

THE LETTERS WE CARRY HOME

A Novel

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First edition, 2026.

For everyone who has carried words too long.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Funeral Guest

The old man stood beyond the cemetery wall as though he had not been invited to mourn.

Elias noticed him while the pastor was speaking about resurrection.

Everyone else had gathered beneath the white funeral tent: relatives dressed in black, church women wearing matching headscarves, former neighbours, distant cousins and people Elias could not remember meeting. The old man remained outside, separated from them by a low wall of sun-bleached bricks.

He held a brown hat against his chest.

His suit was too large for him. The shoulders sagged, and the sleeves almost covered his hands. Even from a distance, Elias could see that the man was trembling.

“You are not listening,” Ruth whispered.

Elias turned toward his sister.

“I am listening.”

“What did the pastor just say?”

“That death is not the end.”

“That is what every pastor says.”

Ruth faced the grave again. Her eyes were dry, but grief had hardened her features. During the past three days, she had organised the funeral, selected the hymns, negotiated with the caterers and answered every question Elias had been too tired—or too ashamed—to answer.

Where should the chairs go?

Had Elias informed his former wife?

Would Amara attend?

What should be written on the programme?

Was Miriam to be buried in the blue dress or the cream one?

Ruth had made every decision.

Elias had arrived from Lusaka with one suitcase and a silence he had been carrying for almost a year.

The pastor raised both hands.

“Our sister Miriam Moyo has completed her journey.”

A murmur passed through the mourners.

“Amen.”

“She fought the good fight.”

“Amen.”

“She kept the faith.”

“Amen.”

Elias looked toward the coffin.

The polished wood was painfully bright beneath the midday sun. A wreath of white lilies rested on top, although his mother had disliked lilies. She had once said they smelled like rooms people had already left.

He wondered whether Ruth remembered that.

He wondered why he had not objected.

The pastor continued speaking, but Elias's attention returned to the old man.

There was something familiar about the angle of his head. The narrow face. The way he stood with his weight placed almost entirely on his left leg.

Elias searched his memory.

A former teacher?

A retired colleague?

Someone from the church?

His mother had known many people. She remembered birthdays, visited the sick and kept telephone numbers written in small notebooks long after the owners of those numbers had died.

But Elias had never seen this man.

The old man lifted his eyes.

For one brief moment, he looked directly at Elias.

The distance between them seemed to collapse.

There was no confusion in the stranger's expression. No curiosity.

He knew exactly who Elias was.

Then the pallbearers began lowering Miriam into the earth.

Ruth released a sound that seemed torn from somewhere beneath her ribs.

Elias reached for her, but she stepped away from him.

The ropes creaked.

The coffin descended.

A handful of soil struck the lid with a dull, final sound.

That was the moment Elias understood that his mother was truly gone.

Not when the hospital called.

Not when he saw her body beneath the white sheet.

Not when he signed the release papers or selected the coffin or stood in her bedroom surrounded by dresses that still carried the faint scent of her soap.

It was the soil.

Three small stones mixed with red dust.

They landed on the coffin, and something inside him gave way.

He lowered his head.

He wanted to cry. He felt the pressure gathering behind his eyes, but the tears would not come.

For months, he had been unable to do the things his body was supposed to do.

He could not sleep when he was tired.

He could not eat when he was hungry.

He could not speak when there were words inside him.

And now he could not cry at his mother's grave.

The mourners began singing.

It was one of Miriam's favourite hymns, although Elias could not remember the title. The church women led the first verse. Their voices rose into the hot afternoon, strong enough to make faith sound like a fact.

Elias looked up.

The old man was gone.

Only a patch of flattened grass remained beside the wall.

* * *

After the burial, the family returned to Miriam's house.

People filled every room.

Children ran through the corridor while adults balanced plates of rice, chicken and vegetables on their knees. Women Elias had not seen since childhood embraced him and told him he had grown thin. Men who had once worked with his father shook his hand and spoke about how proud Miriam had been of him.

Proud.

The word followed him from room to room.

Your mother was so proud of your programme.

She used to tell everyone her son was on the radio.

She never missed your broadcasts.

Elias thanked them.

He did not explain that the programme no longer existed.

He did not tell them that the station had cancelled it six months earlier, after the broadcast in which he had stopped speaking for forty-seven seconds.

Forty-seven seconds of dead air.

In radio, silence was not simply the absence of sound. It was failure. Panic. The suspicion that something had broken.

Something had broken.

He had been interviewing a government minister about a collapsed bridge. The questions had been written in front of him. The producer had been speaking through his headphones.

Then Elias had looked through the studio glass and seen his own reflection.

For forty-seven seconds, he had forgotten where he was.

He forgot the minister's name.

He forgot the question.

He forgot how to speak.

The station called it exhaustion.

The newspapers called it a breakdown.

Elias called it nothing at all.

"Uncle Elias?"

He turned.

A young girl stood beside him holding an empty glass. He recognised her as one of Ruth's daughters but could not remember which one.

"Your phone is ringing."

She pointed toward the table near the window.

The screen displayed Grace's name.

Elias let it ring.

The girl remained beside him.

"Are you not going to answer?"

"Not now."

"It might be important."

"It usually is."

The girl considered this, then walked away.

The phone stopped.

A few seconds later, a message appeared.

Amara wanted to come. She changed her mind this morning. I'm sorry.

Elias read it twice.

He typed a response.

Tell her I understand.

He stared at the words, then deleted them.

He did not understand.

Amara had been close to Miriam. When she was younger, she spent school holidays in this house, sleeping in the room at the end of the corridor and waking before sunrise to help her grandmother water the garden.

Miriam had kept every drawing Amara ever made.

Even the ugly ones.

Especially the ugly ones.

Elias slipped the phone into his pocket.

"Your daughter did not come?"

Ruth stood behind him carrying a tray of used plates.

"She had school."

"Today is Saturday."

"She had something at school."

"What?"

"I don't know, Ruth."

"You should know."

Elias took the tray from her.

"Where do these go?"

"The kitchen."

He carried the plates away before she could continue.

The kitchen was hotter than the rest of the house. Two large pots still stood on the stove, and a group of women were wrapping leftover food in foil.

Elias placed the tray near the sink.

One of the women touched his arm.

"You must eat."

"I will."

"You have been saying that all afternoon."

"I'll eat later."

She gave him the disappointed look older women reserved for men who believed hunger could be negotiated with.

"Your mother worried about you."

The words stopped him.

"What did she say?"

The woman's expression changed.

"Nothing bad."

"What did she say?"

"She said you were carrying something heavy."

Elias waited.

"That was all?"

"She said you had forgotten how to put it down."

Before he could ask another question, Ruth called his name from the corridor.

He found her standing outside Miriam's bedroom.

"The lawyer is here."

"What lawyer?"

"Mama's lawyer."

"You knew she had one?"

"I knew she made a will."

"And you did not think to tell me?"

"I am telling you now."

Ruth opened the bedroom door.

Mr Banda sat on the chair beside the window with a black leather case resting on his knees. He was a small, neatly dressed man with silver-framed glasses and an expression that suggested he had spent his life delivering information people would rather not hear.

He rose when Elias entered.

"My condolences."

"Thank you."

"I apologise for coming during the gathering, but your mother left specific instructions concerning the timing."

"Of course she did," Elias said.

Ruth frowned.

Mr Banda did not.

He placed the leather case on Miriam's bed and opened it.

The bedroom looked almost exactly as it had when Elias was a child. The curtains had changed, and a small television now stood on the chest of drawers, but the wooden wardrobe remained against the wall. So did the framed photograph of Elias and Ruth in their school uniforms.

Elias was eleven in the photograph.

He had one front tooth missing and an arm wrapped protectively around his sister.

He could not remember the last time they had touched without one of them pulling away.

Mr Banda removed a sealed envelope.

"Your mother's will is straightforward in most respects. Personal belongings are to be divided between the two of you according to a list she prepared."

Ruth nodded.

"The house," Mr Banda continued, "is somewhat more complicated."

Elias looked at his sister.

"What does that mean?"

Mr Banda adjusted his glasses.

"There is an outstanding loan secured against the property."

"How much?"

He named the amount.

Ruth closed her eyes.

Elias felt a familiar pressure in his chest.

"That cannot be right," Ruth said. "Mama owned this house."

"She did. However, she borrowed against it approximately four years ago."

"For what?"

"The documents do not specify."

Ruth turned toward Elias.

"Did you know?"

"No."

"Did she give you the money?"

"No."

"You were always asking her for something."

"I said no."

Mr Banda raised one hand.

"Your mother made arrangements that may allow the property to remain within the family."

"What arrangements?" Elias asked.

The lawyer took a folded document from the envelope.

"She named both of you as beneficiaries. However, the inheritance is conditional."

Ruth stared at him.

"Conditional on what?"

Mr Banda looked at Elias.

"On your brother completing a task."

Ruth laughed once, without humour.

"Of course."

Elias ignored her.

"What task?"

Mr Banda returned the document to the envelope.

"Your mother requested that I give you this first."

From the leather case, he removed an old canvas bag.

Elias recognised it immediately.

Miriam had used it when she travelled. It had once been green, but time had faded it to the colour of dry leaves. One strap had been repaired with black thread, and a small burn mark darkened the front pocket.

Mr Banda placed it on the bed.

The bag made a soft metallic sound.

"What is inside?" Elias asked.

"I was instructed not to examine the contents."

"And you followed that instruction?"

"I am a lawyer, Mr Moyo. Following unusual instructions is much of what I do."

Ruth reached for the bag.

Mr Banda stopped her.

"It is for Elias."

Her hand froze.

"Only Elias?"

"That was your mother's instruction."

Ruth stepped back.

Something passed across her face, quick and painful.

Elias saw it and immediately wished he had not.

"When must this task be completed?" he asked.

"Within forty days of your mother's burial."

"And if I refuse?"

"The house will be sold. The outstanding loan and associated costs will be settled, and any remaining funds will be divided equally between you and your sister."

Ruth folded her arms.

"What exactly is he supposed to do?"

Mr Banda nodded toward the canvas bag.

"The answer should be inside."

* * *

The last mourners left shortly after sunset.

Ruth drove home with her husband and children. She did not say goodbye to Elias.

The house became quiet.

Plates covered with foil filled the kitchen. Plastic chairs stood abandoned beneath the trees. Somewhere outside, a dog barked at regular intervals, as if reminding the night that it was still awake.

Elias sat alone in his mother's bedroom.

The canvas bag rested beside him.

For nearly an hour, he did not touch it.

He told himself that he was tired.

That the contents could wait until morning.

That whatever his mother wanted from him had already become impossible because she was no longer there to explain it.

But the truth was simpler.

He was afraid.

Miriam had known him better than anyone. Even during the years when they spoke only once a week, she could hear what he was trying to hide.

"You sound far away," she would say.

"I'm in Lusaka, Mama."

"That is not what I mean."

Elias picked up the bag.

The zip caught halfway. He pulled harder, and it opened with a sound that seemed too loud in the silent room.

Inside were twelve envelopes tied together with blue ribbon.

Each envelope carried a name and a number.

He lifted the first.

1. *Agnes Phiri*

The second:

2. *Daniel Chola*

The third:

3. *Beatrice Mwewa*

Some names were familiar. Most were not.

Beneath the letters lay a hand-drawn map, a small digital recorder and a final envelope.

His name was written across it in Miriam's careful handwriting.

ELIAS

Underneath, she had added:

Do not open until the others have been delivered.

He almost laughed.

Even from the grave, his mother expected obedience.

Elias placed the envelope aside and unfolded the map.

A red line began at Miriam's house and travelled east through several towns and villages before ending near the border. Twelve circles marked twelve locations.

The route stretched hundreds of kilometres.

"This is madness," he whispered.

He picked up the recorder.

There was only one file.

His thumb hovered over the button.

Then he pressed play.

For several seconds, there was only static.

Miriam breathed close to the microphone.

When she spoke, her voice was weaker than Elias remembered, but unmistakably hers.

"My son."

Elias stopped the recording.

The room blurred.

He pressed his fists against his eyes until the feeling passed.

Then he started it again.

"My son, if you are hearing this, then I have reached the place where you cannot follow me yet."

Miriam paused to breathe.

"I know you are angry. Perhaps with me. Perhaps with yourself. Perhaps with the whole world. Anger is clever, Elias. It convinces us that it is protecting us while it burns down every place we might have called home."

Elias lowered his head.

"There are twelve letters in the bag. I need you to deliver them. You must place each letter into the hands of the person whose name is written on it. Do not post them. Do not send someone else. Some of these people may refuse to see you. Some may already be gone. You must try."

Her voice trembled.

"The journey begins where mine began."

Another pause.

"And when you have delivered every letter, you may open the one with your name."

The recording should have ended there.

Instead, Miriam drew another breath.

"There is one more thing."

Elias looked toward the door, though he was alone.

"In the front pocket of the bag, you will find a photograph. Look carefully at the man standing beside me."

Elias reached into the pocket.

His fingers found a square piece of paper.

He pulled it out.

The photograph was old and colourless at the edges. Miriam stood beneath a jacaranda tree, perhaps twenty years old, smiling at the camera in a light summer dress.

Beside her stood a thin young man.

Elias recognised the narrow face.

The uneven shoulders.

The weight resting on the left leg.

It was the old man from the cemetery.

Elias turned the photograph over.

A message was written on the back.

Start with him only when you are ready to forgive me.

Continue the Journey

The Letters We Carry Home

This preview contains the opening chapter of the complete novel.

The full edition includes 30 chapters and follows Elias Moyo as twelve sealed letters uncover family secrets, buried crimes and the truth of his own identity.

Written by Marcus Kasamu

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