

Chapter 1

“See You Soon”

“Another grenade attack.” Richard dug his fingers into the ridges along the steering wheel and drew a deep breath. “Where’s this going to take us?”

“Sha, Richard!” Cyusa’s voice quickly levered Richard away from mulling over these latest news headlines. “What’d ya think of the last question on the biostatistics exam!”

“Huh-huh-huh!” Richard’s throaty half-laugh brought him back into the close-knit lightheartedness. “That professor, now he...”

More talk of exams, classes, and the latest campus news filled the little Peugeot as it hurried along the highway, down into the valley and past the Rwasave Cooperative. None of the five in the car paid any particular attention to the long, sun-splashed rows of beans, tomatoes, onions, and other table crops in the gardens blurring past the windows. Nor did they give any thought to the fact that those very vegetables would soon be harvested and packaged and rushed onto a plane to be flown away and fed to the projects growing market in France. None of them even commented on the beautiful hues and eye-catching textures of the thickly treed Rwandan National Arboretum, which forested the upsweep beyond the gardens and rolled back toward the university’s main campus. They had seen it all a thousand times before, had strolled the paths, had enjoyed the shade and park-like ambiance created by having so many different trees from so many different places in the world planted in one place. And it was so convenient to their residence halls. The forest and the gardens were simply there - a part of life as it was and should be, and they had no doubt that they would all see it a thousand times again.

“Sha, Aline!” Sylvie suddenly leaned forward as if she had just thought of something important, the Kinyarwanda sha, campus in-word for showing close friendship, tipping automatically from her tongue. “Which printers doing your invitations?”

The sun created a quick pearling of miniature rainbows along Aline’s hair when she turned, facing around just enough to speak over her shoulder. “I’m not sure; that’s why I’m staying with my sister in Kigali this week. Invitations. Cake. Candles. Napkins. There’s so much to do to get ready.”

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Richard held the old car to speed, and while the women deliberated about the best way to serve the cake at the reception, they raced through the valley, beyond the gardens, over a bridge, and up the next hill.

“Have you decided for sure on the date?” Lydia asked.

Just then, they rounded a curve. Richard wrenched the wheel to miss a cyclist who had been shunted wide onto the asphalt by the huge mound of green bananas lashed to his bikes carrier. Three chickens, legs trussed and beaks wide, dangled head-down from the top of the load.

“That, yes! August 28!” Aline seemed not to notice that they blasted at only a hair s breadth past the struggling cyclist and his chickens.

“Sha, Aline!” Richard cut in. “You haven’t told me yet if you know how to make those fancy baskets, you know, the ones that every good woman...”

“Oh, Richard.” She batted her hand toward him. “How many times do I have to tell you? You’ll see. On our wedding day, you’ll see.”

He sneaked a quick glance sideways - her blue blouse, the clarity of her dark complexion, her high cheekbones, the upsweep of her hair - and he drew a deep breath, as if by inhaling he could better fix her image in his mind and therefore prevent it from fading during the week they would be away from each other. He often bragged about her, boasting to his buddies that she had the beautiful eyes of a young calf. She deserved nothing but the best, and that was one of the highest compliments a Rwandan man could give the woman he had chosen to be his wife. “I hope I’ll like what I see,” he teased.

“You’ll see!” she repeated. “Just because I’m majoring in economics doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten all our traditions. Our home will be...” She broke off suddenly and smiled. “You know that a groom mustn’t know a thing about the gifts his bride will bring to the house on their wedding day. You’ll just have to wait.”

“Well, I’m profoundly glad I’m not my grandfather, who had to wait till his wedding day to see who his bride would be!” He clucked his tongue. “I like this modern way better, and I like what I see now.”

“Oh, Richard!”

He chuckled, amused at the way she exaggerated the initial sound of his name, catching it with her tongue and turning it from a French R into the Kinyarwanda way of pronouncing it almost like saying d and l and r all at the same time.

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“Richard’s making final arrangements this week for the finishing work on our house, you know.” She turned again to their friends sitting in the back. “We’ll live there till he starts his residency. Then...”

He heard with satisfaction the trace of pride underlying her words, and the soft assurance in her voice as she spoke of their future together filled him with a momentary all’s-right-with-the-world happiness that almost matched the panoramic beauty before them. Cotton-puff clouds flecking a rich blue. Banana plantings, green and verdant, covering the hillsides. Stately eucalyptus bordering both sides of the roadway. At the end of the next valley, distant hills crinkled together, chaining upward into the Nile-Congo Crest and northward toward the volcanic Virunga. Rwanda. The country of a thousand hills. The little Switzerland of Africa, some said, though Richard doubted that his country’s conical, olive-clad mountains matched the rugged grandeur of the Swiss Alps. At least they didn’t look like the Alps he had seen in pictures.

Overhead, the sun beamed down warm and steady, a rare treat during April, when rains are usually at their heaviest, making it a perfect day to begin what he hoped would be a good vacation. Though they had hardly more than a week away from campus, it would serve as a good breather before that last-quarter push, which would bring him to the final exams of medical school. This would also be his first real visit home in more than two years. He had been in close contact with his parents - that was matter of course with all the responsibilities they shared in preparing for the traditional engagement feast and the dowry ceremony. He had even visited with them in the home away from home they had set up when skirmishes between the rebels and the national army during the war of ‘90-‘91 had nearly trapped them under their own roof. Since then, his father had also been overseeing the general construction of his house, but Richard hadn’t driven out to where it was being built on the old home place since...

Abruptly he interrupted his own train of thought. “And tomorrow - in church - you’ll say a prayer for us?”

“Oh, course!” Aline’s reply came automatically. “I always pray for us. Besides, its Easter.”

“I know its Easter. That’s why we have the week off. Huh-huh-huh.” The quickness of his deep chuckle and his mischievous grin served to steer the conversation back into a lighter vein. A mustache neatly accented his full features, and the impeccable way his shirt draped his huskiness gave him the air of a young man well-placed in this world. But it all was a cover for what he was really feeling inside.

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He didn't want the others to know about his uneasiness, especially not Aline. That morning, when the national news had reported more grenade attacks, he could not help but worry. Almost every day someone was killed. Three here. Two there. Another few elsewhere. In addition, two high-ranking politicians had been assassinated during the previous weeks. "Political killings," he repeated to himself now. "Maybe. But you don't have to be a genius to see that real underlying problem is all about ethnic" Since the beginning of the civil war, provoked when the Tutsi-dominated FPR (Rwandan Patriot Front) invaded the northern sector of the country from Uganda in October of 1990, tensions between Rwanda's two main tribes, the Hums and the Tutsis, had steadily worsened.

He glanced again at Aline, now chatting over her shoulder with their friends. She seemed so at ease, as if being beside him made her feel completely safe. That's how he wanted her to feel. As for himself, he felt he had known her forever, although she had walked into his life for the first time ever on a September afternoon in 1992, less than two years ago. He and Cyusa had been sitting with a group of fellows at the video, as they called the bench near the kiosk fronting the university entrance, when a group of young women strolled into view.

"New," Cyusa had remarked. "Must be coming to register."

The others began to analyze the prospective coeds, commenting on the new interest they would add to the campus, but Richard said as little as possible. He could hardly take his eyes off the one in the middle. Her bearing, the grace with which she walked, so much like his mother, yet... Fve got to find some way to meet that one, he told himself. I wonder who she is.

With the faculty of medicine situated away from the main campus, he had no opportunity even to learn her name until the following month. Although the university had banned freshman initiation, second-year boys carried on a clandestine tradition called umusoto. During the first month of school, they randomly picked on the new girls, trying to catch one alone and badger her into expressing herself in a manner no Rwandan woman of good breeding would ever use. The young woman's responses would peg her on the boys' rating list. Richard began hanging around the younger fellows, hoping that one umusoto group or another might lead him to the woman he had seen, hoping, at the very least, to learn her name. One October evening, his plan worked. The next evening, he went to Aline's room.

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“There’s a gang coming to get you for umusoto,” he warned. “If you’d like, I’ll stay to protect you.”

She had liked. The following October, they had become engaged.

So much like my mother, he thought again, remembering why he had been attracted to her in the first place. So beautiful, so tender, so... The word that came to his mind did not mean at all to him what it could have implied to others. “So Tutsi.”

He was thinking of her manners, the way she carried herself, the quiet, gentle way in which she related to others, and not of her being a member of one tribe or another. Yet he could not escape the tribal implications. His own family had been torn apart because of inter-ethnic fighting when he was small, and he still felt the scars from all the years he had been without his mother.

Hutus say I’m Tutsi; Tutsis say I’m Hutu; both call me “Hutsi.”

That new term was coming more and more into common usage, especially around the university. And foreigners don’t understand

Since all Rwandans speak a common tongue, Kinyarwanda, with French as their second national language and with the two main tribal groups, the Hutus and the Tutsis, sharing a common cultural heritage, it’s easy for the casual onlooker to confuse the two peoples. Yet the differences between them are so great that when Richard was small, his mother had been chased away from their home because she was a Tutsi. No matter what democratic ideas and determinations had spread across the African continent during the early nineties, Rwanda still accepted no official blurring of tribal lines. In their patrilineal society, Richard, like his father, was Hutu. He and Shema and Marie-Pierre, his little sisters, though belonging to the group labeled in French as hybrids, were officially three little Hutus who belonged to their Hutu father and had been kept by him when their Tutsi mother was forced to leave.

Hutsi. He rolled the new word over in his mind. Me. Aline... That was one of the reasons why he had felt so drawn to her - she understood, she was part of the same ambivalence, she, too, was a Hutu who in looks and behavior strongly favored her Tutsi mother. That was only natural, for the behavior part, at least, because Rwandan mothers are responsible for educating their children in social graces and moral conduct. All five of us here in the car Hutsi.

His thoughts paused. Although Rwanda has no official middle group, most of their close friends were Hutsi. They could all comfortably associate with folks from both tribes, yet he keenly felt

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that the current buildup of political tensions was making it more and more difficult for them to be accepted by either side. He drew a deep breath, then spoke. "If the president and the others in Arusha this weekend manage to agree and to sign..." he began.

"Sha, Richard!" Aline's voice carried a note of playful warning. "You promised me not to talk of any of those terrible politics, especially not today. We have so many happy things to talk about. Right? Lydia? Sylvie? Cyusa?"

"Well, if he does," Richard continued as though he had not heard, "that may give us good reasons to be happy and to celebrate with our families this week."

"How about us getting together again at the Jacaranda?" Cyusa suggested. "Dinner one evening after vacation. On the balcony. Enjoy the view. And the company." Cyusa looked sideways at Sylvie. "I'm sure we can find plenty of reasons to celebrate, no matter how successful the president's talks are this weekend," he continued.

"Great idea!" Richard agreed. "How about the first Sunday after classes start again - to celebrate the good fortune of all of us?" For the university crowd, the Jacaranda was one of the favorite eating places in Butare. In fact, they had just come from having lunch there before starting the drive home. Then, almost before he realized it, they were whizzing along the straight stretch of highway through the last valley, past the lone tree where a colony of yellow-billed storks nested every year, and twisting up into the hills of the city. He dropped off the others, and then he was saying goodbye to Aline at her sister's place. She stood looking up at him, and he noted again the beautiful softness of her deep brown eyes. "It's going to be a long week without you." He sighed and drew her close. "Have a happy Easter!" he whispered.

She nodded, then murmured, "Good luck!"

He understood what she meant. A Rwandan man was expected to have a house built on the family lands before his marriage. It was not going to be easy to find a trustworthy carpenter with whom to leave all the finishing details and who would be certain to make it a home worthy of this gentle treasure he had found. "I'll need it." He smiled, kissed her lightly, and then turned toward the car. "See you soon," she called after him.