

MAGGIE

FILLEN

THE RETURN



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*“Get up, get out, get away from these liars
'Cause they don't get your soul or your fire
Take my hand, knot your fingers through mine
And we'll walk from this dark room for the last time”*

—Snow Patrol

Prologue

It had not come yet. It had not made its move, but there was a thick warning in the air that only the tribesmen could feel. We, mere tourists and weak-minded victims of the ruthless real world, could not sense its coming. No one could really expect us to, since we all had been living our lives blind and deaf, being herded aimlessly around like sheep, down street corners, into cubicles, and through suburbia without a second thought in our tiny little minds. No one could blame us for being so joyfully oblivious, innocently sitting around the fire the night before we no longer were measly tourists but then true souls of the greater unknown, the deep abyss, the only true abstract and the only thing worth living for.

Some might not blame us for being so unaware, but if only we had known, if only we had listened to the far-off pleadings of the people of this land and the warnings of the wind as it swept through our neatly combed hair. We had all wanted to look so pretty for that first night around the fire.

No one could blame us. Such gentle, simple sights as seeing my parents sitting across from me made me smile, and the other families all cozy as they were huddled together made me jealous, bonding with each other and sharing travel stories.

And it's funny to think, even now, such trivial details and emotions of life that I was experiencing at that moment in time around the campfire—romance, jealousy, happiness, and warmth still meant so much even in the most desperate and apparently final moments of one's life. When humans are reduced to the sheer species they evolved from, maybe pandemonium breaks out and the wolf inside all of us is free from all social order and herding. But in that darkness that enshrouds us, that pushes us down that dark and frightening cliff, a light will always shine amongst the shouting and the despair. It is those emotions that make us human and that keeps us human no matter how much we are treated like uncaged beasts. If we use that light at the bottom of the abyss, we can keep the candle lighted. In all ways intangible, the seemingly trifling details of one's pointless existence aren't so insignificant after all. Perhaps there is some light to every caged and uncaged situation.

But here, sitting in the middle of Africa at this moment in time, I felt wholly human yet, at the same time, like a phoenix. I felt trapped in a body that I was sure was not mine, and I actually believed that I was more than the weak-minded mortals crowding together around me. It was the only thought that kept me from succumbing to my predetermined fate of being tied down by gravity and order to this solid, concrete existence. Surely there had to be some line between the sheep and the wolf.

And here, right now, we were all mortal. We were all humans, even the bushmen who claimed to be not herded by any higher power other than the sun and the stars; even *they* were being controlled by a large puppeteer above them. If he had had his very own free will, then I guess none of this would have ever happened. But there's no time for regret.

Dreams

Even with all the genocide and corruption, Africa had always seemed like a fantasy world to me, living in my boring house in boring America. Simply even picturing the shape of the continent, the expansive night sky, the little thatch huts with half-naked black people walking around outside, giraffes and elephants running through miles of wide-open frontier, made me detest where I lived more and more.

Here I was—surrounded by tall buildings polluting the air. The most wildlife we had around our house were squirrels and birds, and we had about two black people at our school, and they were just as white and boring as the rest of us. It was always my dream to be able to say, “T.I.A.” to someone and really be passionate about it. No one says “T.I.A.” to mean “This is America.” No, the people over there said, “This is Africa,” with such passion, saying that even if the country goes to hell, they will go down with it.

People go back from their calm apartment on the East Coast to war-torn countries in Africa because they can’t escape that continent. It gets inside you, I heard. And here, people were proclaiming they would move to Canada so they could get free health care or so they won’t have to fight when the draft comes in.

Don't get me wrong. I really loved America a lot. I was born and raised here, and I'm sure I couldn't be safer anywhere else. I grew up in D.C. and moved to the West Coast four years ago so my dad could follow his dream of running a law firm in Portland, Oregon.

But being safe and protected here was my problem. I needed some excitement. Not that I envied the kids over there who ran away every night to escape being child soldiers. But maybe something in between would have been nice. Every day I came home from school from the same boring classes and sat at the computer and imagined my life in a different way. *Maybe I could be an FBI agent*, I thought, as I watched the latest *Without a Trace* on TV. Or maybe I could be a globetrotter, hopping from country to country, saving the environment one tribal village at a time. Or maybe I could be an archeologist like Indiana Jones and swing on vines and hide from the Nazis. Or at least, float down the Nile River, uncovering Egyptian ruins, and trying not to get shot by locals or eaten by crocodiles.

I mean, still, as an 18 year old, I was pretty content with my life. I was rich and had friends. I had a few hobbies and pursued them from time to time. I was going to graduate from high school in nearly 3 months, and I had kept good grades and was going to Georgetown in the fall. But I didn't want my life to just be "normal" and "okay." I wanted to go to bed every night out of breath from everything that happened that day or to be so overwhelmed with everything I had seen that day I couldn't even think.

That's why I knew when I saw the family trip to Africa online that I had to go. My parents had let me go to Costa Rica last summer with a teen community service program, so I assumed they would be okay with going to Africa with me.

"Absolutely not," my dad said without looking up from his *Land's End* magazine.

“Dad! Mom! Come on, it’s a *safe* part of Africa. It’s Totoba. It’s basically America! There’s no war there. It’s totally safe. People *like us* live there. *Nick* is even living there right now.” I knew this had to get them.

“Oh, so *that’s* why you want to go?” my mom retorted.

“Well, that was *a* reason.”

“Still no,” Mom said.

“Come on! I’ll never ... see him again if I don’t go. He was the trip leader in Costa Rica, and I only saw the surface of him, and he’s so amazing, Mom, please. I just want to see him again. Plus ... it’s *Africa!* You don’t know how much I need to go there.”

At last, my dad looked up, peering at me through his horned-rimmed glasses. “Where is it in Africa?”

I hesitated. “Outside of Kenya ...”

“Kenya? Absolutely not. They are still fighting there.”

“No, no, no. This country is peaceful. They split so they can have peace. Even though it’s pretty much in the Rift Valley, they are peaceful. We won’t get hurt. It said so on the Web site. We’ll be safe. Why would we be going if they deemed it unsafe?”

“You really want to go?”

“Of course.”

“Well,” my mom said after a short pause, “we have to research the country and the program and where we’re staying and ...”

“Okay, I’ll ... I’ll do that for you, okay? I’ll do it right now.”

I ran to my computer. Just the thought of seeing Nick again made my heart rush. In fact, it raced as I browsed pictures of the country online. The steady African drums were already beating for me, and I knew that I was going to go there and be captured by the Lost Continent like everyone else.