

George Milare

# THE MERCILESS DUO RETURNS

A Gritty Psychological Thriller of Terror  
(Most Wanted – Book 1)

Thriller

**Merciless Ink Publishing**





**To survive is not to be free.  
It's a life sentence.**



# CHAPTER 1

*Thursday, 1 March, 23:10*

The air in the unfamiliar room was musty and oppressive, weighing down on him like a suffocating shroud. In total darkness, with no sound from the outside world, every chirp and hiss of the room's unseen nocturnal inhabitants sounded amplified.

Tiny, prickly legs crawled along his neck, sending a tingling sensation down his spine. He slapped his ear to shake off the unwelcome intruder and jumped up from the musty mattress on the floor.

A sudden spark leapt into the darkness for a split second, startling him.

*Where am I?* he wondered.

A match flared, lighting a candle, the glow of which revealed a girl in a school uniform chewing gum with youthful nonchalance. Her gaze was calm, but with a certain indifference and a hint of cold malice. Her right leg bent, she leaned casually against the wall, which was cracked in several places, flakes of paint curling away from the surface. Geckos and cockroaches scurried away, and cobwebs clung to the corners.

"Surprise, pastor's son!" A voice echoed through the room.

The so-called pastor's son snapped his head towards the sound. His mind vehemently denied what his senses of sight, hearing and smell had perceived.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," said the hostage-taker, his soft voice a stark contrast to his terrifying face.

An icy dread crept over the pastor's son as he struggled to make sense of the chilling scene before him. Instinctively, he closed his eyes and began his anti-panic ritual: "One, two, three—"

A thud jolted him back to reality. He stopped counting and opened his eyes – just in time for the next sound: the pop of a chewing gum bubble, almost comical amid the eerie situation.

The girl blew another bubble, stretching and shimmering in the flickering light.

“Has it dawned on you who we are?” asked the hostage-taker.

If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck ... The pastor’s son’s thoughts whirled. But it can’t be true. Not in a million years.

“I will introduce us,” the hostage-taker interrupted his mental carousel. “I was christened Scarface because of the scars on my face.” Pointing to the girl, he said, “My assistant, always by my side. The press gave us an inappropriate nickname last year: The Merciless Duo. Basically, we are compassionate.”

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph!* His eyes went wide with terror, and he stiffened like a man confronted by a hissing black mamba, coiled and ready to strike.

“Th-the Merciless Duo were k-k-killed in a car chase last year,” he stammered. “They were b-burnt beyond recognition.”

“Were they? Well, here we are again.”

“How ...” His heart sputtered, paused for a fleeting moment, then erupted into a frenetic rhythm akin to the gallop of a racehorse. “How di-di-di...”

The pastor’s son seemed to have his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth. His body sagged under an invisible weight, and his goosebumps almost turned into cystic acne.

The rumours about Scarface and his assistant echoed in his mind: The Merciless Duo are heartless, incapable of any compassion. They never grant their victims the mercy of death. Instead, they inflict wounds – both flesh

and soul – that fester for a lifetime. Each survivor becomes a prisoner of his own shattered mind, tormented by agonies that no prayer can silence, no therapist can unravel, and no drug can dull.

Like a malignant cancer cell, fear began to spread through the pastor's son, eating away at his nervous system. A thick fog descended over his consciousness, engulfing him in all its intensity. His world went blurry, and his knees gave way, buckling under him like overcooked spaghetti.

Scarface swooped in just in time and held him upright. Gripping the pastor's son's right arm tightly, he applied pressure to the biceps until a prominent forearm vein bulged. The assistant disappeared, only to return with a glass vial and a hypodermic needle. She turned the ampoule upside down and filled the syringe by pulling on the plunger. After gently tapping it to remove any remaining air bubbles, she plunged the needle into the pastor's son's protruding vein and squeezed the mixture into his bloodstream.

"This will now strengthen you and sharpen your senses," Scarface said. "You must endure what is to come, with a vivid mind."

## CHAPTER 2

*Friday, 9 March, 19:00*

Detective Chief Inspector Dennis Mugo of the Special Crime Prevention Unit sat in the living room of his modest suburban home. His wife Virginia, a quiet woman with a kind smile and warm eyes, joined him on the sofa with a steaming cup of chai and a glass of frothy beer. The flat-screen TV on the mahogany wall unit was on, the countdown to the evening news ticking down.

At 7:00 p.m., a sketch of a couple appeared on the screen: a man with a scarred face in a dark hoodie and an attractive girl in her late teens with box braids. The news ticker read: *The notorious Duo are back!*

“Good evening, I’m Musamali Demba, and we have a critical update on the notorious criminal pair known as ‘The Merciless Duo’. After a year in the shadows, they appear to have risen from the dead. Their reign of terror last March left a trail of unprecedented torture in its wake, sparking outrage and fear across the nation. It all came to a fiery climax on the night of 31 March, when the high-speed chase ended in disaster. The car in which the two criminals were believed to be travelling plunged off a cliff and exploded in a ball of fire.”

The television showed a wide shot from the top of the cliff to the charred, twisted car, its frame barely visible under a layer of ash.

“The bodies found inside were burnt beyond recognition. And yet, against all odds, whispers of their return have resurfaced. At today’s press conference, the lead investigating officer, Detective



Chief Inspector Dennis Mugo, made the following statement to the media ...”

DCI Mugo appeared on the screen, his voice sounding frustrated as he spoke:

“We have reason to believe that the criminal duo are back. We are doing everything we can to bring them to justice. However, our biggest obstacle is the unwillingness of the victims to cooperate. Most victims are reluctant to seek legal redress. This makes our work even more difficult ...”

The shrill ringing of Mugo’s mobile phone on the coffee table distracted him from the news.

“DCI Mugo,” he answered, muting the television.

He listened to the voice on the other end. Sighing heavily, he ran his fingers through his hair.

“I’m on my way,” he said and hung up.

The veteran, fifty-one years old, clean-shaven, with a military-style haircut, took a big gulp of beer and looked at his wife over the rim of his glass.

“A man managed to alert his security guards just in time as the Merciless Duo forced their way into his bedroom,” he said, his voice tinged with urgency. “There’s a chance the Duo are trapped in the house. I have to go.”

Virginia nodded. “Then go. Take them down.”

Mugo rose from the sofa, ready for another gruelling night in the service of public safety. He led a task force charged with investigating all cases across the country related to the Merciless Duo. Despite the tireless efforts of local police, every lead had evaporated, leaving only dead ends, unanswered questions and simmering frustration. And a nation on the brink of panic as more cases came to light.



Almost as tall as a standard door, with broad shoulders and bulging muscles, the village chief could hardly believe that someone of average stature and height had knocked him down – years of undefeated wrestling had honed his body into a bastion of strength.

“What kind of ox gene has this skunk got?” he muttered, wrinkling his nose at the stench that filled his bedroom.

His eyes narrowed in indignation and disgust at the sight before him: a girl in a school uniform, a screwdriver in one hand and a burning candle in the other. She blew on a bubble of chewing gum until it popped with a soft snap.

“Who shit in your skull, you silly goat?” growled the village chief in a deep voice reminiscent of a buffalo’s mating call. He was known for his vulgar language and obnoxious swearing.

Undeterred, the girl blew another bubble.

The village chief stood up, feeling his simmering anger boil. Proud as he was, he felt no need to cover his nakedness. He turned to face the intruder, a figure with a dark hood pulled over his head. Scars marked his face, and his right eye protruded grotesquely from its socket.

“You numbskull, how dare you break into my home and lay your filthy paws on me?” the village chief croaked belligerently. His name inspired admiration, respect, and awe in his village and beyond. His fame frightened the bravest. “Do you know who I am?”

The left corner of the intruder’s mouth showed the hint of a wry smile. It disappeared just as quickly as he said, “What we already know about you is disgusting. Let’s leave it at that.”

A slight tremor betrayed the village chief’s struggle to comprehend the audacity and insolence. He took a step towards the intruder.

“Do you know who you’re messing with, you brain-dead nitwit—”

“Shh!”

The village chief’s blood boiled; never before had he been silenced with a mere “shh”, like an unruly child. He bent his knees in a stance reminiscent of his golden days as a wrestler. His fierce gaze concealed his plans: dismember the stinking idiot, wrap the body parts in a blanket, and deliver them to a hyena’s lair, where nature would take care of the rest.

The frenzy of blood in his guts made him toss all his elaborate fighting strategies overboard. Like a raging bull, he lunged forward, ramming his fist into the intruder’s right upper abdomen, just below the ribcage.

The girl blew out the candle.

Disoriented by the darkness, the hulking village chief swung wildly, his punches missing their mark and bouncing off the wall with a resounding thud.

A fist that must have been cast in cement slammed into his diaphragm. He took the blows with his stereotypical masculine stoicism, refusing to vocalise his pain. With the ferocity of a hippopotamus defending its territory, he lunged forward, delivering his blows with reckless abandon.

The intruder stopped his left fist in mid-swing and twisted his arm violently. Blows then rained down on his body like a rented mule.

The intruder’s reflexes in the pitch-black darkness left him completely baffled, and he wondered: *does this stinking lump of puke have the genes of a house cat?*

In this extended traditional family in western Kenya, the homestead consisted of several structures and huts, each built in a specific location according to Luo culture and tradition. The ambush on the village chief took place in his first wife’s house, which stood directly opposite

the main entrance. To the right was his second wife's house, and to the left was his third wife's house. His first wife was absent.

Overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness, panic gripped the village chief. The chokehold, tight as a vice and undoubtedly designed to suck out his soul, crushed any semblance of hope that he would survive this confrontation with dignity.

The girl lit her candle and blew a bubble with her chewing gum. The intruder let go of the village chief and watched as the nostrils of his boxer's nose flared and contracted as he gasped greedily for air.

"It should be clear by now that throwing tantrums will get you nowhere," the intruder sneered, his soft voice lacking the weight to be taken seriously.

The village chief clucked his tongue. He wrinkled his nose in contempt and retorted, "What have you been feasting on, you stinking one-eyed scarecrow?"

"You would do well to mind your manners," the intruder warned, his foul-smelling spittle landing on the village chief's face. "I must introduce ourselves and explain why we have chosen you. Then I will ask you a question and expect honest answers."

"What a sick mongrel?" hissed the village chief with renewed confidence.

"Final warning: watch your language," the intruder said without showing the slightest sign of annoyance. "From now on, call me Scarface." He gestured to his accomplice. "My assistant. You must have heard of us."

"Heard of what? Your slimy face and rat eyes?"

Scarface pulled a flip-book business card from the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie, held it up to the village chief and ordered, "Read the title out loud."

This wasn't a coherent speech, but a senseless jumble of words that had no place in his household. He looked

down at Scarface with disdain, then at the business card. For seconds, he stared at the letters on the card, which seemed to him to be a string of more or less abstract, meaningless symbols.

“I said, read the title out loud.”

“Kiss my hairy arse, you greasy slime face!” the village chief boomed, clenching his fists.

The assistant blew out the candle.

## CHAPTER 3

*Friday, 9 March, 19:35*

DCI Mugo veered off Kiambu Road and pulled up behind a line of police vehicles parked at the edge of a newly built gated community.

As he turned off the engine of his Mercedes Benz 280 SE, a police officer approached him.

“It was a false alarm,” said the officer. “We searched the house and the area but found no sign of the Duo. Then, the man’s wife came home from work and suggested it must have been his nightmare. He keeps waking up from his dreams in a panic, claiming the Duo are in the house.”

Mugo slammed his fist down on the steering wheel.



Scarface grabbed the village chief by the neck, pressed his head against a metre-high sideboard and held him there.

The village chief watched as the assistant approached, her gaze predatory, like a lioness on the hunt, her candle in her right hand, a stained screwdriver in her left.

The village chief felt the tip of the screwdriver plunge into his back, the metal biting deep into his flesh. With agonising slowness, it began to carve a shape. Blood trickled down his back, and he bore it stoically. As an iron-willed alpha male, he couldn’t afford to show any signs of pain, fear or terror – especially in the presence of a woman.

In his warped notion of male camaraderie, he whispered conspiratorially to Scarface: “This klutz is not a girl, is she?” To the male chauvinist, it was inconceivable

that a woman – let alone a girl – would have the temerity to make aggressive advances towards him.

“She’s a girl,” Scarface confirmed. “Now zip it, boy.”

“You didn’t call me a boy, did you?”

“Yes, I did. Now keep your mouth shut; we have work to do.”

The village chief felt Scarface’s fingers tighten around his neck and feared the stinking man was trying to cut off the blood flow from his heart to his brain. Every fibre of his body screamed for him to flee, to fight, but his limbs seemed to be encased in solid steel.

He watched as the assistant drew a bottle of yellowish powder from her skirt pocket. She sprinkled it on his back, and the burn hit him like a habanero pepper on an open wound.

As the stranglehold loosened, the village chief seized the opportunity. Standing at full height, he wrapped his powerful hands around Scarface’s throat. Every fibre of his being was devoted to sucking the last bit of life out of Scarface. With the ferocious tenacity of a rhino defending its calves from predators, he rammed his knee into Scarface’s stomach and slammed his head into the sideboard.

Scarface’s hoodie fell off, exposing his scarred and blistered scalp.

“You disgusting, bulbous-nosed fiend!” roared the village chief with fervour. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the assistant unflinchingly blowing a bubble with her chewing gum. “You’re next, you stupid sewer rat.”

The assistant blew out the candle.

The village chief’s eyes darted around the dark room, unable to comprehend the impossibility that had unfolded – Scarface had broken free from his iron grip.

The village chief's breath caught in his throat as a violent twist snapped the wrist bone, sending a jolt of pain through his arm. As a heavy kick shattered his knee with an unpleasant crack, he couldn't help but groan in pain. He fell down.

Two hands jerked him to his feet. Before another sound could escape his throat, a chokehold snuffed out his breath.

The assistant rekindled the candle. She tilted it so that a small puddle of wax formed on a shelf beside her, then pressed the base of the candle into the melted wax.

Dexterously, she unzipped the rucksack on her back and reached for a thick roll of duct tape. She unrolled it, tore off a length with her teeth and handed it to Scarface, who was now pinning the helpless man to the wall.

"Only a fool would prefer to flaunt his male ferocity rather than ask why we singled him out," Scarface remarked. He wrapped the tape around the village chief's mouth and shoved him away.

The once-undefeated village wrestler fell to the ground. He felt both his hands being pulled behind his back. A cable tie was tightened around his wrists, cutting deep into his skin.

The assistant set down her rucksack and took out a small plastic bottle. She poured a yellowish-white powder into it, added a clear liquid, and swirled the mixture several times.

Scarface opened his blue, rusty metal toolbox, the hinges creaking as he lifted the lid. He took out parts of a watering can, modified to suit his grim needs, and ran his fingertips reverently over them. With a glimmer of satisfaction, he began to assemble his makeshift instruments of torture, piece by piece. He attached a sturdy plastic shaft to one end, which would typically hold a



simple garden sprayer. At the other end, he screwed on a trigger guard and attached a black tube to its valve.

The assistant took the assembled device from Scarface and dipped the tube into the plastic bottle with the prepared mixture. Then, using her teeth, she tore off a piece of tape and wrapped it around the tube to hold it in place.

Scarface approached the village chief, grabbed his arm and squeezed his bicep. In a well-coordinated team effort, the assistant put down the torture device and took an ampoule and a needle from her skirt pocket. She filled the syringe and injected the mixture into the village chief's bloodstream.

The village chief's erratic breathing subsided.

The assistant moved to the sideboard. With one last look at the huge man lying helplessly on the floor, she snuffed out the candle, plunging the room into darkness.

A relentless torrent of violence tore through the village chief's nerve endings, each more vicious than the last, ripping his insides apart with unprecedented savagery.

The burly man writhed and convulsed. His jaw clenched against the tape, and the struggle to make any sound added a raw, almost feral edge to his muffled moans. Reduced to a pitiful shell, his muscles seized and clenched as though high-voltage currents coursed through him, his mind buckling beneath the crushing weight of humiliation.

After what seemed an eternity, the vicious torture stopped. He felt a finger pressed against the jugular vein in his neck, apparently to check his pulse.

The surreal horror began all over again.

Oh, god of thunder and lightning, god of the brave, I abandon myself to you. Take me now, the village chief

prayed. He felt that death would have been a far better choice.

The suddenly flickering candlelight on the sideboard cast a glow over the scene. Scarface dropped to one knee and tore off the tape with ruthless force, stripping away the village chief's moustache along with a layer of skin.

The village chief threw up. Like waves breaking and receding on a beach, his consciousness faded and reappeared. Through the haze, he faintly noticed the assistant approaching with a glass ampoule and a syringe. Before he could react, he felt the sharp sting of a needle piercing his neck.

"We don't want you to lose consciousness," said Scarface. "It would be unforgivable to leave you without feeling."

"What have I done to deserve this?" the village chief demanded, but his usually strong bear voice was too weak to be heard.



Oliver Morgan's event management office in Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, was a mess: files, documents, and a greasy box containing the half-eaten remains of a salami pizza lay scattered across the cluttered veneered desk, obscuring the Kenyan SIM card he was still searching for.

Although cleanliness was not his strong suit, the five-foot-eight, red-haired, blue-eyed Oliver was a talented all-rounder. Six years earlier, he had set up a company in Mombasa, Kenya's oldest city on the Indian Ocean, exporting goods from Britain. The business flourished, employing twelve people in marketing, accounts and human resources. From his base in Oxfordshire, he monitored stock levels and managed order books. Every few

months, he travelled to Kenya to oversee the growth and development of his company.

Oliver Morgan breathed a sigh of relief when he discovered the SIM card under a lens-cleaning tissue. His attention shifted to the vibrating phone on the table, his wife's name flashing on the touchscreen.

"Hello honey," he replied, shutting down the computer.

"Hey, where are ya?" Charlotte Morgan asked. "Your flight's in less than four hours. You should have been home ages ago."

"Work went bonkers. I lost track of time."

"Oli, we had plans. I was hoping for a proper send-off before the little one wakes up."

"I feel awful, honey." Oliver got out of the chair and grabbed his jacket. Through the glass door, he saw the cleaner waiting for him to leave so she could start tidying his office. "I'll make it up to you, swear down."

"Where are you at right now?"

"I should be there in a jiffy."

The piercing cry of the nine-month-old baby droned on in his ear. The adorable bundle of joy had a mind of her own, capable of squirming and screaming incessantly when things didn't go her way. When she was awake, she expected undivided attention. In fact, she demanded it.

He heard Charlotte sigh.

"Uh-oh, the little troublemaker's up," she said and hung up.

Oliver's three-year-old daughter, wearing a pretty little dress and her hair pulled back in a cute ponytail, ran up to him as soon as he entered the compound.

Oliver scooped her up, tickled her and blew on her neck, eliciting laughter as she clung to him. With a sense of urgency, he carried her into the house. The tantalising

aroma of his favourite dish filled the air: fried prawns in a homemade garlic and lemon sauce.

"I had dressed up lookin' fly for the occasion," said Charlotte. She was sitting on the edge of a white sofa by a large window, cradling her little 'troublemaker'. The sheer white shirt hugged her curves and exuded a certain seductiveness. "Gotta heat the food. Hope them prawns stay glassy!"

"I'm hella behind schedule. Just gonna grab me a sandwich at the airport."

"Daddy, where are you going?" the daughter asked.

"I'm jetting off to Kenya, sweetheart." He bent down to her level and stroked her hair.

"You're going on the big plane?" A pout played around her lips. "I want to go on the aeroplane with you!"

Sighing, Charlotte moved the baby into a more comfortable position and called, "Come to me, darling, or else, pops' gonna miss his plane!"

Oliver glanced at his wife for a moment. Her face was an unreadable mask, but the rapid rise and fall of her chest gave her away. Every breath seemed a struggle to keep the turmoil bubbling inside her from spilling out. Oliver could feel it all and understood the reason only too well. He was leaving for three weeks, and their farewell would be anything but dignified – reduced to a goodbye kiss. Oliver knew that the last few weeks had added to her frustration. He had been constantly on the road organising events for an international musician and had come home late and exhausted every night – if he had made it at all.

A pang of guilt rippled through him, but it was quickly eclipsed by the prospect of the exciting adventures that awaited him in Kenya, the pride of Africa.

## CHAPTER 4

*Saturday, 10 March, 05:45*

For some villagers, the rooster's crow was an original, organic alarm clock, heralding the dawn of a new day. The second wife of the village chief began her duties by preparing her husband's breakfast of sweet potatoes, yams, and a large pot of chai. The third wife had long since risen to milk the cows. Her daughters were busy in the kitchen – the youngest dipping slices of white bread in beaten eggs and her older sister, Beatrice, frying them to perfection.

"Why don't you say anything today, Beatrice?" complained the younger sister.

"Everything is fine," Beatrice replied with a sad look in the corner of her eye. The abuse she suffered at home affected her deeply. Once before, she had dropped her schoolbag and run to Lake Victoria, but a fisherman had thwarted her attempt to disappear into the water.

Balancing her husband's breakfast in a basket on her head, the second wife called out to the village chief in the customary way: "Wuon Oseko." – A term that affectionately referred to him as Oseko's father.

There was an unusual silence.

She turned the knob and was surprised when the door gave way. As she entered the house, an acrid, sickening smell hit her like a physical blow. Her eyes fell on her husband. He lay grotesquely sprawled on the floor, stripped of all dignity, drenched in blood and vomit. His face, swollen and bruised, was almost unrecognisable.

A primal scream escaped her lips, the breakfast basket slipping from her head as her eyes darted around the room, scrutinising every corner and shadow.

Alarmed by the scream, the family members rushed over. Only the third wife dared to enter the house without permission. *Wuon* Oseko greeted her with a fart.

*What has that filthy wanker pumped into my body?* wondered the village chief in embarrassment. The attack had caused him to lose control of his bowels, and he could no longer hold back the annoying bursts of flatulence. In silence, he cursed Scarface like a farmer whose herd has been ravaged by hyenas.

“*Nyieka, konya tingo Wuon Oseko e kitanda,*” said the second wife – she had asked the third wife to help her lift their husband onto the bed.

“Aaaargh!” The pain that rippled through every nerve ending was more than *Wuon Oseko*’s hardened body could withstand, shattering his stoic demeanour and ingrained toxic masculinity.

“Uuii!” the third wife screamed, then clamped a hand over her mouth.



Oliver Morgan retrieved two suitcases from the baggage claim at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. Working his way through the crowd of travellers, he spotted Omari Sekibo, whose infectious grin revealed a missing canine tooth. Omari was more of a friend and confidant than a mere employee, valued for his loyalty and companionship.

“*Jambo sana rafiki yangu,*” was Oliver’s greeting.

“*Karibu sana,* boss.” Omari’s smile radiated warmth. “How was your flight?”

“Same ol’ same ol’, *rafiki*. Either glued to the screen for mad hours, or catching zeds, or munching on that pre-packaged grub.”

“Boss, use simple language or switch to Swahili,” Omari said, pushing the luggage trolley towards the car park.

Jumping into the car, Oliver’s eyes drifted to the back seat. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up with joy and excitement.

“How old?” he asked dryly.

“Nine. Your belated birthday present.”

With the excitement of a child on Christmas Eve, Oliver took another look at the back seat, examining Omari’s acquisition with an expert’s eye.

“Wow!” he marvelled with a lopsided grin. Without another word, he pulled a wad of twenty-pound notes from his wallet and slipped it into Omari’s breast pocket.

An ambiguous smile played on Omari’s lips as he patted the bundle.

The two met and struck up a friendship a decade ago when Oliver Morgan and his then-fiancée, Vitória García, stayed at a hotel where Omari worked as a manager. A few months later, when Oliver sent Omari a consignment of products bearing the prestigious ‘Made in Great Britain’ and ‘Made in Germany’ labels, he had no idea that the goods would attract so much attention from Omari’s neighbours and friends.

The export business was born. Feeling unappreciated, underpaid and undervalued, Omari quit his job at the hotel to concentrate on selling the goods arriving at the port of Mombasa. Over time, his responsibilities expanded to include running discreet errands for his boss. Now, after seven successful years in the export business, Oliver was looking forward to the grand opening of his production facility in two weeks.

Oliver switched on the radio and watched the fluffy, cauliflower-shaped clouds drift lazily across the sky. It

was a heartwarming sight, but a short-lived one. News of the Merciless Duo filled the car.

“How does the Duo keep wreaking havoc and evading the cops?” he asked, turning down the volume.

“Don’t fret about those crooks; I have booked you a place that will guarantee you total privacy and security.”

“How do you watch your back?”

Omari shifted into a lower gear and slowed behind a minibus in the busy streets of downtown Nairobi. Stroking his hair, he replied, “I have baseball bats and axes under my bed and in my living room.”

“I’ve read that Scarface is pretty much untouchable, innit? That his stench alone will knock you out cold.”

“Shit! You just reminded me. I need to buy torches. They say Scarface only acts after his assistant has blown out the candle she carries. Absolute darkness will confuse your senses; you will lose your bearings. Even if you could defend yourself, you will be helpless.”

“Cor blimey!”

“We are all freaked out,” said Omari, honking at a handcart driver to clear the way. “The Duo’s torture is next level. It’s like nothing you’ve ever heard of from the other weirdos, dead or alive.”



## CHAPTER 5

*Monday, 12 March, 17:15*

The 12-member task force of the Special Crime Prevention Unit, a semi-autonomous directorate of the National Police Service, convened its first official crisis meeting. It was held in the Criminal Investigation Department's boardroom, which had been converted into the unit's exclusive incident room.

Team leader Detective Chief Inspector Dennis Mugo stood at the front of the room, behind him a wall-mounted screen displaying miniature photographs of the wounded backs of the Merciless Duo's victims.

"We are all aware of the brutality of the so-called Merciless Duo," DCI Mugo began in a bureaucratic tone. The charismatic, always impeccably dressed superior had a knack for brevity. His deep, reserved voice matched his dismissive expression, and his six-foot-two, broad-shouldered frame gave him a commanding presence. "More and more cases are coming to light this year that bear the unmistakable signature of the Duo. Presumably, it's the same Duo as last year, consisting of the man calling himself Scarface and the young female accomplice he introduces as his assistant."

He sipped his coffee – his unapologetic addiction to the dark brew set him apart from his colleagues in a department where chai reigned supreme.

"Scarface appears to be well-trained in martial arts and uses darkness to outwit his opponents," he continued, his dark-brown, bloodshot eyes scanning the room and his subordinates. "The Duo consistently follow a pattern of torture. Sadism and a lack of empathy characterise the attacks, which are designed to torture the victim to the

brink of death. In most cases, adrenaline injections are used to stabilise the victim's circulation and vital signs."

Mugo pressed a key on the keyboard, and a colour composite sketch of the Duo materialised on the screen.

"The Duo always appear with their faces uncovered, carrying their instruments of torture in a rucksack and metal toolbox. However, some victims believe that Scarface wears a mask."

He picked up a remote control and stepped aside to give his team a clear view of the screen. A subtle eye roll betrayed his nostalgia for the old bulletin board on which he used to pin photos of murder victims, crime scenes and suspects, weaving a web of connections with lines and arrows.

"As these are not murders, the police are not called immediately. As a result, the crime scenes are tampered with or contaminated. So far, no fingerprints or biological evidence have been found to link the Duo to the crime scenes. The only evidence found at some of the crime scenes is a business card belonging to Dalilah Beale, the chair of the DS Savekids Foundation."

He clicked on a thumbnail, which started a slideshow of the victims in ascending order of attack. Each victim had an inscription on their back, either a number, a letter, or a hashtag.

"The physical injuries suffered by all the victims are as follows: The left eye socket is broken, the teeth are knocked out, and the back is abraded. Some victims also suffered broken fingers, toes, or dislocated joints. As a result of the attack, they have irritable bowel syndrome and faecal incontinence. Some have had to undergo rectal surgery. They suffer from erectile dysfunction and chronic insomnia. Many are in psychotherapy. Some have seen no way out of their situation and have taken their own lives."

Mugo paused the slideshow, then scrolled to the first image, which showed the inscription on a victim's back.

"In this picture, we have the lowercase letter 'm'," he said. "Depending on your point of view, it could also be a lowercase 'w', the number 3, or the uppercase letter 'E'. Any other ideas?"

The question hung in the air like smoke.

Mugo clicked on the next picture and announced, "This could be the number 6 or 9, or the small letter 'g'."

"Flip the photo horizontally," suggested Detective Sergeant Rahab Atieno-Masinde, a woman of average stature who always sported a short, curly pixie hairstyle. Her feminism had led her to choose a hyphenated surname after tying the knot. She had argued that dropping her maiden name in favour of the groom's surname perpetuated the patriarchal idea of marriage, in which a woman is seen as "belonging" to her husband and his family.

Mugo turned the photograph.

DS Atieno-Masinde grinned and said, "It could also be a 'q' or a 'b'."

"Flip the picture vertically," thundered Detective Sergeant Killian Bakari, Mugo's brother-in-law, married to his twin sister. His voice was deep and husky from decades of cigarette smoking. "It could be a capital 'Q' or a zero. I usually write 'O' clockwise, starting at the top, and rarely connect the ends properly. The victims must have wriggled and squirmed as the assistant carved their backs, and the screwdriver may have slipped in the process."

Mugo cleared his throat. "To decipher the message, or to see if this is a psychopathic ritual, we need to get all the inscriptions on the victims' backs and know the position they were held when their backs were inscribed.

There are certainly more victims who have not yet reported their attacks.”

“Whether the Merciless Duo from last year, who were thought to be dead, are back, we can’t say for sure, can we?” asked a colleague sitting next to DS Bakari. “The current duo could be copycats.”

“The Merciless Duo are back,” said Atieno-Masinde. “Our graphologist has confirmed that this is the handwriting of the accomplice. Their description and modus operandi match last year’s Duo.”

“Digital Sleuth,” Mugo called, nodding to the burly Detective Sergeant Bernard Osendi, whose squinty eyes and thick glasses gave him a distinctive look.

Detective Sergeant Bernard Osendi, who wore the nickname “Digital Sleuth” like a badge of honour, nodded. Beneath his unathletic exterior was a sharp mind that had never worked in the field, only in the digital world of crime fighting and intelligence gathering. His unrivalled skills behind the computer screen had earned him the nickname among his colleagues. He was happy to be called that.

“We have five new potential cases,” the Digital Sleuth reported. “Potential because the victims have physical injuries consistent with the Duo’s M.O., but their statements tell a different story.”

He took off his glasses, blew on them, and wiped the lenses on the hem of his shirt. Then he put them back on and glanced down at his laptop.

“Potential victims in Nairobi include property mogul Francis Moshari and German model scout Moritz Rosenthal, who was attacked earlier this month,” he continued. “In Machakos, there are two victims: a youth volleyball coach named Amos Mutisya and a local musician. A village chief is hospitalised in Kisumu. He says he was attacked by two huge men.”

“Fine ... or maybe not,” Mugo mused aloud. “I’ll fly to Kisumu.” He turned to DS Bakari and said, “Killian, you head to Machakos.”

“I’ll pay the property mogul a visit,” DS Atieno-Masinde offered.

Mugo nodded, then turned to the Digital Sleuth. “Send us any relevant details you can gather on these victims.”

“Right away,” affirmed the man, diving into his digital domain to gather pertinent information for the team.

“The rest of the team will check all private hospitals and morgues,” Mugo instructed. “Our goal is simple: we need to find every victim. We have to figure out what the messages on their backs mean. And find out why they’re so reluctant to come forward. That’s the key. It’ll lead us to the motive.” He paused, letting the weight of his words settle over the team.

None of the team members had anything to add.

Mugo concluded the meeting: “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s get to work. We must put an end to this reign of terror.”

## CHAPTER 6

*Tuesday, 13 March, 10:40*

DS Bakari stood by the bed of youth volleyball coach Amos Mutisya in a hospital room in Machakos. His brusque, demanding tone revealed his growing frustration and impatience with the uncooperative patient. How else could he convey the importance of cooperation in the interest of justice? What else could he say to make this man understand that it was his civic responsibility and patriotic duty to help fight the terror plaguing the country?

Bakari noticed a hesitant shift in the man's posture, suggesting that his lower body, most likely his buttocks, had been viciously mutilated. His gaze fell briefly on the doctor's report, which stated that the patient had expressly refused to have his injuries photographed.

"Look, I respect your privacy." Bakari changed his abrasive tone, which was getting him nowhere. "These criminals need to be brought to justice for attacking you. So let me check your back. It'll help us crack the code they're sending."

The man rolled his eyes, a typical passive-aggressive reaction seen in many of the victims the Duo had attacked.

"We can't let these criminals continue their rampage," Bakari patronised. "We must ensure that others don't have to endure the same terrible ordeal."

"God sent his angel of punishment, Kushiell, to chastise me for my transgressions."

"Excuse me!"

"You can't serve God and give in to the devil's temptations without suffering the consequences. The matter

is between me and my Creator. I have nothing to discuss with a mortal being. Now leave me alone.”

Bakari sighed theatrically and shuffled out of the room in frustration, just in time to answer an incoming call.

“Hello.”

“Any progress?” asked the Digital Sleuth.

“Negative. The man appears to have been blackmailed, coerced or intimidated into silence.”

“I’ll send you some ammunition I’ve just found. Let’s see if that knocks him off his guard.”



Four days after the attack, and after countless traditional remedies and painkillers, the lion-hearted village chief showed signs of a swift recovery. His body was an abstract masterpiece of bruises, swelling and plaster casts, coagulated blood completing the work. A bandage covered half of his left face, hiding the shattered socket and injured eye. Blood smeared his swollen lips, dripping from the raw gaps where his teeth had been knocked loose. But he was unflappable, showing no sign of discomfort that could undermine his alpha-masculinity.

With his right hand dislocated and his left fingers broken, he had to be fed. So he had insisted on an opaque partition between his bed and his neighbour’s to avoid the embarrassment of being spoon-fed like an infant. His henchman held out a cup from which he drank a traditional brew through a straw. On the other side of the bed sat his first wife, her fingers fidgeting with each other.

After a single knock on the door, DCI Mugo, accompanied by a deputy chief constable, entered the room, approached the bed and introduced himself and his partner.

He turned to the man – the henchman. “Would you mind stepping outside for a moment?”

“He stays,” the village chief growled, exposing the torn tissue of his gums as he spoke.

“As you wish,” Mugo said, picking up the medical report. Every now and then, he licked the tip of his middle finger as he turned the pages.

He lingered on one page, reading the doctor’s barely legible handwriting.

*Right distal radius fracture.*

*Left orbital floor fracture.*

*Right knee dislocation.*

He skimmed the long list of injuries and turned to a page with a Polaroid picture of the village chief’s back. The inscription, which undoubtedly bore the Duo’s signature, was either an ‘O’ or a zero.

“The report says that you were attacked by two huge men,” Mugo began, putting the report back on the bedside table and taking a notepad and pen from his breast pocket. “Is that true?”

“It’s in the records, isn’t it?” the village chief spat, punctuating the words with sharp, ragged breaths. Out of false pride, he had lied about the gender and size of the attackers. “Those cowardly cocksuckers were lucky they came at me armed to the teeth.” The bruised gums and swollen lips made him slur his words.

Mugo’s interest was piqued. “Could you please explain what you mean by them being armed to the teeth?”

“That filthy toolbox was packed with all kinds of weapons: knives, chisels, hammers, pliers, and so on.”

“Those are tools, not weapons,” Mugo corrected.

“They’re lethal weapons if you misuse them.” A hint of condescending resolve punctuated his words. With a



piercing, unyielding stare, he added, "Hand me a chisel, and I'll drill a hole in your skull."

Mugo picked up the medical report again and leafed through it.

"Allow me to quote your statement: 'A stinking, butt-ugly googly eye. He stank from each and every pore.' I will refrain from making assumptions without sufficient information, but your description fits the notorious criminal duo – a man of average height and a girl in a school uniform." He narrowed his gaze, sharp and intent on uncovering buried truths.

"Don't look at me like that," the village chief shot back with a disdainful expression. "I wasn't so wasted that I couldn't tell a guy from a girl."

Were the Duo afraid of this mountain of a man? Mugo wondered. Had they decided to replace the girl with a man?

"Can you describe the second perpetrator? What did he look like? What was he wearing? Any distinguishing features?"

"The jerk had a nose like a melon and a bug eye that looked like someone had tried to yank it out. When this scumbag pulls down his filthy hood, his scalp looks like a festival of blisters. His ears are like lumps of rotten, melted flesh. The jerk looks like a plucked chicken. He hasn't got a single hair on his slimy face and skull."

The deputy chief constable's shoulders bounced with silent laughter.

"Those sneaky scoundrels pulled off a bunch of tricks to outwit me. I couldn't breathe. That skunk ... the bacteria in his mouth had mutated out of control, like he'd been licking on a raw zorilla all day long."

"Can you describe the second man who inflicted the injury on your back?" Mugo asked a trick question.

"She ... aaargh!"

With the swiftness of a housefly fleeing a threatening slap, the village chief's wife got up and came to his bedside to attend to his agony.



Flashing his service card, Bakari introduced himself to the musician from Machakos.

"Can you take off your shirt?" Bakari continued, sitting on a chair by the bed in the private hospital room. "I need to see the wound on your back."

"It's reassuring to know that the CID is personally involved in my case," said the musician, sitting bolt upright in bed. Bandages covered his body, but his eyes and teeth were intact. "I swear I've learnt my lesson and won't make any more stops in the middle of the night because of a supposed car breakdown. In fact, I only stopped out of pity for the young woman."

"Take off your shirt and turn around."

"They stole my new Nikes and my leather jacket," the musician lamented as he unbuttoned his pyjamas. "I spent thirty-two thousand on them for a music video. You need to know the price, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

Bare-chested, the man rose from the bed and turned around. There was no typical inscription on his back, just jagged knife wounds.

"Got a sore bottom?" There was an indifferent, almost mechanical quality to Bakari's tone. He got up from the chair.

"What do you mean?" asked the musician.

"Did the goons mess with your bum?"

The man frowned. His lip curled as he shook his head.

"Something important is that I have a photographic memory," the musician said. "When the man picked up

my shoes, the mask fell off his face. He has bushy eyebrows and—”

Bakari held up his hand to silence the man. “Report this to the local police.”

He turned to leave but stopped abruptly as a voice from outside, tinged with alarm, called out: “Scarface! Scarface!”

The musician clutched the sheet, fear in his voice as he asked, “Did you hear that?”

Bakari didn’t answer. His hand on the holster, he hurried to the door.

## CHAPTER 7

*Tuesday, 13 March, 13:30*

“Can you describe the person who inflicted the wounds on your back?” Mugo broached the subject again. “You used the word ‘she’ at the beginning of your sentence.”

He sensed the man’s unease – the subtle shifts in his posture, the flicker of hesitation that said more than words ever could.

“I will deal with these empty-headed morons myself,” the village chief blurted out. “I don’t need you for that.”

The deputy chief constable took a step closer to the bed.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you,” he sneered. “Such retaliation is against the law. So, answer the question.”

The village chief’s face hardened like granite. “*Excusez-moi?*”

Mugo adjusted his blue-striped tie, his gaze steadfast.

“Did the perpetrators introduce themselves or explain the reason for the attack?” he asked. “Did they say why they had to inflict these wounds on you?”

“You never learnt that such brainless morons just get a kick out of their diabolical deeds. They don’t need any rhyme or reason for their perverted mind games.” The village chief snorted like a warthog. “Go. Do your homework properly.”

“Let me be clear,” Mugo said, fixing the village chief with a penetrating stare, “obstructing justice by providing false information to law enforcement can have serious consequences.”

“Ridiculous,” the village chief croaked.

Mugo leaned forward slightly and lowered his voice. “Were you attacked by a man calling himself Scarface and a girl in a school uniform?”

The village chief’s face betrayed his shock, but there was something else beneath it – something Mugo couldn’t quite place.

“You can bounce back to your offices,” the village chief growled. “I need my rest.”

“You won’t cooperate with us because you’re being threatened?” the deputy chief constable asked.

“Or do you have something to hide?” Mugo added. “Are you proud to admit that a schoolgirl is responsible for your hospitalisation?”

The rise and fall of his chest betrayed the village chief’s painstaking attempts to appear calm. He turned to his henchman and hissed, “Show these cowboys the bloody door.”

“Are you aware I could arrest you for insulting a police officer by calling me a cowboy?” Mugo shot back. “The charges? Damaging my reputation by implying incompetence and unprofessional conduct.”

“Then arrest me.”

“Would you rather go to jail than talk about Scarface and the schoolgirl who attacked you?” Mugo asked. “What do they have against you?”



“There should be a law against men wearing dark hoodies,” muttered Bakari, slouched in the corner booth of a crowded Internet café, a half-empty beer bottle on the table before him.

“Why’s that?” asked the Digital Sleuth on the other end.

“People are jumpy these days. Someone sees a guy in a dark hoodie, and they freak out. Happened at the

hospital today. Male nurses and patients panicked because some guy thought he'd seen Scarface. Started shouting, "Scarface! Scarface!"

"Dark hoodies are getting a bad rap," the Digital Sleuth said, half-joking. "But if the name Scarface is enough to shake up a hospital ... damn! Have you got it?"

"Got it," Bakari said, clicking on the email attachment the Digital Sleuth had sent. It was a photograph of youth volleyball coach Amos Mutisya standing behind a kneeling girls' volleyball team. "Are the Duo playing vice squad?"

"We'll see. Use it as ammunition. See where it takes us."

"Later." Bakari ended the call, his gaze lingering on the photo for a moment.

He clicked on the print icon, drained the last of his beer, logged off and walked over to reception.

"How much?" he asked, "I also have two prints."

"That's one hundred and seventy-five," said the clerk, handing over the A4 prints.

Bakari slid into his car, put it in reverse and backed out of the car park.

The radio came to life.

"... Pastor Jacob Lamai is appealing for anyone with information about his son's disappearance to contact him or the local police. His son, Noah Lamai, a husband and father of three, has been missing since the beginning of the month. He was last seen leaving his office in Westlands at around ten p.m. Noah Lamai ..."

The sound crackled and sputtered. Bakari turned off the radio.

The volleyball coach watched as the eager officer entered his private hospital room and pulled up a chair beside his bed.

“Here I am again, Mr Mutisya,” Bakari said.

“I have nothing to say to a mere mortal.” Mr Mutisya’s voice barely rose above a whisper.

He was in for a surprise: the officer held a printout of his photo with the volleyball team right in front of his face. It was uncomfortably reminiscent of his encounter with Scarface when he brandished a business card and announced, “*This is the smoking gun. Irrefutable proof.*”

“Either you cooperate, or ...” Bakari paused. The allusion was clear.

The unspoken alternative jolted the man out of bed. He unbuttoned his hospital gown, pulled it off and turned around.

Bakari used his smartphone to take pictures of the wound.

“You can put your shirt back on now,” Bakari said as he sat down. “I’ve got a few questions I’d like you to answer.”

“Please leave me alone now. You got what you wanted, didn’t you?”

“Let’s get something straight; I’m not here to weigh in on your moral compass. I’m a crime fighter.” Bakari demonstratively placed the printout on the bed. “Just because something may be morally questionable doesn’t necessarily make it a crime.”

“What else do you want to know? Was I attacked by the Merciless Duo? *Yes*. Was it Scarface and the assistant? *Yes*. Are we done now?”

“We have only just begun, Mr Mutisya.”

The volleyball coach swallowed hard. There was an undeniable authority to the officer’s voice, quite unlike

Scarface's, yet both had the same unflappable assertiveness.

"Scarface held you in a bent position while the assistant inscribed your back. Is that right?"

Mr Mutisya nodded. "Yes."

"Which side was the assistant standing? Right, left or—"

"She was standing to my right."

"I suppose Scarface told you why they were after you. What was their motive?"

Plagued by feelings of guilt, which he wore like a second skin, he avoided direct eye contact.

"I bet you are married, sergeant," he managed feebly, his eyes fixed on the bed. "We are only human; we fall into temptation."

"I agree with you." Bakari gestured with his head at the A4 photograph. "Have you ever laid a hand on your lover or wife?"

He looked up. "No. I was never violent."

"I'm leaning towards thinking you're not the violent type. Then enlighten me: Why did Scarface attack you in such a vengeful way?"

"It was hypocritical of me to preach high morals in Sunday school and not practise them."

"Can you explain that?"

He shook his head. "What I have done is a sin in the eyes of our Creator. It's not a crime for you to concern yourself with."

"Scarface is suffering from a God complex. He had no right to make you pay for your sins. Who do you suspect has been in contact with the Duo to expose you?"

"Why does it matter? Whoever it was, I can't blame them. I should have seen it coming."

"Scarface usually leaves a business card, which belongs to Dalilah Beale, chair of the DS Savekids Foundation.



I'm sure Scarface mentioned what the card meant and why he had to leave it behind after the attack?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"I totally understand that it's difficult for you to talk about the ordeal. But here's the thing: your cooperation could be key to catching these criminals. I promise that your extramarital affair—"

"It wasn't about the affair," he muttered, voice taut.

"Then what was it about?"

"It was something terrible," he breathed, his voice distant, laced with deep regret. "Something I should never have done."

"What did you do?"

He covered his face and shook his head repeatedly.

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