

Thirst  
By Elizabeth Cain

CHAPTER SEVEN

*Shanga*

The move to Arusha did not go as well as I had hoped. I decided I should take a truck by myself with most of our belongings, construction material, and horse trailer with Jester on board. Suzanna and Kivuli would stay with the Farleys until I could fix up the plantation house for appearance and safety. My wife and daughter would fly up in a week or two. Reena asked us to rent the apartment because she wasn't quite ready to give it up and take her car to Father Amani for Joshua when he came to Dar to finish his vocation under the priest's watchful eye.

All of this would have been fine, but then Suzanna wept for hours over something her stepfather said, and her mother threatened to sue for custody of Kivuli, thinking the baby was Suzanna herself and had been taken from her at birth! This happened while I was out buying wood and paint and roofing in a borrowed truck that didn't have the right hitch for any of the Post's horse trailers.

Suzanna described the scene in the bungalow between sobs that caused the birthmark to burn her cheek for hours after.

"He said I had an obligation to my mother! I was ungrateful and selfish to leave her in her delusional state. I needed to help her get back on an even keel! Like that's possible! Then he said, 'You could stay for your mother, as I have stayed for her, and for you. It's the honorable choice.'"

"I think we live by a different code of honor ... sir," Suzanna had said and then closed the front door behind her.

Farley called me and apologized. He said, "Askari, you are the best thing that has ever happened to this family. I hope you won't stay away forever. I couldn't bear it."

I hardly knew what to say. "I won't let you down, sir," was all I could think of in that moment. But it occurred to me to ask him help me find my father, to give him a task that would make him feel valuable to us.

When I mentioned my plan to Suzanna, she said, "Please don't do it."

Later, I heard Suzanna on the phone with Safina. "I need to come stay with you now! I can't be here ... Can't she go away for a few days? Just until we have the house cleaned and Askari patches the roof? ... Oh ... When is that happening? ... Okay, go with her. I'll keep the leopard company ... Maybe in two or three days?"

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She and Mvua have to go to Dodoma to the government offices to sign some papers for the twins' adoption. I'm so glad your mother and Baraka wanted them. I think Iyeala is a little lost in her new home. Anyway, I can stay in the hut at Shanga. Dakimu will be home with Reena."

"That's good then. I'll come to Shanga after working on our house and doing whatever Mr. Heinrickson needs me to do. I don't want you alone with Chui."

"I can put him in his crate," she said.

"We'll see," I said.

By the end of the next day, I had gathered most of the materials I required and found a proper hitch for the trailer. Suzanna admitted she felt better about helping me with the long drive and managing Jester. "I need to put Dar es Salaam behind me," she said.

"Don't you want to say good-bye to your folks?"

"No. I'll just call and tell them where we'll be," she said.

"Do you think they'll ever come to Arusha?"

"Fulsom, maybe. Never my mother."

"Do you have any feelings for your mother?"

"I think the question is does she have any feelings for me? She's trying to take Kivuli! How am I supposed to deal with that?"

I could not answer her. She was turning her back on the only parents she'd ever known, while I desperately wanted to find my father, a father who didn't know I existed and had no choice in the matter.

I bought the truck, but I didn't tell Suzanna the major had given me a loan so I would be able to afford the vehicle. In spite of his tirade earlier, Farley seemed pleased to do this for me. We spent three days packing the rest of our belongings into the bed of the truck and tack room of the horse trailer. Then we went to see Father Amani, but he could not stop talking about the soon-to-be-in-seminary Joshua and asked a hundred questions about Safina's orphan project. We didn't say anything about Mvua. We spent our last night in Dar in an almost empty apartment.

At dawn on the fourth day, we finished gathering up our few possessions and items Reena wanted, loaded Jester, and sat for a minute with the engine idling when we saw Fulsom crossing the parade grounds. He came to the truck on Suzanna's side, and she rolled down the window.

"Are you off then?" he asked.

"Yes. I hope Mother doesn't trouble you over this."

"May we visit when you're settled?"

Suzanna looked at me helplessly.

"It's a long way, sir," I said.

He sighed. "I've been further ... for love," he said.

"And for hate," Suzanna said.

"Yes ... I have done that. I hope to be forgiven one day."

I reached over my wife and child and clutched his hand through the open window. I said, "The more time Suzanna and I have to build a life together, the more time there will be for forgiveness."

"Thank you, son," he said.

Suzanna stared straight ahead. Major Farley placed his hands on Kivuli's head. "I will pray for you," he said in a choked voice.

We drove out of the city. Kivuli slept, and Suzanna caressed her as she might have one of her childhood dolls. I remembered her telling me Safina had given her one of her black dolls when they were young. Now she had a breathing black doll in her arms. The miles slid by. At Dodoma, about half way to Arusha, after six hours on the road, we stopped to let Jester out for a short break. He nibbled the green grass along the edge of a lush park.

Suzanna said, "I was here once with Safina ... on a field trip. We were nine and eight. We sat on that fountain over there and didn't play with the other kids."

She hesitated, led Jester to a new patch of grass that hadn't been mowed, and then she spoke again. "There's an old, broken-down cathedral near here where we spent the night on the way home. Father Amani said Mass, and we took communion with day-old sandwich bread and grape juice."

She smiled, possibly remembering how odd and special that was at the same time.

"The service was blessed, and I thought God was in that broken-down cathedral for sure, but what I thought about most after that night was crawling into Safina's sleeping bag with her and how we whispered with our arms wrapped around each other that we'd never change, we'd always be together."

"Suzanna, you grew up. Things change, you—"

"Askari, do you think I'm a good person?"

"You are a very good person or else I wouldn't love you," I said.

"I killed a man."

"I know, darling. It was a strange and dangerous time for everyone."

"I don't tell the whole truth sometimes."

"Who does?" I asked.

"Right here in Dodoma, Safina kept a huge secret. She had seen her father, and he had given her that glass with the green ridge like a mountain around it. Her mother was with us disguised as a nun."

"Why does that matter now?"

"From Safina, I learned how to love. From Safina, I learned how to lie."

Jester jerked her away from me to fresher grass. I followed.

"Would you lie to me, Suzanna?"

"Yes, I would. To protect you, to keep you from ... entanglements," she said.

"I love you, Suzanna, but I believe you have been damaged by the lie Fulsom told you to keep *you* from entanglements."

"Safina kept her secrets too. I had to discover them for myself."

She stroked Jester to steady him as school children streamed into the park on their lunch break.

"Then I will discover your secrets for myself," I said.

"God willing, my dear Askari ... God willing."

There was less traffic beyond Dodoma, and we made good time. Mr. Heinrickson had set up a temporary corral and brought in a donkey from a neighboring farm so Jester would have company. Apparently, the donkey had kicked Chui a few times already, and the leopard avoided him. I was to stay in the dusty, little house with the leaky roof while Suzanna spent the night at Shanga. We didn't know who would be in Dakimu's hut, so I unhitched the trailer and drove her around to the center entrance. The gates were closed and locked, but when we shook one of the bells outside, a night watchman recognized us and let us in.

"Oh, Miss Safina waiting for you," the man said.

"Safina? I thought she was traveling with Mvua," Suzanna said.

"Mvua left yesterday. Safina did not feel well enough to go."

"She's sick?" Suzanna asked, frowning.

He glanced away, as if it was not his business, but said, "Something in stomach not right."

"I can take care of her," Suzanna said, as if she knew something no one else would understand.

We walked down the solar lighted pathway to the row of *vibanda* across the creek. We had barely reached Dakimu's hut when Chui uncurled himself to greet us outside the door, and then the door parted.

Safina cried at once, "Oh, I was so worried about you on the road with Jester and the baby. There are many highway thieves and beggars that bother travelers. I sent Kiiku to help you. Did you see him?"

"No," we both answered at the same time.

"It helps that you are black, Askari. You should run down and tell Iyeala you're safely here."

"Yes ... I will. Shall I go on back to the plantation then?" I asked my wife.

"I think so, darling. I'm so tired. I'll probably be asleep before you can reach your mother's hut."

Safina had taken Kivuli and placed her in a cradle she told us Dakimu made for the baby. Then she returned to the doorway.

"Are the twins at Shanga yet?" I asked her.

"No. There was some problem with the adoption papers. Mvua went to straighten it all out. She may be back tomorrow."

"I'll try to have the roof repaired, the cobwebs swept out, and our bed assembled by evening."

"We'll fix your dinner at sundown," Safina promised.

"That will be very welcome," I said.

They went inside, and I could see through the thin canvas door the shadow of a greeting I had no words for. I sat on Chui's crate, petting the wild leopard for a moment, and heard these words— "Oh, I have been so anxious waiting for you."

"I'm here now, and I will never leave you."

And the lamp in the *kibanda* went out.

In a few minutes, I was inside Baraka's hut with her and my mother, and they each hugged me, my mother perhaps holding on a bit longer.

"Have you gotten away without trouble?" Baraka asked.

"Yes. Fulsom was very polite, but his emotions got the better of him. I think Kivuli reminds him of the infant Suzanna," I said. I thought of the look in Farley's face as he placed his hands on our daughter. It was as if the last sane thing was being taken from him. "We didn't see Mrs. Farley. We'll probably never see them again."

"Suzanna is with Safina?" Mother asked.

"Yes. Just for tonight. I hope to have the plantation house livable by tomorrow night."

"We'll send some boys over to help you," Baraka offered.

"That would be great," I said.

My mother seemed to be struggling for the right words.

"Did the horse travel well?" she asked.

"Very well. He'll have an important place in our lives," I said. "Suzanna needs to ride again."

"And Kivuli?"

“We felt like a secure family, like nothing could harm us,” I assured her.

Baraka began to arrange their sleeping nets, but my mother stayed next to me as if wanting to shield me from some kind of harm that could come my way.

“Maybe I will go up to see little Kivuli in the morning,” Iyeala said.

“Yes, Mama, the baby needs to know her grandmother.”

She put her arms around me, and I felt something like a sob pass through her body. I supposed that was what secrets could do to you. You had to contain them, but they wore you down in the end. We said good night.

I drove slowly out of Shanga and around to the coffee plantation. I was surprised to find the leopard on the front porch of our new house. “Couldn’t stay with those crazy girls, huh Chui?”

Then I thought of all my wife had known—a wreck of a mother, a father who was not her own, and a birthmark that disfigured her appealing face. All she had known until Safina, who had seemed an antidote to Suzanna’s miseries. How could I deny her Safina now? Those girls had their secrets, their rosaries, their promises, and their sexual attraction. It was all one thing. But I would stand out, my love singular and powerful. I was the true *mlinzi*, and if I had to guard Safina too, well then I would. Chui purred and did not leave me all night.

Boys arrived early in the morning, and Mr. Heinrickson himself showed up to help. A truckload of dead plants, rotten wood, and floorboards went to the trash pile to be burned. We repaired and painted the white fence that enclosed the yard. I climbed onto the roof and replaced missing and chipped tiles. The teens worked the inside of the house to polished splendor.

I thought of the people at Shanga, living in thatched huts with dirt floors and sleeping hammocks. I felt like a king at the plantation, but I was a king without a father, a man to pattern myself after, to go on adventures with, and to love. There was an empty place in my heart, as perhaps never knowing her real father was an empty place in Suzanna’s heart. She might fill hers with Safina. I could only fill mine with my father, whoever he was.

In the late afternoon, we all took a break, and I walked with my boss down the coffee bean rows as he explained the fertilizing and watering and pruning plans for the trees. He said tomorrow he would build a better corral for Jester and fix the deteriorating barn with divided stalls for the horse and the donkey. He said the animals could keep the tall grass down during the long rains, and he would find a source for oats from some grain planters he knew near Kilimanjaro.

Then we moved the bed and our meager furniture into the house. Mr. Heinrickson found four unused bed posters in the attic of the main house and created a dreamy sleeping place with white netting floating down the sides from the high top rails. His wife brought a vase filled with roses and three cases of bottled water. She helped me make up the bed and welcomed me in a respectful, shy way. She was, she said, Xhosa and Indian and had met her husband in South Africa.

“My name is Jirah, and I hope to be friends with your wife. I rarely leave the plantation, and I am alone here.”

I promised to introduce them tomorrow and told her we had a five-month old baby girl named Kivuli.

“Oh, I have no children. You are very fortunate,” she said, and then she left the room as though she had said too much.

Just at dark, I walked over to Shanga by a path the leopard had made between the *vibanda* and the coffee plantation. He followed me. Fires burned outside the huts, and children played

with sticks and balls in the dirt. Baraka's hut was empty so I moved on toward Dakimu's. I heard Kivuli laughing her baby laugh and smelled a roast of some kind. Vegetables steamed on a grill outside, and Reena was setting tables with flowers, Dak's glassware, and a mismatch of plates and utensils. Chui got in his crate on his own. I supposed there were too many humans gathered for his taste.

Suzanna rushed into my arms, seemingly refreshed and shining. Her make-up was so perfect I could not see her birthmark. Reena handed everyone mango juice and corn cakes and wanted to hear everyone's news. Dak told us Kiiku had been hired by a safari company, doing a legitimate job, having outgrown the wild ways of the Leopard Clan. Baraka asked me about the plantation house, and I said everyone could visit soon. Suzanna had not even seen the luxurious bedroom, nor slept there. That I didn't say. I felt comforted by the night sounds in the woods behind the compound.

Safina held Kivuli. She had braided the baby's milk chocolate curls into tiny plaits. Here and there she had placed pieces of green ribbon.

"Still like that green, don't you?" Suzanna said.

"Still like what I liked all those years in Dar growing up," she answered.

I had brought the things Reena wanted from her apartment and the paperwork for permitting the new lease to an Indian man named Sanjay Patel, of all things! That was the name of the make-believe husband Reena had given when the school in Dar kept asking her about Safina's father years ago. Dakimu brushed peppery seasonings on the meat but did not smile. He seemed uncomfortable.

"Everything is too perfect," he said. "I can't relax." He turned to me. "Are you certain Farley will stay away from here?"

"He says he is in love with Kivuli, as if she were the daughter he never had," I said.

"If you're going to talk about my stepfather, I'm going in," Suzanna interrupted.

"I'm sorry," Dak said. "We should all forget him, please. He is nothing to us now."

But I could not keep silent. "I, for one, cannot find a reason to hate the man. He spared your life, Dakimu. He put the soldier who killed my sister in jail for life. He stayed with a deranged woman for the sake of a child that was not his. What do you want from him? Who knows what my own father has done? Who knows what I will do before my life is over?"

Iyeala looked at me through the smoke from the grill and raised her glass.

Then Mvua was there. She stepped immediately between Suzanna and Safina and whispered something in her ear. I could not abide such rudeness and said, "Safina! Come fill your plate and sit by me. I've not had two words alone with you since our reunion. I want to tell you what I've done to the plantation house and the barn. You'll be pleased."

"I think she'll be pleased to eat with me," Mvua said.

But Safina pulled away from her teacher, lover, whatever the woman was, and put a few bites of chicken and root vegetables in a glass bowl. When she chose a chair next to me, she said, "My father made this bowl. It's my favorite dish. I'll bring you a set like it for your new place, and I can see for myself what you've done."

Mvua glared at us. The others commented on the flavors of the food and the unseasonable warmth, anything but the obvious jealousy in the circle of friends. About thirty minutes later, my wife bent to me and said, "Let's go home now." She grabbed my hand. "Iyeala, if you and Baraka would care for an evening walk, you could bring Kivuli to us later."

No one missed the meaning of *that*. We headed for the dark woods. The leopard put his feet in our prints so softly we hardly knew he was behind us. We went directly to the bedroom. The flowers had been moved to a new dresser, probably provided by Mrs. Heinrickson, and the sheets were turned down. They were pearly white in the moonlight streaming through the bare windows.

“Askari, what a fantasy you have made here! I love it!”

“I love you,” I said.

“Show me,” she replied.

And I tried, yet it was I who was shown a thing I would never forget—from that night on, I knew when she’d been with Safina. She didn’t fling herself anew at my caress, but seemed to be continuing where she had left off, already wet and flushed, her lips already plump for kissing, her hands already on a path toward my orgasm, as if she were already in her own.

That night, she rolled onto her back and said, “Now this is what I’d call heaven itself.”

“Like Catholic heaven?”

“No ... just plain heaven on earth,” she said.

Later, when Iyeala brought Kivuli home, my mother didn’t speak but ran her hands all over my face like a blind person memorizing the contours of a loved one’s features—eyes, cheekbones, nose, mouth, chin. I closed my eyes until I could no longer feel her fingers.

“Mama?” I said.

But she was gone.