

**2020 KALEMBA**  
**short story prize**  
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## *I'll Keep You Safe*

**Vanessa Nakayange**

Hiding a body is harder than I thought it would be. These things are really hard to move around when the soul is no longer powering them, and it doesn't help that he is twice my size. I have a date tonight. I need to wrap this up as soon as I can. Dragging him down the stairs was hectic, but we are now down in the basement. The soft earth under my feet feels good. I cover him with a white bed sheet. It doesn't hide the fact that it is indeed a dead body, he isn't really blending in with the unused furniture we store in here, but the sheet makes me feel better. I know what you're thinking. It isn't common for houses in Lusaka to have basements, but my father is a very unconventional man.

I take out my phone to look at the time and it is very apparent that I will be late. I should rush to shower but my father always says a lady should take her time. I call my date to inform him that I will be late. I don't wear make up, but I take special care into looking after my hair. I have my outfit laid out. A black t-shirt, a plaid red and black skirt and a denim jacket. I don't need to pick out my shoes. I have been wearing the same sneakers all year round. Before I clean myself up, I have to clean up the crime scene in the living room. My victim had knocked over his tea when the poison had begun to take effect. What a pain, it messed up the carpet. I guess I should be glad he didn't get any of it on the couch. That would have driven me insane.

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Alex Musendo is a very anxious boy. He doesn't make eye contact and walks around like he expects you to make him the victim of a cruel joke. He suspected this when I asked him out last week. I find him sitting at a table in the corner of the restaurant biting his nails.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I say sitting down giving him one of my winning smiles.

"It's ok," he whispers before clearing his throat and repeating the words.

"What would you like to have?" He asks picking up the menu. We are in an Italian restaurant along the Great East road. The lighting and ambience gives off a cozy vibe. I pick up the menu, even if I have been here enough times to know what's on it. I always order the same thing, a chicken burger and I don't plan on changing anything tonight. A long period of silence follows after we order our meal. I think of the dead body in my basement and I wonder how long it would take for it to start decaying. I am not worried that anyone will stumble upon it. My father leaves the house for weeks at a time and he shouldn't be expected back anytime soon, but I can't shake the feeling that I should have covered my tracks more thoroughly.

"What is your major," Alex asks, the silence is obviously making him uncomfortable.

"Investigative journalism," I say taking a sip of my water, "It's almost as interesting as medicine."

He looks up at me stunned, "How did you know?"

"Because I pay attention."

He shifts his attention to the table and starts to fidget with the edge of it.

"You're always in dark clothes, you walk around hoping not to be noticed, you never look directly at people or leave your room if you don't need to," I am just showing off now. "Does knowing that I have been watching make you uncomfortable?"

He leans back in his seat, "A little," he says making eye contact for a second before looking away, "I just didn't think anyone noticed me,"

I smile, "Look at me," I whisper, I hope I don't sound hostile. He glances up at me.

"I mean really look at me," I say a little louder.

He sits up and focuses on my face. I see him as clearly as I hope he sees me. His hair looks better today, he probably put in a little more effort than he normally does. The skin under his eyes is the darkest part of his face, a result of lack of sleep. His skin isn't smooth, he has scares and blemishes, which I appreciate. The waitress approaches, taking us both out of this trance. He looks more nervous than he did when I sat down. We eat in silence. I catch him watching me every now and then but think he is too shy to actually say something and I don't push him.

"Ice cream?" I ask when we are done. He nods.

"I know a place not far from here," I say getting up and walking out of the restaurant ahead of him.

I take out my phone and go through my messages. Nobody seems to be saying anything of value. This isn't unusual but every time I go through my inbox, I hope and I am let down. He joins me when he is done paying the bill. I could have spilt it, but I let him have this one.

"This way," I say putting my phone away, smiling and walking ahead of him. I stop to wait for him to catch up. The cars are zooming past us and I can't help but wonder what's going through his mind.

"How far is it?" he asks after a few minutes,

"Scared of walking around in the dark with a little girl like me?" I tease.

"No, it's" he begins to say, "Nothing," he adjusts his hoodie and clears his throat.

"What year are you in?" I ask

He frowns for a moment but then realizes what I am asking. "Third year," he answers.

"Was medicine your first choice?"

He begins to fidget with the sleeve of his Hoody, "Umm, no, my dad thought it would be a good fit,"

"Dad's, am I right?" My attempt at being laid back.

He laughs weakly, very polite.

"Mine wanted me to study law like he did, I agreed but went ahead and did what I wanted. It will be one interesting conversation when he finds out,"

"I bet it will,"

"What about your mom?"

He shakes his head.

"It's ok, you don't have to talk about it. I get it. Parents are a tricky topic," mine went missing ten years ago. I suppose she couldn't handle my dad but she could have taken me with her.

"So what do you do for fun?"

He gives me one of his weak laughs, "I thought you knew everything,"

He is getting comfortable, "I mean I couldn't cross the stalker line,"

"I think you already did,"

"I was trying not to,"

I take a turn into a dark path but he doesn't turn with me.

"What's wrong?" I ask

"I think I should head back,"

I roll my eyes, "Come on, it's a short cut," he doesn't move

"No, I really should be heading back," he says looking around.

I walk up to him, "You really want this night to end?" I am standing uncomfortably close to him and he is trying not to look down

my shirt, "You can trust me," I whisper, I am being sincere and I hope it shows on my face, "I really don't want you to leave," I take his hand, "come on," I give him a little nudge and he follows reluctantly.

Not all boys fall for my charm but I am really glad it worked this time.

"How can you be so fearless walking around in places like this?" he asks, "don't you know what happens to people in parts like this?"

"I have a knife in my bag and I am not alone," I say.

"You have a what?" he asks stopping in his tracks,

"I think all women should have one," I say emerging from the path and into Elm Street.

"See?" I say taking his arm, "You had nothing to worry about".

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We are sitting in his parked car, watching cars drive by and listening to what he calls music but is actually jazz. The ice cream is long gone but there's a bottle of cheap wine on my lap. He hasn't had any on the account that he is driving, so I am drinking for both of us. I rest my knees on the dashboard and watch him. He is stiff and focused on the road.

"Why did you ask me out?" he asks.

"Why else?" I ask shifting in my seat before giving him my answer, "I think you're very attractive,"

He scoffs, I turn the music off and adjust my position so most of my body faces him.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I know what girl's like you are like."

Now I am the one scoffing, "what are girls like me like?"

He shakes his head, "I am just waiting for the other shoe to drop,"

“Kiss me,” I say when he finally looks at me. He wasn’t expecting that and it shows. He starts to blink rapidly and if he had a lighter skin tone, he would be red. My heart is racing, “do you want to?” I ask

“Yes buh,” he begins, I don’t let him finish, and my lips find his. The place we meet is warm and soft. I press against him and touch the back of his neck to encourage him. I want him to know that I am willing to give him all of me if he gives me all of him. I feel his shy hands go around my waist. This isn’t the first time I have been kissed or have kissed someone but it’s the first time I have been completely aware of someone else’s body. I am around people a lot, but it rarely registers to me that they are living individuals. They feel like figments, not as alive as I am, but, I feel this. I feel him. My hand makes its way under his shirt but he pushes me away when my exploring fingers stumbled upon a scar on his lower back.

I settle in seat, his shove wasn’t aggressive, it was more like a reaction than an attempt to hurt me. He seems to regret doing this immediately. We are both trying to catch our breaths. “I am sorry,” he says when he catches his.

“Don’t be,” I laughed softly, “its ok, and I am ok,”

I put on my seat belt “Well,” I sigh, “I think I should get home,”

“Ok,” he mutters starting the car, his voice is shaky and his hands are trembling, he looks like he is praying the earth could swallow him whole. I can’t help but feel that this is my fault but I don’t want to think about it right now.

It’s a twenty minute car ride from the restaurant to my house. In those twenty minutes not a single word is uttered. I step out of the car in front of my gate. My sneakers in one hand and my bag in the other. I walk over to the other side of the car, he rolls down his window and tries with great effort to smile at me.

“I had a really wonderful time,” I say, “Let’s do this again soon,”

He nods but the look on his face makes me think he doesn't feel the same way.

I give him a kiss on the cheek, "look at me," I whisper, he doesn't do it immediately.

"Text me," I say when he finally does. It's a plea. He nods, I am about to turn to walk towards my gate when I remember.

"Oh wait," I say, "just out of curiosity, from a medical students point of view, how best does one go about getting rid of a human body,"

He frowns. It looks like a thousand questions are going through his mind. His features soften and he taps his fingers against the steering wheel considering the question. "Probably cutting it up into pieces, smaller portions are easier to get ride of," he answers, "Why do you need this information?"

I laugh, "In case I kill someone, of course" I answer

"Don't," he says

"Even child rapists?"

His makes a face, "Okay, maybe them,"

I smile and walk away. My victim wasn't a child rapist, he was a professor.

I open my bag and fish around for my keys.

Professor Banda wore a mask. He pretended to care about his students, especially young girls like me. He gave you extra credit and acted like he genuinely wanted the best for you, but right before you wrote your finals he would slip his hand under your skirt and ask for something in return. I did the world a favor when I invited him home for tea. For all his talk about being a strong fierce man, he wasn't very graceful in the face of death. The fear in his eyes when he coughed up blood, the way his eyes widened and he started to gasp for air.

Everything about it was pathetic. I finally find the keys in a hidden pocket. I am angry now. I breathe deeply to calm myself down. I step through the gate. My heart rate increases when I notice my father's car in the drive way.

In a panic, I rush into the house dropping my bag and shoes in the kitchen before making my way into the basement. My dad is standing in front of the dead body. He doesn't to look at me. It feels like my heart will jump out of my chest. I am sweaty and trembling. I open my mouth to say something but only air comes out. It's over. The old bastard will turn me in without a second thought. I'll have to fight him. I could use the rope on the floor next to me and strangle him. But then what?

"Did you do this?" he asks, his voice is oddly calm.

"Yes," I squeak.

"What did he do," he asks turning to face me.

I can't compose my thoughts.

My father sighs and rubs his face, "How will you get rid of him?" he asks, "You must have a plan,"

I do, but all I can do is gape at him. He rolls his eyes, "How can you be so stupid?" he asks. He rolls up his sleeves, "Fetch me the rubber gloves and apron from the kitchen, we have a lot of work to do."