

# **Prince Jbrahim's Favorite**

A Novel

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Cover illustration by  
Kitty McNaughton

Tammy Simmons has just been emancipated after more than five years as a harem and brothel slave on the Persian Gulf. She has become the very happy and grateful fourth wife of the man who rescued her, the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cameroon.

She is suddenly faced with overwhelming adjustments: recovering from years of degradation and close confinement and reinserting herself into a confusing and intimidating world, being the lowest-ranking wife in a polygamous household, learning how to live in exciting and proudly African Cameroon, and the very public life of a wife of a prominent personality. She thought she could push a button and return to her pre-enslavement persona, but being back in the real world is a lot more difficult than she had expected.

At first, Prince Ibrahim, her most recent master, is a very good sport about losing his favorite slave. As time goes on, however, he realizes that none of his other girls can hold a candle to his beloved Mukhmala, and he decides that he wants her back...

Become better acquainted with the harem girls you will meet in this book in the companion volume, *Voices from the Harem*, where they each tell their own story of abduction, betrayal, and enslavement.

This book is dedicated to all the girls locked away in a harem,  
far from their homelands,  
wrenched away from their families and loved ones,  
unable to communicate with the outside world,  
and whose very survival now depends on the whims of the men who bought them.

You are not forgotten.

This book continues the story from *Harem Slave Girl: One Thousand, Nine Hundred and Four Days of Hell on the Persian Gulf*.

However, it may be enjoyed independently.

Its companion volume, *Voices from the Harem*, relates the stories of all 111 girls in Prince Ibrahim's Il Giardino Posteriore Harem (the Rear Garden): how they came to be there, how they have adjusted to slavery, what they think of the harem and their master. It is not a conventional novel. It has no plot, but the individual stories are fascinating and poignant.

Pronunciation notes:

Yerima – YEH ree mah

Aïssatou – Ah YEES a too

Amsaou – AHM sa oo

Yaounde – this is the French spelling of the German distortion of the word

Ewondo (the major ethnic group in the area). Yah WUN day

Douala – DWA lah

Maroua – MAR oo wah

Many Muslim names in Cameroon are in the nominative case of Arabic, so it's Mohammadou rather than Mohammad, Aïssatou rather than Ayesah, Ismaëlou rather than Ishmael, Ahmadou rather than Ahmad, etc. The h (*taa marbuta*, or “tied t”) at the end of many feminine names in Arabic becomes a t when declined, e.g., Fatimah becomes Fatimatou.

Also, since unexpected syllables are stressed in certain names, they have been written with accents, even though normally they are spelled without, for example, Atángana. French names have been written with accents as correct in French, e.g., Gérard.

Many African names begin with one-letter syllables, M or N, such as Mveng or Nsom. Most non-Africans find this puzzling, and wind up overcomplicating things. It's actually easy. Just say the sound Mm or Nn (not em, not um, not meh), just M, then the rest of the word. After a few tries you'll be able to do it with no problem.

## CHAPTER ONE

Tammy Simmons, now Sudari Abdoulaye, was feeling very intimidated, very foreign, and clutched the arm of her handsome new husband Yerima with both hands as he led her into the dining room. She managed a tentative smile as she was introduced to his senior wife Aïssatou, his second wife Amsaou, and his third wife JoAnn. Aïssatou kissed her warmly on both cheeks. Amsaou rose and gave her a big hug. JoAnn looked pointedly out the window.

“This is Sudari, as I’m sure you’ve guessed. JoAnn, it means jewel, by the way. I’m asking for all of you to be understanding and helpful to her. I’ve told you her story, how she spent more than five years in the most horrible type of bondage, and was very nearly tortured to death for getting revenge on a man who had constantly tormented her. She’s been through extremely traumatic experiences and it may take her a while to adjust to normal life.”

“As if this household is anything resembling normal,” Aïssatou remarked, rolling her eyes.

“Well, as close to normal as we have around here,” he said with a chuckle.

“I’m very happy to finally be here in Cameroon,” Tammy said, “and want so hard to do things right. I know I’ll screw up, but I promise to try my best.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine,” Aïssatou said.

“We’re delighted to meet you and promise that we’ll do whatever we can to help you,” said Amsaou.

“Hmpf,” said JoAnn.

Yerima’s eyes narrowed, and he adjusted the folds of his ice-blue gandoura with annoyance. “All right, let’s get down to business. Madame Prime Minister, what’s going on with the servants’ quarters?”

“I’m in the process of reviewing four bids. I’ve eliminated one because I was offered a kick-back. Allah! Don’t people know me by now?” Aïssatou shook her head in exasperation. “And, Mr. President, I’d like to give an update on the pilferage case. I interviewed all the kitchen staff and reviewed the feed from the security cameras and it became clear that the guilty party was Oumarou. I have fired him and am considering legal action.”

“What’s the value of the missing supplies?” Yerima asked.

“At least 700,000 cfa.”

“Excuse me, please, sir,” said Tammy, “how much is that, please?”

“Around fourteen hundred dollars. Give him thirty days. Restitution or prosecution. That’s substantial. Anything else? Finance?”

“We’re considerably over budget, as a result of Alizée’s excesses,” reported Amsaou. We’re still recovering from her vacation to the Seychelles and that party she threw.”

“Great party, though,” remarked Yerima, “but in any case, she’s history and we’ll do the best we can to get back on track. By the way, I got an email from her the other day and she sends her regards. She plans to remarry. Owner of a jewelry store there in Grenoble.”

Appreciative laughter. “Perfect,” said Amsaou, “If he also owns a shoe store and a dress boutique, it’ll be even better.”

“And a travel agency,” added Aïssatou. “Please extend our warmest congratulations and our wishes for every happiness.”

“Arrogant bitch is finally out of our hair,” snapped JoAnn, “and I notice that it took our esteemed husband no time whatsoever to find a replacement. Only this time, instead of a countess and sculptor, our co-wife is a professional whore.”

Tammy stiffened.

Yerima turned to JoAnn. “I asked for your understanding and support, if I’m not mistaken. Do you wish to apologize?”

“I said nothing that isn’t absolutely true and see no reason why I should offer an apology.” She raised her chin and met his gaze.

“I was a slave, and my master leased me to work in a men’s club,” Tammy said evenly. “That’s a long shot from making a voluntary career choice.”

“A woman who gives sex to men she doesn’t know is a whore to me,” countered JoAnn.

A sigh. “She was a *slave*, JoAnn. It wasn’t her idea at all, and it’s a miracle that she survived.”

“I thought slavery had been outlawed.”

“Of course, just about everywhere, but there are more slaves on earth right now than at any time in human history. Passing a law is one thing. Eradicating the practice is something else altogether.” Yerima decided to get back to business. “So, Madame Minister of Agriculture, what’s going on?”

“Wait a minute, please, Mr. President, I haven’t finished,” protested Amsaou. “Shall I transfer the remaining budget from the now-defunct Ministry of Cultural Affairs to the new Ministry of Education? How should we handle that?”

“Sorry. Yes, sure, normally that would be the way to go, but it would mean that Sudari starts with a deficit. Do we have a surplus anywhere that we can tap into until she can get her new undertaking up and running?”

“Yes, sir, Agriculture is running a nice surplus.”

“Then please adjust the budget accordingly.”

“May I please point out,” said JoAnn hotly, “that our surplus is due to extremely careful management, and because we haven’t yet purchased all the plant material we need for landscaping the perimeter fence. So basically you’re punishing me, and I must strongly object, Mr. President, sir.”

“We’re not punishing you at all; we’re just trying to get Education going. What else do you suggest?”

“You’re taking resources away that we had already programmed for the benefit of this entire compound. Already approved.”

“We’re all aware of that, and commend you for your excellent management. But money has to come from somewhere, and it’s going to come from Agriculture. That’s my decision and if you have a problem with it you will talk to me after the meeting. Am I clear?”

“Yes sir.” She eyed him defiantly.

“And, finally, our new Minister of Education. Welcome to the household business meeting. What do you have in mind?”

Tammy smiled nervously. “I haven’t even met the children yet, but I know I’ll need books and supplies. I’d like to get to know them, figure out what pushes their buttons, and use that as a launching pad for improving their academic skills. I plan to emphasize reading, writing, and vocabulary, which are fundamental to everything.”

“We meet every Tuesday right after lunch and we try to keep it to fifteen minutes. Anything else? All right then, thanks, everybody. You’re all doing a terrific, terrific job.”

Tammy stared adoringly at Yerima. She was actually his wife, and was in Yaounde with him, and it was amazing. Amazing.

“Yerima, I need to talk to you,” said JoAnn, with fire in her voice.

“Sudari, my dear, let me give you a tour of the *saré*,” said Aïssatou, “unless you’re busy with something else?”

“No ma’am, not at all, ma’am. And thank you, ma’am. First, though, may I ask a dumb question? I’ve never before seen a tablecloth embroidered with spiders.”

Aïssatou laughed. “That throws a lot of Europeans.” She caught herself. “Here, anybody who isn’t African is called European. Even if you’re Japanese or Mexican, we call you European. The tablecloth is from Yerima’s home town. Maroua is an extremely rich center of African handicrafts, especially textiles and leather. Hand-spun, hand-woven, and hand-embroidered cotton, grown right there. And, my dear, we like spiders. We admire them for their resourcefulness, their ability to make something out of nothing, and we think that their webs are architectural marvels.

“But back to our tour. The *saré* is more like a small village. Right now we have 74 people living here, and we feed another fifty or so every day. There’s Yerima, the four of us, the nine children, assorted cousins and nephews and abused wives and other relatives, twelve staff, and nine emancipated slaves who used to belong to Yerima’s father. This is the family dining room, of course. Over here is the state dining room – that’s getting a lot of use with his new job – and here’s the butler’s pantry, the fully equipped commercial-style kitchen, the staff dining room, and the supply room. Oh, Chef Emmanuel, please meet Madame Sudari, His Excellency’s

newest wife. She's originally from right outside Washington. Chef Emmanuel is amazing. Every single thing he makes is delicious, and he even makes his own pâté."

"Wow! I'm so happy to meet you, Chef. Do you know how to make catfish creole, by any chance?" Tammy asked.

The chef bowed. "Yes indeed, Madame Sudari. Welcome to Cameroon. Is that what you'd like for dinner tonight?"

The chef had bowed. To her! Tammy turned to Aïssatou. "You mean, ma'am, I'm allowed to choose?"

"Within reason, my dear."

"Oh, Chef Emmanuel, you have no idea how happy that would make me. I haven't had catfish creole in ages. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure, madame. And again, welcome."

What a strange but wonderful new world, people bowing to her. And letting her pick out what to eat.

The tour continued. "Upstairs are eight guest suites – right now two of Yerima's brothers are visiting – and this wing down here is Yerima's: his office, his bedroom, his gym. It's kept locked because of all the confidential documents he deals with. This new job is already eating him alive, you know. Meetings all day, receptions every night. And it's wearing me out too, because I attend official events with him, and now there's one practically every evening. I used to write my judgments at night, and I'm getting behind."

"By the way, ma'am, I just want to tell you how much I admire you. Yerima told me how your father tried to force you into marriage and how you ran away and managed to finish your education. I admire that so much. You understand how tough things can be when everything, and I mean everything, is stacked against you, and I just admire you so much."

The senior wife took her hands. "Thank you, Sudari, that's very nice of you. And you don't need to call me ma'am." She smiled. "Although, I must confess, I like it. I distinctly remember the first time someone called me ma'am. Here in Africa, we're taught to defer to men, obey men, depend completely on men, and it's painfully hard to break that cycle. So when I was appointed to the bench, and people – even men! – started calling me ma'am, it was quite a thrill. Yerima told us your story, and you've really got guts. Sometime, I'd like to sit down and chat with you. I'm very interested in the institution of slavery and it'd be fascinating to hear it from someone who's actually experienced it."

"With pleasure, ma'am. And I don't mind calling you ma'am one bit. I said yes sir and yes master so many times that I just about wore out the words, but it feels downright good to say yes ma'am to a woman. And about being a slave, I can tell you how it is in one word: horrible. The Office was the worst. I spent sixteen or seventeen hours a day providing the most revolting services you can imagine to disgusting men. Even though they were generals and oil tycoons, most of them were horrible, and treated me like dirt. If it hadn't been for Yerima, who was

always so much fun, I would've gone stark raving insane. When we had a big fight I got so depressed I wanted to commit suicide, but they control you so minutely, it just wasn't possible."

"But you did manage to commit murder."

"We didn't think of it as murder, ma'am, it was revenge. Sweet, sweet revenge. For years, that man tormented us, betrayed us, lied to us, humiliated us, ground us under his foot. Nenzima and I finally had our chance, and we grabbed it."

"Nenzima? That's a Mangbetu name. A noblewoman's name. My sister-in-law is named Nenzima. From Kinshasa."

"Yes ma'am, Zima was from the Congo. My best friend." Tammy stifled sobs. "She committed suicide before they found us; I was stupid and thought it over too long. If Yerima hadn't rescued me, they would have boiled me in oil. They aren't very nice to slaves who murder Arabs, ma'am, especially Chairman of the Board."

"It's all right, my dear, don't cry. All that's behind you now. Yerima adores you, and he's a very good person. He has his moments – the man has a whopping temper, as I'm sure you know – but for the most part he's easy to get along with, and tries very hard to treat all four of us even-handedly. Amsaou and I grew up in polygamous households, but I must say, he hasn't had much luck with his white wives. Alizée got fed up and went back to Grenoble. I frankly don't understand how they stayed married for sixteen years, because I don't think they ever agreed on anything except when their clothes were off. And now things seem to be rapidly falling apart with JoAnn. Have you ever lived in a polygamous household, my dear?"

"Does being a slave in a polygamous household count?" Tammy made a face.

Aïssatou laughed. "Perhaps. By the way, my dear, do you plan to convert to Islam?"

"One of my owners forced me to convert, which I really resented, so I'd prefer to stay Christian, if that's all right, ma'am."

"Of course. That's a decision of the heart. Catholic?"

"No ma'am, Protestant."

"There's a Presbyterian theological seminary here in town, and they conduct services in English."

"Oh, wow. I'm Methodist, ma'am, but that's close enough."

"Methodists are in the Congo and Presbyterians are here. From what I understand, they decided not to compete. JoAnn's raising Cathy and Michael as Catholics. Yerima's very open-minded about religion; my father would've had a heart attack at the very idea. But this is a Muslim household, and your husband is a Muslim, and you must accept that. He's not a very strict one, but a reasonably devout, practicing Muslim."

"Of course, ma'am. I have no problem with that."

“Plus, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, he’s a public figure, which means that overnight, all of us have become public figures as well. We must always dress fashionably but modestly, and comport ourselves in such a manner that there is never any question about our integrity, our fidelity, or our honor. And since he’s a member of Government, we must never make any comment that can be construed as being the least bit critical of Antoine. People will try to trick you, and let’s face it, Yerima has plenty of enemies, so always be on your guard. If you’re ever in doubt, just smile graciously and keep walking. This is an order, my dear: be courteous to everyone, especially the people who deserve it the least.”

“That’s a very good policy, ma’am. Right now I don’t plan to go anywhere, I just want to sit in my apartment and hug Cleo and Titi and thank my lucky stars that Yerima rescued me.”

“We do not use pagan expressions in this household, my dear.”

“Lucky stars? I never thought about that before, ma’am. Well, then, let me thank Almighty God that Yerima rescued me.”

“That’s much better. Now, over here is the servants’quarters. Right now it can accommodate 36, but we’re expanding it to 60, and that’s what we were talking about at the meeting. We say servants, but this is where the cousins and everybody else stays, including my niece who fled from her abusive husband and several girls who ran away rather than be forced into marriage. My son Ismaëlou has turned fourteen and is too big to stay in the women’s house, but isn’t really mature enough to move to the main house, so when the addition is complete, he’ll have his own room here too. The men’s bathroom is at the far end, and the women’s is over here. Here, let me unlock this room and show you. Not bad, huh? And very clean. If you don’t keep your room inspection-clean, you risk losing it, and these rooms are in hot demand. If you have a job, you pay 25 percent rent; if you don’t, you contribute 20 hours a week to the compound, pulling weeds, peeling plantains, or doing other chores. Over there is the VIP guest house. It has four suites, a salon, a dining room, and a small warming kitchen.”

“Marble?” Tammy asked, eyes open wide.

“Yes. Right now, Amsaou’s parents are there. You must invite your family to come visit us too. I think they’ll be relieved to see that you’re not living in a grass hut with lions and hyenas roaming the back yard. Over there is the chicken coop, and there’s the vegetable garden, and back there is the flower garden.”

“They’re gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous, ma’am. And by the way, my dad used to be with the State Department – a specialist in North African affairs – and he spent several weeks with us in the ambassador’s residence after Yerima rescued me, so I’m pretty sure they know I’ll be living comfortably.”

“JoAnn does a beautiful job with the gardens. She’s a botany professor at the agricultural school, you know. A good person, a very sweet person, and she loves Yerima profoundly, but she really has issues with being one of four. She was supremely glad when Alizée left – they never got along at all. Unfortunately you two will be sharing a car and driver, but be as understanding as you can. She’s number three and you’re number four, so you’ll need to defer to her. It’s the only way we can keep peace.”

"I'm not used to going places, ma'am. I'm still getting used to eating real food instead of wolfing something down between assignments, wearing clothes and shoes, walking around without guards, and feeling the sunshine on my skin. I'm just so grateful to be alive that if Yerima told me I'd never be allowed to set foot outside my apartment, I wouldn't mind a bit."

"Speaking of which, that's where you receive your female guests, that's where you sleep except when you are in Yerima's bed. This is the Fulani way. If you ever have a male guest – and you need permission from me or Yerima to do so and there'd better be a damn good reason for it – you will receive him in one of the parlors in the main house and there will always be a third person present. Once again, bear in mind that you are a public figure whose behavior must always be above reproach. And remind me to show you the secret entrance to the tunnel and the entry code for the underground bunker. We never know when there might be a *coup*, or some other public disorder. Oh, my dear, I just remembered, I need to put you on Yerima's schedule. We try to work things around female cycles and such. When are you due?"

"I have no idea, ma'am. At the Rainbow Harem I was dyed green, and even though I left there more than three years ago, the toxins are still screwing up my system. And at The Office, they gave us shots that stopped our periods altogether so we could work every single day. I have no idea how long it will take before I'll be a normal female again."

"Did you say, dyed green?" Tammy nodded. "*Ça, alors!* My gracious! Whatever for?"

"Sheikh Fahd thought it looked pretty, ma'am. There were six of us, all different colors."

Aïssatou shook her head. "So, for the time being, at least, we can ignore that? Thursday night, all right? The schedule is posted in the kitchen of the women's house. When it's your turn you report to his room at nine o'clock. First, you completely disrobe. Fold your clothes neatly and place them on a chair. Get in bed and assume the position of absolute surrender. Has he taught you that?" Tammy nodded. "Then you wait for his instructions. This is your primary responsibility as a wife and here, we never tell our husbands no. There's no such thing as the 'doghouse' where you American wives send your husbands. When JoAnn told us about that, we positively went into shock. Anyway, here, the husband is in control. When you agreed to marry him, you agreed to submit to him, and as you know, Yerima has enormous needs. Even if you're tired, have a ferocious headache, are so furious with him that you're not speaking to him, you report on time and submit to him. I want to underscore that point. Are we clear here?"

"Yes ma'am. Even if we're not speaking, though?"

"If he sends you away, that is his prerogative. But you must make yourself available."

Tammy sighed. "That's pretty extreme, ma'am, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Did you marry him of your own free will?"

"Yes ma'am."

"What does the word *yérima* mean?"

"It means prince, ma'am."

“You agreed to marry a prince of the proud Fulani people, and that is how we do things. A wife embraces her husband’s culture, especially if he is a royal prince.”

“Yes ma’am. I love him so much that I even offered to be his servant, out of gratitude for saving my life, so I’m prepared to do just about anything.”

“Really? His *servant*?” She stared at Tammy.

“Yes ma’am. I couldn’t imagine, simply couldn’t imagine, living without him, even if it meant scrubbing pots and mopping floors. In any case, believe me, it would’ve been a huge, huge step up from being a slave in a brothel.”

“You certainly are cut from different cloth than Alizée. She loved Yerima, but she hated everything about his life, everything. Outright culture rejection. Then, when he left for two years to serve as ambassador overseas, it was the last straw. She lived only for her nights with him, and when he was posted far away, she gave up.

“Let me tell you a story, Sudari. My marriage to Yerima got off to a very rocky start. He was a lot more domineering than I’d figured, and we were at each other’s throats. We’d been married seven or eight months, and I was preparing for a big exam, and he wanted me to drop everything and do something huge for him. I told him he was out of his mind. He beat me up, and I mean, he really beat me up. I was furious. I reminded Yerima that his *saré* had a back gate just like the one I’d used when I ran away from my father. He was floored, because his own mother was beaten every few months and considered it an expression of love. Anyway, four or five days later, I was still so sore I could barely move, I hadn’t gotten any studying done because my eyes were almost swollen shut, I regretted like mad having married the man, and he had the nerve, the unmitigated nerve, to summon me.

“Listen, my dear, Fulani women are constituted exactly the same as Americans; the only difference is what our cultures demand of us. I went to his room, but refused to acknowledge him, and he got madder and madder. He took me anyway. Rough. Something broke in me, and I did the unthinkable and rebelled against my husband. To my amazement, that excited him beyond belief, and, let me tell you, Sudari, I’ve never forgotten that night. You know how manly he is even under normal circumstances, but you get that man super-excited, and you’re in for quite a ride. That night, our marriage turned around. We both remembered how much we loved each other, even when things were tough. He made a commitment to be less demanding, and I promised to be more accommodating, and nineteen years later, we’re still here. If I had told him no, which I desperately wanted to do, our marriage might very well have fallen apart.”

“He once told me that marrying you was the best decision he ever made, ma’am. And he’s exceedingly proud that you’re a judge.”

“He never said that to me. How do you like that?”

They laughed.

“Well, *pour revenir à nos moutons*, back to the topic at hand. The schedule used to work pretty well, but with this new job, things aren’t always predictable. He’s more often than not carrying out some official responsibility that preempts marital appointments. And even when they hold, he spends half his time on the phone with Antoine. If things are running late, if he’s not too tired,

he'll send for you when he gets home. On Sundays we all have dinner together at one, and when that's over, if it's your turn, you accompany him to his room."

"Yes ma'am, I understand. I'm going to try with all my heart to make this work. Yerima saved my life, and I gladly gave that life to him. I desperately want all of you to be proud of me." She rubbed her forehead. "I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I'm still really jet-lagged, and if it's okay with you, ma'am, I'd like to go back to my apartment and lie down."

"Speaking of jet-lagged, how was your visit to Washington?"

"Surreal, ma'am. My dad is great, and my brother is doing fine – he's in college now, and wants to work for the FBI in their human trafficking section – but when I was kidnapped my mom had a nervous breakdown. She's attempted suicide several times, she's been in and out of the hospital, and she's aged at least twenty years. She used to be a hot interior decorator, always elegant and perfectly groomed, but now her hair's scraggly and her complexion is awful and her eyes have this other-worldly look about them and she hasn't been able to work, and I barely recognized her. So it was a big deal for her that I was rescued, and I showed her pictures from the wedding, and we're hoping that she'll be able to turn things around.

Aïssatou almost fell over laughing. Tammy spoke excellent French, but occasionally made mistakes, and she had just delivered a beaut. "My dear, you translated 'nervous breakdown' literally, but we don't say '*panne nerveuse*', we say '*crise de nerfs*'. *Panne* does mean breakdown, but only for mechanical items such as automobiles."

Tammy smiled apologetically. "It felt really strange, ma'am, going back to my old room. It hadn't changed, but I have. I was only eighteen then. It was like being in a foreign country. I spent three weeks at home, and then went to Marseilles for a week with Pierre and Clotilde. They'd felt terrible, so it was good to let them know that I was okay and didn't blame them for what happened."

"That's where you were abducted?"

"Yes ma'am. I'm feeling woozy and I really need to lie down, though, ma'am, if that's all right."

"Of course, my dear, you are free to do so."

Tammy smiled. "I like that word. I like that word a lot, ma'am. Thank you for the beautiful tour and your sage advice."

"My warmest welcome to this family. We're already proud of you, Sudari, for having lived through hell, and *alhamdulillah*, praise God, you're still able to smile. I think you'll do just fine."

"*Jam ná?*" Tammy said as she slipped into her chair at the breakfast table and reached for the carafe of coffee. It felt so good, waking up when she felt like it – or more accurately, when the raucous parrots perching in the huge mango tree outside the bedroom window felt like it – actually sitting down for a meal, and wearing her favorite jeans and comfy sweatshirt and fuzzy blue slippers. And she absolutely loved the Arabica coffee, grown and roasted just a few mountains over to the west.

“*Jam*,” everyone chorused.

“JoAnn, did you take the last *pain au chocolat* again?” Tammy asked. “You’re always doing that.”

JoAnn made a face.

“Sudari, my dear, please go get dressed.”

“Ma’am?”

“No lipstick? A baggy sweatshirt and blue jeans? And those blue porcupines on your feet? Who is your husband, please?”

Tammy had to smile. “Minister of Foreign Affairs, ma’am.”

“Listen, my dear, you promised to honor him. I’m asking you to honor him with your appearance. Now, go get properly dressed.”

“Ma’am, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Oh, look at that slob over there. She’s the wife of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, can you believe? It’s his image we’re trying to protect. I’m not going to tell you again. Go get properly dressed. And I don’t want to see that sweatshirt and those jeans outside of your apartment again. Or those porcupines.”

“Yes ma’am.”

JoAnn continued feeding Michael in his high chair and made a snotty face at her.

A few minutes later Tammy returned wearing a navy skirt and yellow blouse.

“My dear? I thought I told you to get dressed.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I brought a few things back from Washington with me, but they’re what I wore in high school. My last job, um, I mean, um, I don’t know what else to put on.”

Aïssatou stared at her. “Of course. I didn’t think of that, my dear. We need to get you a proper wardrobe.”

The following Saturday, the senior wife called Tammy to her apartment. “I took the liberty of picking out some *pagnes* that I thought you might like. We’ll start you off with ten outfits and gradually build from there, all right? You need to look good.”

“Ten? I don’t really need more than two or three, ma’am.”

“Yes, you do. Your husband is a highly prominent personality and you must always be mindful of your appearance. Tell me which cloth you like.”

Tammy went through the stack of traditional cotton prints. Most of her choices were blues and purples, but she liked a red-and-yellow pattern as well as a brown-and-gold one.

Aïssatou showed her a deep green palm frond print, and another with bright green swirls. “I thought this color would look really good on you.”

Tammy laughed. “I’m sure it would, ma’am. They’re very pretty, but I’m afraid I overdosed on green when I was in the Rainbow Harem. I was dyed green, I wore green gowns and jewels, I ate off green plates, I slept in a green room on green sheets...I just can’t bring myself to wear green anymore. At least, not yet. If that’s all right with you, ma’am,” she added hastily.

“Of course, that’s understandable. Now let’s get you over to Jacques so he can make you some good-looking clothes, and on the way back we’re going to stop and buy you some shoes. High-heeled shoes. I’ve also chosen a few designs. Which ones do you like?” Tammy made her choices. “All right. What else do you need, my dear?”

“Would it be okay if I bought some perfume? And I need cat food for Cleo and Nefertiti. And a cartridge for my printer. And, um, maybe a chocolate bar?”

“Of course, Sudari.” Tammy wiped away a tear. “What brought that on?”

“It’s been so long, ma’am, I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to go shopping.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Oh, no, ma’am, I’m just trying to absorb the fact that I need clothes. It’s a big change for me. One that I like – very much – but I need to get used to it all over again.”

“In Pidgin we say, softly softly, catch monkey. In other words, one small step at a time. We keep a list on the white board in the women’s kitchen, and if you need something, just write it down and we can usually get it to you by the next day. The cost will be deducted from your allowance. And listen, on Monday I’ll send you my car and I want you to get your hair and your nails done. All right?”

“You’re being so good to me. It’s actually fun, ma’am, I’m just a little overwhelmed. And thank you so much. The world seems so big and so scary; I never could have done it on my own.”

“Yerima wouldn’t stand for anything less.”

“And I’ve never been to sub-Saharan Africa before. I like Yaounde, gloriously and proudly African, but I still have to get used to that too.”

Late the following afternoon, Fatimatou knocked on Tammy’s door, carrying a package neatly wrapped in brown paper. “Madame Aïssatou asked me to bring this to you.”

Jacques had already finished sewing all ten outfits. She stared at them. Ran her fingers over the smooth cloth. She tried one on. He hadn’t even measured her, but it fit perfectly. Stared at them some more. Smiled. Not the ill-fitting stained hand-me-down at Sheikh Khalid’s. Not the boring uniform at The House. Not the frilly fairy princess ball gowns at the Rainbow. Clothes. Real clothes. That belonged to *her*. It was good to be free.

Thursday evening at three minutes to nine, Tammy knocked on Yerima's bedroom door. A buzzer sounded, and she opened it.

He was sitting up in bed. He moved a stack of files to one side, grinned impishly, and said, "Welcome, welcome, little wifey."

Tammy saluted. "Reporting for duty, dear sir." She took off her clothes, folded them neatly as instructed, and climbed into bed.

"Let me get rid of these stupid dossiers. This job is the most fun I've had in years, but it's relentless. How are you, babe?"

"Aïssatou tells me that I must submit to you no matter how I feel, so I dragged myself over here and suppose that you'll figure out something to do with me." She smiled wickedly.

"Ah," he said, "Chances are, I'll think of something. But don't forget, babe, you're in my bed, so rules apply."

Tammy groaned. "We're married now. Please don't tell me I still have to call you master, because bless your generous heart, you emancipated me."

"You only have to call me master when we're in bed. But I insist on that."

She slumped. "Actually, Yerima, I was hoping I'd never have to say that word again. I don't even want to hear about anybody with a master's degree, or mastering a language. Forgive me if I'm being a little sensitive, dear sir. Are you sure about this?"

"Damn sure. All my systems revolve around the fact that when you're in my bed, I'm your loving master and you're my devoted slave. And you know that my systems work, um, very well." He looked at her sideways, eyebrows dancing.

She sighed. "They do, they do, I admit. Can we compromise? Can I call you *jaumu*? I know it means the same thing, but my brain doesn't seem to object to it so much."

"Yes, babe, you may. I just want to say, welcome. Welcome to Cameroon. Welcome to my household. Welcome, most especially, to my bed. I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to take a honeymoon, and I know that you really needed to go see your family, but here we are, married six weeks, and this is the first time that you've actually been in this bed. That month you were visiting your folks, I missed you so much. Don't you leave me like that ever again, you hear? I married you because I couldn't live without you, and then I had to spend a whole month without you anyway." He gave her a long kiss. "Do you remember how to give cat baths?"

"Of course, *jaumu*." She set happily to work, starting with his broad, muscular shoulders. Not a disgusting hairy member of The Office. Her husband. Her extremely gorgeous husband. Oh, what delicious fun!

"I want to hear all about your trip. Later, though. Holy shit, you're good at that."

And holy shit, how it was turning her on.

The phone rang.

"I don't care if it's the President himself," she said, "I'm not going to miss one single second of private time with my darling *jaumu*." By this time she was making little circles with her tongue on his abdomen, getting closer and closer to Grand Central.

"Well, guess what, it just so happens to be the President himself. Hey, cuz, what's up? Yes, it went reasonably well. A frosty start, but toward the end there were a few smiles. If this is going to happen, it'll be behind the scenes, not at the table. Of course, of course, I'm on it. Yow! Holy shit! No, um, there's a very wicked blonde here doing some very wicked things to me and I'm not going to be coherent much longer. Okay, I sure will. Antoine says hi."

"Does he call you at this hour of the night very often, *jaumu*?"

"I'm afraid he does. But he's my boss, so I try to live with it. Can you show the little prince how much you love him?"

Tammy knew what that meant from their succulent encounters at The Office. Expert fingers. Clever tongue. The little prince was feeling very cocky indeed, and the big one started moaning and clutching her.

The phone rang.

"Shit! Hey, cuz. It's all right, don't worry. Oh, you heard about that already? Yes, I fired him for *faute lourde* – grave misconduct. Signed the papers just this afternoon. He was mad as hell, says he's going to haul my ass into Labor Court. No, not in the least, we've got an iron-clad case. No, Antoine, I can't transfer him to the boonies because of course Foreign Affairs doesn't have offices in the boonies. I just plain fired him, as he richly deserved. Tony, my dear cuz, excuse me for being blunt, but I could care less whose brother he is. You pay way too much attention to that crap. If this country is ever going to move forward, we need to hold people accountable for their own actions and not let them perpetually hide behind someone else. Huh? Which joint commission? To tell the truth, that hasn't even crossed my radar screen. Okay, I'll add that to my list." He turned to Tammy. "Antoine apologizes."

"He apologizes, but he still interrupts." She sighed.

"Hello?"

"All right, dammit. *Jaumu*."

"I don't approve of the way you said that. He's my boss, the President himself, and if he calls me, I answer."

She smirked. "Just like Ibrahim required of me: immediately, fully, and willingly. Darling, he's your *boss*, not your master."

He stared at her strangely for a moment, absorbing what she said. Then his high-voltage smile sent her heart racing and the interruption was forgotten. "My sexy little slave is now going to suck her master's toes. Slowly. Luxuriously. Sumptuously."

"*Jaumu*, you have the longest, most beautiful toes I ever saw in my life. I don't think I ever said those words in the same sentence before, but it's true."

“Stop wasting time and get to work.” He grinned. After a few minutes he straddled her and covered her face, her shoulders, her chest, with kisses made of molten gold. She began to whimper. “Oh,” he said, “your jewel has grown nice and fat. Ready for a visit.”

Forty-five minutes later, she lay contentedly in his arms, heart pounding fiercely, her body filled from one end to the other with golden light.

“Whoever’d imagine that this cool, classy lady would turn out to be such a ball of fire? Hey, babe, what’s wrong?” he asked, wiping a tear from her eye.

“Nothing, nothing at all. I just can’t believe this. Here I am, rescued from a psycho, the wife of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and I’m in his own bed, and he’s a prince, and a person I respect in so many ways, and an incredible lover, and I just can’t hold it all in.”

“I love you with all my heart, Sudari, and believe me, we are going to have one fantastic marriage. By the way, babe, how long do you think it’ll take you to learn to speak Fulfulde?”

“Oh, to get along, probably five or six months. Really well, two years. *Jaumu*,” she added quickly.

“Because I want to take you up to Maroua, and show you my horse ranch, and introduce you to all the family, including my brother Daoudou, the *lamido*, or sultan. But you need to speak decent Fulfulde first. A lot of people up there don’t speak French.”

The phone rang.

This time, it was the Minister of Finance. “Yes, Seydou, he just called me about that too. I hadn’t even given it a passing thought, but he wants it racheted up on the list of priorities. Can we please chat about this tomorrow? I’m, um, I’m with my bride.” Chuckles. “*Mañana*, then.” He turned to Tammy, who was glaring at him. “Where were we?”

“We were going up-country to see relatives and horses. *Jaumu*.” She was getting sarcastic.

He looked at her disapprovingly but let it pass. “Turn over,” he said. “Round two.” Blessedly, the phone stopped ringing, and two hours later, they finally fell asleep, snuggled into each other’s arms.

In the middle of the night, Tammy woke up screaming.

“Babe, babe, it’s all right, I’m here. What happened?”

“I’m sorry,” she blubbered. “I was back at the Rodeo, hanging from that meat hook, hearing the screams of the people they were torturing, and I knew that in a few days that would be me.”

He held her tightly and covered her face with kisses. “That’s all behind you, babe. You’re safe now.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, gathering herself.

“You went through hell, that’s for sure. But I’m here for you, remember? You think you can get back to sleep now?”

She nodded. "Thanks, darling. Thank you thank you thank you."

"It's why I'm here. Now, babe, go back to sleep. I'm here. I won't let anything happen to you."

When the alarm went off at six-fifteen they reluctantly untangled themselves. "Seven-thirty breakfast meeting with a South African delegation," he said. "Isn't it fun waking up in each other's arms? We never got to do that at The Office."

She smiled. At The Office, he'd always turn off his phone so they could spend hours together in uninterrupted bliss. But now he was Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his cousin was the President, and she was his wife instead of his favorite slave at the gentlemen's club. Life had most assuredly changed. And most of it – almost all of it – was much for the better.

Tammy picked up the house phone. "Yes, darling?"

"Can you come over here, please? I need you to help me with a project. I think you'll like it."

"Okay, is thirty minutes okay? I need to—"

"No, sorry, babe, I need you now."

She sighed. She wanted to finish matching up the *al-hijra* and Gregorian dates for her manuscript. Another sigh. She'd given him her life, and now he needed a little piece of it. Inconvenient, but not the end of the world. "All right, darling, I'll be right there." She brushed her hair, put on fresh lipstick, and walked over to the main house.

It was a beautiful day. An early morning rain had made everything smell fresh and clean, and monkeys were chattering excitedly from the woods at the northwest corner of the property. A long line wound up the front porch, down the sidewalk, almost all the way to the gate. Dixon, the major-domo, was taking everyone's name, joking, working the good-natured crowd.

Yerima was in the elegant blue-and-silver main parlor, looking every inch the prince in a pale yellow gandoura. He gave her a thousand-watt smile and patted the couch next to him. She swallowed and sucked in her breath. Sometimes she forgot just how magnificent her husband was. She felt overwhelmed with love and humility, overcome by the need to thank him in a very public way for freeing her from slavery and giving her such a beautiful life.

"May I sit at your feet, dear sir? To show everybody how much I respect you?"

"No, madame, you may not. I want you to sit right here next to me, so I can show everybody how much I respect *you*." He handed her his laptop. "This is petition day," he explained. "All these people need something. Some of them just need a few francs for a prescription. Others need help getting a messy situation sorted out. Some are merrily trying to wangle something for nothing. A few of them are so annoying, you want to strangle them. You help with one thing, then they turn right around and demand – demand! – something else. Just like the Arab saying, You give someone cloth, and then he asks for lining. Anyway, things were getting out of hand, so Amsi created this database. Dixon will give you the name on a slip of paper. What I need you

to do is to check it. If you see something questionable, show me, and I'll know what to do. And then enter whatever I give them so we have a record of it for next time."

"There must be close to a hundred people waiting to see you."

"I do this once a month, and sometimes there are a lot more than that. When school starts, everybody needs help with fees and books and uniforms. And when the holidays hit, of course. Most of them are relatives, but some come because they can see the word *sucker* written across my forehead in flashing red lights. Dixon? All right, please, we can get going."

The first petitioner bowed deeply before the prince. His roof had been damaged by a recent storm and he needed help to pay for the repairs. He showed Yerima two different bids. Tammy checked; he hadn't requested help in nearly two years. Yerima gave him the money he needed, and the man bowed his way out. "*Usoko, usoko.*" Thank you, thank you.

The second was a woman whose four children needed shoes. Her husband was in prison and she made so little selling beans and rice by the side of the road that she couldn't afford them. It had been more than six months since she'd requested help, so Yerima gave her money.

And so it went. New eyeglasses, help with a motorbike repair, pleas for jobs, vouchers for visits to the compound infirmary, a toolkit for a young mechanic, a sewing machine repair, a new lens for a photographer. One man tried to get money for a prescription that was more than two years old; Yerima yelled at him and sent him away. "He thought we'd never notice. But don't worry," he said, "he'll soon be back. Once he bandaged his left foot but forgot and limped with the right one. He thinks he's really clever. Be sure to put down what he attempted to do."

One woman wore an extremely revealing décolleté and made no bones about coming onto him. "You do a favor for me," she said, "and I'll do a favor for you, Your Highness, that you'll never forget."

"You're quite beautiful, and I appreciate the offer, but I'm well served in that respect by my lovely wife here." She said her boss at the garment factory gave her a poor review because she refused to sleep with him. Yerima said he'd be happy to look into the matter. "Happens more than you'd like to know," he told Tammy. "Sexual harassment at work is still pretty common. We need more women executives, more women in responsible positions. And continue to educate men that just because women report to them at work, it doesn't confer other, uh, benefits. She's probably telling the truth."

Two teen-age nephews had come together, and all they wanted was pocket money. Yerima gently lectured them about getting an education so they could make something of themselves. He cited several examples from the family, including himself, hoping to inspire them.

They listened politely, and then stared at him in confusion. "But Uncle, why should we go to all that trouble, when we have you?"

Yerima leapt to his feet, looking far taller than six-feet-one, his legendary temper suddenly and terrifyingly on full display. Tammy shrank to as small as possible, and Dixon ducked. They exchanged uneasy glances. "With that attitude, you two leave this compound right this second and don't come back until you both get jobs or are both back in school. Dixon, alert the gate not to admit them any longer, even to eat. I said, get going! What the hell are you two waiting for?"

They slunk off, casting black looks behind them.

Dixon called the gendarme on the spot, while Tammy nervously made notes in the database. Yerima sat back down, so maybe it was safe to look up again. Whew. The raging storm had passed as quickly as it had formed.

He gave her a big grin. “The principal downside to petition day, shameless leeches. Okay, Dixon, let’s continue.”

Dozens more of the same. At length Dixon said, “It’s three o’clock, so I’ve cut off the line, Excellency. “Eighty-two today.”

Yerima nodded. “Since we started keeping good records, the numbers have dropped off substantially. Funny thing about that. How many people did you turn away?”

“About fifteen, Your Excellency.”

“So, you told them to come earlier next time?”

“Of course, Your Excellency.” He sounded just a touch annoyed.

Yerima chuckled. “Sorry, Dixon. I ask you that every month, don’t I? I mean no disrespect. This is the last time I ask that. I promise. And I apologize.”

“No problem, Your Excellency, I understand.”

“This database is amazing,” said Tammy. “Amsi’s an absolute genius, and somebody should write a study about all the people you help. Today you have profoundly affected the lives of all these people, and you act like it’s the most normal thing in the world.”

“It is. It’s called the African extended family, and there’s nothing, and I mean nothing, more important than that. Almighty God has blessed me richly, and now it’s my responsibility to pass the blessings along. This is the main reason I get up in the morning, Sudari, to be able to help people who deserve it so much. What’s the total so far, babe?”

It was more than most people made in an entire year. “Yerima, my love, my hero, my darling, what I like is the way you talk to them. You don’t look down on them. You say it was a pleasure to help, and the way you smile, they know it really was.”

“I told you you’d like this project,” he said. “See? The fellow you married isn’t such a bad sort after all. Alizée hated this; she just saw it as a drain of money.”

Tammy gave him a huge kiss, right in front of Dixon, right in front of the next petitioner. “Not at all. It’s stimulating the economy. It’s helping people cope with what life throws their way. The fellow I married amazes me more every day. I’m so proud to be your wife right now I could positively explode.”

“Wait until tomorrow night for that,” he whispered, eyebrows dancing with mischief.

Next day, Amsaou rapped her signature *doc-doc doc doc-doc* on Tammy's door and let herself in. "You free for lunch tomorrow, darling?"

Tammy shifted Nefertiti to the other shoulder and made a big deal about checking her calendar. "Let me see. If I move things around, I think I can squeeze you in. I read a book at ten, sit on the balcony at eleven, play with the kittens at twelve..."

Amsaou smiled. "I'll ask Isidore to pick you up at twelve-thirty. You sure do like those cats, don't you?"

"I adore them. They always have their priorities in perfect order and help keep mine straight, too. Books and cats are what I missed the most. And chocolate."

"I had no idea that slavery was still so prevalent."

"You'd be amazed, Amsaou. Hundreds of girls are shipped to the Gulf every year, and experts estimate that there are between 25 and 30 million slaves worldwide. I'm extremely, extremely lucky that Yerima rescued me."

Amsaou was general manager of a large hotel, and she gave Tammy the grand tour. It took a while, because they were stopped every few feet by an employee, a guest, or a vendor. Tammy couldn't help but be impressed by her co-wife's patience, good nature, amazing ability to multi-task, and how she quietly oozed competence. It's when they finally seated themselves on the covered terrace in a light rain that Amsaou allowed herself the luxury of rolling her eyes and saying, "Allah! Am I the only person who works in this place?" She chuckled and sighed.

Over a beautiful salade niçoise, Tammy took a bite of albacore and said, "Yerima tells me that you're a singer."

Amsaou laughed. "Oh, I used to sing a little, but it's been years. He plays jazz saxophone, you know, and he's darn good."

"He played *Danny Boy* at our wedding, and it got him a standing ovation."

"Oh yes. *When the Saints*, *Over the Rainbow*, *Si Tu T'Appelles Mélancolie*, *Zangálawah* ... Plus, his own compositions. My favorite is *La Lune de Minuit sur Maroua*, Midnight Moon over Maroua. He's not in the same league as Manu Dibango, but he's darn good. When we were in the band, he'd have all the girls with their tongues hanging out, absolutely at his feet. I couldn't stand him at first – too arrogant – but then I noticed he was overflowing with good-natured mischief, had the courage to stand up for what he believed in, and a very generous heart. And I gradually realized that the cockiness was just self-assurance. He knew exactly who he was and where he was going. Fifteen years ago – fifteen years – he told me he was going to be Minister of Foreign Affairs before the age of fifty, and guess what. He's forty-eight. Time to spare."

"Is it true that Michael Jackson paid Manu Dibango for the African part of *You Gotta Be Starting Something*?"

"Yes, we were all so proud, Cameroonian music in a Michael Jackson hit!"

"Yerima tells me he might run for President one day."

“Yes, he might, but not as long as Antoine is in office, and he’s up for reelection late next year. Yerima’d be a wonderful President. He’s been all over the world dozens of times, is unbelievably disciplined, could charm a starving crocodile, and genuinely wants to help everybody he comes across.”

What a bang-on accurate description, Tammy thought. “What’s your favorite part of being married to him?”

She laughed. “Our nights. The days are great – he’s a good, good person, and I’m very proud to be his wife – but the nights are beyond belief, as I’m sure you know.”

A knowing chuckle. “And your least favorite?”

She sighed. “Alizée was a real challenge. She outranked me, of course, and we hardly ever saw eye-to-eye. She kept treating herself to expensive clothes and vacations whether we could afford them or not, and treated JoAnn and me like maids. We were nervous when Yerima told us that he was bringing home another white wife. Maybe my first impressions are mistaken, but you don’t seem to be that way at all.”

Tammy laughed. “Amsaou, I’m just getting used to wearing *clothes* again. My last job didn’t need them at all.” Her co-wife smiled. “Tell me about JoAnn. I haven’t exactly been overwhelmed by her friendliness.”

“Yerima met her when he was with the UN in New York. She’s complicated. She’s very, very American. After eight years here, she still only speaks a few words of Fulfulde, she rarely wears African clothes, and she’s not the least bit interested in improving her rotten French. But she’s an excellent botany professor, she loves Yerima – I can’t tell begin to tell you how much she loves the man – she’s a devoted mother, and she’s done wonders with the landscaping and gardening in the *saré*. We’re not buddies, but we respect each other. She’s thrilled that she finally outranks another wife, because she was number four for a long time. She’ll probably want to rub your nose in it, at least for a while.”

“It’s human nature,” Tammy observed. “And believe me, I’ve gotten good at putting up with crap. All I did for five years, two months, and eighteen days. Not that I was keeping track, or anything. Question: if her French is so lousy, how does she teach?”

“In English. Bilingual country, bilingual university system.”

“Amsi. Question, please. I see women in the compound with bottles and it looks like they’re pounding seeds. What exactly are they doing?”

Amsaou laughed. “Those are dried melon seeds. They’re peeling them to extract the meat.”

Tammy stared at her.

“Then they take the meat and make something like a cake from it. It’s absolutely delicious, but of course, it takes forever.”

“Peeling melon seeds. You’ve got to be kidding!”

“No, not at all. It takes about a week a couple of hours a day to get enough to make a cake, and you give it to your husband, and he says, ‘Good. Now go make another one.’ African cuisine is very long and labor-intensive for the reason that women’s time used to mean absolutely nothing. That’s changing, but cooking still takes inordinate amounts of time.”

“Peeling melon seeds. Wow.”

“Chocolate mousse, Dari?”

“Oh, my! Two of my favorite words, especially in that order. You know, during my recent check-up, I was diagnosed with a severe, severe chocolate deficiency. A life-threatening condition.”

Amsaou smiled. “So, it’s an essential part of your therapy, correct? Then I’ll get you two.”

“Oh yes. *Medicinal* value.”

“Books, cats, and chocolate.”

“It’s actually a pretty long list, but those would be the top three.”

“Clothes?”

“Maybe somewhere around tenth. If it were up to me, I’d live in jeans and t-shirts. What I missed the most was books. Not one in more than three years, the whole time I was at The Office. Luckily, Sheikh Fahd at the Rainbow Harem had a huge library, and I went absolutely nuts, devouring more than five hundred during the year I was there. As far as cats are concerned, I didn’t even *see* one in five years, much less get to hug one. And for me, chocolate is a major food group, but I’d only get a piece or two every few months. I had less chocolate in five years than I used to have in a week.”

“Another thing that I missed a lot was keeping up on current events. I’d go weeks on end without seeing a newscast. Every now and then an executive would have on CNN or BBC or Al-Jazeera, and I’d hear snatches of this or that, and there was one guy who’d almost always fall asleep and I’d get to listen until he woke up. But that was it.” She scraped out the last possible bit of mousse from the bottom of the second bowl. “If I weren’t married to Yerima, I’d shamelessly lick this bowl right here in front of everybody. I hope you appreciate my herculean efforts at self-control.”

Amsaou threw her head back and laughed. “How you lived through all that and you’re still able to joke around is beyond me,” she said.

“We got into all kinds of trouble if we cried, so the only thing left to do was laugh. And Yerima kept me sane. Then we had a big fight, and he stopped coming, and...” Tammy’s voice broke. “And another man who was real nice to me, even wanted to marry me, gave up because Prince Ibrahim made it clear that I wasn’t for sale, so Taymoor stopped coming too. Then Heineken, a lovable eunuch who liberated an occasional chocolate for me, was finally able to buy his dream cabin in Colorado, and there was nobody left. I was so depressed, and the job was so horrible, I wanted to commit suicide.”

She was sobbing now. “All I had left was my master Ibrahim, who owned me for three years. He was wonderful in bed, but he was mentally unstable, had a huge drinking problem that made him violent and vindictive, and I feared every day for my life. I don’t even know how many girls he’s had put to death – most of them, deliberately, for breaking his thousands of rules – but he’s also killed them accidentally, when he was drunk. I knew he’d kill me too, sooner or later, so one day I told him as gently as possible that his drinking had gotten out of control. He exploded – that was the mushroom cloud you saw to the north a few months back. I was in sooo much trouble.

“One day, on top of the jail time and paddlings and probations and everything else he’d already ordered, he summoned me and issued additional measures. Amsi, have you ever played Yerima’s game of contrition?” Amsaou gave Tammy a telling smile. “Well, he had me lying prostrate on the rug, and my body thought it was that game, and it really turned me on, and Ibrahim demanded to know why his punishment was having entirely the wrong effect, so I told him about the game, and that really turned *him* on, and before you know it, we’d both passed out.”

Amsaou’s hands flew to her forehead and she laughed until she could scarcely sit up. “Hmm. Now I understand why a particular ambassador wanted so desperately to marry a particular American.”

“Amsi, it was the smartest thing and the stupidest thing I ever did in my life. The good news is, Ibrahim was so ecstatic that he cancelled all twenty thousand disciplinary measures that he’d sentenced me to for like, the next five hundred years. And it made Yerima so jealous that when he found out I was supposed to be executed, he bought me and emancipated me. But it also made me Ibrahim’s all-time favorite slave. He called me Mukhmala – it means velvet – and I can’t believe that he’s being such a good sport. I try not to think about what he might do.”

“But, Dari, darling, you’re *married* now.”

“He knows. He gave me a diamond necklace for the wedding and gave Yerima a gorgeous Arabian stallion. We were surprised. Shocked, in fact. The man is totally, totally, totally into control, and totally, totally, totally into getting what he wants. The fact that I’m married wouldn’t slow him down one bit. He’s got unlimited amounts of money and an ego that wouldn’t fit into the Milky Way.”

“You’re still afraid of him, aren’t you? Relax, darling. It’s natural. It’s a part of your return to normalcy. He owned you for three terrifying years, but all that’s behind you now. It’ll take you time to recover.”

A loud clap of thunder made both of them jump.

“You’re right, Amsi, I shouldn’t be worried at all.” Tammy forced a grin. But even Amsaou’s dazzling smile couldn’t get rid of the nervous knot in the pit of her stomach.

## CHAPTER TWO

All one hundred and eleven women of Prince Ibrahim's fabled harem – with the exception of the ones in detention, in the infirmary, or on death row – were gathered in the spacious courtyard. He had invested intense passion, not to mention a fortune, to assemble the most beautiful female *derrières* anywhere on earth. Il Giardino Posteriore. The Rear Garden.

"Good afternoon, my beloved beauties," he began. "I trust that all of you are having a pleasant day. Unfortunately I'm already late for a board meeting, so I've asked Mr. Faisal to announce a few policy changes." He waved a cheery goodbye.

Groans. Rolled eyes. Impatient sighs.

Annoyed, Mr. Faisal took the microphone. "I haven't even told you what they are, and you're already complaining. Yes, Six Beta?"

"When they're good changes, sir, His Highness tells us himself, sir. When they're not so good, sir, he dumps the job on you."

This observation was met with a wave of knowing giggles. Even Mr. Faisal, not known for his joviality, couldn't suppress a smile.

"They're nothing to get upset about, believe me. His Highness is a rare master who understands that life in a harem isn't always exciting. First, he has asked me to see what electives you'd like in addition to your daily training and aerobics classes. I'm passing out these forms with a few ideas, like karaoke and English and French and belly dancing. If you want something else, write it down. As long as at least six ladies are interested in an activity, we will offer it. One proviso: no competitive sports or games, which are unbecoming to the gentle sex. You may sign up for two of these activities each day but there is absolutely no obligation to do so, you won't be scored on your participation, and they will have no effect whatsoever on your monthly evaluations. Now, see, is that so bad?"

Smiles. Nods. Even a couple Thank you, sirs.

"Maybe there's hope for the id– I mean, our esteemed lord and master, after all. That actually sounds like a good idea," whispered Eight Epsilon.

"Don't jump to any conclusions," replied Four Gamma. With Prince Ibrahim, you never know. You just never know."

"Now. A number of you have expressed the desire to be as alluring from the front as from the back, and His Highness is graciously accommodating these requests. Starting on Sunday, you will each be fitted with a device that will, over the next few months, give you a figure that will be the envy of any woman. It is non-surgical, non-invasive, and extremely effective. You will wear it until you have become an F; thereafter, you will wear it two days a month to remain beautifully toned."

"Did you ever say anything like that?" whispered Two Nu, the striking platinum blonde with the orange-bordered tunic.

“Not me.”

“Me neither.”

“I’ve, like, heard of those things. They’re, like, horrible. They give you like, electric shocks, like, every five seconds.”

“What the hell *for*? We’re not whores, we’re harem girls.”

“Oh, really? We’re just whores for one man, that’s all.”

“This is just another one of his *fichu* ego trips. I’d like to open a shrine dedicated to the man’s *fichu* ego, but there’s no *fichu* place in the solar system big enough.”

“What the hell’s an F?”

Mr. Faisal held up his hand and they fell silent. “You *will* comply. May I remind you, these orders are from His Highness himself. Several of you have expressed confusion about the size, since different countries use different conventions. F is the EU standard; in the U.S., it’s DD, in the U.K., E. Three ladies here will not be obliged to participate in the program because they are already of appropriate dimensions. Five Beta, Three Iota, and Zero Theta, please step forward and remove your tunics.” Admiring gasps. “Next item. His Highness has been disappointed in the performance of many of you in his bedchamber and finds it necessary to upgrade your skills. Also, starting on Sunday, you will each receive an additional hour of instruction each day under the supervision of Mr. Abdulaziz, the former Director of Training at The Office, the elite gentlemen’s club known for its highly professional staff. This will be interactive training and you will be evaluated on your technical skill, ability to deliver maximum sensation, eagerness, and respectfulness. These scores will feed into your monthly performance ratings, so I advise you to take the classes seriously.

“All right, one last thing, sort of like a little game. His Highness has become concerned – especially since the recent brawl – that you ladies get so caught up in your petty squabbles that you forget that you have a kind and benevolent master to whom you owe your very existence. Starting tomorrow, each day, right after inspection, you will draw a token that represents a privilege to be surrendered that day. Perhaps it will be sight, or wearing your tunic, eating, or speech. Each day you will draw a new token and surrender a different privilege. You will do so out of devotion to your master, out of your strictest obligation to obey his orders, and out of the duty of submissiveness incumbent upon all women. Hand in your survey forms, and you are dismissed. Oh, by the way, if you show any reluctance, you will draw a second token and surrender a second, or even a third, privilege for the day. You are dismissed.”

“What the hell will this sicko think up next?”

“He’s always been a control freak, but this is ridiculous.”

“If he really wanted our lives to be interesting, he’d let us out of this godforsaken place.”

“Or at least let us watch Oprah. Or the news. Or something besides those raunchy DVDs.”

“I’ve had it. I’m not going to put up with this nonsense another minute.”

“Oh? And just what do you plan to do? Scale the three-meter wall? Take down the Prince, and his four bodyguards, and all six eunuchs, and Mr. Faisal and Mr. Abdul and Mr. Sayeed with your bare hands? I mean, they even make it impossible to commit suicide. I know; I’ve tried. You think you’re the first girl who wants to get out of this place? Calm down, babe. I don’t much like the changes either, but at least they’re not life-threatening.”

“They can only mean one thing: he’s hitting the sauce again. He was better, but it looks like he’s relapsed. For a while he was showing signs of being almost somewhat nearabout approximately normal.”

“He *is* drinking, and I heard that the reason why is because there was a girl at The Office who was so good she made him pass out. Then another man bought her and took her to Africa. Ever since, he’s been depressed.”

“Pass out? Jesus! What did she *do*?”

“Wow. I think I’m doing okay with him if he doesn’t haul off and slap me.”

“These new policies are horrible. Horrible.”

“So? No matter what we think, we’re stuck with them.”

“At the Ranch,” interjected Six Zeta, “you were kept in restraints around the clock, and weren’t allowed to say anything, ever. Either you had a pacifier in orifice one or a bridle bit. The only exception was at the branding parties, when the screams were part of the entertainment. So believe me, this is no big deal.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, y’all,” said Five Iota. “Y’all are complaining about nothing, as usual. Prince Ibrahim owns us. He can do whatever he damn well pleases with us. And if it pleases him to have us blindfolded for a few hours to demonstrate our so-called devotion, what real difference does it make?”

“Oh, shut up, you suck-up, you.”

“Bless your heart, sugar, I’m a suck-up who learned the hard way. Advice from someone who’s been stuck here for eight years, sugar: if your sweet little patootie means anything to y’all, for heaven’s sake, shut up, smile, keep those rabble-rousing opinions to yourself, and be ready to say at any time, *bil-khidma ya agati*.” How may I serve you, master.

“I *hate* being cooped up in this place. And I *hate* saying yes master, how can I degrade myself again to flatter your incredibly overblown ego, master. So demeaning!”

“Y’all are here, and y’all aren’t going anywhere, sugar, so deal with it.”

“No sir,” Five Gamma said a few days later. “May I respectfully ask permission to please draw another token, please, sir? I’m very sorry, sir, but when can I please get something to eat in this place, sir? I just got out of eleven days’ detention and hardly had anything to eat the entire time, sir, then day before yesterday I drew the damned silence token that meant I couldn’t eat, and

yesterday it was the no food token, sir, and now today again, sir, it's the silence token. Yesterday I passed out twice, sir, and I'm so weak from lack of food, I'm about ready to pass out right now.”

“You do not question your master’s orders,” said Mr. Sayeed, eyes blazing.

“I’m not questioning them in the least, sir; I simply want to be alive tomorrow to be able to obey him again. Sir, excuse me, sir, but this is ridiculous.”

“Five demerits, fifty strokes, and you will draw two more tokens today. Trevino? Firenze? All right, since you won’t, I’ll draw them for you. In addition, you will surrender the privilege of sight and the privilege of walking.”

The eunuchs took care of the preliminaries, bent her over the padded leather cylinder, and strapped her in place. The courtyard was filled with screams and sobs as they methodically carried out the correction, one stroke a minute, for nearly an hour. Then they blindfolded her, silenced her, bound her ankles, and left her lying in the courtyard.

She died the next day.

Prince Ibrahim was holding court, surrounded by his four bodyguards, both daytime managers, and all six eunuchs. All the girls had prostrated, he’d put his feet on their heads, and they’d all recited the affirmation of submission.

“Now, my beloved beauties, I have a wonderful surprise for you,” he said. “My personal chefs have prepared a feast: chicken marsala, risi bisi, caprese salad, and tiramisù.” He clapped, and maidservants appeared with glorious plates of food.

Everyone applauded.

“There’s only one catch,” he added. “If you are among the lowest ten performers, you will be served a meal, but you will not be allowed to eat it. Instead, you will kneel and personally feed it to one of the top ten. If you take one forbidden bite, you will be sternly disciplined.”

Two Gamma sighed. The goddam control freak strikes again, she said to herself. She knelt and served her meal to snooty-ass Six Alpha, hating every last molecule of her master. This was the last straw. A couple of the other girls had approached her about killing him. Before, she’d hesitated, but now, she was in. This was absolutely, positively, the last straw.

Prince Ibrahim smiled fondly as his beloved girls knelt before him, the tens to the right, zeros to the left. Every last one just as beautiful as beautiful could be. A stunning collection of the most superior female posteriors in the world. Zero Beta had drawn the privilege of serving as his foot-rest, and she was doing an excellent job.

“*Sabah al-khayr*, morning of abundance, my beloved beauties.”

“*Sabah an-nour*, morning of light, master,” they responded.

“Have you had an exciting morning so far?” he teased, black eyes twinkling. A few chuckles, a few groans. He grew serious. “Betas, please rise and step forward.”

Ten Beta, Nine Beta, et cetera, all rose and took two steps forward, becoming more and more nervous as they looked into his eyes. The twinkles had been replaced by an unsettling steeliness.

“One of you will die today. Do I have a volunteer?”

He had to be kidding.

To everyone’s consternation, Four Beta tentatively raised her hand.

“Come. You are prepared to die for your master?”

She knelt. “Nothing would make me happier, master.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because, master, it shows my utter devotion to you. I love being your slave, master. I love the control you have over me. Dying for you would simply be my ultimate surrender.”

The other girls were rolling their eyes.

“How would you like to die?”

“That’s not for me to say, master.”

“Even if I were to command you to be tortured?”

There was scarcely a moment’s hesitation. “If that is your pleasure, master. I have many times promised to obey you immediately, fully, and willingly. If you wish to have me tortured, I must accept that it is your command.”

Prince Ibrahim smiled proudly. “You are a very, very good slave. Rise and remove your tunic. I am sparing you today, because of your exceptional level of devotion. You will live to serve your master another day. Betas, come and kiss her ass. And I strongly suggest that you show fervor as you do so, because she has saved your lives today.”

They exchanged nervous glances, gulped, and kissed Four Beta’s ass. And if Prince Ibrahim had cared to notice, he would have seen hatred in their eyes.

“At the Ranch,” said Six Zeta to anyone within earshot, “we slept four to a 2 m x 3 m stall, tethered and handcuffed. There was a drain where we tried to pee, but the fillies in positions one and four couldn’t get there because the tethers weren’t long enough. So appreciate the mattress. Appreciate the pillow and the sheets. And for God’s sake, appreciate the air conditioning. When horses lived in the stable, they used it, but when it was converted to a slave prison, they turned it off. You have no idea how lucky we are.”

“I called you in to talk about your headaches,” Mr. Faisal told Seven Alpha.

“Yes sir. Every morning I wake up with a huge headache and nothing gets rid of it. The nurse has tried everything, sir. Sometimes everything gets blurry, so I think I probably just need eyeglasses, sir.”

“They are no longer permitted. In any case, the x-rays show that you have a brain tumor pressing against your optic nerve. We will therefore be transferring you to the Zephyr facility.”

Stunned silence. “The breeding farm? But sir, my performance has been in the top ten month after month.”

“This is not a disciplinary transfer, it is simply a transfer. We’re not punishing you for anything, just sending you to a more appropriate location.”

“Do you mean to say, sir, that I’m going blind?”

“It’s almost inevitable, yes.”

“And that’s why you’re sending me to the Zephyr?”

A hard slap. “His Highness can do whatever he likes with you, whenever he likes, and you are not to question his decisions. The van is waiting. Good day.”

“But sir—”

Another slap. “*Ikharhus!* Just shut the hell up! Trevino, escort her to the garage.” He handed the eunuch her file.

When they were out of earshot, Trevino said to her, “Too bad. Half the girls there have been devocalized or blinded or maimed or have gone completely insane; all they care is that your reproductive system is in working order.”

“But I’ve been a good slave,” she said between sobs. “I’ve done everything they said. It’s just not fair. And why don’t they let the girls wear glasses?”

“A couple of years ago, a girl smashed hers and used the pieces to try to slash her wrists. That’s how it works sometimes. *Hafify zaka Allah min alaza.* May God preserve you from harm.”

The van drove off, its passenger weeping bitterly.

Prince Ibrahim was not happy. A twenty-two million-dollar cobalt deal had just fallen through due to unrest – again, sigh – in the Congo. He checked the schedule to see which posterior would be entertaining him for the evening, and it was Eight Delta. He groaned. Tonight, he needed to forget the lost contract. Tonight, he needed consolation, comfort, solace, fun. He needed

someone like Mukhmalia who could make him forget everything except the pleasure of the moment.

Then he realized something that should have been so obvious, he couldn't imagine that he'd overlooked it for more than twenty years. Yes, he'd usually summon one girl at a time according to the tidy rotation, but he *owned* them, and *yarham 'abuuk*, good grief, he could do whatever he wanted.

"Abdul?" he said, "I'm feeling down. Tonight I want you to send me eight girls. Random selection, in addition to the one on rotation."

"Certainly, Your Highness. Any special way you want them?"

"The way nature made them."

"How do you wish for me to deal with the rotation in the database, Your Highness?"

"Oh. Good point. Well, Eight Delta is the principal here; just note the others as accessories."

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. You see? He *is* turning us into whores, just like at The Office," griped Eight Beta as she prepared to be escorted to His Highness. "I told you. The second Mr. Abdulaziz came on the scene, this whole whore business started. I don't mind staying in a harem, but I resent the hell out of being turned into a whore."

"How else did you plan to spend the evening? Hey, at least it's something to do."

"And the man is cool in bed, not to mention, absolutely gorgeous. That streak of silver in his hair? Those beautiful shoulders? Oh! Could be a lot worse. A lot worse."

"I need cheering up today," he told them as they filed in. "And I could think of no better way than to enjoy the company of the most beautiful girls in the world." He gave them a big smile. "All right. Four Beta, come over here and give my sore feet a nice massage." He smiled. "Nice job, my dear. Now you will give me a nice long blow job, a really nice BJ. Let's see if the new training has been beneficial. Giuliano, bend the other girls over the barre, stuff them with wiggle worms, and have them entertain me."

Six Alpha prostrated. "Yes, my dear?"

"Master, please, may I request your urgent permission to go to the bathroom? I'm terribly sorry, master. I have diarrhea."

"Yes, of course, permission granted."

She jumped up, returning moments later panting with relief. Giuliano strapped her into position and she began to gyrate with the others.

The Prince started to moan, but was still coherent enough to tell Giuliano to get the shackles ready. Eight Delta's eyes bugged open – she knew better than to say anything – and soon she was spread-eagled, wrists and ankles firmly secured to the corners of the bed.

"You look so helpless, so beautiful," said the prince. "His Hardness loves seeing you like that." He looked between her legs, but even after ten minutes, nothing had happened at all. He sighed.

Dutiful wasn't what he wanted. Submissive wasn't what he needed. "Giuliano, send her back. No bonus points, no demerits." He surveyed the beauty around him. "Undo them and have them all come over here and kneel. Who among you likes restraints, and I mean, really likes restraints? No, you don't. I remember you. You're just trying to manipulate me. Haven't you learned by now that I hate that?" He turned to Six Zeta, who had raised her hand. "Hmm. You really do, don't you? Okay, shackle her down and put the nipple-nibblers on her to speed things along. And the rest of you, resume the position of eager anticipation."

Six Zeta smiled. It only took a few minutes for her to be panting with desire.

More like it. His Hardness slid happily into the warm little part of her reserved exclusively for him, a part forbidden to all others, a part carefully guarded that he could enjoy whenever he felt like it. *Hareem* – forbidden places – were wonderful, wonderful inventions, where you could shelter parts like that from unwanted attentions and have them ready for your pleasure at the drop of a tunic.

She responded to him, not as a slave submitting to her master, but as a fully sensuous woman giving herself to her lover. He soon had her screaming with delight. He lay panting, spread out upon her, infused with ecstasy.

"Master, please?" said Six Alpha, kneeling beside the bed.

He groaned.

"Sorry, master, do I have your permission to go to the bathroom again? Sorry, master, sorry."

"Yes, Giuliano, let her go."

When she returned, he called her over. "Why do you have such bad diarrhea?"

"Thank you for asking, master. I have celiac disease, which means that I can't digest the gluten in bread, and I'm lactose-intolerant, which means that I can't digest milk products like yogurt."

"Has the infirmary been treating you?"

"Yes, master."

"Then why does it persist?"

"Because they are reluctant to exceed the recommended dosage of the medication, and it doesn't last all day."

"But why do you keep getting it?"

"I'm required to eat everything on my plate, master."

"Oh, we do give exceptions for medical reasons. We don't ever want to hear 'oh dear, I can't stand that,' but for medical reasons, certainly."

"I requested an exception, master, but Mr. Faisal said no."

"I will instruct him to give you an exception on medical grounds. What do you do during parties?"

"I'm never allowed to participate, master. Mr. Faisal said I'd ruin them. Thank you thank you thank you, master. I've been living like this for three years. You are a very nice master."

"You may kiss my feet. Giuliano, summon Firenze; she may return to the harem. And let the other girls come over here and kneel." When they'd gathered round, he startled them by asking, "What do you girls think about the tokens?"

Fidgeting. Playing with hair. Nervous coughs.

"Well?"

Finally Four Alpha had the nerve to ask, "Master, do you want us to tell you what you want to hear? Or what we really think?"

He smirked. "I see." He studied them for a moment and decided to take a chance. "Let me hear the truth. No demerits, no discipline, no corrections. The truth."

"They stink, master."

"They're horrible, master."

"They make us feel like slaves instead of like harem girls, master. We hate them. They're really annoying. And some of the girls find them sexually stimulating but then they can't do anything about it, so they get really frustrated."

"Let me ask you this: what's the difference between a slave girl and a harem girl?"

"Oh, lots, master. Slave girls are much lower rank. They do laundry and scrub floors and stuff. And they get beaten a lot."

"Harem girls only serve one master, sir. They're prized for their beauty and maintained in luxury."

"Semantics, if you ask me," said Two Kappa. "Either way, your life is basically over."

Ibrahim looked at her reproachfully, but kept his word.

"Very interesting. But you ladies keep forgetting about me. What would you suggest that I do to remind you that I exist?"

Shrugs. "Use the tokens for punishment. And give privileges for rewards. Like chocolate. Or tv."

"Toblerone, especially."

"Television, especially."

"No no, computer games."

"Ice cream, especially."

“Starbucks.”

“Oh, master? We’re sick of the training DVDs, too. Can we have some new ones, please? Please?”

He laughed. “This has been very interesting. Thank you for your candor. You may kiss my feet. Thank you.”

“It was brave of you to ask, master.”

“Giuliano, give each of them ten points and send them back. You gave me courageous and honest answers, and I wasn’t expecting that. Good night.”

“Ladies ladies ladies, I got the scoop,” said Four Kappa. “Firenze told me the whole story.”

“Firenze? He never knows *anything*.” Two Alpha couldn’t believe it.

“This time he did. He told me everything. Okay. There was this American girl named Mukhmalia who belonged to Prince Ibrahim, and he leased her to The Office, and she was so amazing in bed that she made him pass out. One of the members there, an African ambassador, fell in love with her, but the Prince kept renewing her lease – she was making him tons of money – and he wouldn’t sell her. Then she and another girl there murdered Dr. Hassan, and–”

There were high-fives all round. “You go, girl!”

“Yes, but she didn’t commit suicide fast enough, and she was still alive when they sent security up, and they sentenced her to be tortured to death at the Rodeo, and the ambassador found out and rescued her, and actually married her and took her back to Africa with him, and now he’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, and she’s living *la dolce vita*. But Prince Ibrahim is depressed because she doesn’t belong to him now. And that’s why he’s started, you know.” She raised an imaginary glass to her mouth.

“I was on rotation just the other night,” said Five Alpha. “He emptied one glass of prosecco after another, and oh boy. He had six of us there – what’s this mass stampede about, all of a sudden? It used to be whoever was on rotation, and that’s it. Anyway, he had a BJ contest. Winner got thirty points, second got fifteen, third got five. Fourth lost five points, fifth lost fifteen, and last lost thirty. One Xi placed last, and she started bawling because she’s already had performance problems and this almost ensures that she’ll have the lowest score this month. Then she got docked four more points because she was crying. And he also sentenced her to be strapped to that awful simulator every day until she can do the program in less than an hour.”

“Good grief! I’m pretty good at blow jobs, but it usually takes me nearly an hour and a half. I’ve seen girls stuck there for more than three hours, tears streaming down their faces. If you stop to breathe, the damned timer goes backwards, and if you don’t do it right, it gives you shocks. I hate, hate, hate that damned thing.”

“At the Ranch,” said Six Zeta, “one of the overseers quit. A mean one, too; he used his bullwhip a lot. When Nine Two died, he needed to make the notation in her file and noticed that she’d

been abducted from a park in London when she was eleven. She died at twenty-two. He told Mr. Thibodeau right in front of us that it really rattled him because his own daughter had just turned eleven, and it suddenly hit him that we prisoners had once been actual human beings with mothers and fathers and hopes and dreams, not just nameless, faceless assemblages of body parts. The Archangel Jibril (Gabriel) appeared to him in a dream and told him to reevaluate his life. He decided to go back to Alexandria and rethink everything. I admired that.”

Five Delta smiled indulgently, served herself another glass of tea from the samovar, and took a bite of an almond cookie. “While we were there, he spent a lot of time on the phone tracking down an eight he’d heard about. He finally located her owner, a physics professor. He refused to sell her. So his next call was to give orders to kidnap the professor, gouge his eyes out, devocalize him, have him hot-iron branded, and send him to work as a homosexual whore at the King’s Club.”

They stared at each other in horror.

Three Gamma rolled her eyes and sighed. “I wasn’t on rotation, but a couple of weeks ago, Mr. Abdul sent me to him and he had what he called a blossom contest. There were eight of us, and he had us all in the position of eager anticipation, which in his twisted mind is supposed to turn us on.” She glanced up. Without missing a beat, she said, “This guy was just balancing the final apple on a huge pyramid display, and a lady accidentally rammed me with her cart, and I went crashing into the apples, and they all tumbled down, and the produce guy couldn’t help it and burst into tears.” The others dutifully laughed. Trevino moved on. “Well, if your blossom had swollen the most after twenty minutes, you won. The prize was getting into bed with him. Six of us lost – no effect whatsoever. He was furious. Accused us of refusing to cooperate. Cost us each ten points.”

“We’ve got to do something, ladies, this man is out of control.”

“Like what?” Four Kappa said sarcastically, “mount a slave revolt?”

Three Gamma’s glass slid out of her hand and landed on the carpet. Five Delta’s mouth fell open. Something clicked. Something changed.

“There are more than a hundred of us. He wouldn’t dare, um, lose his entire collection all at once...”

“Let’s do it,” said Three Gamma.

“Are you with us?” they asked Six Zeta.

“With you about what?”

The others giggled. Six Zeta lived in her own space, her own world. She’d only spent six weeks at the Ranch, but they had really affected her. She said it was so awful she didn’t want to talk about it, but she rarely talked about anything else. They understood.

The housekeeper who rushed over to clean up the spilled tea saw only perfect pictures of innocence, and moments later Napoli walked by and smiled at them approvingly, seven well-behaved little harem girls, politely socializing in the elegant salon.

Next evening, Prince Ibrahim was even more depressed. A titanium deal was fast falling apart, Habib had screwed up and an uncooperative idiot had escaped with a six-two nine-point eight, and the never-ending staffing issues at The Office were causing more and more headaches. “Abdul? Who was the girl here last night?”

“Six Zeta, Your Highness.”

“I like her. Send her back to me tonight. Fifteen minutes? All right.”

He soon had her shackled in place like the night before. “You’re hungry for your master again, aren’t you?” She nodded. “All right, my dear, you and I are going to have a feast. His Hardness can’t wait to nibble on you.”

Five times he made love to her that night, and five times she shrieked with delight. Once, she actually wept. They had to take her back to the harem on a golf cart, and she spent a full day in the infirmary recovering. She’d earned herself thirty points, and a star by her name in Prince Ibrahim’s database.

But she didn’t make him pass out. Only one girl had ever done that. Oh, he missed Mukhmala so much. Why, why had he let her go? He crash-landed onto his easy chair, feeling very tired, and exceedingly, exceedingly Mukhmala-deprived.

Next thing he knew, a glass of steaming hot tea had been set next to him. “Oh, hello, Roberto, if you’re on duty, it must be morning already. You know, today I want coffee. Strong. With a shot of grappa. And tell Luciano to make me a smoked salmon frittata with goat cheese and chives.”

“Coming right up, Your Highness.” He picked up the tea and looked at the Prince, who had That Look about him. Roberto smiled affectionately. “You really want that pretty American back, don’t you, Your Highness?”

Ibrahim stared straight ahead. “That idiot ambassador had to go and marry her.”

Knowing that she was making another man pass out in her arms was just too much to swallow. Roberto was right. He really did want her back. But she was no longer a slave to be bought and sold like a camel, she was a married woman. Why did life have to be so complicated? *Yaa salaam*, good heavens, he wanted her back. Somehow, some way, she must be returned to where she rightfully belonged.

## CHAPTER THREE

As the household's newly appointed Minister of Education, Tammy loved her daily sessions with the children. She'd grown up wanting to be a diplomat, but she was drawn more and more toward teaching. She had a special place in her heart for sixteen-year-old Samira, a strikingly beautiful girl with Aïssatou's soft intelligent eyes and Yerima's smooth athletic grace. She was very shy, very insecure, and completely oblivious to how meltingly attractive she was. She made excellent grades, but had no idea what she wanted to do when she finished school. She'd shrug. "Get married, I guess."

"Sweetie, even if you're married, you need a way to make a living. What if your husband dies? Or takes another wife and neglects you? Or, you just never find quite the right man? You must never, never be completely dependent on a man. Never. If you have a skill, he'll respect you more. And he'll know you'll be just fine even without him. If you don't, he'll take advantage, knowing that you have no other option."

"But I'm not good at anything."

However, her eyes lit up whenever they mentioned food. One day, after they'd had a long conversation about the previous night's dinner, Tammy had an idea. "Let me check with your mother, but if she gives the green light, how'd you like to learn to cook? I mean, really cook? Chef Emmanuel is a terrific teacher, and I bet he'd be tickled to have another pair of hands in that crazy kitchen of his."

"Oh, Néné Sudari, that would make me so happy."

Permission was granted. Tammy still resented asking permission for everything – it reminded her how she used to have to request permission even to pee – but it was almost always forthcoming. And, as lowest-ranking wife, she had to go out of her way to keep everyone placated.

Within weeks, Samira was bragging about how she'd learned how to make *pommes duchesse*, an elegant spin on mashed potatoes where they were piped to look like carnations and lightly browned, and *poulet hollandais*, and *gigot farçi*, and *tarte Tatin*.

"Chef Emmanuel says you have a real flair, Mira. He loves how thorough you are, how much pride you take in peeling that carrot until it's absolutely perfect, how excited you get when you learn a new skill. Have you thought about going to culinary school?"

"Abi wants me to get my *bac*."

"He's right – you should – but one doesn't preclude the other. With your *bac* you can always go to university if that's eventually what you decide to do." They practiced writing nutritionally balanced menus, calculating food costs, and, with the chef's help, drawing up work plans so that dishes for sample menus would all be ready at about the same time. Chef Emmanuel was so impressed that he soon put Mira in charge of taking the daily inventory and making the shopping list for the following day.

"Saves me a good hour," he said, "and she does a great job."

Ismaëlou, fourteen, resented being lassoed into additional study time, which interfered with what he really loved – soccer. And his twelve-year-old brother Kadry, nicknamed Ditto, followed his lead. Their grades were okay, but they needed motivation to improve, especially their writing skills. “Why don’t you two write a book about soccer?” Tammy suggested. “We’ll make it look really good, with graphics and everything, and show it to Abi. I bet he’ll be stinking proud of you.” There were lots of spelling errors, and quite a few grammatical problems, but they finally had a document they were pleased with. Ditto turned out to be a whiz with the graphics. “Now let’s really open up the audience for this and translate it into English.”

Yerima was blown away. “I’m impressed, but you left out one really important point. I wasn’t too shabby a player in my day, you know. When the other team has the ball, close in on it, and when your team has the ball, spread out. Add that, and it’ll be perfect. Great job, guys. I mean, great job.”

“I wrote a book about soccer,” Tammy overheard Ismaëlou bragging on the phone one day, “me and my brother Ditto. Sure, I can get you a copy, but it’ll cost you a thousand francs. I’ll even autograph it for you.”

Thirty-six pages, but hey, it was a book. Christine at the bookstore agreed to carry it, which thrilled the boys no end.

Oumoul was eleven, and had inherited her father’s gregarious gene. She was funny, thoughtful, and concerned about everybody, but was so busy taking care of her numerous friends that her schoolwork had taken a slide. She adopted a three-legged margouya lizard, fed every stray dog that ventured into the compound, saved stale bread to feed to the birds, and came over almost every day to play with Titi and Cleo, who positively adored her.

“What kind of work do you want to do when you grow up?” Tammy wanted to know.

“I don’t know. Maybe play with a rock band, maybe be a movie star.”

“You know what I think, Oumoul? I think you’re Abi’s girl. I bet you’d be a phenomenal veterinarian like him. Phenomenal.”

A light bulb went off. “You mean, take care of sick animals?”

“You really love animals, and connect with them so well. Think about it. But you need to be good at science. Let’s have a look at your homework, *ma petite biche*.”

“He says that when I’m twelve, he’ll teach me how to ride. I love horses. I *love* horses, Néné, well, the way you love cats.”

“Only, I don’t recommend letting a horse curl up on your lap.”

“And I don’t recommend riding a cat.”

They laughed. “Let’s make sure you stay on top of your homework every single day. And I’ll tell you what. Let’s surprise Abi. Look at this diagram. Did you imagine a horse had so many parts? Crest, withers, croup, stifle, fetlock. Don’t tell anybody what you’re doing, though, let’s make it a surprise.”

"I'm going to be a veterinarian like Abi," she told her six-year-old sister Aminatou.

"He's not a vegetenarian, silly, Abi's the Minister of Boring Affairs."

"Yes, but before, he was a veterinarian. Néné Sudari told me. So there!"

Ten-year-old Bintou was lost in Oumoul's shadow. They were less than a year apart, so they naturally hung out together, but it was Oumoul who decided on their games, Oumoul who cooked up the pranks they played, Oumoul who always evaporated when it was time to be scolded. It took Tammy weeks to figure out that Bintou had a gift for languages and a vivid, highly creative imagination. With Tammy's support, Bintou wrote a hilarious book about a mouse that sneaked onto a spaceship headed for the moon, and the ghost who lent him his bicycle, and the lollipop farm there that supplied most of the solar system. "Why do we always write books about boys?" Tammy asked. "Why can't it be a girl mouse?"

"Yes!" said Bintou. So the name was changed from Khalidou to Khalidatou. The book was nine pages long. They translated it into English, into Spanish, and into Arabic. Then Bintou drew illustrations, and Tammy ran them off and had a copy placed at each place at Sunday dinner.

"What have we here?" said Yerima.

"By Bintou Abdoulaye," said Amsaou, "you're amazing. Absolutely amazing. Your Arabic is suddenly far beyond what you've learned at Koranic school, and I didn't know you could speak Spanish at all."

"*Estoy aprendiendo,*" said Bintou, with a fine accent. I'm learning.

Yerima gave Tammy an approving wink.

Aminatou was six, and looked so much like Amsaou that it staggered the mind. She was really into dolls, so she and Tammy gave them vocabulary lessons so they could throw around grown-up words like voluminous and gargantuan and unprecedented.

Amsaou almost fell over one morning when her six-year-old daughter told her at breakfast, "Néné, I'm rather averse to going to school today. Louise was positively odious yesterday and I'm henceforth not prepared to tolerate her incessant provocations."

Later Tammy admitted that she and Aminatou had practiced that sentence for days. "But she does really know what all those words mean!"

Aliatou was barely four, and could write her name, but within two months she could write the entire alphabet, upper and lower case, cursive and block letters. And count to ten in six languages.

Cathy was also four, very dainty, and unbelievably squeamish. She'd throw up when she'd see a squashed worm, say "ewww" three times every five minutes, and would only color with blue crayons because they were the only ones that were "clean." But she was also endearing. She could write her name with no trouble, but always made the Y upside-down. Finally Tammy realized that this was no accident, and asked her about it.

"The poor Y gets tired holding its arms up all day," Cathy explained earnestly.

"That is very, very thoughtful of you, Cathy, but that's how the Y is made. It doesn't get tired, honest." And henceforth, Cathy wrote Y's right-side up.

"My mommy says you used to be a, uh, I can't remember."

"I used to be a slave. It's a person who belongs to somebody else and who has to do whatever that person says, whether they want to or not. It's a really awful job, because even if people are mean to you, you can't do anything about it. And when you're a slave, they're mean to you a lot. But your daddy rescued me, and now I'm not a slave. That made me very happy."

"That's not the word."

"Did she say whore?"

"Yes, that's it. What's a whore?"

"It's a woman who gives personal services to men. Usually, a whore gets paid, but since I was a slave, only my master got the money. Sometimes they even forgot to give me food. It wasn't any fun at all, Cathy."

"You mean sex?"

Never underestimate a four-year-old! "Yes, sweetie, that's exactly what I mean. Sometimes sex can be beautiful. When a man and a woman love each other, it makes them love each other even more. But it can also be really ugly, and hurt something awful. And when you're a slave, men don't care one bit whether it hurts or not, and you're not allowed to complain. What's the job you hate the most, Cathy?"

"Changing Michael's stinky diaper."

"Okay, Just imagine for a moment that that's sex, and you're a slave. As soon as you change one stinky diaper, he poops again. You change that one. And then he poops again. All day long, every day. And if you say, Listen, I'm sick and tired of this, I don't want to do this any longer, they beat you up, or they don't let you have anything to eat. That's what it's like, being a slave."

"Yuck!"

"Yes, sweetie, you understand. Yuck!"

House phone, extension one. Tammy smiled. "Hello, darling."

"Babe, can you put on something nice and meet me in fifteen minutes? I want to take you somewhere. A fun surprise."

She appeared a few minutes later at the main house wearing a long dress in a red-and-yellow feather print that flared at the knees.

"Babe, wow! You look good enough to eat."

*“On va où?”* Where are we going? Oumarou inquired as he started the engine. Dieudonné, the gendarme/bodyguard, slid into the front seat and saluted.

“We’re going to take this beautiful lady to the house on the mountain.”

Mount Fébé, wreathed in raphia palms and jacarandas, was about fifteen minutes’ drive out of town. A winding road took them past the luxury hotel and golf course. They rounded a curve and the view of the city on the sparkling clear day took Tammy’s breath away. Yaounde was much larger – more than two million inhabitants – and much nicer, than Tammy had imagined. Built on rolling hills, it enjoyed a pleasant climate even though it was less than four degrees north of the Equator. They arrived at a stone-fenced compound where a gendarme saluted smartly and pressed a button to open the gate. The car had barely pulled to a stop when two butlers rushed over to open the doors. Tammy looked at Yerima inquisitively but he just smiled, took her by the arm, and they mounted the stairs. Another butler bowed and ushered them inside. “He’s in the upstairs parlor, Excellency.”

“How’s my man Theodore?” Yerima asked.

A big grin. “He turns four next month, Excellency. He’s into everything. Drives us nuts.”

“Means you should be grateful that he’s a healthy, intelligent child. By the way, George, this is my new wife Sudari. And Sudari, this is George Foncha. Don’t even think about basketball one-on-ones with him. He creams everybody in sight.”

“Even you, Yerima?”

He made a face, and she laughed. “By the way, his grandfather was the single most important reason why the former British Cameroons and French Cameroun became a united country.”

“I never quite understood what happened.”

“The Germans lost Kamerun in World War I and it was split along occupational lines. The French got most of it and the British got a couple pieces that bordered Nigeria, which is why some people still say The Cameroons. They administered them as part of Nigeria, which made us mad, because Nigeria was a colony, and Cameroon was officially a mandated territory under the League of Nations, and later a trust territory under the UN. In international circles, Cameroon is known for petition after petition to make France and Britain respect the special treatment we were supposed to get.

“Anyway, when independence was imminent, John Ngu Foncha went from village to village by bicycle and warned people that Nigeria was a tinderbox ready to explode and that it would be a mistake to remain part of it. And when the referendum took place, most people agreed with him. Besides, English-speaking Cameroonians, or Anglophones – we jokingly call them Anglo Saxophones – have far more ethnic affinity with the peoples of French-speaking Cameroun. It became independent in 1960, and in 1961, when Nigeria gained its independence, all but one of those pieces joined back with the French part. For a while we had a federation with two states, but it was like trying to have a federation composed of Texas and, like, West Virginia. Just too imbalanced. It served a purpose for a time, but now we have a unified country that still happens to be bilingual. And of course, he was right, only a few years later, Nigeria went through a horrible civil war.”

“You must be very proud of your grandfather,” said Tammy.

“Yes ma’am, yes indeed. He was Vice President until 1970. Welcome, Madame Abdoulaye. Welcome to Cameroon.”

Yerima and Tammy climbed the graceful curved stairway.

“Grandpa grandpa grandpa, you’re just not doing it right.” A very exasperated girl of about eight was scolding a gray-haired man in a cotton coffee bean-print tunic and matching pants. They were sitting on leather poufs with a video game. She sighed. “You’re hopeless, grandpa, hopeless.”

“Rascal!” said Grandpa with a delighted smile.

“Scoundrel!” said Yerima.

Grandpa rose and clasped Yerima in a huge affectionate hug. When they released, he took a long look at Tammy, grinned, and held out his arms. “You must be Sudari. You rascal, she’s even more beautiful than you let on. Welcome, welcome, welcome.” And he gave her a crushing embrace.

“This is my hopeless cousin Antoine.”

“Ohmygod,” Tammy said, eyes opening wide. “Such an honor to meet you, Your Excellency, such an honor,” she stammered. The President of the Republic himself had just given her a hug. “Now I know why you looked familiar. Your picture is on the wall in Yerima’s office, but somehow Grandpa doesn’t look quite the same as the President.”

“Grandpa, are you going to finish this, or not?”

“Excuse me just a second.” He sat back down. “Show me again, Marielle? Maybe this time I’ll do it right.” After a few moments the game chimed victory. “Aha! See? I’m not so hopeless after all.”

The little girl had been completely focused on the game, but finally noticed Yerima. “*Tonton!*” Unc. He swept her into his arms and gave her a super-long, slobbery kiss.

“How’s my favorite ballerina? Marielle, meet my wife Sudari.”

She shook Tammy’s hand very importantly. “*Tonton*, how many wives do you *have*?”

“I’m allowed to have four, so I have four.”

“If they let him have a hundred, he’d have a hundred. Sudari, please make yourself at home, my dear. I’d love for you to meet Solange, but her sister has taken ill and she’s gone to Mbálmayo to look after her. As you’ve no doubt guessed, this is my private home. If you want, Marielle, you can stay, but now I need to talk to *tonton* and *tata*.”

“You always have to talk to somebody,” Marielle complained.

“That’s my job.”

“And you’re always, always, always working.”

“I have twenty million wonderful people I need to take care of, and that’s a lot of work.”

Yerima planted his stocking feet on the coffee table.

Antoine poured two snifters of Courvoisier. “Oh my, how rude of me. What would you like, Madame Sudari?”

“Courvoisier is fine. Thank you, Excellency.”

And the President of the Republic served her himself.

“So, how is this rascal treating you?”

“So far so good, sir. I’ve managed to put up with him for two months now.”

“You’re really beautiful. If you ever get tired of him you can just move in with me, okay?”

“Okay, sir, you have a deal, but don’t hold your breath. I have no plans to go anywhere.” Yerima put his finger on her nose; she grabbed it and kissed it.

“I’m getting really good reports at how you’re handling Foreign Affairs, Yerima.” Antoine settled back in a recliner as Marielle climbed onto his lap and snuggled against him. “Your sense of humor goes over well, as does your heartfelt respect for other people, even on the other side of the table.”

“I love the job, but it’s exhausting. Receptions almost every night. I hated being ambassador, so far away, and without my family, but this is loads of fun. I love it.”

“Sudari, Yerima told me about your background. I’m so sorry you had to live through all that.”

She shrugged. “Thanks to Yerima, it’s behind me, sir. It wasn’t any fun, but at least in my case it had a happy ending. A very happy ending.” She kissed her husband’s finger again.

“I’m very interested in hearing more about this. I’ve heard stories of abductions and human trafficking right here under our noses, but I confess I know very little about it. I do hope that you’re writing a book?”

“Yes sir, but it’s still in the early stages. I can work on it for an hour or so, and then I start to shake, but I’ll get it done eventually. It’s hard, reliving everything.”

“What’s the most difficult thing you had to do?”

“Besides put up with Yerima?” They laughed. “Do you realize, sir, that seven of the eight first times we saw each other, I ended up in the infirmary?”

Yerima looked at her in astonishment. “*What?*”

“You didn’t know that? I couldn’t even walk. Nurse Musa laughed his brains out. Called it a case of severe over-enthusiasm.”

Antoine went into gales of laughter.

Yerima was dumbstruck. "This is the first I'm hearing about it. Why on earth didn't you tell me, babe?"

Tammy thought it over. "You know, darling, you're right. I was forbidden to mention it."

"Because?"

"Because it might have been construed as criticism, and you know how protective of members' egos they are."

"Antoine, they even taught them to fake it. Fake it! I was appalled."

"Another way of protecting the members' egos," she said. "See, the rare man who knew what he was doing made all the others look bad." Yerima groaned. "I'd been at The Office for more than a year, and he was the only member who figured it out. I was so naïve I didn't even know what I was pretending to do; I was just following orders. He pushed me out of bed, slapped me up, and told me to get the hell out. I had no clue why he was so pissed. We finally got that sorted out, and he took me in his arms and, well, sir, well, he transformed my life."

Antoine threw his head back, eyes closed, laughing. "Yes," he sputtered, "Yerima has been known to transform the lives of hundreds and hundreds of young ladies. Fulfilling his destiny as rescuer of womankind."

"But Excellency, teasing aside, I still haven't answered your question. I had a master who was so domineering, so controlling, I mean, every single molecule was devoted to control. One time he kept me blindfolded and chained to the bed for eight days."

"I didn't know about that either, babe," said Yerima, sitting upright, knitting his brow in confusion. "How many more secrets have you been keeping from me?"

"No more than a couple million. That was after—"

"Okay, gotcha."

"He was also extremely vindictive. I overheard phone conversations where he'd order someone destroyed. A pilot refused to sell him a girl he wanted, so he had him fed to a crocodile. A contractor screwed up an installation, and he had the man turned into a female and set to work in a brothel. One man hung up on him, and he ordered him to be hamstrung and his eyes gouged out."

"And he got away with it?"

"Again and again."

"Yerima, I thought you said it was an extremely vengeful society, an eye for an eye, obsessed with family honor and all that."

"It is indeed."

"So how'd he get away with it?"

“Intimidation. Connections. But it won’t work forever; one day he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“Maybe,” said Tammy, not entirely convinced, “maybe not. This is how he’s done things for more than twenty years. Anyway, sometimes he had slaves put to death just to underscore the extent of the power he had over them; other times, he had them executed because he was having a party and needed a few fresh corpses so he and his guests could have sex with them.”

“A necrophiliac! You’ve got to be kidding! You mean, they actually exist?”

“Yes, Your Excellency, they really do. He’s very low-ranking as princes go, but he’s such an embarrassment to the royal family that they excluded him from the remotest possibility of succession. Anyway, he was tons worse when he’d had a few glasses of prosecco. The hardest thing I ever did in my life was tell him that his drinking was getting out of hand.”

Antoine sat bolt upright, almost knocking Marielle off the chair. He looked at Tammy, at Yerima, back at Tammy.

Yerima said, “I’ve told you before, she has more balls than I do.”

Antoine was still staring at her. “Either extremely gutsy or extremely foolhardy, I’m not sure which.”

“Of course, he blew up, and I was in tons and tons of trouble, but then I gave him, I mean, in bed, um...”

“She made him pass out,” supplied Yerima. “Using techniques I taught her, she went and made *him* faint. How do you like that? Hey, babe, that’s still on your to-do list for me, you know.”

Antoine was slapping the arm of the chair, howling with laughter. “So, I assume, he forgave you?”

“Give me time,” she told Yerima, “just give me time, dear sir. Yes sir. He said he was going to build a beautiful harem just for me and cover me in diamonds and give me slaves of my own. Just what I always wanted, my own slaves, right?”

“A question here, please. I asked you what was the hardest thing you ever had to do, but I don’t understand that you really had to tell him. Excuse me, Sudari, but it seems to me that you took a highly unnecessary risk.”

“Good point, sir, but his drinking was getting worse and worse, and at least once before he’d killed a person he loved very much while he was drunk, and I knew that within a few weeks or months he’d kill me as well. My grandmother came to me in a dream and warned me that I was in grave danger, and I’ve learned to take her warnings seriously. So I could have kept quiet, and been killed, or speak up, and merely run the *risk* of being killed. Anyway, he traveled, and while he was away, my friend Zima and I finally got our revenge on a man who had constantly tormented us, and—”

“They murdered him,” Yerima said. “They couldn’t take it any longer, so when he got so drunk he passed out, they shackled him to the bed, sawed off a particularly annoying part of his anatomy, and slit his neck. He was Chairman of the Board of the men’s club.”

Antoine held his head. “Sorry,” he said, “I’m having a hard time absorbing all this. First we’re talking about necrophiliacs and psychopaths and now you’re telling me that Yerima’s sweet Sudari committed cold-blooded murder? With those soft ladylike hands?”

“No, Your Excellency, it wasn’t cold-blooded at all. Actually, we had the time of our lives, the second-most fun I had in one thousand, nine hundred and four days. We’d set him up for months and months to make him think we wouldn’t dare. Anyway, it’s not highly recommended for a slave to assassinate an Arab, especially Chairman of the Board, and I was sentenced to be executed by torture. That’s when Yerima rescued me. I owe my very life to this wonderful man, Your Excellency. Three months ago I was a slave on death row, and I still can’t believe how lucky I am that he set me free, and here I am drinking cognac with the President himself.” She wiped a tear from her eye.

“Yerima, my man,” Antoine said with a wink, “I strongly recommend that you avoid getting this lady mad at you.” He poured refills. “Wasn’t that psycho owner of hers upset that you ended up with her? It sounds like he was downright obsessed. I mean, eight days?”

“He was very gracious. For our wedding he gave Sudari a diamond necklace that appraised at \$482,000, and he gave me a gorgeous stallion worth approximately the same. We were surprised, actually, at what a good sport he was.”

“Let me clarify,” Tammy said quickly, “that we sold both the necklace and the Arabian. We’re not keeping a penny. We plan use the money to finance a foundation to combat human trafficking.”

“You sold an Arabian, Yerima? Worth a half-million dollars? *You?*”

Yerima shrugged.

“His dream stallion,” said Tammy, “I was extremely touched. And to put things in perspective, sir, three years earlier, Prince Ibrahim had paid one hundred and thirteen thousand dollars for me.”

“So the horse...oh my.” Antoine shook his head and groaned.

“But,” Yerima added, “to put things in additional perspective, an architect who fell in love with her offered eight hundred thousand for her, and was turned down.”

Antoine sat back and smiled approvingly. “I like what I see between you two. I like it a lot. How are you adjusting to being number four, Sudari?”

Tammy chuckled. “I adore Aïssatou, who’s really taken me under her wing. She’s strict, but she’s also very loving and supportive. Amsi has become my best friend. Yerima told me that even the towels at the hotel are in love with her, and I think he’s right. What a dynamite lady.” She hesitated.

“And?”

“And then there’s JoAnn. Beautiful weather we’re having today, right, sir? I hope your sister-in-law will soon be better, sir. Um—”

Antoine roared, while Yerima made a face. “I naïvely thought that since they were both Americans...” He rolled his eyes.

“Sudari, please, I know it’s not easy, but find a way to get along with her. Please. For my favorite rascal here, if not for yourself.” Antoine grew pensive. “But back to your stallion guy. The more I think about him, the more nervous I get. I know a thing or two about human nature, and I just can’t imagine that he’s let go. My gut is rarely wrong. Be careful.”

They sat in silence a few moments.

“I’ve said almost exactly the same thing to Amsi. I try not to think about it, sir.”

“Sudari, you’ve just given me an idea. I’m going to set up a Presidential Task Force on Human Trafficking, and I’d like for you to serve on it. Would you be willing?”

“Willing, Your Excellency? I’d love to.”

“Marielle, can you please go find Martine for me? Tell her to bring a notepad.”

“*Tonton*, it’s at least five,” said Marielle, scowling. “There’s Tata Amsi, there’s Tata Alizée...”

Yerima laughed. “You’re right. But Tata Alizée decided she didn’t want to be married to me anymore. So it’s still just four. He turned back to Antoine. “Commissaire Yayá would be perfect. And so would Jules N’nang, you know, who cracked the smuggling case.”

“Great ideas, Yerima. And Alice Mpondo, the human rights advocate. And we need somebody from the military...”

“How about Annette Mveng, the major who promotes the opportunities that military service offers girls?”

They batted more names around as Tammy became more and more excited, watching a presidential task force materialize before her eyes.

“Martine, please, I’d like for you to meet Yerima’s latest victim – I mean wife – Sudari. Martine Atángana is my last tenuous link to sanity. She’s my *Directeur de Cabinet*, or what in English you call Chief of Staff, my top, top aide. She’s a constitutional lawyer, knows three-quarters of the population on a first-name basis, and somehow manages to keep thousands of documents and hundreds of projects on track. She also won’t let me get away with *anything*.”

He’d said it in jest, but there was a brief explosion of tension, and Tammy smelled a story.

“Martine, love, I want to create a Presidential Task Force on Human Trafficking, and I’d like for the decree to go out this coming week. Madame Abdoulaye has already agreed to serve on it, and here are a dozen or so other names of potential members. I’d like to extend a personal invitation to each one.”

“So happy to meet you, madame. I love this job, and consider it a high honor, but here it is Saturday afternoon, and of course, I’m at work. Your Ex, I love this idea. You hear stories, you know, like that German tourist who vanished from the beach at Kribi, and that French model

who disappeared from the resort at Limbe. And our own girls too, who somehow never get the same level of media coverage.”

“It actually happened to Madame Abdoulaye.”

“*Mon dieu!* Really, madame?”

“Yes, some day I’ll show you the stainless steel collar that was soldered around my neck. This handsome gentleman here rescued me.”

“Collar?” said Antoine, completely taken aback.

“Yes, Your Excellency. I wore a collar and cuffs; it made it easier to strap me down. I saved them to be able to show people.”

“I hate to break this up, but we need to be going, babe. Embassy of Canada tonight.”

“Always with Aïssatou, never with me. I try not to be jealous, but...” She sighed.

The President rose to see them off. “So, you made your owner pass out, did you? Yerima, my dear cousin, my very able Minister of Foreign Affairs, my lifelong friend, may I borrow her?”

“No way in hell,” was the swift reply. The cousins laughed and hugged goodbye.

“I want to see that manuscript, Sudari. And thanks again for agreeing to serve on the task force.”

“Thank you for everything, Excellency. I can’t wait for it to be up and running.”

In the car, Tammy leaned over and kissed Yerima’s cheek. “Do you remember, the first day we met and you told me to give you a cat-bath, and I started licking you, and you asked me to tell you how you tasted? And I said, influential. I had no idea how right I was.”

“You’re going to make a huge difference, Sudari, I just know it. You’ve seen how these scumballs operate from the inside out. You know names, places. They count on the fact that once they have you, you never get out. I had no idea that Antoine was going to come up with that idea, but it’s a great one.”

Tammy snuggled against her husband and sighed contentedly. “But a certain hero rescued me and messed up their plans.” A quick kiss. “Martine sure seems like a neat lady.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Just a couple of months ago, Antoine got sick of waiting for the National Assembly to act on a piece of labor legislation, so he decided he’d simply issue it by Presidential decree. She told him in no uncertain terms that he didn’t have the constitutional authority. That made him furious, but she dug in her heels. They went several weeks barely speaking. It was Solange who got Martine to calm down and got Antoine to come to his senses. I mean, either the constitution means something, or it doesn’t.”

“That’s another neat lady for you. Solange has a doctorate in microbiology from Stanford. I think I told you that Antoine spent twelve years in Washington with the International Monetary Fund? While they were there, she worked at the World Bank, managing environmental projects. Her father had an accident with a corn grinder when he was a child, and was missing all the fingers on his right hand, so she’s also very active in organizations that help the handicapped. She and

Aïssatou are very good friends. Don't worry, you'll meet her. I think you two will really hit it off."

"Did the Assembly ever pass the labor law?"

"Nope. The opposition is pretty fragmented, but on this particular issue, they got together and deep-sixed it. And Martine told Antoine it was exactly what he deserved."

Tammy laughed. "I like her more and more. Gutsy lady."

"The second-gutsiest lady I know," he told her, giving her a long and loving kiss. "I'm so proud of you, Sudari, so proud. You were completely at ease with the President of the Republic. You just can't be intimidated, can you?"

She laughed. "Maybe it has something to do with the fact that for three years I served generals and oil tycoons and princes and mega-billionaires – as well as the occasional stray ambassador – and you know what? They're all just guys." She thought for a second. "What made me shake in my boots was meeting your other wives. Now *that* was scary."

It was his turn to laugh.

It was still sinking in. He's the one who's proud of *me*? she marveled. Wow.

The President looked resplendent in an ivory damask gandoura and brimless maroon felt hat, quite a departure from his usual conservative suits and flashy Italian ties. He struck a gavel. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to call to order the kick-off meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Human Trafficking. This is a topic that we're all vaguely aware of, but its significance really struck home when Yerima Abdoulaye, our Minister of Foreign Affairs, introduced me to his wife Sudari – here present – who had herself been a victim of this horrendous crime and spent five years in slavery. I'd like to start by going around the room. Everybody introduce yourself and give a brief indication of what you can contribute to this task force. And, Madame Abdoulaye, I think it most appropriate that we begin with you. Give us an idea of what you lived through."

"Thank you profoundly, Your Excellency, for creating this task force. It means a lot to me and I hope it will be able to make a difference. I for one pledge my fullest cooperation and dedication to further its goals.

"When I was eighteen I went to visit some friends who lived just outside Marseilles and was abducted. Next thing I knew, I was on the Persian Gulf.

"My first master was Sheikh Khalid. He was 81 years old and I was in his harem only briefly, because he blew up when he discovered that I wasn't the voluptuous Swede he'd ordered. My next master was Sheikh Ahmed, who assigned me to his son, Sheikh Saud. Saud is actually a very nice person and we eventually became friends. He is opposed to the institution of slavery and when I told him on my wedding day that I hoped to establish a foundation to combat human

trafficking, he offered to endow it. Anyway, at his house things were very complicated. After about a year, against his loud protests, I was sold to a family friend, Sheikh Fahd.

“Sheikh Fahd owned the most beautiful harem in the entire Middle East, the Rainbow Harem. There were six girls there and we wore fabulous gowns and jewelry. But we were also each dyed a different color. I was Miss Green, and although I left there more than three years ago, my system is still suffering the toxic effects. When Sheikh Fahd’s little daughter finally lost her battle with leukemia, he went insane with grief, and became a very scary person. Thank God, Miss Purple managed to poison him.

“My new master was the Prince Macabre, so called because of his fondness for fresh corpses. The technical term, in case you’re wondering, is necrophiliac. The prince leased me to a high-class men’s club called The Office, where I was obliged to work for more than three years. Here are the collar and cuffs that I wore. These are all I wore, by the way. I was working sixteen or seventeen hours a day, seven days a week, providing services that were not only disgusting, but often painful as well. If it were a pleasant job, they wouldn’t need slaves to do it, right?

“Finally my friend Nenzima and I had had enough. One day a psychopath we really hated had so much to drink that he passed out, so we put him in the same shackles he had just used on us. We sawed off a certain very annoying body part, stuffed it down his throat, and slit his neck. It was very, very sweet revenge. Zima wisely committed suicide right away, but I thought things over too long and when security came up, I was still alive.

“Of course, they aren’t exactly dainty with slaves who commit murder, so I was sentenced to be tortured to death at a scary snuff club called The Rodeo. I was put in a big glass pot and a lid was bolted down around my shoulders.”

She’d managed to relate everything so far in a matter-of-fact tone, but now her voice broke and she struggled to maintain her composure. “I was supposed to be boiled in oil.” She took a deep breath. “That is when my beloved Yerima stepped in and rescued me. Emancipated me. And by the grace of Almighty God, married me.” She fought back tears.

“How did you meet him?” one person wanted to know.

“He was a member of the club. It wasn’t just a brothel; it had a bowling alley, four restaurants, a cinema, entertainment like belly dancers, a gym, a pool, squash courts, all sorts of stuff. When I worked Reception I had to kneel and wash the members’ feet, and sometimes we’d talk.”

The truth and nothing but the truth.

“Can you pass those cuffs around?”

“Sure, here. A surgeon had to saw them off.”

“How on earth did you stay sane?”

“I didn’t. I got so depressed I wanted to commit suicide, but they monitor you so minutely I couldn’t figure out how. Either I was on an assignment, getting ready for an assignment, or strapped to a display table to sleep.”

There were more questions, but the President said, “We need to move on. Thank you, Madame Abdoulaye, for a riveting, moving, and disturbing presentation. Your courage impresses all of us.” There was a warm round of applause. “We look forward to hearing more details as time progresses, and I encourage everyone to stay after the meeting if your schedule permits to chat. Commissaire Yayá, tell us what brings you here.”

“Thank you so much, Excellency, for establishing this task force. I head up a police department specialized in crimes against girls and women – genital mutilation, forced child marriage, rape, domestic violence, and human trafficking. We know what’s going on, but it’s difficult to fight this crime, especially since, ahem, we are so, ahem, severely underfunded.”

The President rolled his eyes as everyone chuckled.

“I was myself a victim of forced marriage when I was eleven years old and became a widow at sixteen. It’s only semantics, the difference between a slave and an unwilling child bride. So, Excellency, if we have more resources at our disposal” – more chuckles – “we’ll be able to do a much better job of running down leads and bringing these reprehensible criminals to justice.”

“Anybody else here underfunded?” asked the President with a good-natured smile, and a half-dozen hands shot up.

“Excuse me, Excellency, I have an idea,” Major Mveng said. “There’s a small stipend that comes with serving on this task force. I for one would like to waive it and contribute it to the commissaire’s department.”

A chorus of “me tooos” filled the room.

“Martine, love, find a way to transfer these funds from one line item to another without making Seydou have conniptions, will you? And that is a very generous gesture on your part, all of you. Are you happier now, Madame le Commissaire?”

“It’s not very much, Excellency,” she said pointedly, “but I really appreciate the members’ generosity, and of course, every little bit helps.”

It was an interesting group of eleven members, most of whom clustered around Tammy when the meeting concluded.

“Please,” she begged, “this isn’t about me. Do you think I like telling everybody hey, I used to be a slave in a brothel? But if anybody believes I volunteered for the job, they’re out of their minds. Yerima keeps reminding me that I have nothing to be ashamed of, that I simply did what I needed to do to stay alive. I’m one of the rare girls who got out, thanks to my amazing husband, and I’m lucky to be able to speak for all the ones who spend years in this horrible underground, completely cut off from the world.”

Maïmouna Yayá took both of her hands. “Sudari, you and I are going to be an awesome team, and the two of us are going to do some serious damage.”

“Could I volunteer to work with you? I’m dying to go back to school, but it doesn’t start until October, and meanwhile, I bet you could teach me a lot.”

“Get Yerima’s permission,” advised the commissaire. “I know he’ll say yes, but you’ll get wife-points for asking, and it never hurts to have a few in your account.”

“I’ll ask him tonight,” said Tammy. “I’m trying to write a book, but it’s so hard, I can only write a few pages and then I have to stop. I’ve already checked out half the books from the Cultural Center library. And I spend two hours a day teaching the children, but that’s really all I have on my schedule. It’ll be good to have something meaty to do.”

“What would you like to help with?”

“Well, to start off with, maybe help you organize paperwork. I’m good at that. But I’d like to sit in on strategy sessions and contribute what I know from the inside about how this whole underground operates.”

“My filing box is an embarrassment. Sounds wonderful. And I’ll get this cleared with my higher-ups. I doubt that it will be a problem, given the chair of this task force, but I need to take care of that formality.” They exchanged phone numbers and promised to be back in touch the next day.

“Before we get going,” Yerima said, “I have a disturbing and highly confidential announcement. There was an attempted *coup* Sunday night.” Everyone gasped. “Four colonels and one general faced the firing squad yesterday, including, I’m very sorry to say, my good friend Pierre Nkom.”

Amsaou’s hand flew to her face. “Oh no! I have to go see Sandrine. That’s just terrible!”

“No,” said Yerima firmly. “Call her, or send her a note, but a visit would be out of line. Who was her husband trying to take down? And who is my boss?”

“Oh, oh, of course. But that’s so *sad*.”

“Military Security had been tipped off, so it was put down in less than fifteen minutes. Thirty-some other officers got prison terms. Just a little reminder that Antoine is not universally adored. Issa, we should organize occasional bunker drills.” He sighed. “All right. Madame Prime Minister, what’s the deal on the warehouse roof that the storm last week messed up?”

“It didn’t make the news,” Tammy observed. “It didn’t make the news at all.”

“It won’t,” Yerima said. “So don’t talk about it, all right? Rumors will abound, but don’t confirm them. You’ve heard something, don’t know anything for sure.”

Hmm, thought Tammy, this is most definitely not Washington.

“I got a contractor here,” Aïssatou said routinely, “but he was a strange sort and I finally sent him away. He was asking all sorts of questions about you, Sudari. I have someone else coming on Wednesday.”

Yerima and Tammy exchanged puzzled, nervous glances. “Thank you, Aïssatou. Your turn, Amsaou, for a report from Finance.”

“Sorry to say that we’ve been having some pretty serious overruns in Education. Dari, darling, you’re way over budget again – again! – and I’m missing a bunch, a bunch of receipts.”

Tammy was hardly paying attention; she was still stuck on Aïssatou’s comment. Her heart was in her toes.

“She’s been buying books and supplies for the children. I authorized it.”

“You’re a naughty boy, Yerima, you didn’t tell me that you authorized an overrun like this.”

“That’s because he just this second decided, as usual, to do anything to keep perfect little Miss Sudari out of trouble,” spat JoAnn. “How much longer is she going to be a special case, Yerima? How much longer do you plan to give her special treatment? She’s been here nearly six months and I’m sick and tired of the favoritism you keep showing her.”

“All right, JoAnn, let’s talk about this. Right after the meeting I will transfer you to the servants’ quarters and we’ll hang a sign on your door that says Open for Business, eighteen hours a day. You will not voice a single word of complaint, no matter how disgusting the man or how revolting the service. You will kneel or even prostrate to show him how much you respect him, even if you really hate his guts. In return he will slap you around, beat you up, kick you, or strap you down. Or in the case of Ibrahim, put you in shackles just because he likes the way it looks. You live like that for five years, JoAnn, and we’ll see if you don’t deserve special consideration when you finally resurface. Now apologize.”

“I’m sorry, Yerima.”

“No, to her.”

JoAnn studied Yerima for a moment. He met her gaze. She sighed. “I’m sorry, Sudari.”

“It’s okay, JoAnn, I have a lot of things to work on. Readjusting to normal life is harder than I thought.” She was close to tears. “I figured that I’d sort of, like, push a button, and be myself again, but it’s a whole lot more complicated than that. I was confined to very small spaces for a long time, and the real world is overwhelming. It’s big, it’s confusing, and it’s really scary. I’m trying, and God knows I want to do this right, but it’s a lot, a lot tougher than I ever imagined.”

“Another rude outburst like that, JoAnn, and I will deprive you of one of the principal benefits of marriage for a very long time. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir.”

“Amsi, I have a pile of receipts for you on my kitchen counter. I just keep forgetting to give them to you,” Tammy said.

“Then you’re a naughty girl too.”

“Yes, I am, and I’m really sorry.”

“What about Agriculture?” Yerima asked JoAnn.

“Wait a sec, please,” said Amsaou. “We have two houses with issues. House Seventeen is now seven months behind on the rent. You were going to talk to them, Aïssatou?”

“Yes, I did. Special situation. It would be cruel to evict them, so I think we should just wait. They’ll catch up.”

“We’ll trust your excellent judgment,” said Yerima.

“Okay, and House Nine has needed eight plumbing repairs in eleven months. I strongly suspect that the kids are putting things down the toilet.”

“Can you confirm that with the plumber? We should bill them for whatever repairs were due to negligence. Finished?”

“Yes sir.”

“Agriculture?”

“The vegetables are sprouting; we can start harvesting in five or six weeks. What a great place to live, with three growing seasons a year! And I’ve started planting the hibiscus around the north fence.”

“Fine job,” said Yerima. “Education?”

“I meet with two or three children every day, and it’s a lot of fun. What wonderful kids! Samira has gone from a 12 in history to a 16, and Ditto got a 19 on an English test the other day and couldn’t believe it.”

“They love you,” said Yerima.

“Of course,” sniped JoAnn. “Everybody loves perfect little Miss Sudari.”

Tammy was still so focused on what Aïssatou had said that she let the snide remark pass. What in the dickens was Ibrahim cooking up? And why was that knot in her stomach growing bigger and bigger?

