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THE LUCKIEST MAN ALIVE

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A humiliating removal from a flight leads
to a life-or-death search for the truth

Prologue

In the business-class cabin of Vivair Flight 002 to London, Chloe Mitchell, a lawyer for a group of exiled African politicians, glanced at the man beside her.

His face, etched with anguish, communicated the news before any words left his mouth. “They murdered Viktor. It’s confirmed.”

Chloe stared at him for a few seconds, her mind trying to process the revelation. They’d killed Viktor Malaba, the beacon of hope for the country of Njala, the man who vowed to dismantle corruption and champion an equal wealth distribution in their oil- and mineral-rich homeland. *Murder?* A cold wave of panic washed over her.

The politician leaned in closer. “It was an assassination, Chloe,” he whispered urgently. “The crash that killed Viktor . . . It was orchestrated.” He produced a USB stick from his jacket and held it to her with a trembling hand. “Everything is on here—evidence, names, plans. It’s all we have now.”

Chloe took the USB stick, her fingers brushing against his. “Is there another copy?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“No, there was no time. You must keep it safe,” the politician replied, his eyes darting nervously.

Chloe’s face contorted as she realized what a precarious position she was in. She was now an even bigger target, carrying the only evidence of a conspiracy that could topple a regime. She grasped the USB stick, which suddenly felt heavier.

She hurriedly grabbed her laptop and connected the USB stick. With a few clicks, she had password-protected the device, using a password she knew was memorable and hoped was secure, momentarily quelling her rising anguish. She returned her laptop to its bag and slid it under the ottoman in front of her. She then looked at the USB stick in her hand, turning it over before clasping her hand around it tightly.

Her gaze shifted to the screen in front of her, with its anodyne welcome graphic on a loop. Covering her mouth with her hand, she tried to calm the thoughts speeding through her head, but her heart now joined the race. Every day, she seemed to get deeper into something, and now this.

Her attention snapped to a disturbance behind her. Peering around the seats, she saw a man being escorted off the plane by the police—a drunk passenger, by the looks of it—an impulsive plan formed in her mind, risky but potentially lifesaving. Without a second thought, Chloe stood up and moved into the aisle, pretending to look for something in the overhead compartment. As the police officer pushing the man reached her, she stopped and turned. Then, as she mumbled an apology and moved aside, she deftly slipped the USB stick into the outside pocket of the drunk man's jacket.

Returning to her seat, Chloe watched the entourage with the drunk depart the aircraft. She pulled out her phone and composed a message to her grandfather, sure he'd know what to do.

Urgent. A man removed from Flight 002 to London. In police custody. Gave him USB with vital info. He doesn't know he has it. Please track him down, keep USB safe. Will explain later. Love you.

She sent the text, feeling both relief and anxiety, then turned off the phone. Her eyes returned to the politician, who looked at her *confused* before looking away. Chloe knew he trusted her. They all did. She also knew trust was the only currency in the dangerous

landscape she now inhabited. She heard the forward door close with a thump and fastened her seat belt.

Chapter 1

Silas Knox, the founder of luke-817.org, sat in his dimly lit, dusty office in London's Soho, surrounded by multiple monitors, piles of papers, and boxes of files. His eager eyes scanned his inbox, searching for the next big story.

There was a sexual scandal involving a famous TV presenter, and he'd been investigating the subsequent whitewashing by the TV company. The presenter, a well-known figure with a squeaky-clean image, faced multiple accusations of inappropriate behavior, and several of his alleged victims contacted the website to share their unpleasant experiences. Silas had been collecting evidence, interviewing, and piecing together the puzzle of cover-ups and conspiracy. He knew the police had interviewed several of his whistleblowers but had not taken their investigations further. Despite his work, the presenter's damaging story did not appeal to Silas. He wanted something substantial he could sink his teeth into, something earth-shattering.

A light tap on his office door made him look up. His assistant, Sue, cracked the door and stuck her head through the gap.

"The reporter from the *Guardian* is here."

Silas screwed his face up. *She's early.*

"OK, send her in, thanks."

Silas sighed and looked down at his scruffy "Free Nelson Mandela" T-shirt. He'd put in zero effort at sprucing himself up for this interview. He knew the reporter—a tough cookie

who covered war zones, political scandals, everything. Now, she wanted to write a feature on him. He would be lying if he said it did not flatter him.

Jenny Slater stepped inside, the weight of her large bag pressing against her shoulder. She clutched her notebook close, and he watched her eyes scan the chaotic landscape of his office. Silas could almost hear the cogs turning in her head, cataloging the details.

Her sharp eyes met his.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet me.” Silas detected an edge to her voice.

“Would you like some tea?” he said in an upbeat tone, grinning.

“No, thanks. Alright if we get down to business?”

His smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. Silas understood the shift in tone—this would be a no-nonsense exchange. He settled into his chair, bracing himself.

“What are you working on?” Jenny asked, nodding toward his cluttered desk, sounding casual.

Silas wrinkled up his nose as he replied in a flat tone, “A celebrity douchebag.”

“Ten a penny?” Jenny quipped.

“You could say that,” Silas responded, unsmiling.

As the interview progressed, Jenny’s questions wove through his past, trying to discover what made him tick.

“Your journey to this point is quite a story. Cornwall to Cambridge, and from the BBC to luke-817.org. Tell me more about that transition?” Jenny asked.

Silas leaned back, relaxing into the subject matter. “Cornwall was a different world,” he began, his voice softening. “My dad was a fisherman, my mum a schoolteacher. They worked hard and believed in hard work. Cambridge was, well, a leap in education and worlds.”

Jenny nodded, encouraging him to continue.

“At Cambridge, literature wasn’t just about words. It was about the power they wield and the realities they create. That understanding shapes you. Then, at the BBC, it all came to life. Investigating, unearthing the truth, often hidden in plain sight.”

“You’ve always sought to reveal the deliberately hidden, buried stuff,” Jenny observed. “What drives that?”

Silas’s expression hardened slightly. “Truth is a powerful tool, often wielded selectively. At the BBC, I learned the ropes but needed the freedom to chase the stories that mattered, the ones slipping through the cracks.”

“So, you were hamstrung? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Not exactly. I wanted to be an editor; that’s the reality.”

“And your books,” Jenny interjected. “They’ve won awards. Do you see them as extensions of your journalism? Sidearms? You wrote *Whistleblower* and quickly followed it up with *Digital Revolution*. Did you feel compelled to write them somehow?”

“Absolutely,” Silas replied. “They were narratives that needed to be told, honestly. Books have a permanence, an impact that transcends the immediacy of the news.”

Jenny’s gaze briefly swept over the modest office. “And Luke, the website—how does your creation fit into your vision?”

A deep smile spread across Silas’s face. “Luke is more than a project; it’s my ethos, my dedication to unveiling the truth. Luke 8:17: ‘For nothing is secret that will not be revealed.’ It’s biblical!” He laughed before continuing. “It began small, but it’s grown to define my life’s work. It’s a relentless balancing act. The third book I’d planned on writing, *Senator Connelly*, has had to take a back seat, but it’s still on my to-do list. I’ll write it.”

“You’re bankrolled, though, aren’t you? Someone else foots the bills?” The directness of her question didn’t surprise him; he sensed she already knew the answer.

“It’s no secret,” Silas admitted, maintaining an even tone. “His lordship has been a steadfast supporter of both Luke and me personally.”

Jenny scribbled something in her notebook and then flipped back a few pages. “I have always seen you as a lone wolf. What drove you to collaborate with Sarah Reynolds on the Connelly story? It’s different to how you usually work.”

Silas leaned back again, lacing his fingers behind his head, thinking hard about her question. It wasn’t just a query about his work style but a deeper probe into his personal choices and career evolution. The shift from solitary work to collaboration wasn’t a decision he’d made lightly, and he could see Jenny’s keenness to understand his rationale.

The corners of his mouth lifted into a faint smile. “You’re right. I do prefer to work alone, but the Connelly story was different. Sarah had initially gotten on to it. A woman from the senator’s office had contacted her after her article in *Vanity Fair* on Washington sleazebags.”

He recalled the first time he’d spoken with Sarah about the story. “She called me one evening, all breathless with excitement. She told me about the allegations against Connelly—his misconduct with young interns. It was a bombshell story.”

Jenny leaned forward, her eyes not leaving his. “So, you joined forces?”

“Yes.” Silas nodded. “The story’s scope was growing, and Sarah realized we needed to pool our resources and expertise. I’ve always admired her as a journalist. Working together, we unraveled a network of sexual assault, bribery, and embezzlement. It went much further than the senator, including several high-profile figures.”

Jenny scribbled in her notebook again, then looked up, pointing her pen at him. “What was the biggest challenge you faced?”

Silas’s expression changed, his face clouding over. “The backlash was intense. Threats, smear campaigns, every effort made to silence us . . . they pulled out all the stops.

But we stuck it out. The story might have never come out without Sarah's sheer determination."

"And the publication?" Jenny asked.

Silas nodded, a sense of pride evident as he spoke. "We coordinated the release in New York and London. The fallout was immediate and massive. They were scrambling for cover like cockroaches with the lights on."

Jenny closed her notebook, her expression thoughtful. "So, did this story change your perspective on working with others?"

Silas took a long look around his office, then back at Jenny. "It did. I value my independence, but I learned that sometimes collaboration can bring out the best in a story. Working with Sarah was a testament to that. You can teach an old dog new tricks."

"Your personal life, if you don't mind me asking?"

Silas hesitated, his face momentarily clouded by a flicker of emotion. "I'll keep it simple," he said, a touch of wistfulness in his voice. "Married and divorced twice. Now, it's just me in my flat in Ealing. My work, well, it consumes everything else."

Jenny gazed at him. "Was your relationship with Sarah Reynolds ever anything more than business?"

Silas felt his face flush, the question catching him off guard. She must know something, he thought, or she wouldn't have asked. "A gentleman never tells," he replied, his only response. He cringed, imagining Jenny interpreting his words in her write-up.

Jenny's next question about Lord Worthington came softly, yet it tugged at something deeper within him. "Tell me more about Lord Worthington?"

He didn't hesitate this time. "We've been friends since Oxford. Jonathan's been a lifeline." He leaned forward slightly, reflecting on Jonathan's profound impact on his life. "Without his support, Luke might have remained a dream. He's been more than a benefactor.

He's a loyal friend," he said, genuine appreciation resonating in his words. Jonathan's role in his life was as a supporter and a pillar of strength and companionship, something rare in his line of work.

Jenny smiled. Her eyes warm. "Thank you. I have to say, your story is every bit as compelling as the ones you uncover."

"I don't know about that," Silas said.

After Jenny's departure, Silas remained in the quiet aftermath of the interview, feeling satisfied but uneasy. Recounting his journey brought him a sense of accomplishment, but an unsettling feeling ate at him. His office, cluttered with evidence from ongoing investigations, seemed to taunt him with its disorder. The excitement of past discoveries, documented in his books, now felt remote and insignificant beneath the shadow of his growing frustration. Silas always pursued the next big story as a natural hunter, relentlessly uncovering new truths capable of shaking foundations. However, the stories reaching his desk lately appeared trivial and insignificant. The world had evolved, and the meaningful stories, the "big fish," were diving deeper, eluding his grasp. For Silas, it wasn't merely about uncovering any story; he sought one that would make a difference, one that could stir the waters and create ripples. This yearning for a groundbreaking discovery and his disillusionment with the current state of affairs left him restless and eager to pick up the scent of a fresh lead. The fleeting nature of past accomplishments only fueled his drive for future challenges.

Silas drifted to the small window overlooking Soho, his eyes squinting to make out the street below through the dirt-streaked glass. He ran a finger across the dust-laden windowsill, his long sigh echoing in the room—a sound of frustration born of a deep-seated belief that a significant story had its feet up out there, just waiting for him to notice it.

His train of thought shattered as the shrill ring of his desk phone sliced through the office's dusty silence. He strode across the room, snapping back into the moment. Picking up the receiver, he felt its familiar coolness against his ear.

"I have Sarah Reynolds on the line. Can I put her through?" Sue's voice crackled over the line.

"Sure, thanks," Silas replied, his voice controlled and calm, which belied the flutter of excitement Sarah's name stirred in him. His grip on the receiver tightened, and his heart quickened slightly as he heard the click of the call connecting. "Hello, petal, how are you?"

"Hi, Silas." Sarah's voice, familiar yet urgent, filled his ear, sparking a keen sense of alertness in Silas. Something in her tone told him this might be more than a casual check-in. "Have you seen the news?"