

Chapter 1

Aнна had always assumed that her life would flash before her eyes in the final moments before she died. Boy did the movies lie about that! With the haunting melody, *Angel*, by Sarah McLachlan, playing on repeat in the background, a song that perfectly described her life over the past two years, Anna's thoughts drifted to a conversation six weeks back that begun the countdown to her demise.

Anna dreaded meetings with HR managers because their probing questions usually reduced her to a stuttering wreck. The kind, matronly woman seated in front of her, was however, cut from a different cloth and reminded her of her mother. The woman was dressed in a navy blue skirt suit. Her hair was braided in a ponytail,

while her face was devoid of make-up, except for brown nude lip gloss that accentuated her dark skin. She stared at Anna with compassion, her voice low and soft, yet filled with unmistakable authority. Mrs Natalie Karani could be intimidating without effort if she tried and yet Anna felt calm in her presence; her confidence still intact.

“I don’t know what you did, but you offended someone very powerful, who’s made damn sure you become unemployable in this town. As a journalist at any rate. Do yourself a favour and stop looking for a job in media houses. No one will hire you. Find something else to do.”

She spoke with such finality that Anna believed her. She froze at the statement, stunned by its implications. It explained a lot though, the tiny part of her brain that was still working deduced. Like why no one had bothered to respond to the job applications she had made over the past six months. She was a good writer, passionate and hardworking. It seemed however, that word about her last assignment and unceremonious exit from XTL Media had spread to every major media house in the country. “Why then did you agree to meet me?” Anna asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

“What happened to you was unfair. I did a background check on you and found your record is clean. That raised my suspicions. Normally, a person is given a warning letter or a detailed account of the pattern of misconduct to justify a dismissal. I found none in your case. But I did glean from the grapevine that you are a hot potato right now, not to be touched unless a media house wants to lose one of its biggest accounts. I want to help you, so that you stop wasting your time trying to get hired in a newsroom.” Mrs Karani folded her hands and leaned forward. The hands were covered by spindly veins under her paper-thin skin. She speared Anna with another of her piercing gazes that seemed to penetrate Anna’s armour until



she felt as if the older woman could see right into her soul. “Who did you piss off?”

Anna clenched her fists and stared at the floor. “Does it matter?”

The silence stretched until Anna shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She raised her chin slightly to stare at the files arranged in neat piles across the width of the L-shaped desk. A black laptop sat in the middle with a cordless mouse beside it, on a pad inscribed with the company logo. “I guess not.” The compassionate whisper barely carried across the desk. “Was it sexual harassment?” Anna shook her head. Mrs Karani’s shoulders sagged as she sighed, an almost inaudible breath of sound.

Anna looked over her shoulder. The bright mid-morning sunlight was streaming through the light grey venetian blinds matching the carpet, seat fabric and steel filing cabinets on one side of the room. “Journalism is all I know. It’s my dream.”

“Perhaps it’s time to find a new dream.”

Anna unclenched her fists and smoothed her palms over the black skirt she had donned for the meeting. She wore a matching jacket over a white silk blouse and black open-toed sling backs. Her skin was the colour of melted chocolate - smooth without blemish. Her high cheekbones, small perky lips, and well-shaped eyebrows above thick lashes hid her almond-shaped eyes, as she stared at her lap. Her hair was short and natural, styled into an afro. At about 5 ft. 4 inches tall, with a curvy hourglass figure, to say Anna was elegant was an understatement. She owned only one skirt suit and wore trousers and jeans most of the time.

Her last job as staff writer for the entertainment and lifestyle section of Kenya’s largest newspaper rarely required formal dress. She

hated the job. She longed to cover hard news - business, politics and crime. Instead, she had been stuck writing for the weekend edition of the *Observer* for several years. She didn't care that the Saturday magazine drove sales, ensuring the Saturday edition had the second highest circulation in the company's stable. There were days she wanted to scream at the thought of doing one more article about how to keep things hot in the bedroom, find Mr Right, or cook the perfect recipe for your boyfriend's birthday dinner.

Losing her own boyfriend after a 7-year relationship was not the reason, Anna assured herself. Or his marriage barely three months after he moved out of their apartment, to a woman who was pregnant with his child. She still spent many nights shaking with sobs as tears drenched her pillow, reeling at the loss of her college sweetheart and first love. They were supposed to age together. What went wrong? She threw herself into work. If she kept herself busy, she wouldn't have time to dwell on the broken shards of her love life. Or, the fact that despite her hinting to Ken about marriage for three years and getting nowhere, it had taken Jeanne less than three months to convince him that he was ready for marriage and babies. Clearly, Anna wasn't 'The One'.

Despite this, Ken wasn't the reason she wanted off the lifestyle pages of newspapers. Brian Okello was, or at least, what he represented. The golden boy of the newsroom had fascinated her from the first day he appeared at the *Observer* two years back. Gangly, dark skinned and clean shaven, Brian, 25, often prowled the newsroom aimlessly a whole morning as if lost. He would stop at her chair and, bending down whisper anxiously, "I have nothing for today. Got any ideas?" before continuing to crisscross the room.

The next morning she would open the paper to find his by-line on the front page. "Brian, I thought you were stumped and didn't have



a story? How did you come up with this in two hours?” Brian always shrugged, acting as if it was normal to conjure page one stories from thin air, as he typed rapidly using two fingers, another trait of his. He spoke little, in a low soft tone that forced the listener to strain to understand the words. He sometimes gave the impression that he was aloof. Beneath that exterior lay a brilliant mind with an uncanny ability to ferret out corporate secrets.

His brilliance did not extend to technology though. Any kind of new gadget tied him up in knots. Anna remembered with amusement the time he needed to record a particularly sensitive source for a big story. Brian could not work the recorder after a 30-minute tutorial. In exasperation, the News Editor finally switched on the pen-shaped device; tucked it inside his shirt pocket - Brian never wore jackets - and sent him off with the recorder running. It recorded everything as Brian walked the streets, took a *matatu*, and met his informant. It also recorded the trip back to the office until the News Editor switched it off, three hours later. Anna loved to tease him about that incident much to his chagrin.

Her stories never required the use of a recorder. She longed to cover stories so juicy or scandalous that they trended all day on social media, with people threatening lawsuits after the paper exposed their nefarious activities. Brian’s stories had landed him in hot water several times, with angry demands for his sacking. His watertight stories, with all the facts, figures and hard evidence to back them up ensured these threats never materialised. She would have found his brilliance intimidating if they weren’t such good friends. She felt a little inadequate compared to him. No one had ever threatened to sue the paper or demand that her boss sack her for writing a story.

Instead, her sources often asked how she could get them front-page coverage instead of a feature in the magazine section. A professor

and leading researcher at the University of Nairobi's School of Medicine often lamented that the newspapers always buried health stories in the inside pages. He could not understand why because health affected the entire population. "Why do you media people attach so much importance to politics putting it on the front page day in day out?" he once asked her in frustration.

Anna had a ready answer. "Ever heard the phrase, 'If it bleeds, it leads.'" He shook his head. "It's the unwritten rule in the newsroom. You never want to be on the front page of the *Observer*. Why? Because most likely, it means you're dead and the news is already trending on social media. And it has to be a violent death such as a plane crash, road accident, murder, terrorist attack or natural disaster. For a doctor, maybe there was an outbreak of Ebola and you contracted it while treating an infected person. I can already see the headline, '*Heroic doctor's ultimate sacrifice*,' with his large picture underneath smiling, taken in happier times." A cheeky smile complemented her hand gestures to illustrate the masthead of the newspaper.

"If you're still alive and there's no RIP hashtag with your name attached, blowing up Twitter and Facebook, it means either you did something horrible, or it happened to you. Maybe you were caught in a sex scandal, committed a terrible crime or you're facing financial ruin and we're about to hold a memorial for your bank account or company. In short, your life is a crapshoot. Media attention is usually the last thing anyone needs or desires at that point. But ironically, that is when you get it, acres of coverage. Media will milk the scandal for every juicy detail."

She smiled when she remembered the professor's horrified reaction to her explanation of how things work in the newsroom. Anna spent two frustrating years in media because she did not understand this unwritten rule. So, she tried to fight the system. "The exception is a



Kenyan athlete winning a gold medal; but not just any gold medal. Kenyan athletes win medals so often, it's no longer news. It has to be something special. The first time a Kenyan woman won the Olympic gold for the marathon for example. If our rugby or football team wins the world cup, it will definitely be front page news," she concluded with another cheeky smile.

Brian's track record of consistently delivering splashes ensured that he lived by a different set of rules from other reporters. He strolled into the newsroom at 10 am most days, two hours after the official 8 am reporting time and no one raised an eyebrow. He never read his work to check for spelling mistakes, insisting that was the Sub-Editor's job. Everyone forgave him because of the exclusive news he delivered.

Rumours about their biggest competitor trying to poach him swirled around the newsroom a year after he joined the paper. The CEO called Brian into his office for a chat over a cup of tea. Brian walked out with a 50 per cent salary bump, according to the rumour mill. Anna had never set foot in the CEO's office located on the tenth floor. Imagine achieving the kind of respect where the CEO considered her too valuable to lose. Writing 'pink' topics would not get her there or her by-line on the front page.

Then the story with the potential to change the trajectory of her career landed on her lap, literally. She was cracking jokes with Amina, on their way back to the office after lunch when she felt a light tap on her shoulder. "Are you Anna Kairu of the *Observer*?"

Anna turned and saw a tiny, light-skinned woman with waist-length box braids. She looked like a strong wind could easily blow her off her feet. Anna wondered how her tiny head could possibly hold up so much hair. Her black skinny jeans, red beaded top and matching

five-inch strappy heels looked expensive. The woman grasped her arm in a surprisingly strong grip, frantic appeal in her eyes. “Yes, I’m Anna.”

The stranger glanced up and down the street, swarming with lunchtime crowds. She looked frightened. Anna’s eyes narrowed in interest as the woman bit her bottom lip in a nervous gesture before speaking. “I need to talk to you about a story for the paper.”

“Sure, why don’t we go to the office and...?”

“No!” Her whispered interruption was sharp, with an emphatic shake of her tiny head. “I can’t risk him finding out.”

“Who?” Anna’s journalistic instinct went into overdrive. She watched the other woman jerk the strap of her oversize handbag off her shoulder, open the zip and reach inside, after another furtive glance up and down the street. Anna shivered even though the January sun was blazing from a clear blue sky. She glanced over the woman’s shoulder and then behind her, expecting to see some danger barrelling down on them, but no one was even paying attention to them. Amina and her two other colleagues had continued walking and were now several feet away.

“Please, come to this address at 6 pm. I’ll tell you the whole story.” She thrust a folded paper into Anna’s hands.

“What’s this about?”

“I can’t talk here.” She grasped Anna’s arm again and squeezed it, eyes bright with unshed tears. “Will you come, please?”

“I need a little more information to go on.”

The woman nibbled her bottom lip and hesitated as if debating

something within herself. Then she leaned closer and whispered, “My sister’s ex-boyfriend has kidnapped their baby. He’s holding him hostage. She hasn’t seen him in three weeks. He’s imprisoned her in her flat, won’t let her go anywhere! He won’t allow her to see her friends or family without his driver present. The driver is also his spy. He reports all her movements and conversations to him.”

“Why?” Anna asked mystified.

“He’s trying to force her to sign legal papers giving up all parental rights to Jonathan.”

“The police...”

“Won’t do anything. He owns them. Please, she needs your help. Come to my bridal shower tonight at Sarah’s apartment. She ambushed him at the last minute, told him it’s a surprise party for me. He can’t cancel it without drawing attention and that’s the last thing he wants. It starts at 7 pm. He’ll have someone watching the guests, so come an hour early and use the service entrance at the back of the building. I’ll sneak you in so it looks like you’re part of the catering team.”

Anna shook her head in disbelief. This had to be some kind of joke. Was Amina playing a trick on her? Yet, this woman looked really scared. She had piqued Anna’s curiosity, although she wasn’t yet sold on the idea of going to some stranger’s bridal shower on a whim.

“Please?” The woman gripped her arm tighter. Anna winced.

“I don’t even know your name,” she dithered.

“My name is not important...” she hesitated again. “Sarah’s ex-boyfriend, the man holding her baby hostage...”

“Yes?” Anna prompted, leaning forward until their faces were practically nose-to-nose. Anna inhaled her perfume, a delicate floral fragrance that probably cost thousands of shillings for a few ounces.

“His name is Kihoto Ndegwa.” Anna gasped, eyes widening in shock. The other woman watched keenly as comprehension dawned on Anna. “See you at 6 pm?” Anna nodded lamely. “My name is Tina.” She turned and ran down the street, disappearing around the corner before Anna could unscramble her brain to respond.

Mrs Karani’s cough brought her back to the present. “How about some freelance work? I can write under a pseudonym,” Anna suggested, shaking off her distractive thoughts. This woman had been honest but kind. Perhaps she could still help. Anna was tired of pounding the pavements looking for work. She needed to earn some money fast before her landlord’s patience wore thin and he evicted her.

“Your real name would be on the payroll. I’m afraid my hands are tied. Perhaps after a few months, we can revisit your request.” With that, Anna’s last hope faded away. Ndegwa had skewered her good and proper. How could one man have so much clout in newsrooms? Talk about life being unfair.

She nodded, tried to smile and failed, then stood and stretched out her hand. “Thank you for making time to see me.”

Mrs Karani shook her hand. “Good luck Anna.”

The barbiturates were beginning to take effect. Sarah McLachlan’s raw melancholic voice echoed Anna’s desperate need to replace her despair with emptiness, weightlessness and fly away in the arms of an angel. The haunting soothing strains surrounded her, soft tentacles lulling her deeper into slumber, until she floated on



a cloud. Dark. Warm. Safe. The fear, worry, isolation and despair of the last few months vanished, replaced by an incredible sense of peace as the last moorings holding her to this life faded away. Jo's face intruded but she shook her head to dispel the image. She would be alright. She had to be. Anna whispered a prayer to her sister or perhaps it was just her last conscious thought flickering across her mind.

Forgive Me.