed Pierre a backpack and said

"It's all there. I'd like you to keep me informed of any development the second it happens."

"Sure thing," Pierre replied,

"You really should get some sleep Donald. You look terrible."

"Just keep me posted." Donald said brusquely as he raised his window and eased out of the parking lot.

Daniel Cullen woke up with a splitting headache. He said the drunkard's prayer and forced himself out of bed. He was groggy and had nausea. He walked to the bathroom and had a cold shower. There was a knock at his bedroom door just as he emerged from the shower.

"I will be down shortly." Daniel called out.

"Breakfast is served sir," the Butler said through the closed door. Daniel freshened up and wrapped himself in a thick Savile

row robe before heading downstairs. He sat at the dining table and was going through the local dailies when Gideon, who was in charge of his home security barged in.

"Yes Gideon," Daniel said, irritated with the intrusion.

"We have a situation, sir."

"Speak up Gideon!"

"Several military and armed plain clothed men have surrounded the residence sir." Gideon said. Daniel let out a dozen expletives.

"Have they made any attempt to get in?"

"No sir."

"Hold them off as long as you can. They should show you a search warrant, otherwise it will be trespass." He had to get rid of the leather bound ledger and the vital documents in his cabinet upstairs.

The house had three exits, a gate at the front, another at the back and a smaller gate at the side that led to the next residence which he also rented.

Another security guard came rushing in just as Daniel reached the base of the stairs and was about to run up to his bedroom.

"Two military vehicles full of soldiers have pulled up to the gate. Two mzungus seem to be in charge. They are giving orders to the other Afandes."

"Hold them off. If they try to get into the compound, shoot them. You are protected by the law." Daniel shouted and ran up the stairs. Gideon and the other guard stepped out of the house and regrouped with the rest of the guard detail. They were eight security guards in total. Gideon gave them various positions to hold.

Daniel Cullen hurriedly threw on a pair of navy blue jeans and a T-shirt with the words '*Sh*t Happens*' on the front. He put on loafers and grabbed a backpack that contained money, passports and a few documents.

Outside he could hear his dogs barking ferociously. He opened the cabinet and removed all the documents it contained, the leather bound ledger inclusive. He wore the backpack as he threw the documents that he had collected from the cabinet into a shredding machine and impatiently waited on the other end of the machine with a cigarette lighter and a small jerrycan of flammable liquid. He lit the shredded paper as it was spewed out and doused the flame.

Daniel rushed out of the bedroom and ran towards his study almost breaking down the door. Then he remembered he'd had the cabinet – the one he had just been going through –shifted to his bedroom.

All the documents of any consequence had been removed from the drawer in the study. He turned and ran back towards the stairs. As he literally jumped down the stairs, five at a time, he heard two gun shots go off followed by a sickening howl of one of the dogs before it went silent. By the time he got to the base of the stairs, there was a consistent loud exchange of gun fire, a full-fledged war. He ran through the kitchen, picking up a fire arm from the kitchen cabinet. His butler was curled up on the floor.

Daniel bolted out the kitchen door and made a left, coming face to face with the barrel of a gun. The F.B.I agent ordered him to the ground. Daniel Cullen lay flat on the pavers as another agent came from the right with handcuffs and secured his hands behind his back. He was helped to his feet and whisked away to the front of the house where he saw the lifeless bodies of four of his guards and one of his dogs. The other five

dogs cowered behind the kennel. The rest of his security detail was kneeling, hands on top of their heads.

Daniel Cullen was led to one of the black Special Utility Vehicles with American embassy plate numbers. The embassy Special Utility Vehicles sped off in a convoy of two lead cars and two backup vehicles. The vehicle carrying the modern day Pirate of the Caribbean sandwiched in the middle.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT.

Donald Ikote stepped harder on the accelerator as he went by Daniel Cullen's residence. He was on his way to see Daniel after meeting with Pierre Bagonza when he found the residence under siege. It was like a whole battalion had been sent to capture Daniel.

Donald eased on the Peddle as he passed yet another police patrol vehicle heading in the direction of Daniels house. No need to raise suspicion.

He had to inform Daniels associate immediately. It now seemed clear that the American Federal Bureau of Investigation was behind everything. So there had been no need for him to pay Pierre Bagonza after all. His thoughts were interrupted by the shrill ringing of his phone.

"Hallo," he answered.

"Is this Donald, Ikote Donald?" An unfamiliar voice asked. It was muffled with an almost flat accent.

"Yes, may I know who is calling?"

"We have your paintings."

"Who are you?"

"I am the man who can get you back your valuable paintings." The voice replied.

Donald was quiet for a while, thinking. He had just seen the police, military vehicles and an American embassy Special Utility Vehicle parked just outside Daniels residence. The American government was definitely involved. Was he also a target, was he being baited?

"They are not that valuable. I got them at a charity exhibition."

"Stop playing games Donald, we know otherwise. We have another interested buyer lined up, but we thought we would give you the first priority." The voice said. Donald was quiet again,

"Good bye Donald."

"Wait,"

"I thought you would be interested," the voice said.

"What do you want?"

"One hundred million Ugandan shillings," The voice said. Donald Ikote laughed.

"What makes you think I have that kind of money?" He asked.

"We know you do. You and your colleagues should come up with the money in a week's time or we will move on to the next buyer."

If these guys were for real, then this was a bargain. These fellows were asking for peanuts.

"How do I contact you?"

"You don't, we will get back to you soon enough." And the line went dead.

"How interested was he?" Landlord asked.

"He is interested. But he sounded doubtful that we have the paintings. It is like he believes there is another party involved that actually has the paintings." Robin Mujuni said.

"What makes you think that?"

"He didn't jump at the opportunity to get back the paintings the first time I mentioned them."

"What about the money, did the amount faze him?"

"No it did not. He first pretended that the paintings were not of much value to him, but when I threatened to sell to another buyer and almost hang up, he wizened up." Robin replied.

"Donald is just a pawn. I think the real power player here is the white dude." Landlord said and paused,
"Whatever he sees in those paintings only God knows and I do not care as long we get our hands on the ransom money." He added.

"I had better get over to Astute Inc. and check out for any developments on their front." said Robin.

"You do that. I think I will go and have another look at those paintings. It would not hurt to figure out what secrets they hold." Landlord said, wondering how he would eventually dispose of Robin Mujuni.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE.

As it clocked 1:00pm Pierre Bagonza took a break. He had waited for the thieves to contact him but no one had yet. He turned on the television set and searched for NTV, a local television station. The lunch time news was on. That is when he learned of James Doe's arrest, of Daniel Cullen's arrest.

There were dramatic scenes unfolding on the television set as four of Daniel Cullen's security guards were dragged out of the residence and bundled onto a military pickup vehicle and whisked off.

Pierre picked up his phone and dialed Donald Ikote's number. It rang for a while but Donald did not pick up. He dialed the number again. This time Ikote picked up after the third ring.

"Have you heard the news? I'm watching some footage of Daniel's arrest earlier this morning on the NTV lunch time news." Pierre said as soon as Donald had picked his call.

"I drove by his residence this morning just after leaving your office and found a heavy military and police presence outside his gate. American embassy Special Utility Vehicles also littered the neighborhood."

"Why didn't you inform me?" Pierre asked.

"I was just about to contact you. I wanted to first confirm some issues with Mr. Cullen's associate overseas. Have you been contacted yet?"

"No, I have not heard anything yet."

"I received a phone call a couple of minutes ago. Whoever has the paintings wants one hundred million shillings." Donald said.

"One hundred million shillings!" exclaimed Pierre.

"A cool one hundred million." Donald repeated.

"Are they really worth all that?"

"Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder," Donald said vaguely.

"So how do they want to play this out, how is the exchange supposed to go down?"

"We did not get to that part. They said they would get in touch with me soon," Donald said and paused, before adding, *"they said they have another buyer lined up and I should come up with the money in a week's time or they would move on to him."*

"To him?" Pierre inquired

"I am assuming it is a 'him'."

"Do you have any ideas who the caller could have been?"

"I have three theories. The first is that it is the feds and for whatever reason they were after Daniel, that secret is buried or hidden in those paintings. So they are luring whoever dealt with or has some link to Daniel to extract information from them. A weak link could easily lead the feds to the thieves." Donald replied.

"That is plausible. What is the second theory?"

"The second is rolled in with the third. It is that the call is a bluff by one of us. By that I am referring to my men or someone in Daniel's employ that knows about the disappearance of the paintings and is looking to make a quick buck," Daniel said and paused, before continuing,

"The third is that someone close to you and or Tony got to learn of the value of the paintings by eavesdropping on your conversations or phone calls and pulled of a daring move." They both went silent as Pierre mulled over what Donald had just said.

"Which one is the most plausible?" Pierre finally asked.

"I had first thought the second, but now I'm not too sure," Donald answered before asking.

"What do you think?"

When Donald had mentioned the third theory, Pierre's mind had flashed on his cousin Robin. A sickening feeling had washed over him, but he could not just rush to unconfirmed conclusions regardless of Robin's past.

"I don't believe in assumptions, I believe in facts," Pierre said deflecting the question.

"I don't think information of how valuable the paintings are leaked from my end. I will do some checking, just to be sure, but it is highly unlikely." Pierre added, as he thought of Robin.

"My men, the ones that escorted the paintings, were dumped nude and tied to a pole at a stone quarry in Bukasa" Donald said.

"I'll need to talk to them individually," Pierre spoke, matter of factly.

"I'll set that up. Let me get to Daniel's associate." Donald replied.

"Please get back to me as soon as they contact you again. This time don't keep me in the dark."

"No more information delays." Donald said and hung up.

Pierre leaned back in his chair and digested all that Donald had told him. A quick rap at his door brought him to attention.

"Come in" he shouted. Robin Mujuni walked into his office,

"Good afternoon," he said.

"Good afternoon Robin, enjoying your temporary freedom?"

"My freedom?" Robin replied, apprehensive.

"We visited a loan-shark, remember? And your deadline is just round the corner."

"Oh that. I might be a day or two late, but I will definitely come through," Robin said and paused.

"Thanks a lot for everything. It is a good thing you know the guy."

"Just because I know the guy does not mean you should drag. That was quite a favor he gave me, do not spoil that trust. Where else would you get a loan with no interest charged and nothing mortgaged?"

"Don't bite the hand that feeds you, no? I know he will come in handy again later so I promise I will honor my part of the agreement." Robin said smiling uncomfortably.
Robin was edgy and Pierre was not sure if it had to do with what he had just said about the loan-shark or with one of Donald's theories.

"Any developments on the case you are working on?" Robin asked, looking around the office.

"Actually, there is a file titled Zenith you could help me go through. I am running late on a deadline, and yet I have to step out for about an hour." Pierre said,
"I want you to help me to do a little background research on this new company the firm just took on. But first take these to the secretary down the hall for typing. Wait for them until she is done and then return them to me." He added as he handed Robin a stack of twenty sheets of paper that he had scribbled on.

As soon as Robin had stepped out, Pierre opened up a new email address to which he sent mail from his original email address, indicating that the true value of the paintings was well over three hundred million shillings and had just been smuggled

into the Afri-Art exhibition at the last minute to cater to a private collector who had already paid for them. He added that two more paintings of high value will be shipped to the private collector very soon. He signed off with a fictitious name. Pierre left the email displayed on his desktop screen.

When Robin returned with the sheets of paper, Pierre hurriedly gathered some papers from his desk together with what Robin had returned.

"I'll be back in about an hour," he said as he rushed out. He walked out of the building and took refuges in his vehicle for the next 50 minutes.

If any of the information that he had intentionally left on display on his desktop was used by whoever had the paintings to demand for an increase in ransom, then he will have confirmed his fear.

Robin Mujini walked round the desk and sat on Pierre's chair. He realized that in his rush, Pierre had forgotten to close his email account. He read through an email that was on display.

Then read through it again. As he read through again, he had begun sweating with excitement.

The figure that they had demanded for was actually not as high as they had feared. The plan had been to demand for one hundred million shillings and if Donald Ikote and his entourage drove a hard bargain, haggle down to about sixty million shillings.

They knew that the paintings were at least that much. Now this email had blown the lid off the original ceiling. They could probably get much more from the paintings. He was sure landlord would share the feeling. Robin logged out of the account and looked up Zenith securities. Pierre had better find him on the assignment at hand.

CHAPTER THIRTY.

"Do we have a break though?" Daniel's associate asked.

"Daniel has been arrested." Donald replied.

"What, when…, how?" the associate asked.

Donald Ikote gave him the short version of what had happened.

"So it was the feds behind the disappearance of the paintings?" Daniels associate inquired.

"I'm not so sure anymore. I received a phone call from someone claiming they had the paintings and he wanted one hundred million Ugandan shillings in exchange."

"Could it be the feds phishing for information?"

"It seems less likely. It would not have been hard for them to just grab me too, they are the feds, finding me would not be too hard." Donald said. There was some bad static on the line.

"Hallo, Hallo…"

"Hallo, I can hear you now. I was saying it is less likely to be the feds that called me but I could not be certain." Donald went on.

“I like the irony. It would actually turn out to be a blessing in disguise if it is not the feds and it is actually someone else asking for one hundred million shillings.”

“Even if it were more money that they demanded for, I bet you would gladly pay up.” Donald said. Daniel’s associate thought that an odd thing to say, especially at that material time. If it was not the Federal bureau of investigation then no one was above board. Donald could as well have had a hand in it.

“I have to get back to work,” the associate said, “use all the resources at our disposal to get them back.”

“It might require more...” the line went dead before Donald could complete his sentence.

Daniels associate was glad that he had not put all his eggs in one basket. The most crucial documents required in pinning him and Daniel were in his possession. He had sent vital documents in the cherub painting, but it would be one hectic puzzle for anyone to figure out with only half of the documents.

Michael Bennett had just received the best news in years. Daniel Cullen had been arrested in Uganda and was being flown back to America to face justice. Although he was in custody, the case was far from over. The legal process would drag on for years before any verdict could be reached.

It was still a long war to be fought. One of the two lead foreign government agents that had gone rogue had also been arrested. He was discovered hiding out in South Africa. The pieces of the puzzle were slowly coming together.

Michael Bennett had heard from the grape vine that crucial information, some documents vital to the case had vanished from the body of evidence that had been collected so far.

A week ago, that had been a major setback to the case. Now with the capture of the master mind, Daniel Cullen, all that seemed trivial. A lot of incriminating evidence was bound to be harvested from Daniel Cullen's rat hole. May be Michael's mother would get justice after all.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE.

Tony Sabiiti and Donald Ikote sat in the hired white non-descript van, on the first floor parking lot of Garden City Shopping Mall. It was 2:00pm in the afternoon and sweltering hot. They had swung the doors and windows wide open to let in some fresh. Pierre stepped out of the van and walked about, using his white handkerchief to wipe sweat off his forehead.

"I will get us some water," he said and walked towards Nakumatt Supermarket. The ransomers had called again just two days before their one week deadline had elapsed and made an increment on what they had originally asked for. They now wanted one hundred and fifty million shillings. Pierre entered the supermarket and strolled to the section that held water and beverages.

He was so mad and disappointed in Robin. The increment in ransom money demanded could only mean that his cousin had leaked the doctored information he had dangled on his desktop. Robin Mujuni was definitely in with the thugs. Pierre picked three litters of Rwenzori mineral water and headed for the counter to pay up.

Earlier that day, Donald Ikote had been contacted again. He had been given specific instructions. One of them was to be at the parking lot on the first floor of Garden City Mall before 2:00pm. The second instruction had been for him to remain in the parking lot for an hour, up to 3:00pm

The third instruction had surprised Donald. It was for him to come along with Pierre Bagonza and Tony Sabiiti. They had pre-empted him before he could voice his intention of bringing with him the negotiators – a suggestion he had suspected they would shoot down. They actually insisted on it.

A fourth instruction was to have the money split into five bags, each carrying denominations of only 50,000 Ugandan shilling notes. Each bag would carry thirty million shillings.

The fifth instruction had been to wait for further instructions.

Pierre Bagonza returned to the van and handed Tony and Donald a one litter bottle of Rwenzori mineral water each. He poured some of the ice cold water over his head before taking a big gulp from the bottle.

Tony reclined his seat and leaned back. It was incredible that he still wore his suit in this blistering heat and seemed not too

uncomfortable. Donald had removed his coat and draped it over the driver's seat. He kept swirling his moustache as he sipped on his water.

At exactly 2:45pm, Donald's phone rang. Then in quick succession, two minutes apart, Pierre's and Tony's phones rang too.

Landlord observed the white non-descript van from a Vantage point. On the ground floor parking lot, in a hired Elf truck were the paintings, all the twelve of them. For one hundred and fifty million, Landlord could not afford to let anything go wrong. All the more reason for him to have professionals, Pierre and Tony, around when the exchange happened.

He took particular interest in a group of secondary school students that were walking around the parking lot on the floor. They wore grey trousers and white short sleeved shirts, with stripped red and white belts. The majority of them were in their late teens.

A number of students, about eighteen of them had broken off from the rest and moved towards the white non-descript van, chattering amongst themselves.

On the ground floor parking lot, another group of students wearing a different kind of uniform – these wore black trousers and light blue short sleeved shirts – were milling around the Elf truck.

"Step out of the vehicle with two of the bags, take them down to the ground floor and leave them at the back of a blue Elf truck parked down there, then walk away. Don't mind the crowd down there. By the way, nice checkered shirt you got on," Landlord said after Donald had answered the phone call. Donald looked out of the car window scanning the parking lot,

"Thank you," he said.

"Move now." Landlord said and hung up.

"Give it twenty minutes and then follow the same instructions Donald Ikote has been given. Before you walk away, lift the tarpaulin at the back of the truck and confirm that

we have delivered the paintings." Collin said to Pierre as soon as he picked up the call.

"Why walk away? You are holding all the cards. What guarantee do we have that…" Pierre was saying when the line went dead.

"You will remain seated in the van until Pierre returns," a voice on the other end of the line told Tony before abruptly hanging up.

Pierre, Tony and Donald shared what their instructions had been.

"Don't walk away if you confirm that the truck has the paintings," Donald said to Pierre as he texted on his cell phone, "you will not be alone. I came along with some of my men."

Donald stepped out of the van and Pierre passed him two heavy bags. He hurried off to the ground floor. It was hard to spot the blue Elf truck. He noticed a group of students milling around. There should be some secondary school function going on around the mall, Donald thought. This was the second school uniform that he was seeing.

He walked to the back of the truck, dropped the two bags there and beat a hasty retreat. By the time he got back to the van, his vest was drenched in sweat. As he entered the van his phone vibrated. He pulled it out of his pocket and read a text message.

"We are in sight of the blue Elf truck, how should we proceed?" the text message read. He texted back, *"Hold your positions until Pierre has confirmed the presence of the paintings."*

Pierre waited for a few minutes after Donald Ikote had returned before stepping out of the van. Tony passed him two heavy bags and he hurried off to the ground floor parking lot.

He located the truck quite easily and went round to the back. The two bags that Donald had placed there less than thirty minutes earlier were gone. A cool sixty million shillings gone. He placed the two bags that he had carried on the ground, stepped on one of the hind tires of Elf truck and heaved himself up.

Pierre lifted the tarpaulin on the carrier of the truck. The paintings had been stacked in three rows, four in each row.

Pierre stepped down and was about to call Tony when the group of students swarmed him.

The group of more than twenty people surrounded him and edged him towards the wall. They all seemed to be talking at the same time. Finally, one of them shouted above the din,

"Could we please get directions to Cineplex cinema?"

It dawned on Pierre that this was a distraction.

"Third floor." he shouted and pointed up. He begun to dial Tony's number but one of the students bumped into him and he dropped his phone. The group had turned and was pulling away from him, walking towards the lifts.

"Pierre has taken long down there," Tony said, *"are you sure your men are in position."*

"Positive," Donald said as he dialed a number. Just then the van door was yanked open

"Put down the phone." Collin said pointing a pistol at Donald, his youthful face blank. He was dressed in grey trousers, a short sleeved white shirt and a red and white stripped belt. The rest of the group surrounded the van. If anyone was

observing them, they would assume these were excitable secondary school children.

"Pass me your cell phones." Collin calmly ordered. Donald obliged and Tony followed suit. One other *'student'* jumped into the van and ordered Tony and Donald to move to the back. The duo was then tied up, mouths gagged and locked up in the back of van.

Pierre Bagonza picked up the pieces of his phone – the battery, the phone back cover and the phone main frame had all taken different directions when his phone hit the ground. He turned it on and dialed Donald's number. The phone rang but there was no response. He turned and moved back to the Elf truck.

The spot where he had put the bags was empty. Hoisting himself up the truck again, he lifted the tarpaulin. All the twelve paintings were still there.

As he stepped down, a group of about fifteen men came rushing towards the truck. He quickly recognized one of them as Donald's body guard.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO.

Daniel Cullen lay on his bunker in his jail cell. He read the chit over and over again and smiled to himself.

'As Angelic as a cherub, safe and sound.' Was all that the chit said?

One of the jail guards had passed it on to him during the lunch break.

"You have been a jolly fellow all day." His cellmate said as he looked at the piece of paper Daniel Cullen had in his hand. Daniel crumpled the chit and chewed it.

The chit had given him some comfort. It was not an open and closed case after all.

Kafunda – Road side bar.

Uganda waragi – Ugandan Liquor

Balance – Change.

Afande – Cop / Policeman

Boda-Boda- Taxi motorcyclist.

Mutwalo – Ten thousand shillings.

Chai – Tea. Slang for bribe.

Bagonza- Change some of the names perhaps.

Confidence man – Con man.

About The Author

Alfred Galandi is a Community Psychology Graduate (Makerere University) based in Kampala, Uganda, and a digital enthusiast who explores the intersection of technology and community development. He writes for the online publication NyMy Media and has also contributed to Muwado, another online platform. His work is available on Africanbooks.com and GoodReads, where readers can discover his publications and engage with his writing. *Short Stories and Other Tales* is his fifth book, continuing his commitment to storytelling that illuminates people, place, and possibility.

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