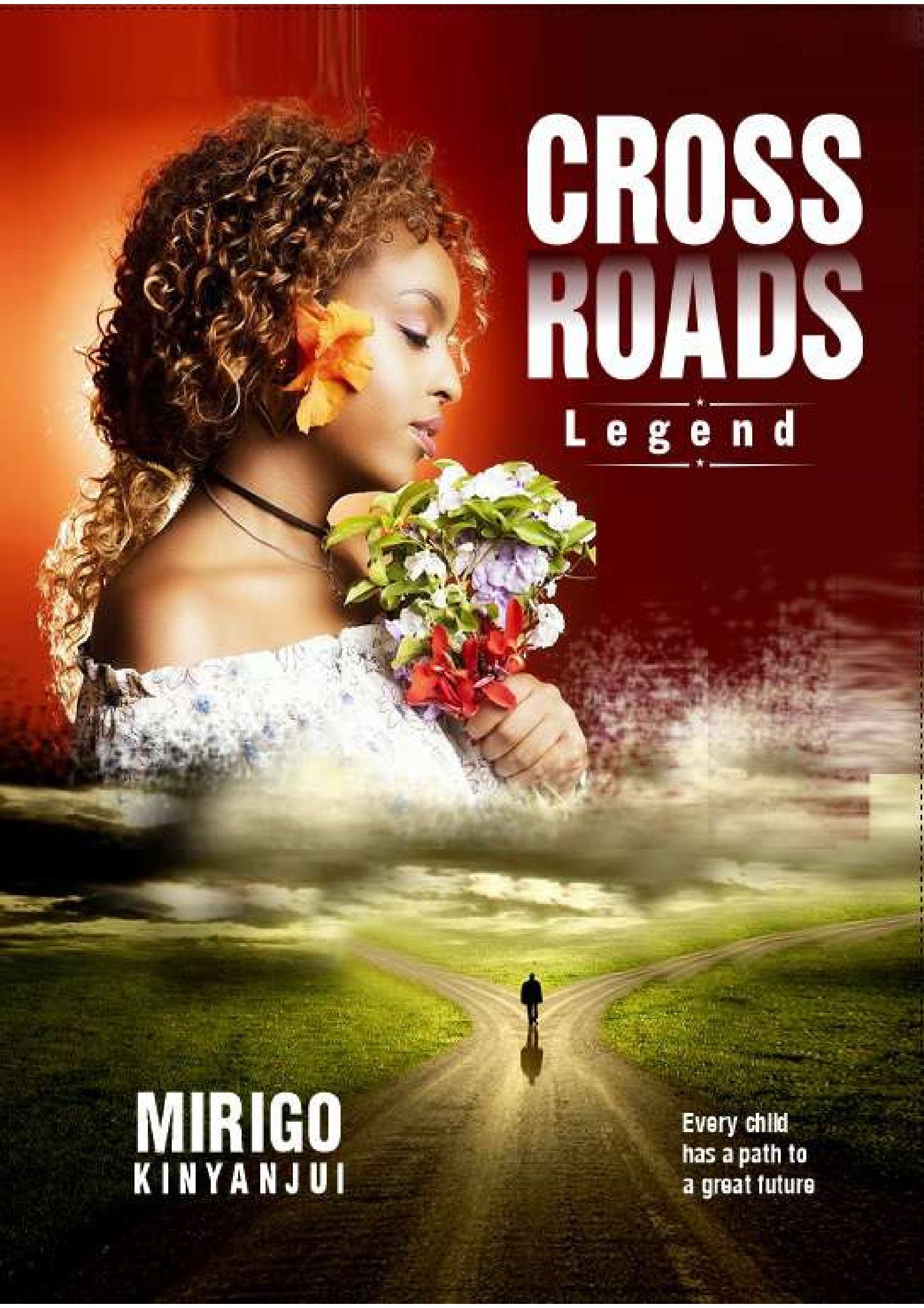

CROSS ROADS
Legend
MIRIGO
KINYANJUI
Every child has a path to a great future

Cross-roads Legends demystifies the urge to feel "more equal" than others. Wairimu is able to position herself among rich kids and makes them feel she is part of their big family, the University Academy. The best stories don't miss the element of love: the writer brings this from an interesting perspective that readers will find captivating. At the end of the day, there is triumph even after experiencing "time travel". This book is thought-provoking, relatable and relevant at this time and age. I highly recommend it to anyone who wants to sample a great book.

Jamlick Kogi (MC Kogi),
Author of The X-Matrix (7 P's of Success), A Better Tomorrow, and Take that Shot
Marketing and Communication Specialist, Corporate MC, Speaker and Trainer

Cross-roads Legends is not just another good storybook; it delves into real-life experiences that hinder us from achieving our life's desires and goals. I particularly admire Jamal's determination to live his life with the woman he adores despite ethnic differences.

Mary W. Kirobi
Director of Culture, Gender & Social Services
County Government of Kiambu.

I love Wairimu's spirit to help without discrimination and risk it all to make others shine without strings attached. It is hard enough to believe for myself, let alone tag a liability in a foreign land.

Damaris Mungai
CEO & Counsellor Psychologist
Founder, Raham Counseling and Training Centre

Cross-roads Legends gives hope after all is lost and hopeless. Time travel takes you to the wasteland and back, helping you appreciate the milestones that once looked insignificant. I love Ji-hoon's skills in managing the ladies within the Super World and his courage to move on after losing his love after the time travel experience.

Wanjohi Gitonga
Founder, Wanjohi Talks Ltd.
Trainer: Capacity builder on Financial wellness, Salesmanship and Insurance.

CROSS-ROADS

LEGEND

Mirigo Kinyanjui

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Jacinta Wairimu Ndegwa, you have been my greatest inspiration and taught me how to be a true African girl.

To my husband, Francis Kinyanjui Githinji, thank you for always being supportive and for tracking my health as I burned the candle at both ends to tell this fantastic story.

To my daughter, Stella Njoki Kinyanjui, thank you for encouraging me to write this book. My dear Stella, the hardest part was picking a pen and paper to jot the first line.

EPIGRAPH

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves, no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads onto way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence.
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

- Robert Frost (1916)

PREFACE

“The worst thing you can do is to lay dead-in-water with a problem. Solve it! Solve it wrong or right. If you solve it wrong it will come back, slap you on the face and you will solve right. Doing nothing seems like a comfortable option because there are no immediate risks; but it is a FATAL way to manage any business.” - ***Anonymous***

My inspiration to write this book came after a close shave with death—twice. In the first instance, I got an allergy after eating sunflower seeds. I had no idea that I was intolerant to sunflower seeds. Fortunately, the incident happened near a hospital facility, and my life was saved.

The second one was from the dreaded Covid-19 infection. I got full-blown Covid-19 symptoms that left me weak and bedridden for months—this season also brought my business to its knees and left me in a depression.

It is in my sickbed that the idea of a book took hold of me: *the only way to stretch myself further into the future would be to put my thoughts down in a book*. *But if I dwell too much on my life journey, it might turn out to be boring to some, so I will write it in the form of a love story that can address the current predicaments we are in as a result of the various setbacks brought on by the Covid-19 “monster”, I thought*. Everyone was in trouble: homes, nations, religions, and ethnic groups—all we needed was a seed of hope to look forward to, new possibilities without judging each other—and so my journey began.

The book is called *Cross-roads Legend* because we make numerous strides in this journey of life, some successful while others “pure” mistakes. In every instance of life—good and bad—we find crossroads where we need to make critical decisions. Sometimes we follow the right path, and sometimes, we get lost—for a long time. In our confusion, at the crossroads, we learn vital lessons and can teach others from our mistakes. It is with this in mind that I wrote the book which is based on true life events with a bit of fiction to complete the story.

Cross-roads Legend is about a Kenyan girl called Wairimu Ndegwa who hailed from a humble background and was awarded a scholarship to study at the University Academy in the USA. Due to her kindness, Wairimu assisted a classmate whose ATM card hadn't been registered by feeding him “peanuts” for a fortnight only to find out she had extended her generosity to a Muslim billionaire heir apparent. They connect, chemistry develops and an impossible love sprouts.

Through this book, I hope to demystify the mistakes you think you have made in life and help you understand the need not to judge yourself too harshly. Some incidences might not have a way to be corrected but navigate through them until you are out of the impasse. Furthermore, you cannot bury your head in the sand like the proverbial ostrich, pretending that everything will be alright. Like a good soldier, you must pick yourself up, dust yourself off, get back to the saddle and navigate your way out of the confusion.
Enjoy my journey,

Mirigo Kinyanjui

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CHAPTER 1

DESCENDANTS OF HOPE

University Academy USA

IT WAS A CALM evening, and I was gazing at the horizon, enjoying the beautiful orange sunset. I was waiting for instructions from Grandma about what to prepare for the evening meal. She expected a guest who was yet to confirm the evening visit.

"I told you I am a reincarnation, Wairimu," she said suddenly, hinting at the beginning of one of her imaginative evening tales.

"Yes, Grandma," I replied with a chuckle. "I know what you mean."

She didn't say anything more. Perhaps she wanted to know whether I was still there.

She had been brought up in a Christian family, which she had failed. It happened when, as a young woman, she decided a beer or two once in a while was not a bad thing and stopped being too strict on religion.

Even then, she was an easy-going and jolly person, not unlike the happy sunset I was enjoying.

She was also the only girl in her family who took beer. Her grandparents—essentially my great-grandparents—were deeply cultural and many were the customary occasions they partook in copiously imbibing *muratina*, the traditional beer.

Grandma's seeming to take after her grandparents with the love for the drink was an example of the reincarnation she was referring to.

I speak about her because she remains a great inspiration to me. Grandma Wairimu, who I'm named after, was a charming and engaging woman, a quality that made her thrive in whatever she did. In her vain moments, she liked to boast that hers was a Midas touch, like that of King Midas in Greek mythology who turned everything he touched into gold.

Any business she touched flourished, which is what made my Grandpa Mwangi fall in love with her. But the truth was also that she was a hard worker

and it helped that she had a solid support system in her husband's moral and financial support.

It is in family lore how her business acumen began to show. After disappointment with poor returns from her husband's grocery shops that she helped run, it came upon her to start a beer business. The business had less competition and offered much better profit.

It also happened that Grandpa knew where to source wines and spirits at reasonable prices, despite being a teetotaller himself. Combined with Grandma's ingenuity, it made their business turn around faster than they had projected, as the bar grew in popularity and profits grew.

THIS PICTURE OF PROSPEROUS if modest affluence in the village is what I found as I grew up under the care of Grandma Wairimu. It was however not always rosy, and there's always a back story to even the most perfect of pictures.

It appears Grandma was not happy, despite her jolly personality. In the course of running the businesses, and her enthusiasm interacting with her swilling *joie de vivre* customers, her drinking gradually began to take the better of her.

It began to show as a problem when her attention seemed to slacken about what went on in the house, particularly as the homemaker everyone looked up to. She stopped taking care of her responsibilities to ensure the home is properly managed, and the children fed and adequately looked after by the house-help. The maid worked unsupervised and seemed overwhelmed with endless house chores. Still, Grandma was keen to be home early enough to assist when the young ones were being put to bed.

In Grandma's telling, the reason for her increased drinking had to do with resentment and frustration because of the manner in which she had been married off. Her husband had been forced on her. She was only a girl when her father declared she marry his friend Mwangi, who was older than her father. Her dreams were like those of any other girl with ambition and verve to marry whoever she wanted and determine her destiny. Her dreams were shattered, and this made her resentful and frustrated.

Another reason she embraced the bottle was because of lack of respect in the marriage. Perhaps because of their age difference Mwangi treated her like a daughter more than a wife. When he was away, he would overlook her and

leave the business under the care of his elder brother. He seemed to trust his brother more than his wife. Perhaps Mwangi was trying to protect his young wife from too much work so she may concentrate on their children, but she didn't see it that way. She felt belittled and unduly overlooked. She took it as cruel and inconsiderate to use his elder brother as an excuse to exclude her from growing her experience running a business. It also irked her because she was brought up by a trader, my Great-Grandma, and therefore was not exactly new to how a business could be run and managed.

As it turned out, her brother-in-law did not seem to have a head for business. He brought sloppiness to Grandma's family business when he was left in charge. Though the business's poor returns may not solely be attributed to the brother-in-law, he certainly contributed. A regular customer cannot fail to see when he does not receive the service or attention he is used to. Consequently, word of customers' dissatisfaction spreads about how things don't seem to be going well at so-and-so's shop, and the number of people buying at the shop begun to decrease.

Her children in the meantime were growing up somewhat neglected as the drinking continued unabated. Her life now seemed to oscillate between the bar and bed, and vice versa. Her husband tried as much as he could to wean her off the bottle. But he was patient and understanding. Though he never spoke about it, except perhaps when they were together in the bedroom, his manner projected confidence that she would grow out of it. But it had already become clear to him what the root cause might be. It had also dawned on him he could not contain the ambitions of his young, restless wife.

However, as Grandma grew older in the marriage, her perspective began to change. Despite the age gap between her and Grandpa, she realised that he adored her by the way he treated her like a princess. By this time, the grocery business had taken the back seat as the bar venture grew to a roaring business.

Her children had also entered their teenage and needed her firm guidance lest they stray. She had to heed this reality, fortified by her husband's unwavering support. She made the decision to slow her involvement in the business and reduce her drinking to look after her family. From there, it was a matter of time before she declared herself "fed up with the drama in the drinking dens," as she told me, and resolved to quit what she was now referring to as the damned bottle.

"THE BOOK OF LIFE has many chapters," Grandma would say to me when I seemed resentful towards my mother, Muthoni, for leaving me behind and never seemed to bother to visit. "You must keep turning the chapters before you die. Some are highly accomplished and very rewarding, other chapters sadden you, while you may not know what to do with others. It is like a class assignment or a sport: You can ace it, but chances also are you can fail and be the loser."

We had all the time, and it was often in the evenings as we prepared dinner, and she always took her time before moving to the next thought, deliberately letting the first one sink. "You know my story," she would resume, "and it sometimes seems to me your mother's experience with her absent mother—me when I was drinking, maybe the reason she is behaving as I did with her. I am not saying that I support her or that it has anything to do with me, but history is known to sometimes repeat itself."

I am not sure I understood it, but it always gave me something to ponder about, and it perhaps helped soothe my anxieties that Grandma seemed to understand what I might be going through.

There were other happier stories, such as the one about her and the Indian shopkeeper, Bacchu.

"I had no idea about love nor that secret admirers existed until Bacchu," she would say with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

This was during the time she termed the resentment period of her marriage to Grandpa. She was then Grandpa's errand girl when, as she now says it with a laugh—when he treated her as a child.

Market days constituted her extended errand duty that involved long-distance travel. She would board a bus to go shopping at Othaya market to stock her husband's grocery store. The bus, named *Tonya Umbuke* (*Board to Fly*), took four hours to reach Nyeri town, with many stopovers in the shopping centres in between where it had to drop and pick. Some days even wait for clients to fill the seats which took a lot of time for travellers were few in the day.

The journey seemed to take an eternity to come to an end. The only thing that made it bearable was the thought of Bacchu. Otherwise, she thought *Tonya Umbuke* bus a cruel mockery.

"I wonder when this Tonya Umbuke bus flew and to where," she would muse. "It was slow to the extreme, a snail is better. The only chance that bus might overtake other cars was when it hurtled down a hill headed to a ditch despite its big name. Otherwise, even on a bicycle, you were likely to reach your destination before it."

On her return journey, Grandma would spend time at Bacchu's shop during the layover in Nyeri as the bus filled up to resume the journey back. The chit-chat with her genial friend was, on the face it, amiable and often involved his home country India, how attractive it was, its many religions, the Buddha, and the idea of reincarnation. Bacchu regaled her with tales of how he had been a playful pauper in his previous life but reincarnated to what he was because of his previous good deeds.

She was enamoured of him in their friendship, though it might appear she had no clue it was Bacchu's secret tryst.

Thus, after the tryst she never knew she was part of, she would leave the unrequited secret lover to deliver her shopping before closing shop in the evening and heading home with her husband.

It would only dawn on her later what Bacchu was up to.

It was a story she loved to tell, and when it reached this moment in the narration, she would cheekily motion to me in a conspiratorial whisper, "Come nearer my granny. Even walls have ears," she would say.

But it was apparent that she, too, must have secretly admired the Indian shopkeeper, a specimen of male beauty and charm, she would say with a sly smile. I can attest to this, having occasionally accompanied her to her friend's shop and witnessed the specimen for myself.

She would conclude her story with a laugh saying that looking fresh and nubile to Bacchu, he may not have known that Grandma's life at the time was steeped in dreary and backbreaking domesticity, and had no time to think of someone's unrequited desires. She would add that, what might have seemed a casual walk home, had the amorous Indian seen her with her husband, was a marathon run to get home on time to milk the cows and cook for the family before dusk.

I recalled the story of the Indian shopkeeper as I gazed at the beautiful orange sunset waiting for Grandma to let me know when to assist her after her call from the visitor.

I had just completed college and was staying with her as I looked for gainful employment. And on quiet evenings such as this one she would often remind me that, unlike her being forced into marriage, I had a choice and a future to craft as I wished. Her dream, she said, was that I should land and marry my Bacchu.

My cousin, Sophie, with whom I had grown up under Grandma's care already had two children as I waited for my *Mr Perfect* to fit her estimation of a specimen of male beauty and charm.



WAIRIMU NDEGWA
(Circa 1965)

"You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great"

I recalled the story of the Indian shopkeeper as I gazed at the beautiful orange sunset waiting for Grandma to let me know when to assist her after her call from the visitor.

I had just completed college and was staying with her as I looked for gainful employment. And on quiet evenings such as this one she would often remind me that, unlike her being forced into marriage, I had a choice and a future to craft as I wished. Her dream, she said, was that I should land and marry my Bacchu.

My cousin, Sophie, with whom I had grown up under Grandma's care already had two children as I waited for my *Mr Perfect* to fit her estimation of a specimen of male beauty and charm.

JOBS MAY HAVE BEEN SCARCE, but I had a lot of hope. My mother and brother, Mwangi, both of them resident in the United States, had been seeking opportunities that would enable me to join them. Knowing this filled me with hope, and soon I received a phone call from my mother she had been able to secure me a scholarship. The admission letter explained that the school was called The University Academy and was based in Silicon Valley, California. I was among top ten students from countries around the world picked for a pilot class and invited to undertake a master's degree in global trade and finance.

I was thrilled beyond words. And thus began a journey not only in distance to the fabled land of opportunities, but a journey to the intricacies of life and love. A few days before my trip to the US was to take place, announcements of a possible outbreak of a pandemic going by the name of Covid-19 hit global news. It would colour the life I was about to begin in the United States.

BEFORE THE D-DAY of my journey abroad, many villagers gathered at my grandfather's home for a small farewell party to see me off in style. There were strict Covid-19 protocols in place. My two uncles and their families graced the occasion. I would have given anything to see my mom and brother there celebrating with everyone else. I could feel frustration creeping in knowing that my missing dad was still in the country God knows where, and could not be there to witness his daughter's success. Despite the need to have my parents and brother with me, Grandpa and Grandma were all over me, proudly talking

about me as if I was their long-lost daughter. I spotted some women in headgear conversing and laughing boisterously. I could tell that most of the villagers were happy, though a few of them were envious. They couldn't appreciate the girl child's success and must have been hurting inside. My uncle was particularly amazed by my grades despite pushing me to a local day school, though my grades had earned me a slot in the prestigious Alliance Girls High School. Perhaps it was because I wasn't as beautiful to him as her light-skinned daughters with gorgeous African hips. I was dark-skinned, like my mom, and slim. In African culture, I didn't fit into the stereotypical female form with the big frame that men like to admire.

To make matters worse, I kept my hair short. When in a trouser, the elderly confused me for a boy and would salute me as one. To minimize the confusion, I would put on long earrings and a necklace. Some days I would stick a flower on my short hair at the side of my head.

The event was called to order as the master of the ceremony took the stage and announced that only two guests would be allowed to speak. One was my uncle, and the other was my former secondary school head teacher.

My uncle was the first to take the stage: "Greetings, everyone. Thank you all for coming to grace this occasion. It has been a long time since we had such a celebration in this compound. Wairimu's mother, Muthoni, graduated from America, and most of us could not attend her event. The same thing is happening today. She has missed her daughter's graduation party, but we thank God they will be united soon. They can as well throw another party on that end. I remember the day I admitted Wairimu to Gatugi Girls Secondary School. She was disappointed to the point she felt her world was coming to an end. Every evening her Grandma had to remind her she was competing with no one in school but herself. It did not matter that she did not go to Alliance Girls. She had everything within her to triumph and soar as high as her dreams would take her. Thank you, Wairimu; you have done us proud. I wish you well in all your endeavours." He hugged me and slipped an envelope into my graduation gown.

My principal took the microphone and began: "Thank you, Wairimu's family, for inviting me to her farewell party. I have no words to thank this girl for the grades and motivation she has given to other students. She used her voice to encourage our weaker students. The encouragement showed her sense of compassion, and this lifted all of us. She used her hands for charity. Thanks

to her volunteering with local charity organisations, she helped the old free themselves from jiggers. She donated all the books her brother sent her from abroad. She used her mind well, and it sent her to campus and now for further studies abroad. Wairimu, you will be one successful woman in this life; just for being selfless with all within your reach. Keep up the excellent work. We look forward to hearing you cover more milestones as you progress across the borders." She came to me and gave me a warm hug. It felt weird for the principal to hug me, but yes, I deserved her hug.

The emcee then opened the event for everyone to interact freely. The sun was setting rather quickly, and was a good reminder that my day to travel to the US was close. It was an exciting experience for me, and I counted every hour and day before the travelling day.

As my Grandpa saw me off at the airport, he looked into my eyes and said, "My wife Wairimu, you only have this one life that you can spend on becoming a better version of yourself and leaving a mark in the lives of others. Make sure you do not waste it by hating, questioning, regretting, or running after people who don't see your worth. My advice to you, my dear Wairimu, is that you believe in your God-given talents and do that which moves you some steps ahead. Make yourself proud, my granny. I guarantee you that the wise will admire you. The weak may feel threatened, but once you're determined to grow, you'll not even notice those working against you. You only have this one life my wife Wairimu, so whatever is on your action list must be accomplished, no matter the storms ahead. When you are struggling and about to give up, believe in the power of hope; something better is possible if you are consistent. You have won in this land, and victory is waiting for you in that Promised Land. Pass my love to my daughter, Muthoni, and my namesake, Mwangi. Tell Mwangi that I will be waiting for him to come and see us. We love them very much and are happy they settled well there. Tell them I will take the next flight if they hurt my beautiful wife, Wairimu." He teased me as he gave me a last memorable kiss on my forehead. It sounded like a well-prepared speech featuring some of the best advice I had ever received.

Grandma had carefully packed enough green tea and lemon to keep me hydrated throughout the trip. She filled my bag with all the familiar foods and ingredients I was used to, like maize flour, tea leaves, local spices, and sweet potatoes. I did not want to appear rude to Grandma. But when I was offloading my boxes from my Cousin's car, I left all the foodstuffs in the vehicle. If I

carried them, I would easily exceed the allowable personal luggage weight of twenty-five kilograms.

Grandma was visibly emotional as she bid me goodbye. In her usual loving motherly style, she gave me a tight hug, and at that moment, I felt I needed her even more. Our bond felt more vital as we both clung to each other tightly, sobbing uncontrollably.

As she regained her composure, she told me, "Award yourself gold, my poor girl. I pray to the God of *Kirinyaga* to be your guiding star in this foreign land. I hope to see you again, my baby. Do not disappear on me like your mother, Muthoni, and your brother, Mwangi, who were swallowed by that monster nation." I hugged her again and turned away, away from my people and country and towards a new and exciting future.

As soon as I left my grandparents and headed for the check-in area, I was lucky to find another lady also travelling to the US who was friendly enough to take me through the process of boarding. She was a good-looking middle-aged woman who was well-travelled and quite talkative. She introduced herself to me as Charity. I would later learn that her kids were all grown up, and she was heading to the states on that trip to visit her eldest daughter. We engaged when she saw me struggling to put my bags through the checkpoints.

"Young lady, are you okay?" she asked.

I was not, but Charity was quick to save me from further embarrassment by picking up my luggage and putting them alongside hers on the luggage carousel. I followed her like a daughter as she presented our passports at the boarding counter. I felt like a real African queen: I now had a guide throughout my journey and could afford to rest, watch a movie on my screen, and shop a bit in the duty-free zones in the airport. I bought a simple gift for my brother, a notepad and a pen. I wasn't sure what to get my mom, so I bought her a small handbag. I also remembered to buy my sweet lady, Charity, a packet of chocolates for her daughter's family.

As I travelled to this new land of the unknown, I momentarily took notice of the air hostesses. I had heard about them from other girls who wanted to work as air hostesses. I could see why the girls would feel they had chosen the wrong careers. All the flight attendants I saw had flawless skin, making me want to stare at them. The perfume they wore would linger on for hours, and as I walked around the terminal, I could see them chit-chat and laugh while talking about places to buy more perfumes, powder, and earrings. They had

fascinating hairstyles that felt indigenous to our African countries, albeit very well done. I thought the hairstyles looked Nigerian though I wasn't sure. Seeing the air hostess proved to me that our continent of kinky-haired people had thousands of braiding styles that would make a girl look unique and beautiful.

Africa had a way of spoiling us for choice on what we could do with our hair, whose kinky nature makes it easy to it style as desired beginning with braids, hairlines, and spring-like rolls, or whatever style is in fashion. Now, as an Academy girl, I would have to learn what California offers. *I wonder if I will perm my hair, curly kit, straighten it, and tie ribbons or use hair clips. We spend a lot of money on our hair while men only walk into a barber shop and spend less money and time there.* My mind was racing.

Though I had help, I found the first flight I ever took to be a complete nightmare, especially the connection I had to make at Heathrow airport. Also, the trip was too long—I had been at the airport to see people off, but I didn't know what they went through to get to their destinations. However, I remained grateful that I had help; without it, I would have been lost somewhere. My landing experience, as the plane's tires screeched when they touched the runway, almost left me deaf. Despite the annoying landing noise, I could feel a fresh wave of excitement. However, I could also feel doubt growing: how would I cope with my mom and brother, who have been absent from my life for so long? My plane touched down at 10:00 am on the 17th of January 2020.

The process of picking bags was also new to me—back home, there would be a marathon to pick up our bags when we arrived at the bus terminus, or else thieves and opportunists would help themselves with the unguarded luggage. At the airport, the conveyor belt kept coming and disappearing with bags for some reasonable time for everyone to get a chance to pick up their luggage. I loaded mine in a trolley and headed to the waiting bay.

I was anxious to meet my mother and brother because I had not seen them in twenty years. My grandparents brought me up after my mom left me behind to finish her medical studies in America—my brother was only five years old, and Mother had to leave with him. He was now fully grown and a policeman in California.

My dawn…

I cleared Mutitu Primary School back in 2010. Mutitu Primary School was an ordinary village school with little to brag about. The floors were dusty, and fetching water from a fountain known as Gatheru was the order of the day—we did it to keep the floors wet and keep away the fleas. Our head teacher was a young, brilliant man who, to many, served as a father figure. Schools, in our days, were supplied with milk famously known as "Maziwa ya Nyayo" literally, milk from the then-sitting president, Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi. He introduced milk to all public primary schools. Each student was entitled to three packets of 100ml of milk each per week.

Mr Kamangu, the teacher responsible for giving out the milk, would busy himself with this duty and ensure that the excess milk is spared for another day, especially for the lower the classes of Grade One to Three. He also ensured we had enough exercise books to write on. Unlike other schools' culture of trashing exercise books from the previous grade at the end of each year, in our school the note books carried over to the next grade which made revision easier. Because of this other schools seemed to run out of exercise books 3 years ahead of our school. This constrained the government's budget, leaving parents to incur extra expense buying class materials, from textbooks to notebooks for their children.

I liked school and particularly admired my culture teacher, Mr Gathuma; he would give us tales of how Kenya got independence after our forefathers, the Mau Mau, fought the British colonialists. These dreadlocked freedom fighters lived in the forests and were fearless young men. Until then, I had not known Mau Mau was a kind of acronym or slogan that reads:

M – Mzungu
A – Aende
U – Ulaya
M – Mwafrica
A – Apate
U – Uhuru

The slogan translates to mean: The white man should go home so that the African can gain her freedom.

The European settlers' greed was unacceptable to Africans, who couldn't see themselves forever live in bondage. The colonial government took advantage of the Africans by demarcating land and allocating the best tracts to the missionaries and white settlers while forcing Africans to be their servants as many more were condemned to live in reserve areas where they could be easily controlled. I still remember how one of our teachers, Mr Gathenya, used to lead us in a song:

"*Wako wapi wabeberu waone haya tuliyo yatimiza kwa miaka chache, niwao walisema hatuna akili, nahuku watunyonya afadhali kupe."* (Where are these billygoats that said that we are short of brains to see the milestones we have achieved in a few short years, yet they sucked our blood—worse than a tick).

We only had one female teacher, Mrs Kiragu, who taught us home science classes. She was the first person I had ever heard mention that women have menstrual cycles. She told us we might start our menstrual periods and start using pads in the next few months since we were nearing teenage and were already of age. Hearing that from my teacher marked one of the saddest days of my life. I went home crying and blamed Grandma for not informing me of such a thing. My imagination of menstruating made me dread the toilet. Constipation took me over as I skipped meals in order to stunt my growth and delay my need for pads. But nothing changed what was meant to be. By age twelve, I knew what it felt like to wear a pad and was familiar with the "black panty". I hated the endless pains and weak legs that could hardly hold on firmly to the pad that was longer than my panty.

Mutitu Primary School was a day school back then. It was a good school with a solid reputation it lived up to. I passed my primary school exams with good grades—good enough to be admitted to Alliance Girls High School, one of Kenya's best-performing girls' schools.

However, no one at home bothered to know where Alliance Girls High School was; no one was interested in taking me there. My grandparents were old and needed my presence more than they needed me educated. Education made their daughter, Muthoni, my mother, disappear from their lives. They decided I'd join Gatugi High School, bought uniforms, and the admission process was concluded. Things moved fast after my Alliance hopes flopped—I would end up being my grandparent's caregiver and when they were long gone, I imagined, my uncles would throw me out of the *boma* (homestead) with

nothing. I had witnessed this with a neighbour, yet my grandparents were adamant they did not see that happening to me, probably to appease me and calm my worries. They claimed that, culturally, my mom was a son because she did not get married. My uncles, however, still differ when I engage them in a friendly conversation about this matter. That is how I learned that my prospects at my grandparent's place were grim.

I was not too fond of the school my grandparents picked for me, nor did I have someone to lobby for my admission to Alliance. The school chosen for me was for the remnants of the village, those who failed to acquire the minimum grade to attend a good school, or those who could not raise school fees. Although it was the Catholic mission in our area which sponsored my secondary education, it was as a strategy to enrol brilliant students to revive the school—it was a dying school, quite literally. Everyone, including me, was aware of the kind of non-performance that plagued it. I was not about to join it, and I swore I'd leave school if everyone settled for it.

My grandparents would get on their knees, insisting that the sponsorship was a godsend, given other parents' financial constraints. But I held my ground; there was no way I'd work so hard to get good marks in my final primary school exams only to attend such a pathetic school.

My uncle tied me up on the school's reporting day, loaded me on a *bodaboda* motorcycle taxi, and drove me to school. That is how I reported to the school, tied up like a criminal. I cried an ocean all the way to the school and long after I had been admitted. I was well-known to all the teachers and students, who knew I deserved better but had no one to fight for me. My mom abandoned me long ago, and my uncles had their own families to worry about. For the longest time, I toyed with the idea of marriage to save me from the high school that was picked for me. The biggest problem was the lack of a suitor; no man had ever looked at me romantically.

I regretted the absence of an average family with a present mother and father. My uncle's son and daughter were admitted to a better school than I was, yet they scored worse marks than I had. I wrote my mother a letter and promised her to do my best on the condition that she would find me a school in the US to join her and my brother. They wrote back, and both pledged to honour my request if I would get good grades in the school I was attending.

The school was under-equipped and under-enrolled. There were only eleven students in my class. When students would be sent home for school fees, only

three students would be left in my class. Consequently, teachers would piggyback on the lack of quorum in class as an excuse not to teach.

The library was pathetic, and you could count the total number of books to be found on the shelves. The lab operated only on days we had a university lady student who taught chemistry lessons. Eventually, the school dropped all science classes for lack of teachers willing to work there. It was frustrating.

As we sat for our Form One end-of-term exams, I made a mental paradigm shift; I decided to make that school my Alliance High School. I affirmed to myself that I had the potential to perform, even if I was not in Alliance. I had to be my competitor and set the pace to get to the destiny I always dreamt about. I began borrowing books to read and gathered a lot of information from the internet under the guidance of my brother in America.

The head teacher was transferred to a different school, and an Indian principal replaced him, Mrs Gomes. Grandma was excited that a *Mzungu* teacher, a white lady, was assigned to her village to teach in the local high school. Success, for me, was assured.

Mrs Gomes felt sorry for me since I had been forced to attend a school I didn't want to attend and vowed to do her best to convince my mother to work harder and find a chance for me to escape the village life. I buried myself in books; I wanted to prove to everyone that I could still make it even with the little resources available and shine like all the stars learning in good schools.

Mrs Gomes had a hunger to help determined students like myself. She organised focused students into groups to help us study better and harder. On the other hand, we decided to make the best of the situation since time was still ticking; whether we studied or not, the final paper would still come. We resolved to tutor ourselves with little or no supervision. We kept our teachers permanently on their toes to research and provide us with accurate information on the topics we studied—this oiled our unrelenting spirits. We were on fire.

I had been topping our exams with excellent grades—all 'As', to be precise. In the inter-school exams, I emerged number one, the best in the region. Two of my classmates were runners-up. Our school produced the three top students in the province for the first time in the school's history.

My name was already on our school administrator's lips; we had put our otherwise unknown school on the map. I was unstoppable. Number one was my default position for all the other exams that followed. The second and third positions were free for the next determined students; not even my hormonal

imbalances or emotions motivated me to relent on my desire to succeed—nothing like competing against yourself. I knew what it took to succeed when I had no gatekeeper. I was my absent mother's daughter, and I desired a magna cum laude degree from the University of Nairobi.

I made myself proud when I got one.

No one attended my graduation; the journey from the village to Nairobi would have been too tedious for my grandparents.

I took selfies on my graduation day and sent them to my mother and brother, who could not travel to Kenya to attend. They were so happy that I had made it, yet sad that I had no one to share my victory with. My grandparents organised a small party in their homestead for villagers to celebrate my graduation—this attracted my former high school administrator, who attended in honour of my being the school's best student on record, a record that had not been broken.

After university, it was not all roses; I could not secure a permanent job as I waited for my mom to get me an opportunity in the US. Instead, I only worked a myriad of internships. I was under-qualified for any good and well-paying job I laid my eyes on. I couldn't understand why they all needed five years' experience when I had all the energy to transform any workplace that took me in. It did not seem to matter whether I had enough tips from career coaches; a full-time job was a nightmare to come by.

I had started losing hope. My dream of working with flagship companies was shattered within my first year after university. I had to put up with heels and tight dresses to make me look professional, but all the heels did was give me blisters, not get me hired by the big organisations. Everyone I worked with thought I was smart. This however did not help me pay my bills. Interns were paid peanuts since employers felt that interns took more than they gave back to the organisation. We were liabilities, undeserving of respect, yet their way of doing things is what would hold us back. If they let youth introduce modern technology to the workplace, profits would double.

However, the gatekeepers were old dogs with old tricks that were hard to change. They know enough to keep them in office, and I wouldn't be part of their charade. I packed my bags and left the city to join my grandparents in the village and strategize my future again.

I had sent enough résumés to fill a cabinet and finally received an offer letter from a local secondary school to teach Mathematics—I was disappointed that

as educated as I was, the only job available for me was to become an untrained teacher.

Nevertheless, I was hopeful; in the grand scheme of things, I had my mom rooting for me. She was doing her best to get me a scholarship in the US. I knew I would eventually become an urbanite; the village was no good for the elite. My training had equipped me to work smart and reap benefits, yet the work was only hard in the village.

I would advise my students as I taught the mathematics class: "Join any school that comes your way; grades are determined by you, not the teachers, not the school, and not even by other students."

THE AIRPORT WAS ORDERLY despite the beehive of activities. Everyone was hurrying to connect or get to the clearing desk meant for arrivals. Charity, my unpaid guide on my first day out of the country and into the land of opportunities, had moved on with her journey. We hugged and exchanged contacts hoping to meet again in future. I followed her with my eyes as she walked away despite having taken enough photos with her—she had been my mother for a day and a good friend.

My mother and brother were already at the airport when I arrived. We had only seen each other on video calls, but they were family. I knew they could find me even with their eyes closed—they would smell my African scent.

Then my brother spotted me. "Wairimu, over here. Come here, little princess," he hugged and lifted me excitedly, literally sweeping me off my feet as mother joined the jubilation. We locked each other in a bear hug for a minute before I broke the silence.

"Hello, *Mwangi*," I greeted my brother as he placed me back down.

"Shhh! My name is John Paul, in short JP," he quipped back.

"What! Did you change your name?" I asked in astonishment.

"Welcome to my world, sister," Mwangi winked at me. He looked more American than the African boy I thought I would meet. His accent also made me pause and process his words. He was handsome and well-groomed, and for a second, I wished he was not my brother so I could inherit him as a husband. Before my naughty thoughts took a toll on me, he interjected, "You look so mature, now a grown-up lady and beautiful," echoing what I thought about him.

"What a reunion," Mother chimed in. "Finally, you are here, my baby *Mimo*. We had camped here the whole day since the airline altered your plane schedule, making you late by three hours."

I did not comment since I had no idea how plane schedules were read and had no notice on my misbehaving phone that we were delayed. Maybe the pilot made the announcement when I was asleep.

I could not let go of my mother's hand; I didn't want to. I felt like a baby who needed to recover from the long season from which I had been abandoned. I could feel my mother had the same vibe, so we stayed glued together.

We walked to the car as my mother tried to catch up on her family back home and my experience on the plane. She was eager to know more about Grandma, whether she had been ailing or able to lift heavy things and go to the marketplace like she used to. She was not concerned much about Grandpa's well-being though she wanted to know whether his back had stopped aching.

Mother and I got in the back seat as JP took the wheel. She talked animatedly, thrilled to see me and raised many questions about my upbringing, so many that I did not bother to answer her; I just listened.

The questions were probably a way for her to kill her anxiety about seeing me after such a long time. She tried to hold back her tears but couldn't manage it for long; she let her soul pour out all her tears of joy that finally she had her two children under her wing.

Mother admired me from head to toe when we stepped out of the car. I wished I was a little girl so I could sit on her lap and ask all the silly questions that mothers are ready to answer. She touched my hair and studied my well-manicured nails. I wondered whether my nails took after the father I had never met because she seemed so keen on them; they were nothing close to hers. I waited for her to inspect my body as my impatient brother screamed at us to move.

My mother and brother had organised dinner for me in the evening, and before then, they had treated me to a snack and do some light shopping. It was beautiful to have family who could take me in unconditionally—having lived without them; I did not take it for granted. I thought about how my trip abroad would turn out without them, and I couldn't quite visualise it. Without them, I would have to learn the hard way. Seeing them reminded me of my admission

to the University of Nairobi. Were it not for my roommate, Scholastica, who helped me settle down, the urge to quit and go back to the village would have washed over me.

At my primary school I knew everyone by name. I knew their homes and daily routines. Then I was admitted across the fence to a local secondary school, where it took me minutes to reach my grandparents' home. I lived with my grandparents and did not experience homesickness until I joined campus, and eventually from Nairobi to the United States where I completed my transition from a villager to an urbanite—as I had always envisioned.

I gazed at the magnificence of the land of opportunities, exhilarated by all that I saw. In my country, the superhighways were being built, while in the US, they were a daily occurrence. The boulevard was a new vocabulary, and underpasses were unheard of in my country. My dream had come true; I had constantly fantasised about joining my mother and brother in America, though not as soon as it had happened. I nonetheless was thrilled.

We arrived at a shopping mall where my mother did some shopping for me. I was careful not to provoke them with my appetite and desire for new clothes. I would wait for my mother to suggest the clothes and then pick those items she guided me to. We were quickly done with the shopping and headed for our dinner location.

As we had dinner, I was armed with the basic information I needed to survive in the US. Being a Friday, we had the weekend to tour a few places to familiarise myself with the neighbourhood I would be living in and the means of transport to school and back before being allocated a hostel in school.

My mother and I then took a bus to school for admission; I got my admission card and was ready for Monday's class. It was hard for me to keep track of the roads we used to get to Mom's house. Mom lived in a standalone compound—not too big, but had a well-manicured fence. The flowers in the compound were well-placed with beautiful blossoms. She opened the door to the old-school seating room with chairs covered with seat covers that did not match—they were clean, but the detail were lacking. The walls were full of pictures of Mom and Mwangi, with a fading one of me when I was a baby. The photos were all antique; Mother had no time for photography. Her kitchen was well organised, with everything in its place. She ushered me to my bedroom and pointed out the bathroom where I could shower. JP had dutifully dropped my bags in the bedroom before I got in. I could tell that the room previously

belonged to JP; everything in it had a man's touch, including the blue bed cover on the bed. No wonder Mom had insisted on buying new bedding for me.

I was too tired to overthink things, and I quickly picked up my towel and headed for the bathroom. I didn't care what soap my brother left in the bathroom; I just needed the shower. The warm water was soothing after my long journey, and I was in and out in minutes. I had no time for a nightgown, which I misplaced. A t-shirt was good enough, which I put on and quickly hopped into bed since the weather was warm enough. I had forgotten to ask Mom whether I was to share the bedroom with my brother that night, but I was too tired to ask. The question lingered as sleep dragged me to wherever it needed me that night. Jetlag had won the fight, and I only felt Mother tucking me in for a second before I went off to God knows where.

The next day I was up by 8:00 am and so hungry I could hear my empty belly growl. I took another shower and heard JP coming into the house as I dressed. We had breakfast together, and he offered to take me to his place so I could see where he lived.

JP lived in a cosy bedsitter; I imagined myself in such a house in a few years time. In my mind, I could see where the fridge would fit, the bed, and my man's corner. I caught myself imagining because I was smiling so hard; I hadn't even started school and couldn't afford to buy anything, yet I had begun to plan for my tiny home with my imaginary Bacchu.

"Let's go watch a movie today, Wairimu. At least that way, you will feel more at home," JP offered. "It has been a while since I visited a theatre to watch something, and since you are here, it will be a good treat for both of us, yah?"

He picked up the empty glasses he had served juice in and cleaned them. I admired him for that. Back home, I was used to our African men leaving dirty cups and plates on the table after they finished their food. I could tell that the US culture was a bit different—everyone cleaned up after themselves.

I preferred being outdoors to indoors, so I jumped at the idea and agreed to go out with JP for the movie.

The queues at the theatre were long since schools had opened, and movies were one of the favourite joints for students. I was fascinated by young couples walking and holding hands and young girls like myself chatting in groups. I longed for the day I would make friends and go out without being accompanied by my brother. We got to the front of the line and bought popcorn and movie

tickets; I got caramel-flavoured popcorn and 3D movie glasses. The 3D experience was new, but I was lucky to have my brother to guide me.

The name of the movie was *No Retreat, No Surrender*. Half the time, I did not follow what was happening in the movie because my mind wandered to the classroom and how everything would turn out. I flashed back to my university in Nairobi: when I stepped into class, there was no allocated sitting position; we would sit where there was a vacant seat, listen to the lecturer, and then call it a day once classes were over. No one cared whether you showed up. However, performance at examinations would be the ultimate betrayer of the effort put into studying. It was my first opportunity at total freedom. I was not reckless, but I enjoyed the freedom of university. Maybe the need to pass my examinations to get my green pass to join my mom and her son kept me focused. I was a devoted student, but again—I was poor. I had no money for entertainment, and naivety played its part too. I had no boyfriend and no time to search for one. Campus men had no time for bookworms; they were spoiled for choice; party girls were the majority.

"You enjoyed the movie, sister dear?" JP enquired.

"Yes, I did. I hope to get more such treats," I said, trying to fake excitement about the movie. I was afraid, too, since the movie was a bit too real for my liking through the 3D glasses.

"Of course, this is my specialty. I enjoy seeing all these young people. It reminds me that I am not yet too old. I hope to pick one of these girls one day for a wife. But they are so arrogant. They don't even say hi to me. If anything, they look at me more when I'm in uniform. I guess without it, I scare them," JP said as he chuckled.

"Come on, brother. It will help if you improve your smile. No one needs to know you are a cop. Relax when out here and say hello to the ladies. Girls have been eying you ever since we entered this place. They can tell we are siblings, and I am not your woman, but you have not returned their signals, even remotely," I fired back.

"I need to hang out with you more to appreciate their reactions, Mimo. My work is so engaging that venturing out for love is not easy."

"We should. The need is mutual. I am also searching. I am sure even at my school there will be girls. Just keep your eyes roaming and your heart ready for love, brother."

After the movie, JP took me to a fast-food drive-through to introduce me to the American burger. The drive-through was particularly exciting since we didn't have to queue in line; we did it in JP's car. When we got home, we spent a few minutes knocking on the door without a response, but since JP had a key, he let us in, only to find Mom dead asleep on the couch. We both surmised that her long hours in hospital corridors had taken a toll on her. She, however, didn't need much to get her up.

"You are back, my babies. I have made dinner for you. How was the movie, my dear Wairimu?"

"It was fascinating. Oh, and Mom," I said shyly, "I have eaten; I have no space left in my tummy. We ate a lot of junk food courtesy of JP. Buuuut," I cut her off, seeing her about to make a fuss. "For the sake of being a good daughter, I will have some of your yummy meal."

"That is it, smart girl," JP said, already seated at the dinner table.

I could swear that JP had a hole in his tummy because he ate as if he had not had a meal for a month. Men are lucky with food, I thought. I wonder where their food goes. They eat more than women, yet they look leaner.

The night was long. I heard every little sound that reached my room, from the barking dogs to the blaring horns of cars outside. Finally, I managed to catch some sleep for three hours before dawn.

CHAPTER 2

PIONEERS INTRODUCTION

The Language Barrier

I GRUMBLED AS I TURNED to reach the alarm and snooze it. It sounded noisier than usual and startled me from sleep. I couldn't quite reach it and stretched my hand feeling around the bedside table until I got the clock and turned it off. *Just ten more minutes,* I told myself. *But wait, I am not at Grandma's house. I'm in America! I need to get up.*

"Ahhhh-hhaaaaaa!" I yawned, stretching myself as I lay in bed. A smile began to form on my mouth when I remembered that today would be my first day of school in America. I paused, trying to listen to birds sing, but I couldn't hear any chirps. I wasn't sure whether there were no birds or they woke up earlier than I had and had already left the hood. *Everyone, even the birds, is so focused around here.* I could feel myself get anxious as I stared at the ceiling, trying to imagine how everything would turn out when I reported to the school.

I wonder what my classmates look like, their nationalities, and our seating arrangement in class. I hope I sit next to a girl so we can make mistakes together. I wonder if I will fit in with the dress code and style I find the girls have adopted. Hmmmm… I wonder how hot the boys here look and how they behave. Are they "hyenas" (team mafisi), like we call them back home? Our African men tell you to your face, "You are beautiful," or "I would like to be your friend," or, better still, "I want to take you out on a date." I wonder if the boys here are that bold.

"Wairimu! Wairimu!" Mom called out loudly from what felt like downstairs.

"Yes, mother!" I shouted back, now fully awake.

"Mimo dear, hurry. I'll drop you at school. This is not Africa; time is of the essence. If we delay one more minute, you will miss your class, my girl. I hope you rested well; we don't want you sleeping in class, do we?" she said, poking her head into my room.

"Yes, mother," I said as I skipped out of bed and quickly started preparing myself.

I tried on a few dresses in quick succession, not impressed by what I saw every time I turned to check myself in the mirror. By the time I was in my fifth dress, mother was already ushering me out of my room so we could leave. She had packed everything for me, and breakfast was on the table. I hurriedly gobbled down a bit of it, and we left the house.

I arrived at school twenty minutes late; everyone had already taken a seat, two at each desk, and only a single, lonely-looking Arabic guy at the back remained. There were only three ladies in this University academy class, including myself, and the two ladies had already taken a seat next to each other. I made a beeline to the back to take the seat next to the intimidating handsome man at the back of the classroom. *Wairimu hails from Kenya; I have seen more intimidating animals like a wasp. No human stands a chance with a Mau Mau descendant.* I told myself as I walked over to the empty seat.

As I drew closer to the seat, I could tell that my would-be deskmate was the gorgeous guy I had ever seen. My jaw sunk slowly, and though I wasn't conscious as I walked towards him, I quickly hid my fascination for him and closed my mouth before his dark brown eyes landed on me.

"How are you?" I asked the Middle Eastern stranger when I got to the empty seat.

He did not answer and just stared at me like I was a ghost. I was expecting a megawatt smile now that he had gotten himself a deskmate. Instead, I greeted him, and to my amazement, he just stared at me. The expression on my face quickly changed to match what I felt. *Now I understand why no one is seated with you.* I could sense that his energy would repel me. *What did I do to deserve sitting with such a mean-spirited man?*

He didn't seem willing to move and let me through to the empty seat beside him. A bit embarrassed, I shyly requested him, "Excuse me, Sir, can I pass?"

He stood up and paved the way facing the opposite direction as if a bag of dusty cement was being passed in front of his face. He then quickly sat down when I had passed without a second glance. I did not know what I could have possibly done to offend this man I had not met before. I shrugged my shoulders and decided that I would not let anything come between me and the excitement I had on my first day in class.

I scanned around to see the new faces in my classroom. It was hard thinking straight after encountering my deskmate's uncouth behaviour, but he was as

handsome as the devil. As I looked around the room, my deskmate piqued my curiosity; I wanted to know his name. I was, however, still shy after the cold encounter with him. *Let him be; after all, he is my deskmate. I will eventually know him by name, status, and character.* However, I wanted to study him, look at him and see if I could decipher some of the mystery behind him.

Since he was looking away, I examined him from head to toe. He seemed unfairly gorgeous and astonishingly handsome to be ignored. His Muslim attire looked sparklingly bright and expensive. His cologne was so seductive that I wondered why his attitude made him so out of reach. He looked polished, almost mannequin, and less human. I started panting and sweating, I couldn't remember how it started happening, but it was happening all at once. I wished he sat away from me so I could not feel what I was feeling, protect my space and watch him in peace. I couldn't pull my eyes off him despite his rudeness. Then these thoughts passed through my mind:

> He is well-groomed, but his manners are wanting. How can he behave like he did not notice that he now has a deskmate? Even if he didn't feel like saying hi, a welcome smile would do. What a man! I miss Kenya already. Men are courteous and give way with a big smile and great admiration for their women. They say hello to you and want to know more about you. You have to scale down the information you give them since their curiosity rivals that of a cat. We take for granted that teasing. I miss the reassurance from my home boys. They would definitely let me know that they had seen me enter their space, and they would at least smile or glance at me. A smile started to form on my face as I thought of the men I had left back home. These African men can make you miss a step. It is as if it were their first time seeing a girl, no matter what the girl wore or, worse, if she wore a pair of shredded jeans.
>
> During the railway construction in 1896, the Europeans hung clothes in the cabins as they supervised the building of the railway from Mombasa to Nairobi. I heard that there was a furious fight at Mtito Andei (Forest of Vultures) as the railway workers tried to claim land from wild animals at what would come to be known as Tsavo National Park. I could see the King of the Jungle refusing to entertain any of the plans made on their behalf. Lions jumped in the train wagons, shredded the European's clothes, and killed several workers. "Leave us alone; go and do this

nonsense somewhere else!" I assumed the lions must have said. "This is our home; you are not welcome in this animal kingdom."

When the surviving Europeans got to Nairobi, they gave all the shredded clothes to Africans, helping with the railway construction. The men took them to the tailors to remove the torn parts. Eventually, they were miniskirts so short that the ladies from the lake basin could only cover their fundamentals. It was not a big deal then since many people walked naked. Try that today; even donkeys will come to spectate in the arena.

Before I picked another annoying thought, the Lecturer opened the door and walked in, and there was pin-drop silence. He placed his bag on the table with a thud as he breathed heavily. He looked pleasant but like he was in a hurry. He had no time to spare and didn't want to mince any words with us; no niceties, just business. He behaved like he had an ongoing relationship with us and had known us for longer than we had known him. I could tell he had a happy-go-lucky personality even though he looked in his forties. He had trimmed his hair short but retained his long beard that tapered at the end.

"I am Sean Bellows. Welcome to the pioneer class of USA academy, California. Let everyone kindly share their name and country of origin; better still, if you know the meaning of your name, do share it," he smiled.

We all looked at each other, and then there was a buzz of activity, with everyone going on Google to find the meaning of their names. I had no business with Google; I knew what Wairimu from Mt. Kenya meant.

The first in line was a Russian girl. Despite being a backbencher, I could clearly see the chemistry between the Lecturer and the Russian girl as she stood up to introduce herself. I imagined her heart throbbing with excitement, hoping to impress our middle-aged teacher. Mr Bellows had mistakenly joked about his status, that he was single and available to mingle. *What woman does not dream of winning such a man for herself? I wonder how you survived this long without being taken, Mr Sean Bellows.* I looked at the girl seated next to the Russian girl, and her excitement was also evident. *I bet they are wondering who will be the lucky one to win the teacher. Your introduction must be precise, a trigger even, something that will make your name linger in Sean's mind for a while.* I coached the girls in my mind.

"My name is Alya Bella. My name means an adorable warrior who might end up saving the world," she said gleefully.

The lecture room erupted as we booed her down. Alya was a beautiful and more mature lady than me, probably thirty years old or older. *She could only save "Sean's world," not any other.*

"My second name is Bella. It means the beautiful one. I am a fighter; being a Russian lady, I had to be a top student to qualify for this opportunity. Time will prove my remarks, dear classmates. It is a pleasure schooling with you all," Alya said and took her seat.

Mr. Bellows warmed up to Alya quickly, and I could see her firmly placing her foot on his heart, so he let Alya Bella fight with us for the next five minutes of the lesson just so that he could watch her do it. I sensed he had experienced loneliness for a long time, and Bella's attention probably made him feel wanted.

"Thank you, Alya, for the introduction. You can narrate the rest of the story to me later," he smiled slyly, "what a way to start my day."

The Lecturer was already swept off his feet by the bold Russian girl. So he stared for too long; maybe I could tell Bella felt a bit uncomfortable. She averted her gaze by looking to the floor to stop her eye contact from confusing the Lecturer.

"Next one, two minutes," Mr Bellows bellowed, pointing at the Indian girl.

Alya's deskmate stood up to greet the class. She didn't look like a pushover too. She was indeed pretty, with a flawless face and make-up to match her attire. She straightened her clothes like a lady, making me wonder why I chose to wear trousers on the first day of school. I felt intimidated as a wave of panic swept through me. It then occurred to me that I had never before introduced myself in front of a group of diverse nationalities.

"My name is Aashna Anika. Aashna means the one who is devoted to love, and Anika means grace from God," Anika said, smiling.

The class was silent for this one; no one booed. I assumed it was because of her accent. She reminded me of my Mom's attachment to India. I also thought that very few of my classmates understood what she had said.

MY MOM, MUTHONI, had travelled to India for an attachment some time back and had googled and found herself in the wrong city. Instead of

Ahmedabad, she landed in Hyderabad. The two cities are located five hundred miles apart.

In Hyderabad, everybody seemed happy to only speak in Gujarat, and finding someone to interpret Gujarat into English was impossible. This frustration drove my poor Mom to switch to her mother tongue, Kikuyu if only to amuse herself conversing with them. After all, no one would tell whether it was English or Greek. Eventually, when she removed her schedule sheet, a man, Mr Sanjay, saw Ahmedabad and realised how lost my mother was. He would reveal to my Mom that she was in the wrong city and advice her on what to do.

"The next flight is 8 pm; it is now 11 am," Mom observed, before frustratingly adding as she took a seat on the dusty floor. "My goodness, what a mess!" she said, though to no one in particular. "What will I be doing with all that time?" Seeing her frustration, Sanjay decided he could not watch Muthoni suffer in his country. He took her to the airport desk, where she would pay for and get a ticket to Ahmedabad.

However, not even the task of buying a ticket was without challenges. Hyderabad's airport was a provincial airfield that didn't accept US dollars. They needed to find a bureau to change the dollars Muthoni had into Indian Rupees. Sanjay took on the job of ensuring that he helped Mom, who was literally deaf and dumb due to the language barrier, a language that Sanjay could speak. She was finally able to purchase her air ticket to Ahmedabad.

Muthoni breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped away from the airport ticketing counter. "Sanjay, could you take me to a fine hotel so that I can freshen up and have a meal?"

"Yes, of course, Muthoni," Sanjay politely replied.

Muthoni was taken to the hotel, and within a few minutes, she had freshened up, and they were seated to have their meals. However, the menu didn't have regular meals, so there was no way to order without looking like a fool. Having travelled to Africa before, Sanjay could guide Muthoni because he understood what she must have been going through in the unfamiliar territory. Sanjay guided her on less spicy foods to try. After listening to what was on offer, she settled on a snack. It was good enough for her in the situation she was in. She also didn't want to risk tummy issues as she travelled.

Once they completed the meals, Sanjay hailed a tuk-tuk taxi outside the hotel. He took Mother on a tour around Hyderabad city as they waited for the

plane's departure. The sceneries were elaborate and beautiful, nothing close to what she had seen either in Africa or America. They were unique, with deep history and culture.

As Mom and Sanjay crisscrossed through the town, she explained to Sanjay that she was assigned to look out for Amaranth (Rajgira in Hindi). The crop's nutritional value had been the subject of one of my mother's PhD papers. She needed to understand the crop more and see how Indians used the seed as food. Due to Amaranth's nutritional composition, Sanjay explained to Muthoni that Amaranth is a great food for fasting.

"The Amaranth seed can be added to food and cooked together with other ingredients. It can also be popped like popcorn and added to snacks," he said. "As porridge, it is also delicious," Mom nodded.

She only heard popcorn, porridge, and tasty. Sanjay decided to buy his own air ticket to assist my poor Mom in Ahmedabad.

Soon it was evening and time for the duo to get their flight. Mom was happy to be leaving the city, while Sanjay relished being a tour guide for the African queen. As they checked in, they were told their flight was delayed, yet another dramatic turn of events that my mother wasn't prepared for. An announcement was made that they would have to wait for another hour.

The waiting passengers were livid and made their frustrations clear. Insults were hurled, and even worse, the messenger who made the announcement was roughed up. Lucky for him, the security team was close by and whisked him away before he could suffer serious injuries. Naturally, the airport management office was furious at the behaviour of the would-be passengers, and a new message came in through the intercoms, "No more alerts until the plane is ready for boarding in two hours."

Muthoni was tired and not about to invest any of her emotions in the ongoing events; she texted the Taj Mahal hotel to pick her up from the airport once her plane was able to fly her to Ahmedabad. She notified them that she needed an extra room because she would be going with a guest.

Sanjay and Mom would arrive at Ahmedabad, and her experience would be better now that she had a guide by her side.

"I WANT TO INTRODUCE INDIA in a nutshell. In India, we care about the ABCs," Anika said during the self-introduction in class. "'A' stands for

Almighty, 'B' for Bollywood, and 'C' for Cricket. We are God-fearing people, love our movies, and cricket is our football. So you are welcome to India!" She said and sat down.

Anika was a beautiful girl, and the men in the room seemed to concur as they followed her with their eyes. *I bet they wish you had more to say.*

Mr Bellows was more confused than anything else, "Ok, you are done?"

"Yes, I am, Sir," Anika shyly stood up to answer the Lecturer.

"Good, that was fast. We will come to India to see the Indian ABCs. Next one, please. Keep it brief like Anika."

I wonder how teachers keep everyone's name in their minds and remember that name the following day.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, social distancing was of the essence. The desk ahead of me was a metre away. On it sat a Chinese boy who looked like a teenager, but he was 30 years old and was quick to affirm his age. He stared intensely at Anika as she made her introduction. I saw this because I kept looking at him as Anika spoke.

He is totally in love with Anika, I would think to myself.

It was his turn to introduce himself and impress the Indian girl. His voice was deep which somewhat made his good looks more alluring. He had long hair tied with a ribbon into a ponytail. His smile told me that he was an easy guy to talk to, unlike the Chinese men who carry out road construction works in Kenya. You can hardly see their face due to the safety gear they wear throughout.

"My name is Cheng Changpu, an accomplished flourishing vine. The name is a simple definition," he said with finality. "In China, we do not just pick a name; every name is a business. All of you know that Covid-19 started with us. Unfortunately, we sneezed, and the whole world caught the flu. As the world tries to figure out our business tricks, we are the only operating economy." Though he elicited a smile from us, we all knew it was a silly joke.

"Anyway, China is the best country to do business. If you need it, we have got it. Although this Covid-19 virus wounds us as a human race, we are not bowed yet. We are yet to emerge from this fog of war with this hidden enemy," Cheng stated forcefully. "I call it the fog of war because the Covid enemy has remained unseen and undefined. Its rule of engagement is erratic and miscellaneous. Worse still, the enemy has developed mutations. Scientists

might have nipped it in the bud if we are dealing with one variant of the virus, but now new strains have emerged: the Delta variant and India Variant. We do not know the havoc it will wreak on humankind yet. We need to keep strong and unite to fight this invader. The first line of defence against this invisible corona is you and me. Stay safe, and be your brother's keeper. After all, the Covid-19 pandemic had to start somewhere, in which case, China was the pioneer. Forgive us, my comrades," he said, bowing and sitting down.

I like Cheng. He can market his country amid the Covid crisis, I thought.

We all looked at each other, turned to Cheng, and clapped for him.

"Thank you, Mr Covid," we shouted.

He had demystified the stigma we had on China. He smiled and bowed with respect again and took his seat.

Mr Bellows had nothing more to add since he knew that starting a conversation around what Cheng talked about would bring on a heated argument. It would be easy to contain ourselves and treat Cheng and China as two different entities.

"We have our class spokesman right there. Thank you, Cheng. I am impressed; keep your spirit high. This is the United States, and no one is discriminated against. The world will heal in due time," Mr Bellows commended him.

He turned to invite the next student, Ji-hoon, who was already halfway through his introduction.

"My name is Lee Ji-hoon. I am from South Korea, the home of K-dramas. Our movies are deep and very entertaining, like the world-popular Arthdal Chronicles. We created our alphabet and dished the Chinese characters. Please do not get too excited, Cheng Changpu, that we catch the flu when China sneezes; it might be your downfall. The economies that will have collapsed before Covid-19 is over might blame it all on your economy and reduce the trade they do with China and source locally to avoid the inconveniences they are experiencing at the moment. It is our new normal, and the dynamics of our operations will change. Most parts of the world have started cottage industries in the backyard to mitigate the shortages they are experiencing in raw materials and services they outsourced…"

"Are you done with your introduction, Lee?" The teacher interjected, "Let that be a topic for another day Ji-hoon. The more value you see in other people,

the more you feel good about yourself. Complement them, magnify their strengths, and ignore their weaknesses to make a difference in how they live their life. We pray all economies to do more in their country than outsource. That is the gap we are here to learn how to fill. Thanks for the intro. Next one, please," Sean Bellows said, sounding slightly irritated. "Name only for the rest of the students; we are out of time."

Ji-Hoon showed his respect by bowing and sitting down.

In my village, we only bow to those in the top offices, but Asians seem to respect everyone. I will adopt that culture, too, and start bowing to all. I thought to myself as I shifted my eyes to the next person introducing themselves.

"My name is Diego Antonio from Brazil. Antonio means invaluable; Diego stands for one who advises," Diego was soft-spoken and seemed shy.

"My name is Abdi Jamal from Qatar."

I was very attentive to learning more about my deskmate through the classroom introduction, and here he was speaking, though as soon as he started, he had finished.

He has no idea whether names have meaning and why he is Jamal or Abdi in the first place. He did not even stand up like the rest. Half the time, I thought he was talking to himself, throwing daggers at him with my looks. *Language barriers can make an intelligent person look arrogant or a complete idiot.*

The Lecturer did not comment; he looked at me. I thought he wanted me to fill the gap for my deskmate, so I stared back at him.

"Time is up, young lady; give your name, please," Mr. Bellows said, pointing at me.

I stood up, and fear gripped me as I faced the other students. All my classmates turned and gave me unfamiliar, strange looks. *Am I the only one with a different skin colour and hair texture*? *Snap out of it, Wairimu, speak like the African queen you are. Free yourself from whatever meanness; yes, you are different, but different is good,* I told myself.

I could feel the confidence easing back into me, and with a big smile, I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. *Don't panic, Wairimu. Just cough it out.* I hastily cupped my hands and coughed, then said, "My name is Wairimu from Kenya, in Africa."

As if I hadn't said anything, Mr Bellows moved on, apologising to the class for the time taken. He ended his lesson and promised to continue with the

introductions during the next lesson. I wonder whether he cared to remember Abdi and me since he was standing close to the door, quickly concluding his class and seeming about to walk out.

However, the rest of the classmates—Fritz Berchwald from Germany, Botan Hiroshi from Japan, and Andrew Trevor from the USA—would later introduce themselves to the rest of the class.

I sat down but remembered that I hadn't bowed; I stood up quickly and did a quick bow that left everyone cracking their bones in laughter as I nursed my embarrassment. The Lecturer also burst out laughing and asked for my name again. He repeated my name, Wairimu, three times. *I hope he remembers me in his next lesson, even if it is for all the wrong reasons. I deserve to stick in his head as well.*

"In the meantime, I will be rooting for you. I convey my best wishes to you all, and I pray that your efforts bear a bountiful harvest from this beautiful school. Stay focused as I am; together, we will change and disrupt the way business is done today. So get ready to be the change the world is looking to embrace. Have a beautiful afternoon," Mr Bellows said.

"Before we meet for the next lesson, kindly head to the library and pick some of the books we will use in class; your library cards are ready. Something else," the lecturer said, passing along some papers, "have team discussions on the topics on that paper. It will be the first homework I will give you. It is gradable; treat it very seriously. I expect you to report on behalf of your deskmate, not yourself. Learn something different before tomorrow, and do not be in a hurry to go home," he picked up his bag and left the class.

Even after Mr Bellows left the classroom, everyone remained seated, scrutinising the piece of paper with our first assignment. After giving it a few minutes thought, I decided that I had completed my work. I was crystal clear about what to report about my deskmate. After all, it is my marks, not his. I didn't care what he would write about me; he could write whatever he wanted. I was not in school to endure his arrogance. At least he had the idea that I hailed from Africa. It didn't matter what country he thought I came from. If he forgot the one I had said, he would have to pick an African theme and culture to match me, and I bet no one would tell the difference. It would be a fantastic first assignment.

CHAPTER 3

EPITOME OF YOUTH

The Task Ahead

WE WERE IN CLASS again, and Mr Bellows broke the ice as soon as he walked in to get the ball rolling, perhaps because the students were still new to each other and couldn't easily converse with one another. Suddenly, however, the class became abuzz with conversations, unlike a moment before when everyone seemed absorbed in whatever they were doing.

I, however, still couldn't talk to my deskmate, who I thought was a pompous hunk. I thought Jamal might disrespect me the moment I spoke to him. I even could not dare ask my deskmate to pave the way for me. I unlocked my phone, pretending to be busy with it. Then the most unlikely thing happened. I felt a tap on my hand. I turned and looked, and there he was—Jamal, my deskmate, looking straight into my eyes.

"Wairimu, it is you?" he clumsily asked.

"Yes, I am Wairimu," I said and smiled, trying hard not to meet his gaze.

What followed was an attempt to speak the English language in a way that resembled a toddler who had just started walking, trying to walk without holding onto things for support. "I am Jamal," he said and flashed a desperate smile. "I more comfortable speaking in Arabic but is okay. I, like you, live here now because of studying, but I don't have any more USD because my visa card has trouble, so I cannot withdraw money," he said, pulling out his ATM card.

I could not believe my deskmate was trying to converse with me, though the topic seemed about a sensitive issue: money. I listened attentively and smiled to win his confidence.

"So you are saying that you don't have money right now because your ATM card has problems?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, absolutely," Jamal replied enthusiastically. "My family, they already paid for my hostel, but problem is food. I have finished already money in cash but ATM a problem," he said.

I felt honoured that the only person he was comfortable explaining this predicament to was me.

I gave him a big smile that made him feel at ease, and he smiled back.

"Why don't you call your parents and tell them what is happening?" I asked.

His smile turned into a frown as he stared at his phone and said, "Phone not yet figured to call home."

"Hmmm… Phone not yet figured to call home," I repeated, looking at the phone, "Oh, you mean that the phone is not yet configured to call home?"

"Yes, yes…"

I thought about it for no longer than five seconds and promised to fill the gap. I did not have much, but being Kenyan and having learned from the ultimate university of hard knocks, I decided to find a way to keep my promise. I knew I could rely on my intelligence to find a solution and, in the meantime, turn on my charms to comfort my devastated classmate. I could see in his eyes that he was an intelligent guy pursuing knowledge. I set out to help, whatever that would look like.

One kind word can change someone's entire day, I thought.

"Come, let me first buy you lunch as we figure out how to unblock your card," I told Jamal once it was lunchtime.

We headed out of class, mingling with other students, until I noticed I had left Jamal some distance behind me. I stopped walking to wait for him, and matched his pace when he was beside me. I decided to be more intentional in finding ways to include him in the class mingling sessions. I could tell that the language barrier was particularly hard on him and that he needed someone to lift him once in a while and remind him of his worth, besides the fact that he was not fluent in this foreign language.

Once we had our meal, I could tell that the small act of sharing a meal with him meant the world to him. After lunch, I escorted him to the hostels. He looked vibrant and energetic compared to the Jamal I was interacting with earlier that morning. As I bid him goodbye, I could tell he wanted to spend more time with me.

"I need to find a way to sustain both of us, Jamal, as I promised. So I have to go and figure things out," I told him, this time able to look into his now sad eyes.

"Okay, Wairimu."

I could tell he was following me with his beautiful eyes until I disappeared from his sight.

WHEN I WOKE UP the following day, I went through my morning routine on autopilot. I couldn't remember anything I did, including the class lecture for the day. Bella's notes, which I had borrowed before leaving school, saved me as my mind wondered where to get financial support to see us through the day. Us meaning my deskmate and me.

How did I land such a responsibility amid such trying times when everything is new to me too? From my absent mother to a self-centred brother, he is lucky to have lived all his life with his Mom as I struggled to survive under harsh village conditions back home. I thought I needed to find a way to take care of this situation with Jamal before I could start thinking of letting him know just how much I fancy him.

I headed to my brother's house and knocked on the door. No one answered, so I kept knocking. Finally, my brother opened the door, having come from the shower. I hastily walked in, leaving him standing at the door.

"Hello, my small sister."

I nodded to his greetings and headed straight to his music system, which was playing at full blast, and turned it off. "How can you hear anything with this thing on Mwangi?" I rhetorically asked.

"Never call me Mwangi. I changed my name to John Paul. Call me JP. If you call me that name again, you will regret it, so don't!" he said as he headed back to the bathroom. He then asked without a hint of humour in his voice: "Do I look like a Kenyan man to you?"

He ditched his Kikuyu name for the "cooler sounding" black American version of his name, short forms, and acronyms of his name. Having left Kenya when he was only five years old, I could see where this was coming from. He had lived in the US longer than in his motherland, Kenya. However, Mom was able to keep him in check and make sure that he never forgot his mother tongue by speaking it to him often.

"Now that you are not Kenyan anymore, I cannot call you Mwangi?" I shouted at him and laughed.

He then walked out of the bathroom, wiping his head with a towel.

I wonder why men found it so hard to finish wiping their bodies in the bathroom. Grandpa had a similar habit, and Grandma was good at screaming at him for leaving the floor wet on his wake from the bathroom.

I picked up the mop leaning by the bathroom door and cleaned the mess JP left behind from the bathroom to his bedroom door. Like my grandma, I felt my brother needed to understand how to finish his business in the bathroom before roaming in the house dripping water. He could also learn to cut his beard at the sink so that no mess would follow him from the bathroom.

I thought about my idea to ask my brother to help Jamal but sensed there would be a lot of resistance from him. I was, however, determined to request support from him. Then an opportunity presented itself; his wallet was within my reach

As JP was busy in the bedroom finishing up whatever he was doing and shouting at me, I tiptoed to his wallet and lifted a few dollars from it.

"Goodbye, JP. It was nice chatting with you," I shouted as I hurried towards the door.

"Please wait for me, silly girl; I need to spend some time with you before I get to work. I had planned a surprise for you. You need to know places, and I have some time to take you around, baby sister," I could hear him sprint as I darted out.

"I am in a hurry; we have a group assignment," I said, my hands trembling.

All this was new to me; I had never taken anything from anyone without permission, and now I had just stolen from my brother.

"Do not move an inch before I come," was the last thing I heard him say.

I imagine he noticed his wallet was not in the position he had left it, and, being the man he was, he would count every banknote and coin only to realise that his cunning sister had lifted 100 USD from his wallet. He tried calling my phone every ten minutes for the next hour until it was time for him to go to the office.

I had set a funny ringtone on my phone, assigned only to my brother's number. He would think that I had picked up the phone when it rang, and now that I had parted him from some of his money, I assume he was hurling all manner of insults at me before I responded, only to realise that he was having a monologue.

He must have bit his tongue as he threw the phone on the seat. He must have banged the table so hard that the two glasses sitting pretty on it must have bounced off the table, hit the floor, and broke, adding him thirty unplanned minutes to clean up. I thought he must be cursing at me and saying that he would never entertain me in his house again.

I was tired of the constant calls from JP, which I left unanswered. *Once the money was in my pocket,* I assured myself that it was mine. *Call as much as you want, brother. I will even block your phone calls for the day because we will have an endless argument if I answer them. I have serious issues to settle. My desire to prove to Jamal that I am an abled African woman gives me the agility to win this battle. Jamal must survive until his visa card works.*

I understood that to be happy, one must never try to own love but be a donor of love. Love is risking all that you have to make someone else shine. I had to pass this litmus test with distinction.

Jamal was more than happy with the little I could deliver for him on such short notice, and his heart started melting; I could feel it—It was like my heart melting.

I TOOK THE SINK DUTY that evening after my last drop of coffee. Our hostels were finally ready for us to occupy, and I took one next to my Jamal. We spent a lot of time together. I literally lived with him.

Jamal lay on the couch admiring my see-through mini skirt. I finished the chores and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower before class. He joined me and gave me a smouldering but short kiss on my cheek, and for a moment, I thought how much my gulf boy had transformed. He had become a bit more romantic; his fingers would make an electric wave on my skin, and I would be rendered helpless as I submitted to his demands. Thank God we had come this far without an incident. Otherwise, I didn't know where I would raise a baby with my Mom and her son's hostility.

"We need to be in class, sweets," I told Jamal. "Three more minutes, and Mr Bellows will be screaming at us."

We quickly prepared ourselves, snatched our bags, and headed to class.

I knew JP kept the money incident to himself since my mother hadn't mentioned it. But he hurled enough insults at me through text messages.

Who cares? I thought to myself. *I am an African queen and must survive and support my deskmate.*

Just a few days and the hundred dollars were over? I was baffled. *This place must be very expensive. For many people, one hundred dollars in Kenya would be enough for a month. It can pay for rent, food, and entertainment*, I thought to myself. *I need to find more money.*

On the fifth day of toiling for my deskmate, Jamal kissed me on my forehead amidst my anxiety about how to fund our existence. *I should not panic*; *I just need to keep things moving.*

The conviction that I would make Jamal's card work one day did not make life any easier, but it did make me feel much better. I gave him a desperate smile as calculations that didn't seem to add up kept running through my head. *He is looking up to me, and therefore, I cannot seek his opinion. All he requires is the mother he left in Qatar, and I am doing my best to fill the gap.*

I needed money and had no one else but my brother, JP, on my mind. *I must find a way to reach his wallet again as soon as possible.*

As these deflating thoughts filled my mind, I remembered my grandma telling me once that service to others was the rent we pay for being alive and occupying this earth. "It is the very purpose of life, not something you choose to do when you feel like it. Serve someone today, and they will serve you tomorrow in a better way that suits your needs. When you do not choose a need to serve, you become more empowered since you learn in the process. When you avoid responsibility, you stagnate. You should do beyond the expected," she advised. I assured my soul that I was well able to keep on fighting until this situation was over.

I had gone to visit Mom and left her house earlier than I wanted to avoid JP since I was in no mood for drama in my Mom's house—but I had a plan.

I went to JP's workplace and went straight for his desk and, as I got there, faked a faint when I saw JP stand up to charge towards me. I landed on his arms, pretending to be half dead. JP panicked and started calling his colleagues to help. In the confusion, I picked the wallet from my brother's pocket and helped myself to some banknotes. I couldn't find a way to put it back in his pocket. In the meantime, I could hear the ambulance, which was already at the entrance to the building hosting JP's office. I knew I was in a lot of trouble even as I lay with one eye open to find an opportunity to escape. I was rushed to the waiting ambulance, and as the paramedics sought my details from my

brother, I managed to sneak away with the three hundred dollars I had picked. I left the wallet in the ambulance.

I knew JP was breathing fire when he found out. He knew exactly what I had done but couldn't bring it up; otherwise, I would rot in jail or be deported. I knew he had to give a lame excuse to the ambulance team and his colleagues, but I didn't care. Everyone would have to handle their problems; for now, mine was already taken care of.

I bet everyone was confused after the incident and talking in low tones, wondering whether it had to do with a pregnancy that I ran away from.

"THIS GIRL IS A STUDENT from Kenya. It is in Africa. She is a student at the University Academy here in California. She has not understood how the system works here. Maybe she got afraid, that is why she disappeared," I imagined JP trying to create an excuse that made sense.

I could see JP in my mind's eye taking his wallet from the ambulance and apologising, promising to follow up with me and take me to the hospital if needed. However, as before, I had blocked his number, preventing him from reaching me.

"Why is this girl in need of big money suddenly? What is she funding?" JP must have asked himself. "Is she a petty thief, or what is going on?"

I need to inform Mom about it so we can decide what to do with her, I imagined JP thinking to himself. *It was only a few days ago that she took money from my wallet, and today, again, the same thing happened. I wish she could be more open so that I could see how to help her. I will so involve Mom now.*

However, this is what I later learned transpired:

JP excused himself from the office and drove to Mom's house to report the news of her daughter's mischievous ways.

Mom was going through her menopause, and nothing seemed to matter anymore. As JP explained the incident to her, she wondered what was wrong with her son.

"Three hundred dollars is something to come and report to me? Do you know how much I have spent on you, JP? I mean, Mwangi? Reduce your debt to me and pay me the difference. Your sister has suffered in Kenya, and now you are here complaining about the money you have earned? How did you survive before you started earning?"

She continued, "Don't you dare abuse my intelligence JP. Have you forgotten the roller-coaster you took me through before you got the hang of this America? You called a hotel here, thinking it was a tea-room hotel in Kenya, and started ordering *manoria ngui*. Were it not for a Kikuyu migrant who heard your ignorance and ordered guacamole for you, you could have landed in jail for causing trouble. How many times did you empty my handbag? And don't blame the rats; there are no rats here to pick banknotes for dinner. Please think twice before you come to me with such complaints. Go to a police station and report her or hire a lawyer; you have money now. Shame on you!" Mom rebuked him.

JP left without another word. *What is wrong with women?* He wondered to himself. *They are impossible! These two women matter to me most, yet they drive me nuts. Mom does not even give a damn. This is not normal; we need to tame Wairimu collectively. Money is not the issue here. We must stop her before this behaviour escalates. Simply because I am single doesn't mean my parental instincts have not kicked in yet. What of the time I will get a wife? Will I manage to tame her, or will the situation worsen with three unbearable women?*

This is a catastrophe waiting to happen!

JP bit his tongue as he tapped the steering wheel, pondering his next move. He was struggling with Plan B but had already made a decision. He went home and picked up all his trousers and took them to a tailor to have zippers and buttons put on them.

Never again will this petty thief access my money. My house and office are out of bounds for her. This is not Africa. I will not let her trample on me. I am not someone to toy with just because I'm your brother. You can visit your Mom but avoid my territory.

CHAPTER 4

THE INVISIBLE

The Sky Is Not My Limit

"JAMAL, I NEED to get a nice nickname for you. Your name is too formal. Any ideas on what name you want me to call you by?" I said.

"You said you are a descendant of what?" Jamal answered with a question.

"I'm a Mau Mau descendant," I replied.

"Aha! Light bulb moment," he said, smiling. "I will call you Mau. That is my nickname for you, Wairimu."

I smiled as I watched him beam, realising the ingenuity of the nickname. To Jamal, Mau is one name, and Mau is the other. So Wairimu Ndegwa was replaced by Mau Mau, a sobriquet I told him I liked because it symbolised the group of ethnic communities from the Mt. Kenya region that rebelled against British colonial rule and fought for our country's independence. Anytime he would call me Mau, I told him, it would evoke in me the spirit of my people's heroism and sense of pride.

"I have a nickname for you, too," I said. "I will call you Isis."

"What do you mean? ISIS is an evil movement that we, as Muslims, hate to be associated with," Jamal protested.

"Despite what I've just said, do you think Mau Mau is any better? What is holy about our relationship anyway? Your people do not know there are human beings with kinky hair who hail from Africa. Worse still, this African girl is from a Christian family," I laughed as I challenged Jamal.

"Come to think of it, my Mau, the day your mom discovers you are dating a Muslim boy, you will be skinned alive. I wonder what our parents take us for. We are grownups; who said they still have to dictate who we date and marry? We are all human beings and should be free to seek our soulmate until we find one. It does not matter whether the partner is from your community or an alien land, provided it is your choice. That is why there are so many separations. External forces dictate to us what an inappropriate relationship is. Jesus and Mohammed need coherence. We are on our own here, my queen. You know

what? It does not matter what our families think. We are in it together. I am determined to fight the system to have you by my side forever," Jamal said with conviction. The passion with which he also said it was moving enough to make me feel his love.

"That is true, my darling. Let us stick together and fight the opposition from one court," I said. Jamal smiled and ran towards where I was to give me a tickle. I screamed as I ran away from him as he tried to grab me. Failing in catching me, he called a truce and continued our discussion from where we had left it.

"I concur with you, Mau, about the Isis nickname," he said after we had calmed down. "Unfortunately, this is precisely how your family will view this poor Muslim boy in love with their daughter. By the time I prove I am a good guy, I guess I will be nine feet under," Jamal joked. "It is a risk worth taking anyway. No one can win this battle for me. I am the One with all the tools and agility to get to the final line."

"I can imagine the reaction from your family in Qatar when they see this kinky-haired girl and the only heir of their wealth opens his mouth and says, 'meet my fiancée.' That will be the day we will both be buried before the twelve hours are over. At least for Christians, we have some days to mourn. Do you guys mourn, or does the family forget about you instantly?" Jamal and I laughed.

"At least call me Aziz; it is a Muslim name and means the Mighty One. But pronounce it as ISIS, if you want, my love," he told me.

"Ok, dear Azizi," Jamal was tickling me as I struggled to get away from him as we headed for class. We were at our seats a few minutes before the lesson and busied ourselves to prepare for the subject before the class started.

Mr Bellows was cheerful that day, and we seemed to grasp everything he taught us. However, just before the lesson was done, Mr Bellows left the class in a hurry responding to a phone call. It must have been an important call to have pushed him out of class before the bell rang. I looked at Jamal and winked at him; his eyes twinkled as he looked at me. I could hear him say, *what next now, my guide?*

Jamal excused himself to the gents. I cleared our desks and headed out for coffee while waiting for him. My emotions ran wild when I saw him coming towards me. I ran halfway to meet him on the hostel corridors as he approached the pavement to the school canteen area. Then, something startled me, and I stopped.

What the hell is happening?

I screamed as I paused to look around me. I was outside the cafeteria, and everything seemed to fly all over. I rubbed my eyes as if to get a clearer view. The boys were toasting each other left, right, and centre. Other onlookers and I rushed to the scene to learn what was happening. Our class was the only one in that particular tower, so we had an easier time knowing one another well. However, the eatery place was common to all. That is where we would meet the rest of the campus students, who seemed to think it a privilege we did not deserve to use the new block because we were newbies.

On this particular day, there seemed to be a vendetta, and the older students decided to teach us a lesson. My Jamal had not paid attention to his classmates since he was a shy guy, and when the fight broke out, he was fighting our classmates. I had to pull him to the ground, risking injuring myself. However, when he saw Lee being mobbed by main campus boys, he quickly wriggled himself free of me, dashed back, and grabbed the two men atop Lee by the neck to free his classmate.

I was beyond impressed by his strength and fearless attitude as he held the huge men on either side and tossed their heads around like rag dolls. Though I didn't want him to get involved in the fight, he had freed Lee, who had then gone back to help save Jamal, who was now on the floor with a bleeding nose.

Should I walk away or help him? I was unsure what to do.

Everything was getting out of hand, and the boys were very aggressive. However, I was determined to help my Jamal and not spectate. Lee had driven the boys from Jamal, but he had none of it. He rushed towards one of the campus boys who had given him a bloody nose and was on top of him in a flash.

"Before I die, I will have shown you the way to hell," Jamal shouted as he struck him.

I should have been watching the action from a distance since, as a girl, I didn't have nearly half the strength or bravado as the boys. Still, my love for Jamal kept me returning to see how I might help him.

The campus boy threw Jamal off him, and I was immediately by his side, on my knees, nursing him. I could tell he wasn't used to such situations—flash fights; he had been brought up in a palace. A security team dealt with his battles, and now that he had to take care of himself, he was excited.

He needed more karate classes to improve his skills. Though down, he wasn't out and was proud of himself for being involved in the fight despite nursing the bruised nose and aching limbs. No royal decorum was respected here. Men are equal when proving their masculinity as the ladies try to play peacekeepers of the bunch, mercilessly tearing at each other.

It was an awful sight as I watched the boys fight. I wanted to smuggle my Jamal and get holed up in the hostels until either of the two camps between the old boys and the newbies won the fight. It was one of the rare moments his eyes were not on me and were instead trained on his rivals.

The boys from our class fought fearlessly, and Jamal didn't stay down for long when struck. He would push me away as I tried to nurse him and get back to the fight. Soon, the campus boys were screaming and withdrawing for their dear lives.

I wondered how men should appear so at ease in what to me was a senseless brawl.

I was happy to see police officers, probably my brother's team, coming to the scene to stop the fight. The girls were screaming for assistance when they noticed that the incident had turned bloody, though Lee and Cheng had already sent the campus boys packing.

The officers circled all the boys, handcuffed them, and shepherded them to the waiting police cars so they would be driven to the cells. My Jamal had never been in police custody in his entire life, or away from home and his parents. I guess jail was, however, inevitable, especially now that he had been pushed to display his masculinity. I could sense his excitement as he was led away.

I imagined that if I were in that position, would my mom understand that I was compelled to fight by others and not blame me? Or would it be the end of all the privileges I enjoyed as her daughter? To my mother and brother, participating in such fights is as delinquent as cheating in an exam or skiving classes—dire consequences would follow.

I was not enthusiastic about going to the station to check on the boys with the other girls just in case my brother saw me and decided to victimise me. Any slight provocation might stir his emotions, and I was not sure he would not prompt my arrest too. So I decided to go back to class and try to finish my classwork. I decided to wait and learn what transpired from the girls who followed the boys to the police station.

I had read a whole chapter but couldn't understand what I was trying to read.

Wairimu, get a hold of yourself. Focus, I admonished myself.

I had to empty my mind of all the anxiety I felt to read and grasp the topic. It was hard for me to settle down when my Jamal was in trouble. When he was not ok, I could not concentrate. It didn't matter the consequences; I was his keeper.

The jail walls cannot stop me from fighting for your rights. Nothing matters so long as I am in your heart, my Jamal.

I couldn't study, and I knew it. So, I picked up my bag and followed the group to the station. I was there in ten minutes. My classmates were there protesting outside the station that it was the campus boys who provoked the academy boys and that the campus boys ought to be punished.

When JP saw me, I could tell he became agitated. He pressed his hands on his head, trying not to lose his temper and cause a scene, especially now that many of the boys' parents were at the station. After composing himself, he stood up and took charge to calm the mayhem ensuing from the aggressive parents.

From a distance, I admired my brother in action. He looked brave and in charge, a no-nonsense man ensuring that there was law and order. However, my attention quickly shifted to the old fashion antic seats in the station, and I wondered why government institutions didn't move with the rest of the world in upgrading the standards of their institutions. *I pity you, JP.* I didn't care how much security the job provided. I loved elaborate offices with beautiful furniture. But I guess I'm different, not a bird of the same feather as my brother.

My veins smell wealth and attract the likes of Jamal. My brother smells a job so he can put up with such filth. My preferences when I was still in the village made people refer to me as "the arrogant peasant." I could see how they would settle on that description of me. I had nothing but my soul in this foreign country, yet I looked down on the well-abled cops despite their challenging circumstances.

The arguments between the parents' and the cops' escalated and moved from outside to inside the station as I paved the way for those going inside. I dared not go in.

I wonder why you are on this side, Wairimu. You should be inside as well. I reproached myself.

I was sure that was the same thought on JP's mind. He was busy handling the parents and didn't come near where I stood. The day was turning out to be very overwhelming for him. I think he just didn't want to deal with me then. After all, my issues with him were not for public consumption; they could wait for another day.

My respect for my brother grew, however. His matter-of-fact handling of the issues made him stand out. He had taken steps to hurl out some of the campus boys' parents who were as unruly as their sons.

In my home country, we have a kind of respect for police officers that borders on fear. Such ugly scenes are unheard of. Citizens toe the line when it comes to police orders. Otherwise, the police can turn violent or victimise you by charging you with an unrelated crime. A situation that, if not well managed, you might end up in jail. They are notorious for such malevolent highhandedness. The system enables them, and the existing police oversight institutions don't seem able to hold rogue police to account. They are warlords of some kind. One has to understand this in my grandmother's land. Disobedience is only witnessed during riots. Even then, they are no one's cup of tea because of the serious police beatings that follow them.

I opened my mouth to defend my classmates but immediately closed it before uttering a word. I stared at the ground and cleared my throat, but no one paid attention. The parents were busy hurling insults at the police, who had locked up their sons.

I stepped back and disappeared into a corner to be a spectator from a distance. Bella and Anika chickened out, too, and joined me. It felt safe to have a buffer of familiarity—my mad brother in the station with my University Academy fighters. Another reason I stepped back was the fear that my brother's colleagues might recognise my face and remember the ambulance incident. It was chaos everywhere as the parents of the campus kids cursed, pointing fingers in all directions. Since the academy students were international students, they had no representatives. However, our lecturer, Mr Bellows, quickly came to the station to save his minions. His apparently spoiled students had not been easy to handle, but he took it all in his stride. Mr Bellows and the

security team witnessed what transpired, and their presence made the campus boys hold their horses.

Finally, the boys were out and mingling as if nothing had happened between them. After all that had happened just a while ago, I could not believe the boys were happy giving each other handshakes. Everyone was left surprised and, at the same time, confused, yet happy that the mayhem was over. I couldn't understand how they reached a truce. These fights were expected on campus, so no one was charged. The boys claimed it was a friendly joust that had been misunderstood. They maintained that the incident was a passing cloud, even though I thought they should all watch their backs.

The school bus was waiting to take us back to campus. I noticed a Mexican girl, who I came to learn was called Malia and who had been present as Lee Ji-hoon's cheerleader. He had been very discreet about her, and I was curious to know when and where he got the guts to date such a free-spirited girl. While on the bus, she shouted a warning to the campus boys, telling them never to touch her man, Lee, again. I wished I could muster the same courage to warn the ladies to keep their snail eyes away from my gulf boy.

We all had a chance to have Jamal, but I won. So keep your reservations until the deal is sealed; we are a couple now. If you don't like it, go to hell and hang, I thought.

There were no designated seats for anyone, so I ended up sharing a sit with one of the campus boys called Neon. I put my bag between my legs to free my hands in case he decided to attack me. I would cover my head with my hands to block the blows. The bus came to a stop in the school compound. No classes were going on since the students who had remained behind had boycotted in solidarity with their colleagues who had been taken to the station.

Before they started chanting and cursing, the ringleader, Neon, stood up and announced that the university academy students were good people and welcomed all of us to the school. "They are part of us and should be treated like family," he said.

Jubilation followed his pronouncement, which made me smile as I looked on. I congratulated Neon, but he had other things in mind. As I told him how reasonable he was, he decided to hug and kiss my lips. I retreated quickly before Jamal saw us. As I did so, I dropped my bag and bent down to pick it up. Interestingly, at the same time, Neon was making his move that was certain to

provoke another war, Jamal, who was behind me, had tripped and was busy getting himself up and straightening his clothes to have noticed anything.

The university boys got away with it this time, and I truly hoped they would not try to agitate our boys again in the future. They enjoyed hanging out with the International University Academy boys since they came from affluent families and spent heavily on parties. They complimented each other since the campus boys knew all the dens to take the academy boys to blow their dollars.

Jamal stood at the gate to the hostel compound. His expression seemed cold. I could tell he wasn't happy.

"What is making you frown, my love?" I quizzed him. "Is it because I tried to help you and interrupted the fight when you got hurt? I was just concerned. That is why I stepped in, to protect you," I hugged and kissed him.

"Wairimu is supposed to protect who? I am the man who should fight for you. I may seem weak in your eyes, but the adrenaline in my system can kill a lion. Never come near fighting bulls, my love. It is too dangerous. We get hurt, but the pain fades with victory. Emotions renew your pain; women never heal. Their souls carry all the painful burdens of life. Ask me about this fight next week, and the same boys we fought will have a drink with us." I could tell that Jamal was angry about me interfering in his battle.

I couldn't help but break out in tears. Jamal didn't seem to appreciate the effort I put in trying to ensure that he was safe, nor the screaming that had left my throat sore. Jamal quickly hugged me and assured me that all was well. We left for the hostels so that he could remove his messed clothes and take a shower to clean his bloody face. I made him a cup of coffee as he prepared for dinner, and since no one had the energy to cook, we walked to a pizza place and called it a day.

I was on a mission to fulfil my grandma's prophecy of getting a handsome man with Bacchu's looks: tall, handsome, and the true epitome of manly beauty. I took a selfie with Jamal, and my wild natural beauty complemented his good looks, to which he responded with a great smile. I put the photo as my profile photo on social media. The heat that stirred Jamal's heart was more than the forty degrees of heat experienced in Doha, Qatar. It was a new experience for him, and I could feel it; the man was on fire; I was more than he bargained for.

I feared I didn't allow him to fully immerse himself in his studies to make a meaningful contribution to his father's petroleum business. He had a lot to

learn, but he also needed the time to make merry with his newfound love, this carefree African girl. He touched his lips as I sent the photo I had just taken to my cousin, Sophie.

I should stop reading those erotic books I keep and stop focusing on my grandpa's prediction. It gave me a beautiful fulfilling feeling about finding a perfect guy from a different world—outrageous and funny. However, Jamal has not told me he loves me, and I live my fantasy daily without expectation, I thought as I admired the photo I sent to Sophie.

Jamal was occupied with his own thoughts, too: *Her voice relaxes me so much, and she is the first woman I have ever listened to without answering back. It breaks my heart when I imagine our ethnic differences. She has answered all my prayers about a woman I adore and would love to marry. I was consumed by love. I did not know women could be wild and show affection publicly. Back home, women are trained to worship the man. You cannot easily converse with a woman unless she is a family member. Wairimu is my teacher, my friend, my deskmate, my companion, and my soul mate. For the first time in my life, I feel a sense of freedom and—this girl is different. I need to feel more of this weird love, total submission to what life can offer.*

"Sometimes, quite often... I mean, I have always thought about you, Wairimu," he said.

This revelation was the perfect surprise for me.

The thought that went through my mind was: *If it is not love he has just confessed, I don't know what else it could be. It was the first time he had expressed his feelings for me. It is not a dream anymore but the sweet reality I always aspired to have.*

"You are sure, Jamal, you love me, for real?" I turned and kissed his lips. We were interrupted by my phone, which started beeping.

"Hello Wairimu," Sophie had sent me in a WhatsApp message, "your selfie with this dude is hot. You really have struck the jackpot in the States. You are looking good. Such a lucky girl. How did you land such a handsome man?"

"Thank you, Sophie. He is my deskmate. I am trying my luck to win him over. We have been hanging out for some time now, and I hope it will manifest into a happy ending," I replied.

"It will, and you look happy together. I like Jamal's eyes so much. I will show Grandma these photos. She will be so excited that you have a man already."

I went into my phone's photo gallery and forwarded more of my pictures with Jamal to Sophie so she would show Grandma. "Thank you, cousin. I have sent more for Grandma. Kindly print out some photos for her. I will call you later; class starts in a few. My love to all, and tell Grandpa I owe him big time."

Jamal and I rushed to class. As the lecturer taught, I thought about my time in school. I must admit that I was a darling to many in the class. I demystified the assignments given, especially to the students from Asia: Cheng and Lee, and also to Jamal and Anika. I could understand and speak English more fluently, which made Jamal very dependent on me though his communication skills improved greatly.

The class ended, and the lecturer seemed determined to leave us with an assignment that would take a while to research and deliver. Despite the workload, I was disturbed by other matters. We had not managed to sort out Jamal's visa card. Nevertheless, this was a problem to be solved another day.

The lecturer left the class, and I immediately jumped on Jamal's lap, which confused him for a second or two. As he tried to tickle me, we were interrupted by the bell and the lecturer walking back into class to cancel classes for the next day. "See you in Monday's class, and you better have sent in your assignments before then. Enjoy your long weekend, people," he said as he banged the door behind him.

CHAPTER 5

ENCOUNTER

Thorn Rose

AFTER THREE DAYS, we had no money and were as destitute as the New York rats. We needed to work on Jamal's Visa; otherwise, my well would run dry again, and I had run out of tricks on how to get more money from my brother. I stretched my arms and yawned as I got out of bed.

Our bills seemed to be increasing by the day, and, for the first time in my life, I could not make heads or tails of where I was taking this ship to dock. I, however, tried to keep strong. *This Visa card has to work soon before I get busted by JP.*

As I prepared for the day and weighed my non-existent options on how to help my Jamal survive the long weekend ahead, I had a call from my mom to join her and JP for lunch in town. I quickly finished my assignments, took Jamal's hand, and we sprinted to the bank to sort out the Visa mess before I joined my family. We succeeded this time, but the activation was to take a day. We needed a Plan B for Jamal to survive that Friday.

If I can solve the matter of Jamal's survival for today, I will handle everything else I need to do later.

I kissed Jamal's soft lips and handed him fifty dollars, the only money I had on me. I also promised to return to the hostel after finishing my lunch meeting with my family.

With a boyfriend now, my University Academy obsession was at an all-time high, or so my brother and Mom thought, since I was never available to hang out with them as often as they would have wanted.

"What grade do we expect from this commitment that keeps you in school to a point you don't make time for us?" my mother would ask, and my answer would always be the same: "I am trying to adjust to this environment."

Deep inside, I was scared and braced myself for the lecture I was sure would come from Mom about the two episodes of stealing from my brother. I had not talked to him since the ambulance drama and knew he must still be

extremely angry with me. I knew this because he didn't say hello, let alone speak to me at the station during the school fight incident.

I was sure he would swallow me alive if he could, but I was ready for the consequences—my love for Jamal made me very bold. But the need to keep Jamal sustained and still study made me feel like I was getting split into two. I knew my family wanted the best for me. Still, I had to constantly give them general answers that made them comfortable and feel like I was moving in tandem with their expectations of my progress in school. I did not want to burst the bubble of high expectations they had for me, but I knew that one day I would.

I was good at playing with words, and the terms I used when explaining my progress in school were enough to qualify me as a good student. Sales and marketing terms were like Greek to medics like my mom and the police officer, my brother. They were happy with as little explanation as possible on my progress since they didn't want to embarrass themselves with the jargon I would spew out that they neither understood nor offered an opinion.

In truth, I was struggling to juggle between books and my Jamal. The revelation would make them understand there would be no *magna cum laude* from their daughter, Wairimu Ndegwa, after all.

To my surprise, Mom ordered my brother to shop for me after lunch before dropping me back at the hostel. There was no discussion about my mischief. I behaved as if nothing had happened between my brother and me. He kept his silence. His glance was enough to tell me that I was not welcome around him despite his silence. However, he had to comply with Mom's demands.

We drove to the supermarket in silence. I picked from the shelves all the shopping I desired, enough for Jamal and myself for a month. JP was so mad that I was over-shopping; I could see it in his eyes. He was seething. His wallet was in his hand, and, in protest, he placed it on the counter to free his hands and remove items from my trolley. As everyone spectated on his *busyness*, I got an opportunity to swipe a few dollars from his wallet one more time and stepped aside. He paid for what he thought was enough shopping for a month and dropped me off at my hostel.

"Let us not cross each other's paths soon, Wairimu." Those were his remarks as I picked up my shopping and left him standing by his car.

Jamal was at the hostel parking lot to help me with my luggage. He tried saying hello to JP, but my brother shrugged and drove off. We watched his car pull out and drive into the horizon.

Who cares? I am liquid enough to entertain my Jamal now. I smiled as I watched JP drive off; the storm that stared right at us was now behind us. *We are sorted even if Jamal's Visa card is delayed for a day or two.*

"What is with your brother? He did not even say hi to me, Mau?" Jamal complained, puzzled at how the cop he thought accommodating helping parents at the station could just drive off.

"Maybe he did not hear you. Excuse him for today, my dear Jamal."

I sighed in relief, wondering why JP was so annoying. *I doubt we will ever tag along with you in anything, dear brother. I cannot wait to make my own money and stop depending on you.*

Jamal slung my shopping bag on his shoulders as he gestured for me to follow him. I had to fight the urge to walk a step behind him, so I could marvel at my ability to pick a few dollars from my brother's wallet—for the third time.

Whether JP responded to Jamal's greetings or not was inconsequential; we were set for the weekend. Jamal looked over his shoulder and caught me smiling by myself. He wanted to join me in my amusement. Unfortunately, whatever tickled me was not yet information for his consumption.

So I lied to him. "I am busy admiring you from behind."

If Jamal knew how anxious I was before I left him earlier, he would not breeze ahead of me with such confidence; he would dread having been such a liability to this broke girl.

But he was blissfully oblivious of my concerns as he pulled me to walk alongside him. When we got to my room, he used his free hand to remove the hostel keys from his pocket and opened the door for me. He handed me my shopping as he gently hugged me and wished me a good evening and sweet dreams. I thanked him and walked into my room; I could feel his eyes on me until I closed the door.

He thought we wouldn't meet again, but I needed some privacy to divide the shopping and surprise him with his share. In five minutes, I was at his door, knocking. He did not respond immediately since he didn't expect anyone then. When he opened the door, he had a gloomy and sad look on his face, only to find me standing with my lips puckered up, ready to receive a kiss.

He was very excited as he pulled me in and rocked me in a prolonged kiss that filled me with ecstasy. After the sizzling moment, I glided into his kitchen area and arranged his shopping. I then took a shower in his place and settled on one of his T-shirts since I had no change of clothes in there. Because of this back and forth, we resolved to ensure the door joining our rooms would be opened.

"We should get keys from a private vendor, so we don't have to step out to visit each other's rooms," I told Jamal, to which he agreed. We would look for a locksmith ourselves so as not to involve management and the grilling that would follow. Getting the key should take a couple of hours, which we would do the following day, and freedom of access would prevail.

A few minutes after my shower, the boys came calling for Jamal to join them in watching a football match. I did not want to flower the den, so I went straight to my room.

"Women are full of secrets," my grandma used to tell me. "Never explain to a man how you put the food on the table when he is not in a position to do so."

Jamal does not know the drama I go through to sustain him. He finds it very fascinating and imagines I have supernatural abilities. I choose to view gratitude as my crucial value in life; now that I think about it, my appreciation for it has grown. I have always been thankful for all my privileges, and I thank God I have been rewarded with more, like having Jamal. I have wronged my brother enough, and I hope one day I will be able to pay his money back or gather enough courage to tell him what I was going through with my deskmate's predicament. In Jamal's country, women are dependents, and here he had a superwoman who, if only briefly, would sustain him without fail in this foreign land.

I had overheard Jamal say to one of his friends, "I wish all women would be empowered like my Mau to be co-providers with the man. It will be one of my plans when I get back to Qatar. She is so admirable; she does not have much, but my Mau is willing to share the little she is given for upkeep by her family. I wonder how many mountains she would move if exposed to the allowances my dad gives me. I am sure it can be enough for her to feed her whole village and take orphans to school. I cannot remember when my mother took a keen interest in my well-being as Wairimu does. Every day she calls me before I sleep to say good night and is my alarm clock in the morning to remind me to

have breakfast. She even does this when she spends her night with her mom. I don't feel the homesickness I had started feeling the first day I landed here. Life is on track with an efficient and well-advised stage manager."

JAMAL WOKE UP in the mood to take a walk on the beach and made that clear to me as he tried to wake me up. *I thought the water must be wilder today than ever, only that I am not a good swimmer*. I was used to swimming in a village stream, not the endless sea waters. I, however, couldn't venture an excuse not to take the swim lest it implies that I didn't trust Jamal enough to save me in case of a swimming incident.

As I pulled myself up, I gave in to a yawn. I was hungry.

"I'm game, on condition that first," I smiled cheekily, "we have a meal from my favourite joint. You know it."

I could see disappointment creep over his handsome face. "We will be late, my Mau, and miss the sunrise."

Then he flashed me a sly smile, picked a packet of crisps next to the bed, and dragged me, half-naked, to the beach. He made me run three kilometres and swim for an hour with him. I desperately wanted to get back to bed when we got back to the hostel and wasn't interested in his sweet words now that I was too tired to even care about my hunger pangs.

I took a shower half asleep, and once done, there was no chance to rest: Jamal didn't want to hear of my fatigue as he dragged me to class to do my assignments.

"Now you are free to eat and drink your head off, my Mau. It seems like we always have to rush against time to finish classwork. Our common goal in school has become merry-making—we need to be responsible now that we have chosen one another. We need to start shaping our future amid all these temptations our peers are going through," Jamal said with finality as he marched to class, holding my hand to ensure I kept pace with him.

His behaviour was new to me. *Does this mean the honeymoon is over?* Jamal was now assuming my role. I was the one who used to drag him to class.

"Did you enjoy the morning breeze today, Mau?" he asked

But before I could answer and pour out my disappointments, a strong gust of wind from nowhere almost knocked me off my feet. Jamal rushed to save me and herded me to a nearby Mexican hotel to take cover.

The hotel wouldn't have been our favourite place to break our fast, but the strong wind outside was unbearable, and I didn't feel like I had the strength to withstand it. I decided not to answer any question from Jamal after what I felt was him terrorising me the whole morning. I knew my response, or lack of it, would sound rude to him. I didn't know what to tell him.

But I knew that music would prevail where words failed and probably be better than mere words. I removed phone from my pocket and put on his favourite song and the earphones—one on my ear and one on his. As we listened to the music, both our moods brightened. As I sat there with the man I adored the most, I couldn't help but think about how on some days, we would wake up weighed down by our sponsors' (parents) load—in other words, their expectations of us, which also provoked the question: Is this their life or ours?

I grabbed a tray from the hotel counter to serve ourselves. The best option would be the pizza being advertised all over the place. I served it and filled the side plate with salad to strike a balanced diet; I am lazy with food.

Now I understand why people chew tablets to complement nutrition. I have a taste for junk food, and now, with the opportunity, no one can stop me from indulging myself since I am a grown-up.

My mate, Jamal, was worse than me; he would survive on steak and bread, and veggies never grow in the desert. He did not look at them at all. For him to have them, they had to come wrapped in wheat or rice to pass his throat. I put enough salad on his pizza and covered it with another pizza. Since he kept talking and talking, he finished the meal without realising there was a heap of veggies on his plate. It was such a filling meal that I knew I would not have lunch later. I offered to clear the bill, and we left.

The sun was high, but clouds were starting to form. The boys were teaming up for basketball. I argued about attendance with Jamal, and we agreed to disagree. I left to visit Mom as Jamal changed for the basketball game.

My life can sometimes be tedious.

Sports had never been my thing, especially because the outings were often followed by drinking sprees that tended to attract all sorts of people and unnecessary arguments. Don't get me wrong, sports are fine, but they were not my forte. The bit about sports that engage in physical activity, such as running, is never my thing. I would rather read or cheer on the players than be on the field. I prefer cheerleading because I think myself a good noisemaker and

would choose it any day instead of running around in the game. I thought I was being rude to my ISIS for a minute, but I needed to rest. My body wasn't used to the marathon I had been in with Jamal by the sea.

I stepped into my mother's house as she was coming out to run an errand. She dragged me along to accompany her.

I thought it was a bad idea to show up before confirming Mom's itinerary.

As I walked around with Mom, at the back of my head, I knew that I needed to go back to school before the basketball game was over to guard my man. I gave all manner of excuses to be dropped at school as Mom went home, promising to see her the following day.

I popped in briefly at the game's site to pick my Jamal before the vampires gracing the event set their eyes on his tipsy head. Everyone from the university academy was there. From the looks of things, I was the only one missing. I joined in as if I was there the whole time and became a busybody serving everyone. Jamal was always seated in a corner, following me with his eyes just in case the campus boys decided to put their dirty hands on me.

It was almost midnight before the game ended, and the basketball floor was converted into a dance floor. I was dancing with Cheng, and the two of us seemed the only ones who looked sober. Other students were busy trying their vocals as their legs appeared too weak to accommodate them on the dance floor.

Jamal looked on but, at some point, wanted to join in my dance. I felt him slam into me, and both of us hit the ground. He was too drunk to dance, but Cheng graciously offered to help me get him on his feet. We staggered to the hostels and slept without taking a shower. We were utterly wasted.

The following day my head was banging from the few drinks I had taken, perhaps also from the vigorous dancing. I needed time alone. I excused myself to revisit my mom. I lied to Jamal that Mom wasn't home the previous day when I had gone to see her. After the morning glory at the ocean, visiting Mom would be a good breather. I would also get some soup to treat the hangover.

I hugged Jamal and rushed to catch the bus home. Jamal told me he would return to bed to continue nursing his hangover. I wasn't sure when he introduced himself to drinking, but his resilience showed the habit had long been with him in Qatar. His father had a taste for wine. I guess that's where his son, Jamal, started the ritual of baptising his tongue with alcohol once in a

while. At least, I don't believe that I am to blame for the habit. He would overcome it with time. For now, we just needed to be left be.

Jamal would later narrate it to me: He was woken up by a call from the bank. He was alone, as I was at home with my mother. The bank informed him that his visa card was usable. He wanted to surprise me when I returned. We had earlier been window-shopping though I had no idea what he was up to. He knew exactly how I wanted my room to look. He quickly found a designer to help him and went to look for the items required for my room makeover. The designer did a perfect job on the room and added the needed female touch that surprised Jamal too.

Jamal stopped in my room as he tried to imagine how I would open the door and wonder whose room I was in after the makeover. He thought I would step out and read the room number, then step in again to check whether I was dreaming.

She will probably notice the portrait of her and me and start screaming, "Oh my God, Jamal, you did all this for me?" Then and just then, for the first time in my life, will I have done something worthwhile for the woman I love?

His phone rang, and I asked about his whereabouts as my weekend was cut short by my mother's sudden engagement out of town. I didn't want to be home alone and excused myself to return to the hostel, claiming I had some homework to finish. Since I was already on my way, he locked my room and met me in the school café. We went out for a snack with a plan to return to the hostel much later. He did not mention anything to me about his Visa card working. He told me to go in and rest as he caught up with the boys to finish some work in class and then join me later. I must have looked tired and with no energy to join the class discussion.

AFTER THE SNACK, I took care of the bill as usual, and we parted ways with my boyfriend as I headed to the hostels. When I opened my room, I was in shock. I quickly retreated to check the room number. *I must be in someone else's room*. But it was clearly my room. As I stood there with my jaw open, it suddenly dawned on me that Jamal's Visa issue must have been cleared. It was a surprise makeover for my room. I had no words to thank my gulf boy.

Who is he, and what float does he have to afford all these expensive things without a blink? Am I dealing with a drug baron, or what?

I had no idea petroleum was as valuable as gold. A bubble of awesomeness hit my heart. I was embarrassed that I had discovered Jamal was being humble with me. I had peanuts compared to the upkeep this pampered heir had. I wasn't sure anymore whether I was a match for this tycoon boy.

Once I settled in my refurbished room, I googled his dad's company and could not believe what I saw. *Was this the guy I had tasked with carrying my laptop bag from class and doing all manner of silly tasks for me? Should I continue behaving the same way, or should I be more courteous to make him feel honoured? Anyway, I am here to enjoy life, not to adhere to cultural demands. My wild side is what sparks love in this relationship. Being oneself is more interesting than introducing a character I will not sustain in the long run. I allowed Jamal to experience my world. It may not have been much, but it has opened some windows and experiences for him that he otherwise could not have gotten a chance in this life to experience. I am a Mau Mau descendant, beautiful as all my descendants. Jamal loves me for who I am. Souls have no boundaries; humans decide the status quo. I am happy with myself and will keep being me. It is the adventurer's route I will never regret travelling.*

I was content with my creation.

I heard Jamal in his room. He had just entered whistling a tune I hadn't heard before. I opened the connecting door and showered him with romantic kisses on his face, hands, tummy, and everywhere possible. It left him speechless, and he submitted to a love-making session that knocked him off for the day, making him miss his morning prayers at the mosque.

The following day, I left early to finish some assignments in class since I had spent Saturday running errands with Mom and a grand finale Sunday with my love, Jamal. The class was planning to go out to celebrate Cheng's birthday. Jamal and I intended to rest due to our long weekend, but we were forced to participate. I had a poor threshold for the usually long *party-after-party* outings the boys seemed to like, and when I looked around, the only ladies in our class, Bella and Anika, were nowhere to be seen. I made myself the emcee for the event to ensure it would not take too much time. Soon the ladies were back in dinner attire. I felt out of place with all the ladies dressed to kill. I had no time to prepare like a lady and was too tired to care.

I took two minutes to appreciate their beauty as I made fun of myself as the odd one out. I pointed out that I had an essential role in making the event a

success, which all the men in the house agreed to, and they paid for wine in my favour to support my point.

The cake-cutting session was over in one hour, and people started drinking earnestly. I sent Jamal a text. He did not appear in a hurry to leave. His favourite song by Boyzone's *No Matter What*, had just started praying, and everyone was trying their vocals on the much-loved classic, including my Jamal, who was now glued in with everyone in the house:

No matter what they tell us
No matter what they do
No matter what they teach us
What we believe is true

My bed was waiting, and I was not going to disappoint it. It had been a long time since I spent a night in my room, and I looked forward to it now that it was all pretty. I left Jamal behind in a hurry to get to bed. Before putting the lights off, I admired the luxurious furniture I was bought by my man and the soft rags that probably cost him an arm and a leg. Before I counted all the luminous hanging stars on my roof, I was already snoring.

A dove cooing from my hostel window woke me up. The coos somehow sounded like a special salute to me. I got out of bed and made cereals as a thank you to my boyfriend. I then opened the door to Jamal's room to grace him with a cup of lemon water and the cereals I had just made.

CHAPTER 6

THE BLISS

Gut Feeling

I WAS PEACEFULLY SLEEPING with my Jamal when, from the corner of my eye, I saw someone come in through the door.

But why didn't we lock the door?

Before I could do anything, I realised that the intruder was Jamal's mother. I started sweating bullets so that the whole bed felt wet with sweat. His mother screamed and started hurling things at me, from the pan to the sofa pillows. I was scared beyond words and just stared at her, frozen in one spot. It was then that I heard Jamal calling my name. It sounded like he was in a tunnel calling out to me. I remember trying hard to tell Jamal to save me when I woke up. His face was inches from mine, seeming poised to kiss me to comfort me. I shot up and held on to him. I quickly narrated the dream to him, afraid that some version of it was actually happening.

"Oh my Mau, I am so sorry. May your day be filled with light and your nights with serenity. Nothing bad will happen to you when I am here; I will protect you. I am sure to keep my word, beautiful one. All that you dreamt about is in the future. Whether then we will be Muslims or Christians or agnostic, it does not matter. Here and now, it is just you and me," Jamal assured me.

I fell forward onto his lips, and we were locked in an endless romantic kissing session. Jamal's arms were warm around me, and I felt safe. He pulled me closer, murmuring something as if he was in deep slumber. We settled back in bed, but after some time, I slowly wiggled myself out of his arms and sneaked to my room to prepare for class.

I felt relieved that class ended early that day. I needed to tidy up my room. Of late, I had been oscillating between class and evening outings. That wasn't normal life for a woman. I first opened the windows of my small prison that I would only enter at dusk. I moved all my bedding, including Jamal's, out to air as I dusted our rooms. Dusting them was easy since the rags were out to air too. I finished quicker than I had anticipated.

There was a pineapple and some oranges in the kitchenette. I tried my luck at making popsicles. I have a sweet tooth, you know! After blending the pineapple and putting all the ingredients together, it did not taste as great as I thought it would. I added a few scoops of sugar, then I thought of some brandy we took home the other day and poured some into the mix. The spike made it perfect. I did not mention it to the boys as they passed by from a tennis game, so I gave them a piece each. Cheng wanted two, but I had made just a few. The boys were already on a kind of high from the game's excitement, and the alcohol in the popsicles must have added a twist. We all ended up in the field as the whole class was invited to join in and contribute to drinks and meals.

Thanks to my loaded gulf boyfriend, all the drinks were on him. We ordered some pizzas as Lee and Cheng prepared the salads and Asian dishes. I missed seeing my Kikuyu men cook for their ladies. My experience with my tribesmen was that they roasted meat and ate it by themselves as they prepared it; rarely would you find spare roast ribs hanging on the grill.

As we continued merrymaking, Anika remembered we hadn't printed the homework for the day; everyone was too drunk to care. The only sober mind there was the Russian girl, Bella, who was on medication for an infection after catching a cold that, luckily, was not Covid-19. She sprinted to the library and did a copy for each of us, and since the classroom was open, she dared not bring the work to the field since she knew we might use the papers to wrap takeaways. She placed a copy on everyone's desk and rushed back to collect her fee for the errand. Men are generous when drunk; she was paid forty times more than she spent.

She was happy with her proceeds and the fact that her skills were not going down the drain. The joke was that she had started making money before her attachment was due. We made fun of her, but she did not give a hoot; money was in her pocket. Bella left as night fell since the infection was turning nasty on her poor throat.

I was also thoroughly drunk. I even forgot about all the clothes I had taken out to air. Jamal had gone back to pee in his room, and when he didn't find his bedding, he went to the clotheslines outside, picked up our now-dried clothes, and placed them in a heap on his bed. We couldn't sleep on his bed, so we placed my mattress on the floor in his room and covered it with a blanket for the night. We had an early class, and we couldn't believe the mess in Jamal's room when we woke up. We went to class with banging heads from a hangover;

everyone looked pathetic. The lecturer wondered out loud what had befallen his class.

"Why a party on a weekday, people?" he asked, showing some frustration. "It is on a Tuesday, a day after the weekend. Did you have some leftovers that you needed to clear?"

Everyone in the class pointed at the brewer, Wairimu Ndegwa, the Mau Mau descendant. I was furious because my contribution was just the popsicles.

We had disappointed Mr Bellows and were all in a pickle. The discrepancy on our part warranted a guardian summon. I had already done my homework, which I took to the lecturer. Then I decided to take it upon myself to issue the guardian summon telling everyone to take responsibility for their actions:

"Stop acting like *Davids* here, like you are kings and someone had to keep your diaries," I lambasted my classmates. "I am not Delilah from the Bible and you, the *Samsons* that followed Delilah blindly. You voluntarily bought your party items. Face the consequences without pointing fingers. We did not come here as a group; I did my work despite the party, so come forward and bring your assignments," I told the class before I bowed and took my seat.

The lecturer was so tickled to see me fight back boldly without blinking. He thought that I was still high from the previous day's festivities. The rest of the class knew that side of me, and everyone was on their feet, cheering me on for more. Jamal was in heaven seeing his Mau on the podium with the lecturer summoning the class to order. I always spoke my mind and wouldn't be intimidated by the naughty heirs. I was from an average background, with no riches left behind as a fallback plan; my wealth lay in my brain and hard work.

I couldn't be on the list of the unruly since deportation was not an option for me. My next major breakthrough was school grades and credentials. I needed to make a name for myself. Relations do not bear fruit by shaking hands but by holding hands during critical moments, as I was doing with Jamal. I just needed five more individuals like my Jamal, who would find me a job when I was done with schooling. I was not there to pass the time.

"You have made my day Wairimu," Mr Bellows said, laughing. "I am not about to teach today. We need to discuss some ethics that will guide our way forward. You are adults now, and some level of responsibility is bestowed on you that everyone needs to adhere to. This is the first incident that involves all of you, so I will let it pass. But next time, expect to be summoned. By the way,

the marking of the assignment I just asked for will be done, and it will be part of your grades. Hand in your work now because I need to step out and release you to rest while I structure the way forward."

The amusement was over. Besides myself, there wasn't anyone else whose work was ready, including my Jamal. He had lied to me the previous day that he would be left in class to finish his classwork before joining the boys for the game. That did not happen. The boys had shown up shortly after I left, and he got carried away with excitement. I was saved by the popsicles, which I had to wait for to get frozen. That is how I managed to do my classwork as I waited for them to be ready. The only assignment everyone had ready was the photocopies, which Bella did for everyone. *What a shame.*

JAMAL'S DRESS CODE had changed. On Fridays, he would be spotted in a Muslim robe, while on other days, he would be dressed like the average American man. His Dad visited him, and they almost passed each other in the school corridors. He was determined to surprise his son and see how he was coping alone in the foreign land he had sent him to study, but instead, he surprised himself. He could not hide his anger after meeting his son in typical American garb, which he deemed completely inappropriate. Jamal was dressed in shredded jeans and a vest that exposed his chest. Jamal had also been to the gym and had puffed out his chest so that he looked a bit sexy, like a model. After the fight between the University Academy and the regular University students, he did a lot to up his game. He was now a good fighter, just like his fellow Asians. Jamal assured his Dad that he was still as religious as he was always back in Qatar.

"Nothing has changed, Dad, it is summertime and I needed to feel lighter," he tried to explain himself.

The excuse was accepted, but on one condition: When summer ended, he would revert to the family dress code. Little did his Dad know he was dealing with a transformed son. Jamal requested me to go to the classroom since he was popping in with his Dad and wanted to introduce me as his deskmate. In the meantime, he had rushed to the hostel, pulled down everything related to me, and packed the bag in my room before taking his Dad to see his bedroom.

His Dad was impressed with how organised Jamal's hostel was. Back at home, Jamal's room would be a pigsty were it not for a housekeeper to clean

after him. The guy was known to strew his belongings everywhere. He had also mentioned to his Dad that when his Visa card was down, I paid for his bills.

"Meet my deskmate, Wairimu. She is the one who kept your son afloat for over a fortnight as my Visa card was being reactivated," Jamal said with a mega smile.

"Thank you very much, young lady, for helping my boy to experience tough love. He did not try to reach me for backup, which was huge progress. It has made him learn to survive the hard way."

"You are most welcome, Sir. It was my pleasure to help."

I stood there, lost for words and somewhat a bit nervous. Omar must have been very impressed, for he gave me two thousand dollars as compensation for taking care of his son's upkeep. He had no idea we were a couple and that we intended to keep it that way. Omar invited me for dinner with them, which I declined, giving the excuse that I had a family event that evening. I feared Jamal's emotions toward me might betray our relationship. We took a collective photo, and Omar invited me to Qatar when we closed school. I agreed to the invitation and excused myself so that Jamal and his Dad would be alone in the classroom.

They followed me with their eyes to the door. I turned, bowed again, and closed it behind me. It was my first time feeling so nervous since I started dating Jamal. I was the angel Jamal needed to meet to understand life has more to offer when still young. We were unstoppable, openly dating, and very happy with our lives. Now that I had met his immediate family member, I wondered what Omar's reaction would have been if he knew I was dating his son. He looked as pleasant as his son, kind-hearted and soft-spoken. *I guess the rich are humbler than the average lot.*

I need to fill up my afternoon now that Jamal will be engaged for the weekend. I counted the USDs I had received from Jamal's dad again and appreciated his generosity. No matter how small my contribution to Jamal had been, it helped and made a difference in his life, considering he might have starved without the help. A small charity from the heart holds more weight with the Almighty than a big one with pomp and fanfare. It had paid back well for me.

I can now pay back my noisy brother. It is amazing what one can accomplish when we do not care who gets the credit. Give without expecting anything in return. It is not the

amount that matters but the love that is put into the giving. A thing cannot be too small to share with the needy; be generous when you can. Be the person you would like to meet in this life.

I went back to my room as Jamal entertained his Dad. I dressed up to go and meet my brother to reconcile over the money incidents. I thought of calling him first to be sure he would meet me.

"You are thinking of how to steal money from me again, silly girl?" JP responded to my request to meet. "This time, you will get nothing. I am ready for your tricks. Bring it on, African queen."

"Do not worry, brother; the coffee is on me. I broke the poverty ceiling. Let us meet at 3 pm."

"That's okay, baby sister. Despite your mischief, we are still family, and I have missed you too. Today is my off day. I'm easy you can come over. I will drop you off tomorrow at school. I had planned to try a recipe today, and it would be fun testing your cooking skills just in case a husband comes knocking," JP Joked.

"I am good in the kitchen, brother. Unfortunately, you left home when I was still a baby, and Mom treats me as one in her house. She never lets me cook for her. I should surprise her one of these days. See you shortly, JP." I called him by his new name not to lose him before our meeting.

Little did JP know that I would come driving. I dressed in a beautiful silk dress and high heel shoes. I looked like someone working in a bank. I showed up driving a sleek white Mercedes Benz.

"When did I last see you, Sis?" JP asked, surprised by my transformation. "You joined the mafia or what? How did you suddenly become this trendy?!" JP exclaimed, inspecting me from head to toe.

"Hello, brother, how have you been? It has been a while. Do you remember my deskmate?"

"Your Muslim deskmate who helped you carry your shopping last time I dropped you at the hostels. I can only recall his face vaguely?"

"Yes, that guy. His name is Jamal. His Visa card had been blocked when we opened the school, and the drama I took you through with the money was actually to support his upkeep as we struggled to reinstate the card. I have come to apologise about the money I took from you without consent as I pay it all back,"

"Excuse me, Wairimu; you stole from me to maintain some man? Are you mad?"

"I know. It was a pathetic move. I did not know how to explain this to you. JP, do you know what it means to hold space for someone?" I posed. "This has not happened to you since life has been predictable on this side of the world. In Kenya, we lived one day at a time. We had no control whatsoever over the day's outcome, let alone a new dawn. That is why I trusted myself to support Jamal. I knew that no one would die or get inconvenienced by the few USDs I took from you. I am not justifying the act, but the action justified the means to keep Jamal afloat. Holding space for him meant walking alongside him without judging or making him feel inadequate. I accorded him unconditional support to realise the desired outcome at the time. This brought us even closer; we are now dating. He is from Qatar, the land of Gasoline. I had no idea he was the son of a billionaire. He has showered me with gifts and love ever since."

JP was lost for words. I bet he wondered whether what he had heard was really what I had said or whether it was some kind of illusion.

"Are you naïve or stupid Wairimu? You came to make merry or study?" JP angrily said, to my surprise. He was looking at me in utter disbelief.

"Who said I am not doing my studies?" I interjected.

I feared my brother would delve into my finances, a topic I was not ready to engage in.

Do what you want with your life JP. I have mine to shape as well. I simply cannot work an eight-hour job for a salary that cannot cater to all my expenses and needs for growth. I am a more ambitious girl. Life is more than taking care of bills. I was taking the poison and expecting JP to die as I had a separate conversation with him in my head.

"When did you hear of Christians from Kenya marrying gulf men?" JP rhetorically asked, "This is a death warrant you are looking for, my sister. It does not matter whether it is love; you are not compatible. Save yourself the heartbreak,"

"A true bond in a relationship does not call to be equal in wealth, qualification, or talent but commitment and understanding one another. We have invested heavily in what we believe, which has taken us this far together. If you have reasons to justify struggling in life, don't ignore the reasons to be

grateful as well, JP. There are always reasons to be thankful, but our minds only focus on the complexities of life. That must be why you are quick to point out all the loopholes in this relationship. His Dad is here to see him from Qatar. I was introduced to him as the deskmate who took the burden to sort out his son until his card was okay."

These thoughts went through my mind:

I have no way to prove to my brother and mom that I am an extraordinary child. Their expectations will be complemented differently and not by me being the top student they hope me to be. The situation, as of now, warrants a pass. I am behaving like a teenager, with all these love emotions taking a toll on me. If classwork has to be accomplished at all, I have to spend my day in the library to concentrate. With Jamal around me, no classwork can take precedence. To him, passing or failure will make no difference; he is a CEO already. He is here to pass the time and grow up. Jamal is being groomed to be the heir of the family petroleum businesses. This is the single reason he came to the States, to align himself in an international setting to learn a thing or two about how to run the family business on a global scale. The academy opportunity has helped him come across unlimited sources of information and business opportunities that will change the business landscape his Dad has been operating. Still, Jamal does not flaunt his billionaire status; he is so down-to-earth that one can easily mistake him for an average guy.

To me, school credentials are as important as his love. In case this love fails, my only fallback plan is good grades. So, with helicopter parents or not, I must deliver—for my future's sake. My Jamal is very good with IT, and though he does his things mostly in Arabic, his effort has not been wasted on this one. He is thorough and remotely operates his father's businesses on many occasions. We have gone several times to meet his father's clients, and he has shown to be good in sales and marketing. I know this because I have tagged along as his pretend Personal Assistant. More importantly, though, as we grow closer, I can now say hello in Arabic, "marhaban." Thank you, "shukran,"the same word for thank you in Swahili. I also know how to say goodbye, "bi," which sounds like an infant's English, but not too hard. He ought to learn a bit of my mother tongue, too.

I snapped from my reverie and landed on my brother's very mean but curious look.

"Jamal's dad gave me a token of appreciation, and I thought it was time to refund the money I stole… ummmm… took from you," I said, smiling.

"How much were you given?" JP enquired.

I took out the envelope containing the money and handed it over to my brother.

"Take your portion and help me invest the difference. I have also added my savings from the pocket money you guys give me since all my bills are taken care of by Jamal. I know my orientation is different from his; that is why I am careful with the way I spend my money,"

"I wondered why you needed so much money and, in no time, the need fizzling out so quickly. I was concerned you were being shaken down by some bully, but now I understand. I will do this on condition that you will stop seeing this Muslim boy before things get out of hand. I will not tell you to stop abruptly, but slowly start cutting ties. I have seen enough of such relationships, and they end up ugly because of relatives' and friends' interference. Some end in death. Let us not tempt fate, however tempting it might be to be with the guy."

I agreed to his call to reduce the tension building between us, regretting having brought up the issue this early.

"Good girl, I am happy you have been able to make a tough choice. Will we start cooking now?"

"I have no appetite, JP; I need to get going."

JP held my hand and assured me the discussion was healthy, and he was happy I had trusted him with such sensitive information.

"That is why we are siblings, Wairimu. Please do not go. Let us sleep over it together. Let us not even cook; we can go out to celebrate after the many fights we have had. First, we'll drop this car back to your friend. I will drive you back to school tomorrow as I promised,"

We drove off, dropped Jamal's car at the hostel parking lot, and headed to a pub to enjoy ourselves.

Jamal's Dad got a call to attend to an emergency back home and decided to return to Qatar immediately. Jamal dropped him at the airport, and since he had more free time than anticipated, he called me to touch base. My heart stopped when I saw my gulf boy's phone call, and I picked it up quickly. "Hello darling Isis, I am with my brother, JP. Come to the pin location I am sending you,"

In ten minutes, Jamal arrived. My brother and I had already taken enough glasses of beer. I waited for my brother's reaction as Jamal took my hand and brushed kisses over my knuckles with his charming smile. I guessed Jamal was delighted to meet his Dad and now had the chance to meet his would-be brother-in-law. He looked vibrant, to say the least, and determined to make things work with my brother.

Nothing will deter this relationship; he has made up his mind; I am his woman for life.

With another winning smile, he turned to my brother for grilling.

JP must have wondered how God would give all these looks to one guy. Before he complained further to the creator, Jamal's piercing brown eyes landed on him, making him speechless for a minute. He is also blessed with all otherworldly beauty and style. My brother was lost for words because, to him, Jamal and I are two different beings. He was the polished uptown boy, and I the simple village girl.

How are they compatible; he is Muslim, and my sister is a Christian though I have never seen her attend church. I need to know the genesis of this relationship; it does not make sense to me at all. Someone is taking advantage here, and I need to get to the bottom of it. JP must have been thinking.

JP stammered something and gave a gesture for Jamal to have a sit. He could barely move his eyes from Jamal as he placed his order with the waiter.

"Aren't you going to introduce this guy to me, Wairimu?" JP's tone was accusative.

"Oh, this is Jamal, my deskmate. We met in the University Academy and, by default, found ourselves deskmates. All the other seats were taken by the time I reported in class. He was alone, and I took the vacant desk next to him,"

I then drew a blank, and I became short of words. It was a very awkward moment after the deflating conversation I had earlier with my brother.

"Cheers, guys," I shyly toasted my boyfriend and JP. "Pick it up from there, sweets. This is my brother, JP. We are the only children born of our mother, so he is like my Dad. Feel free to talk to him."

"Is that all you will tell me about your deskmate, Wairimu?" JP enquired with a lot of respect despite his wanting manners earlier.

"I am Jamal. Pleased to meet you, JP. Finally, I met my brother-in-law. I am as surprised as you that Wairimu does not tell you I am her boyfriend," turning

to me, Jamal asked, "Are you afraid of your brother, or have you given up on me, beautiful?" He smiled at me as he sipped his first drink.

Jamal gave me a quick kiss on my cheek and extended his hand to greet my brother. This time Jamal received a warm handshake since JP was curious about the relationship and wanted to know more. Jamal dwarfed my brother, so he had to take two steps backward to have a normal conversation with Jamal.

"Hi Jamal, I understand you are dating my sister. Do you know how dangerous this affair is?"

"Yes, I know and have no regrets about meeting your sister Wairimu," Jamal replied.

"Don't you think you are jeopardizing my sister's life?"

"We are in this together, and in any case, this is not the first relationship in the world between different ethnic communities," Jamal retorted.

"Here we are talking of two serious barriers to the relationship, Jamal: A relationship between a Muslim and a Christian, and then an African girl and gulf man. Who will approve of your marriage, my mom Muthoni, or your Dad, Omar?"

I was dumbfounded by how my brother bombarded Jamal with questions on how we would fight the cultural system to live together as husband and wife. To me, all these questions were farfetched and uncalled for because we still had three more years to finish college. We needed to be left alone to enjoy each other's company for a while without interference.

"JP, we need to unshackle ourselves from mental chains of religious control. We must stop following rules, regulations, and traditions that distance humanity from those we care about. We need a mind shift. What evil have I committed to being born into a Muslim family so as not to be given a clean bill of health to marry the love of my life, Wairimu? What is wrong with Wairimu loving this Muslim boy? I am ready to be disruptive; we will go against the tide. It is also an option to get us to our destiny. I am not saying what we are facing is an easy challenge, but by wisdom, a house is built. Through understanding, it is established, and its rooms are filled with love. This is not a process that will take a day; we are prepared for the long haul. At the end of the day, it is not about what you have or accomplished. It is about who you have lifted and who you have made better. It is your call, too, my brother, JP, to ensure Wairimu and I win."

"I can tell you for free that this is mission impossible," JP retorted.

"All these have been planted in our minds to intimidate us into ensuring the status quo goes unchallenged. I will not fall for it; I will follow my heart and dreams," Jamal insisted. "This love is rooted deep in our soul and cannot be uprooted by spectators. One reason many people die alone and are miserable is being separated from their loved ones by families and communities. I am ready to take the less frequented path. I better have my Wairimu than make others comfortable at the expense of my happiness. Let us have a friendship drink for today. I do not want to overthink the outcome; time will be our best bet. I sincerely love your sister and am ready to climb any mountain to break the ethnic code."

Jamal's response seemed to have left JP confused. Jamal was an eye-catching young man. I knew JP was only the big brother by worrying about me. *How will she keep him away from the straying eyes of American women?* JP must have been wondering

However, I could tell he was warming up to Jamal already. Ultimately, he must have thought my relationship with Jamal was deeper and more grounded than he had imagined.

I could also tell that he was taken aback by Jamal's wisdom when he said, "I give culture credit for shaping societies, but I find them wanting for they are not upgraded to match modern demands. The first thing on a Kenyan school questionnaire reads: What is your tribe? The second one was: What is your religion? Wairimu, who went to school in Kenya, tells me that if you did not belong to the school sponsor's religion, you could miss a vacancy in the school. I know my cousins belonged to the Pentecostal Church while we were Catholics. I'm told they used to trek across valleys to get to their school simply because a closer school could not accommodate students from other denominations. That isn't very pleasant. How and when will humanity know all humans should receive the same treatment and opportunities despite their ethnic or religious background? What sins have the young ones committed by being born of zealous believers with opposing views?"

"Precisely my point, brother JP," Jamal responded. "I am happy you can now read from our page."

I could tell that JP felt that Jamal was a pleasant man, down to earth, and very committed to me though I also know he wished the issue was as simple

as Jamal put it. Jamal was sad to learn from JP how I had to risk a lot to sustain him, but this made him feel more attached to me.

An emotional Jamal said, "I vow to fight for this relationship with soul, my Mau. True love climbs mountains to find a soulmate. That is a confession that I will take to the grave. No one will come between us, Mau. I will live to cherish these sacrifices you made with no strings attached for a guy you did not even know." Turning to JP, he smiled and raised his glass for a toast, "Cheers, brother! I will pay all that debt. My sincere apologies. It is unfortunate I caused your family so much pain and misunderstanding. Wairimu, you are truly amazing. Did you risk all that to save me? Thanks, my love; I will never forget your kindness, my dear Mau."

"Cheers too, Jamal." We both toasted my gulf boy.

"This is my bill," JP said. "I agreed to entertain my sister, and now I have a brother. As the eldest in the family, let me welcome you, brother Jamal."

I let my brain get consumed by the fire of Jamal's love and ignored the potential cultural threat that kept popping up. *One more glass of wine will do that magic for now*. I started speaking nonsense to make the men change the topic. They made merry until midnight, and we were too drunk to drive back. We slept at JP's house. JP was happy for me but needed a day to gauge Mom's temperature on the affair.

We resist change because we focus on what we have to give up instead of focusing on what we have to gain. Things, good and bad, expected and unexpected, will always happen to us. It is how we respond to them that determines our breakthrough.

CHAPTER 7

JEWEL OF WISDOM

The Real Party

IT WAS A LAZY morning and Jamal was in the library trying to finish his assignment since his Dad and brother-in-law JP, had taken up his weekend. The library was a state-of-the-art facility stocked with advanced modern technology to facilitate our learning.

"My Mau has a fierce soul and a brave heart, her strong mind is full of wisdom. She made me believe in my ability to learn the English language faster than I anticipated. Also, because it is the language I use to communicate with her, now I can do my homework without her assistance," I once heard Jamal say to his friends.

Life demands very little from us when we choose to live simply and happily. We just need to be optimistic and let life flow naturally without adding stumbling blocks to our paths. Press on to the future with greater achievements. Life is like ice cream; you have to enjoy it before it melts. When it does melt, it is like the mistakes that we cannot undo. We can only toss them in the sea and forget them, letting them rot where they fell as we curve new opportunities for ourselves.

On this particular day, the lecturer was determined to change the course of my sinking ship. *I need to pay more attention to my schooling. For the first time in my life, I am mixing books with pleasure. Maybe I am of age, but leisure is consuming me more.*

Once the lesson was over, the lecturer offered everyone coffee, so we followed him to the canteen area. I had never seen a teacher offer his students food or a drink before. Being single saves Mr Bellows a few coins and this was a noble way to spend it. He paid for our coffee and disappeared to rest before the afternoon class. As usual, our appetites kicked in and people started ordering snacks and, for some, lunch.

We parted ways with Jamal, and I walked towards the classroom to call my grandma back home. I sandwiched my tiny body between the library wall and the administration block to take a shortcut to the classroom. I landed on the

bulletin board with the weekly announcements. I stopped and checked for anything relevant to me: I had nothing to do with sports and related stuff. There were study groups and community help groups, but none that I had joined yet. My life revolved around the classroom, my family, and Jamal.

I need to be more social. I should catch up with Bella on what they are up to with Anika… but wait, I am not a follower. Anyone doing community service should be my focus.

There was an attractive flier about a dance competition in the evening. I had missed shaking my leg to what some people might say are my African jungle dancing skills.

A wave of urgency hit me. Just a few months before, I was super excited to be selected as one of the academy university's students. I was excited to make new friends in a new environment. But now, seventy per cent of my time is spent on irrelevant activities unrelated to what brought me here.

I needed to call my mind to order and create a reasonable schedule that would help me streamline my daily routine. *At least not before tonight; this dance party will set the momentum. However, it is agreed that I need to accelerate my performance. These mysterious elite heirs can derail my course if I am not careful or focused. Their accounts are never in the red like mine. I also don't want to keep looking up to Jamal to sort my bills. I can play smart by avoiding events that are not quite affordable to me.*

I felt someone tap my shoulder, and I turned to find Cheng, the Chinese boy, standing next to me.

"Hello, Covid," I called Cheng by the nickname he got from his classmates on the very first day of our introductions. "Is everyone going to the dance party tonight? I will be contesting. You better show up, Cheng, with your Anika."

"Who told you there is a jig, madam know-it-all?" he said as he kissed my cheek.

"Look here on the board."

"I was unaware of the contest; I should join it as well. You know, I am a good dancer, too. I will show up to shake a leg as I admire your African dancing skills."

"You know what, Covid, I am always amazed by the meaning of your name. Is it for real, or were you joking? You are Cheng Changpu, an accomplished

flourishing vine. Where have you flourished, young man?" I joked with the Chinese boy.

"I am the hooligan boy who acted in the Chinese movie, *The Handsome Dudes*. Do you remember the tall guy's twin brother?"

"Yes, I remember him. He resembles Judas Iscariot from the Bible. Extremely gorgeous and very mischievous. His wisdom is intriguing. That Judas boy was raised by mean beings from the land of the devil. They have no single good thing one can learn from them. They are all dark souls serving the same devil. I even wonder how you were an okay kid with no single role model in your life. This movie made me believe our destiny is curved on our palms."

" I don't know Judas of the Bible; I am a Buddhist," Cheng responded.

"Google Judas and see yourself, right there with all your mischievous looks. Your twin brother fits our Jesus, tall and handsome."

"Who is Jesus again?" Cheng quizzed sarcastically.

"The difference between your brother and Jesus is that your brother has an eye for girls. Jesus was focused on his mission to save the world from sin. Jesus is one with God and the Holy Spirit. Leave that to Christians, Mr Covid. Your brother is a heartbreaker. He has a strong third eye for women. He cannot sit with men since women raised him. His personal guards are women, and he fights for women. He cannot even punish a woman witch! He should not come to Africa. Christians have been waiting for Jesus' second coming from the year 2000. They might confuse him for Jesus because of all these women around him. 'Come and see Jesus of Nazareth is here with Mary and Ruth,' they will probably say. In heaven, people are immortal: They look very young. If the Holy hands of African queens touch your brother, he will be just like my Jamal. Equatorial heat is no joke. What is wrong with you in that movie? You can unite all the hyenas and greedy pigs looking for treasures, but women are not on your radar? You avoid them like the plague. Are you gay, or are you born with some disability, Cheng? Come to Kenya and I'll hook you up with a beauty, then you can get kids with naturally curled hair who are Kenchic," I chuckled at my own joke, adding, "That is to say, a Kenyan and Chinese combination—Kenchic."

"Wairimu, I now understand why Jamal loves you. Never weary of comedy. My Bollywood girl Anika is permanently on books researching this or that, she has no life. She needs to snap out of that bubble and have a life. Life will never be perfect. It is all about how you make it suit you. It is never about pleasing

others. Anika works hard to please her family. I wonder whether the movie, *Coming to America* was acted in India, 'Yes my king...' silly, use your head!" Cheng said, slapping the air. "I am not gay Wairimu, I am *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."*

"Is that even a word Covid?" I asked, mesmerized by the pronunciation.

"Yes, it is English. In China, we know the English that matters. Why do you have to give people an easy time? Why are dictionaries there? Check the meaning as I google Judas and Jesus," Cheng said, turning on his phone.

"We are late for class Cheng," I said as I held his hand and started walking towards the classroom.

"We only have 40 seconds... Run!" Cheng pulled me and we sprinted together hand in hand.

As we got to class, every eye was on us, including Jamal's.

He must have been wondering where we were coming from. We exchanged a thumbs-up with Cheng and smiled. I knew it would be a long day trying to explain where I was to Jamal, yet we parted ways two hours ago. Fortunately, the class was in session, so no answer was expected until after an hour or so.

"See you on Monday," The lecturer said, dropping a book on Bella's desk. She returned her gratitude with a smile, followed by a wink. Some of us walked to her desk to tease her as the teacher walked out.

"You have taken the big fish, classmate. We cannot joke around with you anymore," I teased Bella. "We saw it coming the very day we did our introductions. Mr Bellows could not concentrate after your introduction." I left the classroom as Jamal joined the boys surrounding Bella's desk to tease her some more.

After a super-fast shower, I changed into a fresh sundress that I could nap and shine in during the dance competition. I hated cleaning clothes; if there was one outfit for all situations, I would definitely have it in my wardrobe. I would sleep in it, go for leisure, and swim in it.

I looked at myself in the mirror. The sundress gave me an urbane and sophisticated look.

One might even confuse me for a palace heir, yet I am just a simple girl from the foothills of Mt. Kenya. For now, I am happy with the upgrade for as long as it lasts. Nothing in my wardrobe bears semblance to the lot I came with from my village. Jamal has been in charge of my dress code and it is truly a special place to be.

Satisfied with my appearance and resolution to look hot, I decided not to take a nap and headed to meet my Jamal so that we could go to the dance party.

Jamal was dressed in a cream suit while I settled on the fitting, tiny, shiny, flower-printed golden sun dress that opened up just below the knees to complete a mermaid look. I thought Jamal looked too formal for the event. I dragged him back to change into less formal attire. He had not been to a disco often, so I excused him but chose a pair of black Jeans and a designer T-shirt.

We held hands and confidently entered the dancing hall that was already bathed in loud music as everyone tried to showcase their dance moves. The hall decorations were well selected: The theme was gold and cream. However, the dress code for the day was not limited to those colours.

Jamal had no idea what salsa was. I was showing him the moves but gave up midway as he was doing an excellent job stepping on my toes. He didn't seem able to dance to the beat and synchronise with my salsa moves.

The event was super fun, however. Eventually, people were too drunk to contest, so we ended up dancing any way one pleased for the fun of it. The party started to wind down at 5:30 am. Jamal and I found our way to the exit. My Jamal, not being a good dancer, had swallowed enough alcohol to make up for it and couldn't walk to the hostels by himself. Luckily, Cheng was nearby engaged in what appeared a genial lovers' fight with Anika.

"Can you guys finish this fight in bed after getting my Jamal in his room?" I tried my best not to sound like I was begging for help but ordering them to do something for me. They were pleased to focus on something else for a while.

This boy, Cheng, must have had strength equal to a fifty horsepower vehicle. He put Jamal on his back and sprinted ahead of me to the hostels. I was panting, trying to balance my unsteady self and keep pace. We could tell it was already morning because the lights around the school automatically went off at 6 am. To add salt to injury, we were tipsy and the streets felt lumpy, causing me to slide and stumble as I tried to hurry along.

I was staggering and trying to keep steady by carefully holding on to the walls while keeping close watch in the gloom not to lose sight of Cheng with Jamal on his back. A sudden thought occurred to me: *What if Jamal's dad showed up right at this moment? What excuse would I give for his drunk son?*

His father would definitely swallow me alive in his disappointment about the situation. The girl he honoured the other day but she is busy showing his son all manner of things that were against his beliefs.

Maybe I would have responded, "He may be your son but he is my man now. My future husband. A husband?"

The thought made me laugh.

Before my eyes could set on Cheng, I saw a flash light ahead and saw Cheng and Jamal. But they were sprawled on the floor with Lee trying to lift them. I hadn't even seen them fall. Cheng appeared fine, he must have run out of gas, but my Jamal was still in dreamland. Lee stepped up to help and held Jamal by his shoulders while Cheng held him up by his feet. In reality, it looked like Lee was carrying two people since Cheng looked like he was being dragged along. I sobered up a bit and hastened my pace to open Jamal's room.

There is no need to cover him in his dirty clothes, I thought as I covered him with a bed cover. Both Lee and Cheng left and I let my Jamal sleep as I crashed on my bed like a log.

I woke up fresh the next morning. As my eyes did a final sweep of the room to ensure everything was in place before I left, I noticed my pet dove outside on the window sill. I opened the window and dropped her some breadcrumbs and a bottle top of water. I checked on my boy. His head was still heavy with sleep,

I have some time alone and can do some class work, I told myself. I took a shower and left for the library.

I was in a hurry to get to the library but decided to pass by the cafeteria, where I snacked on something that filled my tummy. My hunger satiated and eager to leave, I missed a step in my haste. Luckily I didn't fall. I felt a strong pair of hands hold my shoulders to steady me up: It was Neon.

"Hello, Wairimu. We have crossed paths again. I have missed you a lot," he said as he flashed a sly smile. "I thought you would be mine, but I noticed you are taken already by that Arab guy. Where is he today? Can I buy you a cup of coffee as we get to know each other better?"

Though taken aback, I had the presence of mind not show surprise at the directness of the invitation, which I deemed inappropriate. "Hello, Neon. Nice to meet you again."

Our University academy class had many early risers and adopters too of many things. We would not be caught off guard by any other class, especially the main campus students. I would hear that they would procrastinate for days and were often late trying to meet deadlines. Some were such laggards, like Neon. We would see them standing in front of the notice board every other time, checking for anything new or an upcoming event. *I wonder what they report to their poor parents?*

"Thanks, Neon, for breaking my fall. I was a bit consumed by the surroundings and forgot to watch my step. I wish I could share a cup with you, Neon, but I have a Zoom call at the library in the next few minutes. I appreciate the kind gesture though," I said matter-of-factly, adding, "and oh yes, I am engaged to Jamal, but we can remain friends. I can always have coffee with you another time, Neon. Thank you for the offer."

"What is with all the Uni Academy girls? Not one is available. They are all taken. I tried Bella and almost lost my teeth to Sean, the lecturer. I snooped on that Indian girl and the karate boy, the Chinese, was on my neck. Maybe I have to wait for the next class."

"I guess you were a little late, Neon. Next time make sure you start early. If you'll excuse me, dear, I should be going. See you on Friday at the basketball game."

I took a deep breath. I was a little stunned meeting Neon and his killer smile trying to woo me. *He is such a good-looking man with those dimples that accentuate his look. He was a Briton and had a beautiful baritone voice. He seemed like a carefree guy. I wish Sophie was not fast with life. I would have introduced her to this handsome man. It would be fun dating guys from the same campus.*

"No worries, I am glad to have bumped into this beauty. I absolutely respect your decision but don't be too rigid, take life easy. You are still young to get engaged. Test more waters beautiful, I might be the lucky number two," Neon was saying.

It was turning out to be a very awkward conversation, and I was becoming impatient. I also thought his somewhat possessive smiles at me might confuse a passerby to think we were a couple.

"No way, Neon. I am all good with Jamal. Be my good friend as you try your luck elsewhere. It was nice meeting you, have a lovely day," I responded quickly and was on my way.

"Same here, Wairimu. Don't get offended. I mean no harm. See you on Friday. Cheers girl!"

I pretended not to hear what he had just said as I hurried to set up my laptop for the online class. *I don't need such a distraction on such a busy morning. I hope not to even come across you, Neon, now or in the near future. He is such a handsome guy though, and his sexy blue eyes can paralyze any strong-willed woman. He is also good with words. I had to suppress my feelings to get away from him.*

As I walked away, I tried to fight the urge to turn and look at him but failed. I quickly glanced over my shoulder and he was still there following me with his mischievous eyes. I hurried and vanished into the library corridors without looking back again.

I wondered why schooling had become such a hassle, yet I was very focused back in Kenya. Every day I would wake up and water my dreams in this Uni Academy. However, even as I do, rain pours and waters what I left to wither: My fears and insecurities. I wake up in the morning only to find them sprouted and banging in my head. They are the hardest to uproot, especially when my Plan B is not in place.

Nevertheless, I am hopeful about my success, as I was in high school and needed to cultivate the same enthusiasm, only this time with the involvement of the entire Uni Academy class. I was going to suggest to my classmates to make it a point for all of us to head to the library after class for two hours and then start our merry-making after. That way, we will not have surprises when graduating.

I went straight to class before the lesson started and hammered out my proposal to present to the class. Everyone was hungry for a solution, but no one had devised a strategy on how we could deliver collectively. Everyone agreed to my call, and we made my proposal a routine. We would now have more time for group work, opening doors for businesses represented by the heirs in the classroom.

I need to be linked to the Ministry of Tourism back home to learn more about the businesses I can create from these students on behalf of Kenya, I thought as I relentlessly watered my classmates' parents' business with ideas. *I am a doctor's daughter. She has enough patients; she needs no referrals of me, while my brother's desk is full of referred criminals.*

CHAPTER 8

MY ROOTS

The Calm in the Storm

LIVING WITH ABSENT PARENTS was not a bed of roses for me back in Africa. After a series of dramas unfolded between my father and mother that drove them apart, my grandparents raised me. I learned this from my grandmother.

Teresia Muthoni, my mother, met my father, Kiragu son of Kimani, while they were in high school. Kimani, my Dad's father, had five boys who looked very alike and could have been age mates. One could not easily tell Kiragu apart from his siblings. You would have to have closely interacted with them to tell them apart. Grandma used to tell me that she was unsure whether Mwangi, my brother JP, was Kiragu's son or belonged to his brother, Kariuki. They all visited her home and could not tell them apart. The boys were no angels either, thus her doubts about who sired my brother.

Suppose one landed in their *cube* (cubicle), as the young men's sleeping quarters were referred to, and were usually built apart from the main house. If you strayed into the boys' cube, you might not tell who was really with you, only to realise the actual Alberto had just entered. You'd pray that these boys do not share their dark secrets; they were like twins and would even share clothes. They even had the same skin tone and height. They were born one year apart and belonged to the same age group.

"Your Dad, Kiragu, refused to marry my daughter, yet Muthoni was stupid enough to give birth to you and your brother from the same man that broke her heart. I thank God you took after that man, as your mother must have taken after your grandpa with her temper. Kiragu is handsomely polite. You would not suspect that he would be mean. He used to visit your Mom in school and would join the family to help with chores. I was thrilled that my would-be son-in-law was a handsome, hard-working man. Had Muthoni's relationship with Kiragu come through, they would have made the most adorable couple I had ever met. They looked beautiful together and were both committed to

working hard in school. When Muthoni was not in the first position in class exams, Kiragu was."

I remember when my grandma told me how my Dad came to my grandparents' home to see my mother, who had been unwell. She had missed school for a whole week because she had contracted pneumonia, which can be life-threatening and easily confused with a common cold.

"When schools closed, Kiragu camped in this homestead with your uncles until Muthoni got well. He fed her breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The whole family was confident Kiragu and Muthoni would marry one day. I do not understand at what point he changed his mind causing her so much pain and anguish with the breakup."

Kimani, my absent Dad's father, had a vast coffee plantation where villagers picked coffee to earn a living. It was perfect grounds for youth to meet and mingle. That was how my Mom met her love, Kiragu, long before joining the same high school.

The villagers would discuss how well Mr Kimani paid coffee pickers. Everyone looked forward to the weekend to earn money from coffee harvesting. Being a friend to the Kimani boys made one earn more. They plotted and entered in the harvest register more kilos than picked by their favoured friends to claim higher payment. Kimani's sons would later meet the friends and split the money.

After coffee payments on Saturdays, the youth would have a party in one of the boys' cubes. Sunday, after mass, again, everyone met at the marketplace to shop for what their money could afford. Being young is silly. Theirs was instant gratification. They didn't seem to have the idea that one could accumulate cash and buy something more worthwhile in a month.

As narrated by Grandma, one day, Mom left early for my Dad's home. She met his mother in the kitchen and helped with preparing breakfast since it was the tradition that, as a young person, one would help out in whichever home they visited. She was not a guest in Kimani's home; the family knew Muthoni, my mother, as Kiragu's classmate and a regular visitor to their homestead.

Kiragu joined them for breakfast and later left in Mom's company so that he could see her off. It was then that she broke the news to my Dad about her pregnancy. Kiragu was shocked for a minute but chose to be strong for her and quickly composed himself. He agreed to meet Mom again in the week to discuss the way forward. But, in the meantime, he advised my Mom, Muthoni,

to inform her parents about her pregnancy. He promised to break the news to his parents too. They parted ways, and Muthoni went home, happy her man was willing to take charge of the situation.

She passed by her friend Purity's home to break the news and request her to accompany her to the clan meeting. They were both excited and had a lot to discuss about how early it was for Muthoni to be a mother. Muthoni worried about whether she would continue with college if she passed her exams or whether she was destined to be a housewife. These were intriguing questions to a young mind. They decided to deal with the outcome later.

Purity took Muthoni to the marketplace to check the cost of infants' clothing so that she could know what to budget for. It was a beautiful day preparing for a newborn. It was hard to tell the sex of the baby before it was born back in the day. One would therefore buy unisex clothes as they awaited the child's to know the sex

Muthoni went home and reported to her parents about her coming baby. The news was not taken well, her being the most promising in the family and had great hopes for her academically. Her father was particularly disappointed to the point that it was some time before he could say as much as a "hello" to greet Muthoni. Little did the mother know what awaited them at Kimani's homestead. Muthoni's family had picked a date with Kiragu's clan to discuss the coming baby and the way forward. After Kiragu was informed by Muthoni, he went straight to seek his age mates' opinions about this new episode in his life. He approached the boys' den, clearly afraid of what he would divulge to the group. He laid his case to them.

"Hi guys, I feel like I am trapped in a spider's web. Every time I try to release myself, it gets tighter. I love Muthoni so much, but I am a needy man. I am yet to go to college, and she is carrying my baby. What should I do now?" Kiragu asked his band of boys. His voice was trembling.

To address his dilemma, the clique decided to stage some "fiction movie" for Teresia Muthoni and her clan, *mbara ya ngura* (Ngura clan).

A homeless man, Watur, who had been roaming the village for a long time, was passing by. Where he originated from and how he landed in the village, nobody seemed to know. He walked from home to home with the youth and fed in their homes. He was handsome and very charming; you could not turn

him away when he visited. Villagers believed he was the son of an employee in one of the coffee farms who had passed on, leaving him an orphan.

I was lucky Watur, the antagonist, was still alive and got a chance to meet him. He gave me the story of my Dad and Mom first-hand. However, Watur was the devil in the flesh. He stage-managed the scene for the boys to mess with my mother. He had heard my Dad's explanation of his predicament. He took the floor to advise my Dad, and the boys on how to avoid bearing responsibility for the pregnancy.

"Kiragu, your attitude towards Muthoni must change now that you understand you cannot marry her immediately. That will make all the difference. You have to be bold, Kiragu. You are too young to tie yourself to one woman. Women will always be there for you, more youthful and more beautiful. It was an accident, and he should not get punished for it. Impregnating girls will happen with many more in the future. Are you going to marry all of the women you will impregnate, my friend?" Watur posed, with the other boys chiming in, in agreement.

Kiragu did not understand what they meant, for his love was for only one Muthoni, not twenty girls. He only wanted advice on dealing with elders when the Muthoni clan came to see his parents. His brothers and friends took the floor in turns, convincing him otherwise.

"Pull yourself together, Kiragu. You cannot take responsibility, Kiragu. We are older than you, and we are not yet married. How do you raise the baby? Dad will refuse to take you to college, and that will be the end of you, young man. You will become a local casual labourer in this village and live out the rest of your life as one, just like your cousin, Mwaniki. His wife was lucky to be employed as an untrained teacher, and Mwaniki became a Kenya Bus driver. It would help if you were careful about how you handled this situation. Mwaniki got married when he was fresh from high school, and his parents gave up on him. We all have women with our children in this village, and we have never owned up, courtesy of this gentleman, Watur. We have the plan to save your neck," Kiragu brothers and friends plotted.

The boys and Watur discussed and decided the devious "fiction movie" would have three characters: Three boys would present themselves at the elders' meeting and pretend they had a romantic relationship with Muthoni. The first claim would come from Mwaura, a good friend to the boys and known to the Muthoni family. He always tagged along with other boys to visit

Muthoni's home. He claimed to have met Muthoni in a famous disco club in their village called *Maus Disco*. Maus was not a disco club for the ordinary, well-behaved girl. If a lady visited Maus disco, the villagers would say that the lady *nimuchune maitho ni mbaka* (a cat has licked her eyes), meaning she could not be a loyal girl. Kamau, the owner of the disco, had gone to study abroad and got a business opportunity in the USA. He had done a few odd jobs that helped him become a businessman. He would work the day shift as a truck driver and the night shift as a security guard.

He bought a music system that brought on syncopation—a musical term for various rhythms played together to create an off-beat tune. As granny told me this, she asked me not to ask her more about what the words meant. She said she had explained to me the best way she knew how.

Maybe she, too, had chanced to visit Maus' disco. I laughed at the thought of Grandma being exposed to a modern disco, Maus, back in the day.

If you were wife material, the only disco you would have attended in my village would be in homes where circumcision rites were taking place. Some locals who owned music systems and a car battery to power the music system hired for a night disco in honour of the circumcised boys. The families of the initiates would foot the bill and invite villagers to the night party. There would be plenty of food and snacks. If the family was well off, the party lasted for days.

Kariuki, one of the brothers to Kiragu, at the time a student at the College of Agriculture in the Rift Valley, acted as the second character who would claim he met with Muthoni on her way back from Nakuru to visit her Uncle Muriithi. Muthoni's Dad, Mwangi, at some point was a long-distance truck driver who traversed the borders of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi. He left money with his brother, Muriithi, for his family's upkeep when passing through Nakuru. Muthoni, being the youngest, was more flexible than her siblings and was often sent by her mother on errands to her Uncle's place in Nakuru to collect money and the shopping their Dad may have left while in transit. Kariuki would claim that twice they had boarded the same bus as he returned to college. That is how they planned he would victimise my mother. The plan was foolproof. No one would doubt they crossed paths at some point.

What a double-crosser! How can a would-be brother-in-law known to my Mom for so long be that evil? He has no respect for the unborn or the damage he is causing my mother's relationship with his brother, Kiragu. I wish the betrayal had come from a total stranger, not someone Mom considered family and friend.

The third character was a relative to Kiragu, Weru. He was unknown to Mom's family. Weru schooled in Britain and returned to Kenya a couple of months before the unfolding events. His family lived abroad. His Dad had a girlfriend back in the day, and they got the boy Weru out of wedlock. The boy was dumped in his grandpa's compound right after birth by his mother, from the Maasai community—they believed the child belonged to the father. His father, who was working in Britain, was already married. He convinced his wife to have the child under their custody, to which she agreed. The Dad came and picked up his son and ensured he enrolled in a school in Britain—Weru ended up attaining good grades. Weru had a perfect relationship with his parents and was a darling in school since he was a well-rounded student.

His parents got him attachments in different countries, his last being Germany. He got a beautiful lady who he married, and they had two children. They lived a happy family life until the lady decided to get a third-born child from another man. It broke Weru's heart, who packed his bags and returned to Kenya, leaving his family behind. He was sued for the child's maintenance but opted to quit his job so he wouldn't have to take responsibility. After all, he argued, the woman decided to mess him up.

Weru's pride prompted him to return to his mother's land after declining an offer from his Dad to support him before he got another job. He had made enough applications and eventually landed a job as an auditor at the United Nations Headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. He was a good-looking and brilliant man.

To him, the outright lie to be perpetrated was a great game to play for his dear cousin. He also felt it was good revenge, though unfortunately to the wrong woman, for that is exactly what he would have wanted to do to his German wife to prove his masculinity. Weru, back in a Kenyan village, couldn't be traced by his German family abroad—he was a free man with little or no respect for women, starting with his mother, who abandoned him and got married elsewhere. Weru's mother had nine more children and had no business with the illegitimate son. However, she did entertain him, so he would help

educate his siblings. He had no problem with the arrangement. After all, he had no family to nurture. To him, Muthoni, my poor Mom, was just another victim of circumstances, just like him.

The young men were cunning and persuasive, and the elders bought their story. My poor Mom had no way to defend herself against the devious scheme by the boys. The meeting could not go on with three men in the picture, and all of them claiming intimate liaison with my mother, Muthoni. My Mom's clan left without a word, never to look back. I can never imagine the humiliation Mom must have felt.

As she went home that day, the first enemy she needed to defeat was the feelings she had—rage and despair. She had no way to defend herself and no energy to fight back. She was disappointed that her boyfriend, Kiragu, did not support her in her hour of need. In his eyes, he was as much the victim who had no control over whatever drama happened to Muthoni. His brother, Kariuki and Watur, guided the matrix to its devastating completion.

I looked at Watur, now an old man, narrating the sad separation of my parents and wished I could avenge my mother now that this man, Watur, was old and fragile. How could he be so casual with such fatal information that could send him straight to his deathbed? Does he know who I am and why I want to know more about Kiragu and his descendants? At what point did he imagine he was famous to my generation as he was in Dad's time, more so to a girl child who is determined to break serious barriers created by Dad's relatives to make her a villager for life?

"Anything else you would like to know, my princess?" Watur smiled at me, apparently contented he had issued a good narration.

Yes, there are, for sure, ways to kill a heartless old man like you. You are pathetic and good for nothing, I was thinking to myself. *No wonder you are a loner with no roots. You have distanced yourself from reality, which is why hurting others is nothing to you but a Game of Thrones. Whether twenty women kill themselves or the innocent babies dies is none of your concern. Boys should jump in bed with anyone, anytime and anywhere, without fear of retribution, for they have a superman like you to win battles for them without a scratch.*

"Why am I not letting these words fly into this old man's semi-deaf ears?"

I was now in tears.

"Why are you quiet and in tears, my girl?" Watur enquired; his pleasant voice disguised the hell this man could unleash without provocation. His whole body was calm, like someone connected to some higher power—an ascetic. Despite the few lines on his face, his skin was flawless, and if properly maintained, one would confuse him for a palace heir. He was well-dressed and had a taste for designer clothes that he would buy for nothing from second-hand goods stores. He worked for an older man as his Customer Care Executive in a local town, bar, and restaurant. *The owner would be well rewarded for having this good-for-nothing but a talented liar in his business.* He attracted all manner of women due to his Cushitic looks, being of Somali origin.

"Oh no. Thank you, Watur. That is all I needed to know."

"I hope Muthoni did not abort the baby. She was devastated back then. Kiragu's father had five sons who were like Billy goats. Each of them had three or more cases because of how much girls used to confuse the brothers. I did this drama with many women, but Kiragu loved this particular woman. Their relationship was known to most of us, and we would go out together on many occasions. We messed up these women big time. I regret a lot today for being part of their downfall," Watur said, seeming to show regret. I doubted whether he was regretful at all.

Little did he know he was talking to the boy's sister who, in his mind, he had aborted twenty years ago. He has no business regretting the act when he is toothless. If he is a man worth his salt, he should be married by now to appreciate family values. No one knows his origin, his family, or his language. He is a light-skinned man with a devilish smile that is hard to ignore. He has no history of impregnating any woman in our village for all the years he has lived there, yet his best friends seem to be women. Men do not find him a threat in any way since he has not been reported in any incident with their women. They called him Father Watur. To me, he is an idiot with no purpose. He is the reincarnation of a terrorist who torments women. All women talk about how he engages them with sweet stories just for a plate of food. Then he moves on to his next targeted home. His place is the grave where all the women will forget him. He denied many women an opportunity to marry their loved ones as he satisfied his ecstasy in loneliness.

How cheap were my Dad and the boys not to realise they were men with functional faculties before they sold their kids to this good-for-nothing beast, Watur?

Luckily, due to Grandma's Uncle Wokabi's connections, my dear Mom would study in the US after Fourth Grade. She then had a baby boy named after my Grandpa Mwangi. My grandpa, who was very mad with Mom, did not want her to further her education. He wanted her married off to an older man for being a disgrace to the family. Grandma resisted and organised with her Uncle to take Muthoni to the US, the land of opportunities. Now that my mother had made it, my grandpa, Mwangi, introduced her as his daughter from *Meka* (America). I feel sad that grandpa forced my mom to carry her baby when she was still needy as a young college girl. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise, for it could have been tough to get Mwangi to the US later when migration rules became more stringent.

Still, I do not blame my Dad for not marrying my mother then. He was young and did not want to take responsibility at the age of nineteen. He was still in school, and according to tradition, if a man agreed to be the father of an unborn child, he had to marry the girl whether in a position to cater to the family or not. Family life would officially *start* for him with no job and waiting to get to college. It was unfortunate that my Mom conceived when they were both very needy. Though I do not blame him and acknowledge his inability to take care of Mom, it did not warrant the behaviour from their side of victimising her as a prostitute. That was uncalled for, and it feels difficult to forgive my Dad for that one insult. He played dumb when the boys unleashed their meanness on my mother.

I also did not understand when Kiragu and Muthoni agreed that they needed another child for me to be born, only to be neglected—this time by both of them. *What a generation!*

Maybe she wanted a family from the same man, or she never learned her lesson. Better still, perhaps she was still in love with Dad. They had conceived me when she had visited Kenya and only realised that she was pregnant when she was back in the States. Her work schedule and schooling would not let her stay with an infant. She took a break for two years to raise me, then returned me to stay with Grandma. It was hard to stay with an infant in the states. She could not afford a caregiver for my brother, who was still quite young, and me.

She left me in Kenya and was determined to come back for me when she was more stable. Growing up, I couldn't remember when I last saw Mom. Maybe she used to visit when I was younger, but the only parents I knew were

my grannies when I came of age. They are the ones that enrolled me in my first nursery class. They are the ones that taught me to be kind to others and to report to them any evil that should come my way. They are the ones that introduced me to God through their church. I tagged my grandpa for admission when I was old enough to join primary school. Only later in life did I start questioning why they were my grannies and not my parents. It was an alarming reality to comprehend where every child I knew talked about their Mom and Dad. I did not know the difference between Mom and Dad, for I did not recall any experience with either.

I excused Dad and Mom for my brother, but I felt they were mature enough to take responsibility when I was born. According to Grandma, Mom had gotten my Dad an opportunity to join her in the US. If he were not selfish, they would have been able to take care of me as they studied. Women find it hard to give up on a relationship they cherish. My Mom thought that her becoming an American girl would move my Dad enough for him to join her in the US. Little did she know she was pregnant again, and her man had better ideas about how he wanted to live his life. He did not choose us—he later married and moved on.

My grandparents made me realise that the present moment is a gift that should not be wasted by trying to amend what is water under the bridge. I made up my mind to stop filling my days with regrets and wishes that were farfetched and unreasonable. I was grateful to my grandparents for filling my moments growing up with excitement and hope.

I had made it this far because my grandparents quit chasing after fortune. They chose to raise me and my cousin, Sophie. When I look back on my life's journey, I feel like there was not much to brag about during my growing up as a child, yet we were more giving, more caring, and more sensitive. Even if I had absent parents, the whole village protected me from ridicule, and accorded the same rights as a child with both parents.

The community would put their coins together to send one student to study abroad, mainly to Britain or India. Today it is a man-eat-man society, everyone for himself.

"Wairimu, the descendant of hope. This far, you have come. Thanks to the Almighty," my grandma once consoled me.

CHAPTER 9

TIME TRAVEL

My Calendar

I PROCRASTINATED going to the library to pick the new syllabus series. It had been three days since we had been told to go pick them up, and I was afraid I might find them out of stock. However, I still hesitated. Despite the curriculum having changed, the school didn't want to overstock the new syllabus before the academy got rooted.

I managed to rush to the library and was lucky to find a set left—I had to share with Jamal for the time being. He did not care whether the books were out of stock; he could afford to buy his own. If my name missed from the book collection register, I'm sure my mom would have deported my lazy bones back to Africa. I had to be vigilant in my operations since schooling in the US was a lifetime opportunity for this Mau Mau descendant. I still had some time before the afternoon class. I called my grandma to catch up with village drama. It had been a while since we spoke.

I went to sit on a bench next to the field where there wasn't much activity.

"Hi Grandma, how is your boyfriend, my grandpa?"

"Hello, *Kairitu*," she responded, teasing me with one of her nicknames for me that means little girl. She then told me how Covid-19 had frightened everyone and slowed operations from the heart of the cities to the villages.

"People are covering their noses and mouths with all manner of masks to escape the virus—they say that Covid-19 forms cobwebs in the lungs, arresting them leading to the victim's death. Covid-19 is a terrorist in every household, and it doesn't discriminate causing havoc and panic."

I was concerned when she mentioned that many low-income earners had relocated their children to the village to stay with their grandparents because they had no one to look after them with schools closed indefinitely and parents away at work.

As a result of the children being in the village and their grandparents not being able to contain their high energy, they would hop in all over the

neighbourhoods, leading to suspicion it was them spreading the virus as Covid-19 cases increased in the village. Grandma explained that many of her agemates had already died from the virus. With vaccines still unavailable, people started to use what they said were Chinese remedies to escape the virus. This would involve mixing steaming hot water with blue gum tree leaves in a basin and covering their head over the container with a heavy cloth to inhale steam from the mixture. People would also drink lots of water mixed with ginger, garlic, cinnamon, and rosemary. Scientists never proved these remedies to work but faith kept those using the remedies going and probably felt better because of the placebo effect.

"We are told that these demons stay in the throat and nose for three days. When we do this therapy every day for twenty minutes, this steam stimulates the cobwebs. These demons may have formed in the lungs, and the steam relieves someone," Grandma tried to explain, though I corrected her.

"We lost my dear friend Mama Mugathe to Covid-19 two days ago. That was the first burial villagers were not allowed to attend. I watched the burial from my fence, stepping on a chair and holding onto the fence chain. There was no church sermon, just a tiny group of people that seemed beastly to bury my friend who seemed dejected like a thief on account of the virus. No songs, few eyewitnesses; everyone was miles away. It was tragic. I cried a bucket, dear one. I have never seen such a mean burial before in my entire life."

She continued her tragic story for an hour before leaving it to fate when said in our Kikuyu mother tongue "Even if we die, God help these young children to survive and inherit the jungle."

This is a loose translation but the way she put it in Kikuyu is hilarious. Her tone might have been sad, but I could not hold my laughter.

"It was a pleasure talking to you, Grandma. I am sorry about Mama Mugathe, but no worries, heaven will receive her even without the proper burial she deserved," I comforted her.

"I have good news for you, Grandma. I got my Mr Bacchu here in America. I sent photos to Sophie. She told me she was coming to the village over the weekend to pick up her kids. Look at them and tell me whether Jamal has Bacchu looks or if I should keep searching."

"Oh my God, she delivered them yesterday. The guy is a knockout, Just as I imagined," Grandma could not hold her excitement, which was clear in her ageing voice. "Is he American or a foreigner like you? You are unique, my girl.

How did you hook up with such an amazingly good-looking man on such a vast continent that swallowed my daughter Muthoni? Have you met his family, or does he live alone in Meka (America)? When are you planning to get married? Has he hinted at a date to you? Did you tell him about me and how I play an essential role in your life? Can you travel with him here so I can meet him? I hope he will understand my broken English. I knew you were not a cockroach. Your beauty is nothing to be ignored, my Wairimu. Only a few months and such a handsome man chose you. Thanks to the almighty, for he has answered my prayers."

I could not answer any of the questions Grandma was asking. Instead, I smiled at the receiver. I knew Grandma would be shocked to realise I had chosen a man from the land of Jesus and Saddam Hussein. Jamal's maternal grandmother was Jewish, and married to an Iraqi man. *She will realise looks are not only in India, the land of Bacchu.*

Hard to say, but I have a tiny bit of doubt about me and Jamal. Part of me didn't have much expectation in the relationship given that culture did not allow such an engagement.

"Yes, Grandma, I plan to bring him over to meet you when we close school."

Grandma didn't know that Jamal was a Muslim and didn't need to know at that point. The closest Grandma knew about Muslims was from the news when the terror group, al Qaeda, bombed the American Embassy in Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Then later, the al-Shabaab terrorist attacks at the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi which saw many people killed, and other similar incidents such as at a university in Garissa.

No way Jamal will be welcome in my family. He will give my grandparents a real culture shock.

I was yet to come up with a strategy to stage-manage the relationship. *Mother will not be amused either. She is civilised, but she knows Muslims are a bit strict regarding women from other communities and more so from other religions. The only bond we have is love. From Jamal's side, it will not be easy either, but we are on cloud nine for now and willing to deal with the coming storms later.*

I rejoined Jamal in his room. He was busy polishing his Cs and Ss. In my opinion, it didn't matter where we pronounced an 'S' with a 'C', provided one

could understand what I was saying. After all, the East folks' accents are worse than mine, yet we communicate.

"Class time, darling Jamal," I cooed.

We left Jamal's room and walked briskly as the sun honoured our skin with some warmth.

"Good morning, class!" The lecturer called out as he entered the class carrying a heavy batch of files. He slammed them on the table with a sigh of relief. "I hope you have not forgotten your exchange programs to designated countries. The program will last a month and is fully sponsored by the school. Here are your catalogues to guide you on your designated locations and who will be your local hosts. You will be grouped in pairs as follows: Lee Ji-hoon (S. Korea) and Cheng Changpu (China), destination Britain; Aashna Anika (India) and Andrew Trevor (USA) will be heading to Brazil; Alya Bella (Russia) and Fritz Buchwald (Germany) will go to the land of the Zulu, South Africa; Botan Hiroshi (Japan) and Antonio Diego (Brazil) will be next-door in Canada and Wairimu Ndegwa (Kenya) and Abdullah Jamal (Qatar) you are going to Germany. Your trip is taking place in two days. Do the necessary preparations. All the best, my people. See you next month."

The lecturer walked out as everyone moved to link up with the person they had been paired with. Jamal and I exchanged a high-five. "Together till the end," he said.

"Yeeeesss," I answered with delight. "We will travel together, my Jamal," I moved in to tickle him as he pretended to fight me away.

We then planned our itinerary and did the necessary shopping.

As we tried out the clothes we had bought for the trip, I noticed Jamal deep in thought.

"What is it, dear?"

"Rumour has it that the trips might be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and a worldwide lockdown might be coming soon. We are hanging on the balance, my Mau. If the lockdown is confirmed, the school might shut down, and all of us sent to our respective countries," Jamal said, tightly holding my hand.

That meant Jamal would have to return to Qatar until further notice, and I would be home with Mom and JP despite not wanting to be separated from my man, let alone indefinitely. My thoughts raced with panic at the idea of a lockdown.

"What is your strategy in case this lockdown happens, dear Jamal?" I asked Jamal as I kissed his ear.

"I am as confused as you are, Mau. For sure, my parents would not want me locked down here. Chances are, I will head back to Qatar until schools re-open. I have read somewhere that such pandemics can even take years to subside. I hope this covid thing will not take the whole three years of our school life, though there are suggestions we might have to learn remotely by taking classes virtually via internet. We might also have to graduate online."

"Stop right there, school aside, that means no meeting again until the three years are over? When borders are open again? God forbid!"

"Nothing will change my love for you, Mau, not covid, not distance. By now, you should realise your true impact on my life, dearest, how I appreciate the smile you give me every morning as I wake up. Your kindness, Mau, when I landed in this land of opportunities turned my entire life around. Your attention to detail transformed my communication skills."

"My dear Jamal, not all classrooms have four walls. My life experience is a class to you, for you were brought up with a silver spoon in your mouth. It is the first time you have been let out of the cage. Keep tapping lessons from the universe and my wild survival skills. This way, you will be able to survive anywhere life lands you. No matter how busy my schedule is, I will always find time to do something for you; that is how much I love you, my gulf boy," I said, getting emotional.

"I will relentlessly pursue your heart, Mau," Jamal assured me as he lifted me to rest on his lap.

Our connection provided such a fulfilling relationship for us. My lifestyle had drastically changed, which Mom could not fail to notice. She didn't seem to have the courage to inquire whether I had gotten a job or how I was able to sustain such a lifestyle.

She had invited JP for lunch at home since he was patrolling areas near her house. JP was happy to pop in. He hadn't visited her for some time. The previous month had been hectic. As they had their late lunch, Mom hinted to JP her concerns about my lifestyle and that I appeared to have become independent a bit too soon.

"Wairimu is not asking for pocket money anymore. Of late, she has become too busy for us. She comes here in a hurry and does not even spend a night with me anymore," Mom said.

JP decided to test the waters on whether Mom would agree with me being in love with a Muslim.

"Tell me the truth. Is your sister, Mimo, dating a Muslim? Show me his photo now," she demanded.

JP did not suspect Mom would storm the school to fight Jamal and stop our relationship, so he picked up his phone and shared a picture of Jamal, him and me.

Her eyes turned red, and she started hyperventilating like someone who had just come from jogging up a hill. The next minute Mom was on her feet and was hurriedly out the door, clearly heading to my school. In the meantime, JP tried to reach out to me to alert me that she was on her way to unravel what was going on between Jamal and me. Unfortunately, we had left our phones in Jamal's room and gone to the beach for a fashion show in the clothes we had bought for the Germany attachment.

JP started his car and drove towards our hostels to get to us before Mom landed in her cab. However, she got there before him, having got slowed down by a traffic snarl-up that did not relent. And since I had not locked the door to my room, Mom walked right in. The first thing to catch her eye was a portrait of Jamal and I and the car keys we had left on the table. The make-over Jamal had done to my room must have been a shock for her. She found more than the few items she had bought me. Someone told her Jamal and I were at the beach area.

"Jamal, you should dread the day my mom will discover this relationship. She is a monster. She does not care whether she is in public, she will cause drama," I remembered telling my boyfriend, prophesying what would happen and demonstrating how Mother would deliver a kick on him.

Jamal being the easy-going man he is, said, "It is expected, but it will not change a thing. Bring it on, mama. The earlier, the better," he had said, helping me out of the outfit I was wearing so that I could try the last outfit for the Germany school trip.

"We have perfect weather around the equator. I have never dressed for winter, so this coat is heavy on me. I wonder how I will survive in it in the German winter."

"Same here, Mau. I am from the desert. We walk virtually naked in the heat."

Jamal and I were busy chasing each other on the beach and hadn't seen Mom charging at us until she was right next to us. I had just jumped on Jamal's

lap when I saw him freeze and tense up, bracing for something about to happen. I turned to see whether there was a tsunami coming from the ocean, only to see Mom flying in the air to land on us. I closed my eyes—it was like an elephant had landed on us given the force of her crush.

JP had just parked his car and was watching the drama unfold from a distance. He was probably trying to strategise how to get Jamal out of there and leave Mom and me to settle our scores alone. Before his second step, the unexpected happened—I simply disappeared! Vanished into thin air!

In the meantime, Mom was on top of Jamal, grabbing and shaking him by his neck—then she stopped and stood up.

"What has happened? Where did this silly girl vanish to?" Mom seemed to say, as she scanned the beach to see where I had disappeared to. That I could vanish into thin air seemed to fuel her rage, probably tripling the punishment she would mete on me.

"I better not catch up with you, Mimo," she screamed.

JP saw all that happened, and as soon as I disappeared, he hurriedly joined Mom to narrate what he saw.

"She just vanished! God knows to where."

He removed his phone from his pocket and dialled his colleagues from the police station to check CCTVs around the area. People were attracted to the commotion and joined in the speculation since some had seen how the drama had started. Jamal was looking at his hands, fiddling with them.

"I cannot believe you have fooled me with your silly games, Mau. Do you fear your monster mother that much? Come back—I will protect you, girl," Jamal screamed.

Mom turned her eyes ablaze and her body tense ready to pounce and skin Jamal alive. JP could not convince her that I had vanished into thin air.

"Where is this stupid girl hiding? Get her now before I lose my cool," My Mom warned Jamal. "I saw her in your arms as I pounced on you, young man!"

Jamal had no answer for her; he was lost in thought. He knew that something peculiar had just happened and had no control over it.

"What do I do with our assignments, sweetie? All these clothes, our love?" Jamal continued with his monologue in tears.

I LANDED ON MY KNEES on an unfamiliar isolated beach, sobbing uncontrollably. I was confused and terrified, and I blamed it all on Jamal.

"Where are you, Jamal? Where am I?" I screamed, looking around me. "Jamal, you promised never to leave my side. You are the man to fight for me. I trust you more than anything in this world. You did not prepare me for this, my Jamal. The new reality is killing me. I never saw this coming. What happened to me?"

I was filled with a strange anxiety. It was as if my physical essence was not mine. I frantically touched my body to feel whether it was real.

"Mama, save me! I saw you charging towards us, but now I am alone in this strange place. Save Mimo, save me! I am terrified."

The silence was deafening since I was used to background noise—music, cars hooting and advertisements.

"Where am I?" I screamed into the open space around me.

Wait a minute, is that a dog with puppies? "Come here, cute one," I called out to the dog, being the only living thing close to me. "How is this your world with these beautiful puppies? Anyway, in my land, you are man's best friend. Show me around. I need to stop being a cry-baby and explore this strange land. From the look on your face, you are startled too. We are in it together, but you are not as spoiled as I am. To be honest, If I have reasons why I struggle in my mind on why I am here, one of them is keeping my love, Jamal, close to me. Yet now I am separated but I don't know by who and why. I am grateful to see you though, to have you as a companion. Either way, I can't stop thinking about the complexity of this unfortunate reality." I gazed at the dog's big eyes. "You seem to connect with the universe better than I do, mother dog. Your instincts are more precise. Let us make the best out of this situation. I am not one person who gives up when things get tough."

"Wait a minute!"

I rubbed my eyes as if to clear my vision as I looked around.

I saw an otherworldly human-like being emerging from the ocean. "Heeeiii! Over here!" I shouted.

Who are you? Wow! A beautiful fairy-tale lady dressed in jeans pants and a full veterinary doctor uniform. She looks in her thirties. Does that mean there are cows, goats, and horses here? Where is the homestead, at least I get an egg to eat? Let her come and take us there already, I thought to myself.

I yawned as the veterinary lady approached us.

"Hello, madam vet, what is up with this place?" I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible so as not to look out of place. "I do not know where I am and why I am here."

The lady broke down as we embraced each other, flooding me with her hot tears. The background noises came from the barking dog and the three puppies begging their mother to lie down so that they could continue with their merry suckling. After five minutes of staring at each other, the vet lady broke the silence.

"I am Judy from Australia, and I am a veterinary doctor. I was at a client's cowshed attending to a cow giving birth. When I requested my partner for scissors and stretched my hand to receive them, I found myself trying to save my skin from sinking into the sea," she said and broke down with a loud cry that provoked the dog to bark again. "Oh, my God! What is all this now? Where are we? Why me!" Judy screamed.

I was lost for words since, as it turned out, I was emotionally the stronger one at that moment and the first one to arrive in this god-forsaken place.

"Relax, Madam Judy. All will be well with us," I tried to calm her down.

Due to the nature of Judy's work, she always had some chewing gum to keep her breath fresh, so she dug around in her pocket and gave me a chewing gum. I must say I was grateful, and I needed the sugar spike badly to calm my anxiety. We sat down on a protruding stone for Judy to dry her clothes.

In the meantime, another guest arrived in this alien land. It was Lee, the Korean karate guru. The last thing he remembered was playing basketball for his team with his friends from the USA University Academy. He was in the air, locking in the fifth goal, when, in a flash, he was covered in dust after a thunderous landing on the dusty ground on his butt. He rose quickly to box this terrifying monster that had just knocked him out. He is alert turning around methodically to face this invisible attacker.

"Show yourself, you coward," he shouted, swinging at the invisible monster. When he realised there was no one around for him to fight, he started wiping the dust from his hands and frantically tried looking around himself to find the other boys.

"Where are you guys?" he shouted. "Okay, No answer. Where the hell am I? Anyone here? Anything? Oh, dearest me, this is the hour even Buddha abandons you. Not even the devil is here. Nothing looks familiar."

He jumped to test the force of gravity in the alien land and didn't immediately come down to the ground—he hung some centimetres in the air and had to walk his weight back to the ground.

"Excuse me! Are you kidding me?" he shouted at no one again. "Do you mean I am not on earth? Eeeishh!"

It was then that he heard us screaming from a distance and thought one of the voices sounded familiar but was unsure whose voice it was.

"At least, if nothing else, there are women here. Not too bad."

He followed the noises we and the barking dog were making. We were seated on a hill facing the ocean. Though he could see us, his walk to where we were felt longer than should have been expected.

"Wairimu, you are here?" I sprinted and jumped into Lee's arms.

What a feeling of relief. I couldn't stop sobbing.

"Who is this lady, Mau?" Lee inquired.

"It is a long story, Lee."

"You guys know each other?" Judy asked, surprised.

"Yes, we do. We're classmates from USA University Academy," Lee replied.

"What the hell is going on?" I saw confusion written all over Judy's face.

"Where did you guys find a dog?" Lee asked.

"I found it here suckling her puppies," I said, trying to think about where the dog might have come from.

The dog wagged its tail while jumping all over Lee, clearly happy to see a male in the group.

Thanks be to you, our man, it was probably saying through its millions of licks.

"I will give you a name today," Lee tells the dog, "You will be called Compass. You will guide us, and we will follow your instructions."

Judy nodded and smiled, "What a brilliant name. No better guide than her. She has two driving instincts now—the desire to feed her young ones and to serve her new master, Lee," We all laughed heartily.

He hehehe!

Hi hihihi!

Hi ho hi ho!

GuGuGu! The dog, too, contributed its opinion.

"Oh, what fiction!" Lee exclaimed before falling into deep thought.

Judy and I exchanged ideas trying to understand why or who to blame for our predicament. Lee sat by himself, no doubt trying to figure out his next move as a practised team leader.

Compass had already identified an abandoned cave with freshwater that had collected in a small depression and a few usable pots, which she directed us to. It looked like the user had not left a long time ago. We hoped that whoever it was would come back sooner rather than later and explain to us what was happening.

Once we got to the cave, I sat by myself, trying to wrap my mind around everything that had befallen us to be stranded on this wasteland. I pretended to pay attention to what Lee and Judy were setting up, but I was truly not there, which Lee noticed. I was at ease now that Lee was with us, but my head felt like it would explode from over-processing thoughts about the people I had left back home. All of a sudden, Lee engulfed me in a hug.

"I had missed getting a hug, Lee. Nothing makes sense to me, and everything looks like a science fiction movie. I wonder how I became a character with no apparent role to play in this cruel joke."

As Lee hugged me, warmth grew within my body and memories of Jamal burned in my mind. I desperately gripped Lee to feel a sense of my Jamal's touch, but it did not feel the same. I longed to return and remind Jamal that I missed his lips—I couldn't do that with Lee since I might send him the wrong signal—but the desire was overwhelming.

"I wished I could get a bottle of wine to knock my head off, forget myself and do all manner of things that would give me a break from this suffocating reality," I said to Lee.

"I miss that feeling too, Wairimu. This world being our new normal, we have a lot to fix and learn simultaneously."

Lee put me down, breathing like he had lifted a ton of logs. The feeling of lifting a woman after a hug also took his mind back home.

I knew we needed to grasp the endless landscape better and embrace the new base. Lee and Judy were doing better than I was. Maybe they had not left a lot behind. This, however, was beside the point—we were all in this together.

I felt a bit tired and wanted to curl up and sleep for weeks. Judy had organised sleeping areas for all of us. I was thankful to God that I vanished in winter clothes. My coat would be my blanket going forward. I even had a sweater to donate to Lee, who landed in sports clothes.

Judy took the corner she had prepared as a bed and gestured to Lee to use the space near some pots that were placed in the opposite corner of the cave. Within minutes I was lost in weird dreams about my grandmother sending me to the forest with my friends to fetch enough firewood for a week with hyenas attacking us. I ran to save my friend from a hyena as she screamed for help. Maybe this was a kind of preparation for the new species of wildlife in the wastelands we had been discarded in.

I opened my eyes only to find Lee's arms wrapped around me protectively since, in my desire to save my friend in my dream, I had almost slammed my body against the ground. He grabbed my back and turned me to face him—his face was full of sympathy. He did not know how to comfort me. He placed me on his lap without a word and held on to me tightly. Judy joined us but sat a few feet from us.

"Oh, my God! It is morning already," I said, rubbing my eyes and freeing myself from Lee and feeling a bit embarrassed.

"Good morning. Where do we start our day, guys?" I said.

"Good morning Wairimu. Are you okay, dear?" Judy asked.

"There is nothing to be okay about? I am just trying to be reasonable dear Judy. This place is hell. No one is here to tell us what sin we committed so we can repent."

"I know. I feel the same way too, but what to do? In this alien land, I feel like a zoo exhibit. I am not okay with my creator for this unplanned relocation where we did not pack anything to help us kick-start life. All we have is each other and a dog—we just wake up hopeful in this wilderness," Judy said.

"However, being near the ocean, fish must be readily available, and wild berries must be plenty. Let's see what we can find," Lee said, leading the girls out of the cave.

The place was habitable, but with no other traces of humanity or animals we were used to on earth—except for the dog, that is, and what looked like birds flying in the distance. The pivot of survival in this time travel occurrence depended on the energy generated by the work of our hands. There would be nothing like working brilliantly here—we were reduced to basics. Getting pricked by the thorny fruit-bearing trees would be the order of the day. We had to sit in such a way that we could watch which fruits the birds ate so as not to poison ourselves with what might look like juicy fruit to our eyes.

Judy's hands were tied since she had no equipment to test the poison in the available plants. Birds and insects became our doctors and teachers in this land, and the ants looked similar to those on planet earth.

Sometimes I wondered whether to be grateful even in such challenging times. Maybe if I were on earth at this particular moment, my situation would have been worse, or I would have been dead by now. I might never know the situation I had been saved from. Maybe it is a springboard to my next opportunity, Judy had her monologue as she cooked for her new family.

The weather was moderate, with occasional conventional showers that Lee had anticipated and built an artificial dam to collect rainwater for drinking. The cave retained warmth at night, and the stone layout was perfect for beds. We retired for the day, each of us locked in deep thought.

The following day we woke up and headed to the sea. We rested on the beach, pondering life in the wasteland. I let my thoughts wander as wildly as they could. The sea's calming effect made me grateful for natural gifts like being able to take a step. Just one step on a care-giving journey made Jamal and I get into a relationship. My beautiful smile assured him that he was in safe hands and he trusted me. I lit his candle, and we enjoyed our journey together, giving him hope and lifting his spirit the same way this early bird lifted mine today as it sang and followed us on our way to the beach.

Lee touched my hand, and I knew someone cared for me here despite the hardships. One day at a time: I couldn't wait to use all the pain we had experienced to fuel a brighter future. I hoped the baby steps we took every day would lead us there.

CHAPTER 10

CROSSROAD

Check-point

I, JAMAL, SON OF OMAR, what has befallen me? Just when the sky opened a new life for me, the clouds took all its beauty.

I was devastated but determined to unfold what had happened to my princess, Wairimu. She couldn't just vanish without a trace when life for us was just beginning. I felt a lot of pain. The despair was clouding my judgment and dimming my zest for life. I never could bring myself to do anything exciting with Mau vanished.

Compounding the matter was the tricky situation I had with Wairimu's family. I didn't have a say in searching for her because I was not her immediate kin, nor was our relationship official with JP and Mau's mother. I had to tag along and agree to their every whim.

I hope you are safe, my Mau. I hope life is treating you well, whichever dimension that time travel took you. Are you positive enough to have faith that we will reunite one day? I do not know how to lift my spirits. I am full of regrets and complaints about this whole situation. I hope the future holds happiness for me—for us. For now, I am just an empty shell. We were at the climax of our ecstasy and future expectations. I feel lost.

I quickly put together a team of astronauts to navigate space and give possibilities of life on planets other than earth. At least I had enough money to do that. I knew the effort had been made before, and nothing tangible came of them, but I didn't know how else to proceed. Still, one has to start somewhere to investigate other possible dimensions that can hold life.

The whole campus was in full gear, trying to unfold the mystery of the disappearance of the two students, Lee and Wairimu. Many were devastated, but none more than Neon. He had a soft spot for Wairimu, I could tell, despite her being engaged to me. In his urgency to find her, he was also concerned that his country, though advanced in space technology, was not working fast enough to find the two disappeared international students. The campus students joined the University Academy students in searching for the missing

students. The only tool and guide we had was the intangible evidence given by eyewitnesses since there had never been a report of such a thing as time travel happening (one sneaking to a parallel dimension invisible to the rest of earth) before.

Standing on the dais, as the team leader in charge of the search, I gave the following speech:

"Something tells me that, of all the things humans have achieved so far, be it in technology and all the other fantastic stuff that we have invented, the ability to innovate has been tapped from some cosmic frequency somewhere. All that required of us is to understand that arcane frequency better. You cannot defy nature. Let us not forget that education took us from thumbprint impressions to signatures. Technology has taken us back to thumbprint impressions, for no one can own your fingerprint. We are wired with most of the information within the universe. We have lost two members of our reputable university, one of them being my Mau.

Jamal pause in his speech and thumped his fist on his chest around the heart, as warm tears freely flowed down his cheeks, then he continued.

"I cannot rest or eat. I feel empty. I don't know how to live without Wairimu, the tragedy being that I could not help as she disappeared before my eyes. I have no right to seek answers from anyone other than myself, yet I am clueless as anyone else here.

"We all have our reasons why this search is essential. For me, it is to pursue my love. Maybe for the school, it is a responsibility they owe the duo, Lee and Wairimu—them being US Academy students. As a nation, it is responsible for protecting everyone, including international students—yet not even the government reports what could have transpired and how. The insurance company may want to save money by claiming that vanishing from the universe is not on its cover, but getting involved might also be gaining the opportunity to recruit clients susceptible to vanishing in this new mystery, just like it happened with Covid-19. Insurance companies could open a lucrative category for time travellers. I am sure the whole world would be interested.

"Maybe the two disappeared members, Lee and Wairimu, have gone on to bring forth a family of the future. Maybe whatever it is that has disappeared them aims to propagate life through my Mau and Lee. I, however, have not given up and look forward to starting a family with Wairimu. I trust God to come through, and I will soon be reunited with the love of my heart and marry

her. My favourite people in the academy class, as you know by now, are my comic girl, Mau, and the Karate guy, Lee—we interact daily. We've had great moments with the duo skiving classwork to party but it bonded us, helping us collaborate in classwork and make us better students.

"I know the general public may speculate about this new time travel phenomenon—it's worse than Covid-19. At least Covid-19 is a monster we can anticipate and live with, like the flu. With time travel, we have no idea what is causing it, let alone how to predict or stop it. We don't know what to do. We don't know its symptoms, season, or reason for it. We know nothing at all about time travel.

"In life, you must get involved in something more significant than yourself, which triggers your imagination and creativity. As time has passed, Wairimu's vanishing has made me stop limiting myself to what I think I can or cannot achieve. I will explore solutions as far as my mind will let me. I believe we can achieve an outcome no matter how impossible the hurdles might seem. The day I find Mau, I will be the happiest and most successful version of myself. It will be a payback. I have always promised to meet myself at the top. Though unsure of where the top is, despite knowing this could be the journey's beginning. What I'm sure of is that I have nothing to lose other than find my vanished Mau. She is the reason I have made it this far in this foreign land—some of you understand what I mean. I have no words to explain how special she is.

"Though we don't appear able to deliver on this mystery despite all the money and influence, we are still determined to win despite the world already experiencing an economic crisis due to the imminent Covid-19 lockdowns. The mission shall not be the easiest for the school closes in two days, and everyone is busy booking flights to go home before total lockdowns commence. I also have to leave because there's no way I can explain it to my father and not risk my relationship with Wairimu, who is everything to me. Our meeting today is geared towards mapping out the course we should take to find Wairimu and Lee. I would suggest the volunteers working on this misfortune immediately open a group wall on social media to keep communicating online. With the internet, physical presence is no longer a hindrance to accomplishing a goal. All that matters is determination and goodwill. It does not matter how long it shall take to find my Mau."

By this point, Wairimu's mother who is in the group listening to Jamal is sorely troubled and has wept throughout the speech. She, however, appears to have relented in her complex feelings towards Jamal, touched by the speech her "son-in-law" is delivering—a son-in-law, who, with Wairimu's disappearance, might never come to be. She recalls her plans to make it up to Wairimu for abandoning her in Kenya to pursue her education. She regrets that the unimaginable happens when she has the opportunity to be with her two children. She feels like Wairimu's disappearance is a punishment from God for trying to possess a Wairimu she did not play a role in bringing up. And this was when a mother-daughter relationship was taking firm hold. And now the daughter was gone.

"How will I communicate this tragedy to Wairimu's grandparents, which I must since the mysterious vanishing is becoming global news?" the mother wonders. "The sooner I tell them, the better. Her grandmother calls every other time to guide me in interacting with her granddaughter. Through her, I learned that Wairimu had a boyfriend, which led me to ask JP about Jamal. That might be the cause of this whole tragedy." She, however, now pays more attention to the boyfriend.

Jamal resumes where he has left off with his speech:

"I think it is time we went back to the crossroads and rediscovered our bearing. The animal and plant kingdoms still follow natural commands, but we human beings have metamorphosed everything about us.

"Imagine today if there is a shift in the realm we tap from, and we lose the signals, just like we have lost my Mau and Lee. What would happen to all the inventions we have achieved so far? Allah created different zones for a purpose. He made some regions burst with heat, like my homeland Qatar, Dubai, Saudia, and many others. Typical temperatures there are around 40 degrees Celsius. Qatar's heat is my natural habitat—living there with animals like camels, sheep, and goats with unique oases and plants to feed us. The same applies to Europe and other snowing places—God gave us exceptional skills to adapt to these environments and survive the weather. Today technology has made all of us live in the same climate, with an air conditioner or a heater and fire in a hearth. Some have remote controls for everything we need in this life, and we can preserve food for months in the freezer while warming the food could take a minute in the microwave.

"We can trap the air we breathe in a container to serve us in space. Despite rampant pollution in many water sources, man can use desalination processes to clean salty ocean water or tap water from thin air. With facetime on social media, I can be in my mother's house on the phone chatting with her and the family.

"Life has it all today. What does that tell you? If the frequency we tap this technology from, by any chance, mysteriously vanishes as my Mau and Lee appear to have done, who might survive to claim the world back again and attain the same level of technological advancement? I am a descendant of the desert, but like a broiler chicken, I am not weatherproof to the Qatar heat. If I am exposed to that heat long enough without water, I will die of dehydration. Thanks to technology, my space has to be a balmy 21 degrees at all times. If it were to fail, ninety percent of my desert brothers and sisters would be gone with it. They do not belong there; they belong in balmy climes such as one might find in Kenya, the land of my Mau. Perhaps only animals and natural vegetation can pass the test of time in most parts of the world today. The rest of us might need a Plan B.

"We no longer cast information in stone. We claim all data might be safe in the cloud. With unpredictable pandemics such as Covid-19 and this new phenomenon of forced time travel, what guarantees do we have that our information in the cloud will be there forever? What contracts do we have we won't lose all the data we have in the form we have today and never be able to recover it?

"I have digressed, but the disappearance of my Mau provokes it. Oh, my Allah!"

Everyone listening to Jamal ponders the questions he is posing. He delivers it as something of a wake-up call. He continues:

"There is so much that most of us have no idea how they came into being. We are followers and consumers, not inventors. We can't even guess how all these things came into being. If cooking gas and power vanish today, some of us might sleep hungry. Some cities have few trees to provide firewood, a sorry indication of how some of us don't care about the environment though we know its place in sustaining life.

"Yes, all wisdom comes from God, but He did not intend for humans to change the natural order of things. I say ignore modern technology noise and literally open a new slate by engraving all our ideas on a stone slab for future

generations. We need many platforms to store information. Maybe this time travel had happened to some generations before us. Perhaps we are yet to discover where the ancients might have engraved their information. We need platforms transcending time. We can be sure new dimensions will prevail, and I'm hopeful we shall come up with solutions and be more vigilant of our surroundings.

"Together, we can script a practical manual, a Plan B that encompasses the universe. Humans are aggressive when threatened. This phenomenon of forced time travel cannot defeat humanity. I am sure we will not rest until we win this battle.

Oh my God! This pain is too much. It is the thorn in my flesh. The more my thoughts drift from this reality, the more I hallucinate. Please hang in there, my Mau. I am doing my best beautiful princess."

As Jamal is saying this, his head falls to his chest. He let the microphone fall from his hand, ending the meeting without concluding it. Everyone was quiet.

Wairimu's mom stepped out to call home and notify her parents that their grandchild had vanished due to some indescribable phenomenon in time travel. They predictably could not understand a thing and were more confused than when they heard on the news that some students had vanished from school. They had no idea Wairimu was one of them. The village was devastated to learn one of their own was among the disappeared. The news spread nationally, and prayers were held at every level of society. She was the only student given the University Academy admission from Africa. It was, therefore, big news. Everyone hoped she would be found soon.

JP, also in attendance at Jamal's meeting, stood up and took the microphone:

"Once again, I take this opportunity to thank each of you for creating time to come and help us with ideas on how to get back our two disappeared heroes. I am Wairimu's elder brother and a friend of Lee Ji-Hoon. I met him through Jamal and Wairimu. Unfortunately, he is not represented here since his family is in South Korea. I called them this morning, and they are doing their best from their end to see what can be done on the same. Another lady from Australia, Judy, disappeared under the same mysterious circumstances. They suspect she might be on the same time travel as Wairimu and Lee. We hope they are safe, wherever they are, and soon we can get them back to this universe. The government is doing a tremendous job of getting them back. They have put together a group of scientists to develop the way forward. I

suggest we follow the lead rather than invent the wheel ourselves. It might be expensive for us and less productive. I am on the government committee with Lee's dad and forwarded Jamal's name to represent the Academy. Everyone else has to be patient for now. We have created a page for suggestions and updates on the group's social media wall. Without further ado, have a good day. Keep hope alive. In God, we trust. God bless our country," JP concluded.

It still didn't feel real to me, and I had to remind myself that I was still alive. After JP spoke, I retreated to my room. It had been a long, lonely day—the first day at the University Academy without Mau on my side. I opened the door that linked my room to Wairimu's. I looked at the portrait on her dressing table we had taken together. I stared at her beautiful glowing eyes—eyes that promised me heaven only yesterday, eyes now vanished. I looked at all the décor I had bought her and the food leftovers she had cooked for our dinner, which were still fresh. The food reminded me of her and it broke my heart when I imagined this might be the last meal I would ever taste from my Mau. The food was tasteless, but I ate it hungrily as the thought of losing my soul mate consumed my mind.

I heard the room's door being opened from outside. I did not make a move, unlike days before when the first thing Wairimu and I would do was close the connecting door. It did not matter anymore. They are both my rooms, now sadly empty without Wairimu's vivacious presence. That phase of our lives had come to a halt and might never be recovered. My purpose at the University Academy had been to grow my capacity to be more effective in my father's business. It shifted to searching and taking my love, Wairimu, back home with me. Without her, the school was irrelevant. I was consumed by numbingly unrelenting grief. My time to leave was up. I had to pack and go home, where I would reconcile my thoughts.

The door finally swung open. It was Wairimu's mom and her brother coming in. Their presence made my grief deepen. It didn't matter the tears would make me appear vulnerable to my would-be in-laws. The thought of being unable to console Wairimu's mother and brother bothered me the most. I stood up to pave the way for Wairimu's mom to pass and sit on the couch. I grabbed some tissue to wipe my tears.

I saw Wairimu’s mom look at the open adjoining door to my room. I saw her avert her eyes in a look I understood. There was a look of helplessness on

her face; it was water under the bridge. Her Mimo was disappeared and no longer belonged to her but to the Muslim boy.

"Jamal, I don't know what to think or say. When are you planning to go home?" Wairimu's mother broke the silence.

"I am taking the first flight tomorrow morning, Mom. And if you don't mind, I will request a favour: To leave my things with you until I return. We don't know with this pandemic how long we will be out of school. Once they open the borders again, I will come to see you."

JP stood up and served himself Juice. I realised I had not offered them something to drink. I stood up and offered Wairimu's mom some water. She appeared deep in thought as she took a sip of the water. She must have been consumed by deep grieve about her daughter to have continued with sipping from the empty bottle for a while.

"Wairimu's greatest desire was for us to live in harmony as a family. I request we go out and have dinner together before my departure. We leave everything to God and time. We are weary, and no efforts can help us aim our arrows better, for the enemy is still invisible. The keys you hold can access both Wairimu and my room, Mom," I said to Wairimu's mom. "JP, kindly take my car. I will transfer my rights to you so you can service it."

I flipped the top of my laptop open and looked at all the websites Wairimu, and I would regularly visit. The thought brought a teardrop or two to my eyes but I was able to compose myself. I transferred the Benz to JP and handed the key to him. After ensuring we had covered everything we needed, we stepped out for dinner. No one had an appetite, but sharing the meal was a good idea for we interacted more. Wairimu's mom did not want me to leave, admitting that she saw her daughter through me. For the first time, I could see Wairimu's hands, nose, feet, and even voice in her mother. My eyes were glued to both JP and his mom. They make the perfect Wairimu, who I was missing deeply.

We drove Wairimu's mother to her house. It would be my first time entering her house. Everything about the house haunted me. I could now see where everything Wairimu talked to me about was placed. From the corner where her mother sat to order her daughter around the kitchen, she cooked their dinner. Those were memories to cherish. We took a cup of coffee and left. I declined the offer to sleep at JP's place. JP dropped me back at the hostels and agreed to pick me up in the morning and take me to the airport. I needed time alone

in my room to remember and bid farewell to my Mau. My heart grieved with no one in the house to console me.

CHAPTER 11

THORN IN MY FLESH

Resentful

I HAD A WARM FAREWELL hug from Wairimu's brother and mother as they saw me off at the airport. They banked on me to develop a strategic plan to get Wairimu back. After all, she disappeared in my arms. I promised to travel back to USA as soon as the campus was open again.

As I disappeared in the airport corridors, Muthoni probably felt like she had lost the other half of her daughter that she had been hanging on to. She had become fond of me, and my assurances that Wairimu would return kept her spirits high. Now that I was also gone, the emptiness she experienced must have deepened.

My family was at the airport two hours before my arrival. I had mentioned what befell us, and of course, reports of Lee and Wairimu's disappearance were already international news. The spared academy university parents were thankful to God: *Whatever snatched the two students did not pick my child*, the parents must have thought. Being back home felt great, but the joy was cut short by Mau's thoughts. I quickly spotted where my family stood waiting. I dropped my bag, fell into my Father's arms, and rested my head on his shoulder in tears.

"Dad, have you ever had a thorn in your flesh that hurt really bad? I am dying from the inside."

"Have you been diagnosed with cancer or something?" Father enquired, concern written all over his face.

"Worse than cancer, Dad. I lost my soulmate to time travel," I replied.

"What! Wairimu was your woman, Jamal?"

Dad only knew that Wairimu was my deskmate but had no idea we were lovers—I was in great pain, having lost my first love. The whole family got in the car, and we drove in silence. Tension filled the vehicle. Nobody seemed to know how to react to my admission about Mau. I went straight to bed and was left alone for the next two days, though I attended family meals.

My Father finally spoke to me and invited me for a walk on the beach to understand what this was about my dear Wairimu and me. Being a man, he understood perfectly what I felt about lost love. He, too, had lived something similar. Strict cultural traditions averse to accepting foreigners had denied him the opportunity to marry his first love, a German girl, back in the day. It turns out he had vowed to protect me from such traditions, but this phenomenon of time travel was beyond him. He had never heard of it before and therefore had no idea how to deal with it or offer comfort, though he tried.

"My Mau laughed as much as she breathed and loved me as much as she lived. Overthinking is the greatest cause of my unhappiness, but my mind has refused to move an inch from the crossroads at which I lost my Mau. Will the disappeared ever come back? If so, after how long? Do they age as we age, or do they grow younger with time?"

My Father had no answer to any of these questions. Not that I expected answers either. He probably wondered whether to dwell on the missing girl or wean me from her memories.

Not a night passed without me going to the beach. I had this thing that my Mau might emerge from the sea, the Persian Gulf. Now that I was home, the journey felt lonely. No one in my family knew Wairimu besides my father. In the USA, the burden is shared by Mau's family and classmates.

One Friday, my emotions were particularly elevated due to the sermon I had listened to that day from the Imam at my mosque. It was about the beauty of marriage. It took me a thousand miles away to the land of my love, Mau.

I walked to the beach, sat by myself, and started talking to my Mau: 'I have been trying to find ways to fill my days since you've been gone. It is not easy. Your disappearance is the emptiness I feel, my Mau. The speed of love is dazzling. I do not know how to quit. I just hold on. My mind will not clear thoughts of you from its cabinets. I have run out of tears, though the pain remains persistent. My heart has no room left, just an endless hole of hopelessness.

'When will those arms of hope surround me again, my Mau, and assure me that my life is still worthwhile? Maybe your comeback will bring my senses back again. I often call you the angel of hope, but I feel abandoned. Will time honour me one day to see you back in one piece?

'Your memories will not let me off the hook. I miss touching and holding you. It is hard to forget you, my love Mau, for whom I have so much to remember.'

Jamal's dad, Omar, entered Jamal's room to check on him. The door was open, but Jamal was not in, and no one seemed to know where he could be. His favourite spot was by the sea. He walked there and found his son seated at the beach.

"You are still at the ocean shores this late, my son? I hope you can put this girl, Wairimu, behind you soon. We got a beautiful girl for you to marry. She will distract you from thoughts of Wairimu, and you will have a life again. It is not easy, but a new chapter will keep you sane. Your new pride will touch your subconscious mind, and its effect will travel outwards as positive energy to distract you from your current situation." Omar seemed to be talking to deaf ears.

I WAS UTTERLY CONSUMED with my search for Wairimu to have any thought of marriage just yet. But custom demanded that I should already be married, having long become of age. I knew this was what was on my parents' minds. They had already identified a bride for me and set a wedding date. Plans were already laid for me to meet her before the wedding. Father resonated with my anguish of losing a lover. Still, my mother was upset by what she insisted was my insanity to think of marrying a foreigner and a black person at that.

I finally agreed to the wedding, but on the condition that Father would invite Wairimu's family and hold a ceremony to break the cord that tied me to Wairimu. Only then could I move on. Also, he had to promise he would allow me to consult on Wairimu's search with the University Academy team. He agreed to this and discussed the matter with Mother, whose ignorance still baffles me. She didn't seem to have an idea there was a continent called Africa, leave alone a country called Kenya. All along, she thought Wairimu was a black Indian.

JP and Muthoni finally arrived in Qatar. Mother could not believe such humans with kinky hair exist in the world. Many married women on this continent work to propagate a family and are conditioned to that purpose. They are supposed to wake up early to conduct domestic affairs. The information they receive is limited to local news. Like with the hijab, their

exposure is limited to shielding them from the world. The men can do anything they please, including travelling and conducting international business. That is precisely why I ventured to the USA to tap into global ideas to help grow the family business internationally.

Wairimu's mother, being an American, did not seem to care what my mother thought. She was well-travelled and was familiar with the unmistakable disdain people with racist tendencies display when near people of colour. Not to excuse my mother, it was how she was socialised. Even so, Wairimu's mother was a confident Black American woman and took it in her stride.

In Arabic culture, we eat together as a family using our hands. Spoons and forks were frowned upon. Wairimu's mother tried to conform, but all the food she scooped would spill on her chest and down to her tummy. She excused herself to the lady's room to freshen up, only for her to drop close to two plates of rice as she tried to get up. Once she returned, she demanded that she be served on a separate plate and given a fork and spoon. Being in her menopause, she would get random hot flushes and needed fresh air, but she would be reminded not to go out.

"This is Qatar, Mom. The weather out there is 40-plus degrees. You cannot step out. The weather outside is actually more hostile than what you are experiencing here." I tried to caution her, though she was in her own weather zone – menopause.

"Then do me a favour, Jamal. Balance air conditioner settings to be just right. I need to eat my food hot, and my body needs to remain cool," She demanded.

The drama from Muthoni left my family very entertained. Mother was a bit judgmental when Muthoni and JP arrived. However, after spending two days with the guests, Muthoni seemed to have changed my mother's attitude from the submissive woman I knew to a bold and assertive lady. It wasn't easy to understand. But Mother surprised everyone by requesting her husband to be allowed to work in the family business. It later emerged that Muthoni opened up and narrated to my mother her suffering after being rejected by the Father of her children. She also told Mom how she was forced to study in a strange America and raise her son.

The subject naturally turned to Wairimu seamlessly despite the language barrier between them. "We cannot seek achievements for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our children. We may not know the outcome

of my daughter's tragedy if we sit back and do nothing," Muthoni said. "But I thank God for all the support we have received from different institutions since we lost Wairimu to whichever mysterious dimension."

"In God, we trust to find Wairimu," my mother chimed in. "I am also keen to have your daughter found since my son is not the same boy we sent to the USA. A big chunk of him is in the alien land with Wairimu. She must have meant a lot more to him than I thought. Jamal told me the other day that when he met Wairimu for the first time, she thought him a snob. But later, she discovered how pathetic his English was and therefore lacking the language to express himself, making him appear snobbishly aloof in his silence. It takes courage to admit that you don't know something. Wairimu saved my son in that land of opportunities. Your daughter seems to me to have made him a better man."

I was glad to hear that coming from my mother. I was within earshot to follow the conversation, though I was in another room.

"He did not mention both of them surviving on Wairimu's little pocket money?" Muthoni asked with a smile.

"Oh yes, his Father mentioned that to me. It must have been tough for your girl to manage it for both of them, yet Wairimu is not a Muslim."

There was a pause before my mother went on in a tone that came through as thoughtful. "Now that I mention your daughter's generosity despite not being a Muslim, it makes me wonder why we should fight about a religion that we did not choose to follow anyway? No child chooses his or her religion, it is often chosen for them by the families they are born into. What sin has my Jamal committed for being a Muslim, your Wairimu for being a Christian, or Lee who disappeared with Wairimu being a Buddhist? Religion should not be a reason to keep us apart. We all believe in the same God, only that our orientation is different. After all, isn't your Jesus our Prophet Issa in the Quran? We need to respect each other's beliefs and live in harmony."

"There should be no condemnation, Mama Jamal," agreed Muthoni. "We are all humans on a mission here on earth, and then one day, we all return to our creator. The Almighty is the only one with the answer to why we exist within different races, why He chose a different religion for different locations, and how these religions shape our lives. We all need to do our best to uphold values without judging. We so much appreciate the visit and hospitality from

this family. We hope to reciprocate when you come to the United States too. We pray that one-day Wairimu will come back to us."

"I pray day and night for Wairimu to come back, Muthoni. Her comeback will restore Jamal's sanity. He has been quite affected by her disappearance, so nothing seems to matter anymore to him. Jamal is not the boy I raised, he has become a loner, and no one seems able to console him. Your presence lifted his spirit a bit."

"I will talk to him before we leave. Life cannot wait for Wairimu to resurface from wherever she is. Maybe she landed in a land with men, too, and might have picked one already. We need to cross that bridge when she is back in one piece. For now, let's all release her spirit." Wairimu's mom said in conclusion.

At that point, I walked into the room to check on the two mothers. Despite the language barrier, I was still surprised they could communicate effortlessly. *When souls connect, not even language can keep them apart.*

"Hi Jamal, kindly take me for a walk. I will put on a hat to guard against the blazing Qatar sun. Today is our last day here, and I would love for us to talk," Wairimu's mom told me.

"Sure, of course, I have missed taking a walk too," I accepted the invitation.

We held hands and left for the beach. A cool breeze from the sea made the heat bearable

"My son, Jamal, thank you for having JP and me here to visit your family. Unfortunately, we are not here to discuss dowry but time travel, which we have no idea whether it will have a happy ending. I have come to appreciate you so much as my son-in-law, and the honorific will remain so long as I live. I also request you to lift yourself and face the world. Push yourself, for no one else can do that on your behalf. Rise above the pain you are experiencing and create a new world that makes sense to you. Life is an illusion, like a movie in which we all play roles. We must keep filling the gaps on this journey, not staring at them forever. I can assure you that Wairimu will forever be your woman in this life or the afterlife. You will always hunt for one another, but life must go on for now. Get married and start a family as soon as possible to distract yourself from Wairimu. These words might seem unkind to Wairimu coming from me, but I wouldn't want you to get wasted by love that might never be fulfilled. You have my blessings, dear."

It made me a bit relieved and somewhat happy to hear Muthoni utter those words. "I hope this relationship continues even after you return to the US, Mom. I still feel much pain, but it feels better that you and JP understand and share in the pain. I will marry for formality's sake, but I feel no affection toward the woman I'm marrying. It feels like it will hold an unfortunate woman hostage in my house, for there will be no love in the marriage or much attachment to the family and probably the children that might come of it. My instincts tell me Wairimu will be back one day. Until that feeling goes, I wish to be left alone. Any push towards marriage is at one's peril."

"I know that feeling, Jamal. I have been a victim of love, too, hence the reason I feel so sad for you. We leave it to God. He is the only solution to all we are going through. Remember, you are obligated to continue this family as the only son of Omar."

"I hear you, Mom. My mind is ready to move on, but my soul and body are all with your daughter, Wairimu."

"We trust God for a proper transition. Keep trying to be the best boy in the absence of Wairimu."

The walk came to an end, and we were back in the compound.

"I will keep you posted on what I plan to do with myself amid all these demands. Keep praying for Wairimu and me," I told Muthoni as we parted ways.

We hugged, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like Wairimu was back in my life through her mother. The visit ended well, and Wairimu's family returned to the States. Mother promised to visit them when the Covid-19 lockdowns come to an end.

My Father is one of the most influential tycoons in Doha, being in the oil and gas industry. In the Arabic family set-up, a boy child is more exposed to business and life than a girl child. Men are trusted with business affairs and inheritance. I was sent to the US to study and carry out business intelligence as I mapped out oil and gas markets for our family business. It was my first time venturing out of my comfort zone, having my life controlled by my dad, almost like a robot with guided instructions and a structured system. I had no business caring for myself or taking any responsibility because it is hard to be at fault in such an environment. Everything was given to me on a silver platter.

No matter, I can access all the money I want. It is how I met Mau that changed my world. I put it to her background of doing things for herself since

childhood that she was able to organise me in the way that she did, giving me a new perspective in life, including filling the void after leaving Qatar.

With Wairimu's disappearance, I think I became anti-social. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Dad promised me that if Wairimu ever came back, he would let me marry her, but in the meantime, he needed me to marry and move on with life.

I agreed to my parents' demands and got wedded, but I kept a separate house for myself and bought one for my wife. I vowed that my home would belong to Mau.

Two years had passed since Wairimu disappeared to heaven knows where. Recalling her sacrifices and how she stole money from her brother to sustain me made me feel greatly indebted to her and her family. I did not know how to love another woman, not even the mother of my child. My ultimate dream was to have a baby with curled hair from the Mau Mau descendant, Wairimu. I've apologised a lot to my wife for not being a present dad and would mention to her that I hoped to do better in the future: *Why do I relax on a ship, yet I do not know the captain? A plane that I haven't met the pilot? The bus is a humbler contraption, but it is its driver I trust to take me to my destination without care whether he has a driving license. My belief is a bit shaken about whether Allah will repatriate my Mau. But He is the one who introduced me to her. He must understand my pain and bring her back to me.*

The fact that I am broken wasn't in question. I remained hopeful my Mau would appear soon.

CHAPTER 12

WASTELAND

My way or the highway

SINCE I CAME to this wasteland, Wairimu told Lee who was basking with her in the sun, "I have appreciated freedom more. I wish I had done better to fight for my continent, Africa, with much of its wealth in natural resources still intact. The greed to strip it of its resources, often enabled by corrupt governments allowing local and foreign corporations, is rising. It reminds me of what happened to the Pacific Island of Nauru. The Island rich in phosphate mining in the day, is among the poorest in the world after resources exhaustion. It matters to me that Africa remains the poorest continent, despite its wealth in resources. Africa resources should be safeguarded to help turn around the lives of its citizens. Before I met the love of my life, Jamal, I had plans to be an eco-warrior. I wanted to fight for more conscientious utilisation of its resources to improve the welfare of Africa's citizens. I'll admit that these plans got slightly derailed coming to America, but they still can be salvaged. Being trapped in this dimension reminds me to rekindle my dream. We have no idea where we are, how long we will be here, and no hope of leaving this backward wasteland and returning to civilisation. It is totally beyond me to understand why we are here.

It allowed some respite to the torment in my mind to talk to him. But he reminded me of the life we had left behind, which is why I unburdened my personal life to him.

"I know I was a troublemaker back in the Academy University while your behaviour has been top-notch. My mom and brother thought I had lost my mind when I fell in love with an Arab boy. It is clear that my family doesn't share my thoughts on love, but it is up to Jamal and me to make our families see what it means to us and our future and get them on board. But I understand them. They can't seem to reconcile our different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. I see it as my mission to change such divisive perceptions. Girded

by the hope of seeing those awaiting us, Lee, your Malia, and my Jamal." I tried making light of the situation and getting a reaction from Lee.

"Yes, Mau Mau descendant Wairimu," he said with a knowing smile playing on his lips.

"Good one," I said with a chuckle. "I did not think you knew the origin of Jamal's nickname for me. Is it your intention to remind me how I sorely miss him?"

"No," he replied with a shy smile." On my mind right now is how your family thought you had lost your mind. It reflects my concerns. I expect the same misunderstanding about love with my parents back in South Korea. I am their firstborn, and dating will be a fraught discussion with them. They expect me to finish school and return home to marry. They don't expect me to fall in love with a foreigner. My Malia will be an alien in their eyes, though I really don't care. I see Malia marrying this Ji-hoon as unstoppable."

"I love to simply call you Lee. The name fits you better than Ji-hoon," I said, trying to steer the conversation away from the emotional stress he was beginning to display. It seemed he had this bottled up for some time. "Why would a parent give such a handsome guy such a name, Ji-Hoon? It comes with a lot of responsibility—wisdom, purpose, and rank. Now you can fulfil the three in this new dimension. There is no competition here—you could be a CEO, scientist, astronaut, man, or leader. Whatever you want to be, I see no sky to determine your limit here. The North Star that guided sailors back in the day in our universe appears to emerge from the east here, or the West or South. Difficult to tell the True North here." I said, pointing at the star to Lee.

Then I remembered he had been busy painting messages on a wall for those who might come after us.

"I like the practicality of journaling our experiences with pictographs on the wall. The information might help the next batch of hapless time travellers here. I like that you believe that wonderful things are yet to happen. Each day, you put in the energy to put a pictograph on the wall telling our experiences. Their depictions of hope encourage us to believe we will find a way to escape despite the sense of helplessness that engulfs us. Carving information on walls takes us to our first use of technology to preserve experiences – technology that, to my mind, seems the most durable if you look at the Roman sculptures and engraved writings. To think of Voynich's manuscript, which remains undecipherable, it always makes me wonder what format books of the distant

future will take and how language will evolve. Will future generations use the same language as we do? Pictograms, at least, can claim to be a universal language. I particularly like this one you drew about our first day in this mysterious land," I said as Ji-hoon nodded in concurrence.

"I agree, Wairimu. If technology failed today, I fear that many would go down with it. Many in the younger generation seem to have no time for basics. They seem too dependent on utilities like electricity to think of a world without it. They seem wed to their smartphones, computers, and game. The gadgets absorb the accumulated knowledge over the generations that have given us the science that made technologies possible. I fear some folks may not survive in a technology-free dimension like this one we find ourselves in."

I don't know if we are enjoying the dimension ourselves, except to accept the fact and make the best of it. And, come to think of it, it might bear semblance to the Earth we have left behind, but we may not even be in the same universe. If so, what cosmic mode does this dimension operate in?

"I agree with you, Wairimu. The experience could be unbearable for too many people on planet Earth. Humankind needs to return to the crossroads, where a crucial decision must be made, like in the Robert Frost poem, which is one of your favourites. Humanity could start on a clean slate in this land as they tone down their greedy ambitions and hopefully slow the rat race."

"When the going gets tough, the tough get going. That is our motto, Lee," I said as I lifted my hand to remove a ladybug from his hair. "Lee, I have not told you why I am a Mau Mau descendant."

"Yeah, would love to hear it," his face brightened with interest.

"It all started with my great-grandma, Wangari, the mother to my grandmother, Wairimu. Wangari was a trader selling bananas and Indian spices in my hometown, Nyeri. She never let any of her bananas go to waste as she gave them away to family, friends, and other passersby at her stall. Because of her generosity, she was well-regarded in the village. Wangari's husband, Ndegwa, was a member of the Mau Mau, the Kenyan resistance movement that fought the British colonialists in the 1950s to regain their land and freedom. In reprisal, the British authorities put many people in concentration camps, and many women and wives of detainees were not spared detention. Indeed many villages were left without people, who were herded into reserves to monitor them better and prevent them from supporting the freedom fighters. The camps were rough places where prisoners endured degrading

humiliations, including physical and emotional abuse. Wangari was among the lucky ones to escape the colonial dragnet and remained in the village. She was left with her husband's mother after Ndegwa, my great-grandfather, left for Nairobi, Kenya's capital, to help Murage Wokabi, a journalist, distribute newspapers. The Kikuyu newspapers kept the community informed while aiding the Mau Mau effort. *Wihuge* (Beware) was the more combative and inspiring of the two newspapers they were involved in than the more established *Muigwithania (The reconciler* or *Unifier).* It was, therefore, a matter of time before the editors would be rounded up and put in detention.

The village elders brought the news of Ndegwa's arrest to my great Grandma, who advised her to be vigilant as the colonial authorities would likely come for her as a Mau Mau collaborator. Yet it was not this warning that made Wangari escape. As Wangari was about to serve the elders tea, she overheard them saying how Ndegwa's daughter, Wairimu, was now of age and needed to undergo the customary circumcision rite so that she may be marriageable, perhaps to one of them. My great-grandmother did not let on that she had overheard this discussion. Being a Christian, the very idea of circumcising her only surviving child, who was barely twelve years old, let alone the undertone of her marriageability, was not something she could countenance.

She and her daughter disappeared from the village that very night. Morning would find them at the Nyeri bus station, where they boarded a bus to Nairobi to stay with relatives. With the threat of colonial arrest still hanging on her head and not knowing when she and her daughter would return, Wangari started a butchery business with the help of her relatives. In the meantime, the colonial police were tipped on her whereabouts, and she was subsequently arrested and sentenced to three years in jail. Her daughter, my Grandma, Wairimu, was still too young to run her mother's business. Some of the close relatives who had sheltered them were also arrested, leaving Wairimu somewhat neglected by those who remained behind with her.

My Grandma, who at the time felt vulnerable and abandoned, made the best of the situation and started fetching water for people to earn some money. She could persuade the school she was attending to allow her to continue her education. During break time, she fed the school master's livestock to earn a plate of food.

One day a neighbour from her village spotted her on Nairobi streets. That is how Wairimu learned that her mother had returned to the village after completing her jail sentence. But upon returning home, she found a sickly mother who, in the years she had served in jail, had become old from the hardships and abuses suffered in detention. Her front teeth were already missing, lost to a guard's boots after she refused to be made "Chura," the person assigned to empty prisoners' stool buckets. She had said she would rather die than become Chura.

It was my Grandma Wairimu's turn to look after her mother. In her determination to get back at the colonialists and chase them from Kenya, she enrolled as an underground runner to ferry food to the Mau Mau in their forest hideouts. She earned a reputation as a risk taker, having learned to be self-reliant in Nairobi during her mother's absence in detention. Adding to her ability to take the initiative, she was among the few who could read and write and helped villagers to write letters and the like

"Now I know where you must have got your stubbornness, Mau," Lee commented after I was through.

"Me? Stubborn?" I asked as I lay my head on Lee.

"Continue with the story. I find it quite interesting," Lee requested.

"Another guard had mercy on Wangari and changed her assignment. She was transferred to the kitchen as a cook—she was a great cook. That I can attest we shared her meals back then. Later there came an announcement that the families of Mau Mau men would be allowed to join them in detention. My great-grandpa, Ndegwa, was detained in Marsabit. If we ever get a chance to return to our planet, I will give you a tour of where he was detained."

"Have you ever been there?" Lee asked me as he brushed my hair with his fingers.

"Not yet, but now I look forward to retracing those steps."

"Yes, Mau. Visiting the place will add perspective to the story, feeling it in Marsabit beyond the village where it all started."

"Precisely, Lee. Knowing about Marsabit is not enough; being there will enhance the reality of my great grandfather's incarceration and the story leading to, and emerging from, that moment in time to this moment I'm narrating it."

"Yes, and it reminds me, we haven't discussed our family history at home. It is something I must pursue if I ever return home alive. It makes it feel urgent

to dig into my history listening to you. Go on with the Mau Mau chronicles. I am curious to know more."

"My Grandma and her mother went to Marsabit to join her father, Ndegwa. The family was complete once more. Things were, however, to change drastically for Wairimu, my Grandma. Her dad was incarcerated in the same camp as his friend, Mwangi, who he met in detention. But Mwangi took a fancy to Wairimu. He had lost his wife, who died while he was in detention. It was normal in those days for a father to bequeath a daughter to a friend in marriage, which is what Ndegwa did over protests of his wife, my great-grandmother. It was a man's world. The irony was that Mwangi's children were in the same school as my Grandma—the firstborn had been her classmate. And now that Wairimu Ndegwa was their dad's wife, she had suddenly become their mother."

"What!" Lee exclaimed in disbelief. "That must have been traumatising!" he said, adding, "It's akin to that song, *I am my own grandpa*, that Covid boy – Cheng, once made us dance to. Unlike the novelty song, your Grandma's experience is no gimmick and has nothing humorous about it.

"I must have been very tipsy. Can't remember how the song went," I replied, looking to hear it, which Lee obliged.

He stood up and moved to sit on a rock to face me as he tried to belt the song.

"It's an old one, composed in 1947, and could be your Grandma's age. It goes like this:

Many, many years ago
When I was twenty-three
I was married to a widow
Who was pretty as could be
This widow had a grown-up daughter
Had hair of red
My dad fell in love with her
And soon, the two were wed

This made my dad my son-in-law
And changed my very life
My daughter was my mother
Cause she was my father's wife
To complicate the matters

Even though it brought me joy
I soon became the father
Of a bouncing baby boy

My little baby then became
A brother-in-law to dad
And so became my uncle
Though it made me very sad
For if he was my uncle
That also made him the brother
Of the widow's grown-up daughter
Who, of course, was my stepmother

(Chorus) I'm my own grandpa
I'm my own grandpa
It sounds funny. I know
But it really is so
Oh, I'm my own grandpa."

I could not help a chuckle. It was a humorous song. "My grandma's story is not funny at all," I said. "But to continue with her story, whatever dreams she might have had were shattered. She was and still is quite a romantic lady. And, of course, her dream of ever marrying a former classmate called Mwega died like that. She was, therefore, resentful of being in the marriage and had grown irascible as years went by. Any little thing would set off her temper, which she often unleashed on the children, as my mother told me. In the meantime, her husband viewed her more as a daughter than a wife. It took her a long while to earn her husband's respect before she gradually asserted herself to become a decision-maker on equal terms with her husband.

"But Grandma was also quite religious: The family joke went that, in a village burial ceremony, for example, no one made the mistake of saying, 'We give this opportunity to Mrs Mwangi to close with a word of prayer. My Grandma's prayers were known to take forever. She prayed for everything—the food and the bereaved family while mentioning each member's problem. She prayed for God's intervention in the village, and its issues and would pray for just about anything. The villagers were frustrated, for they had other matters to attend to after the burial. Some saw the humour in it, saying that even the body buried

would be tired of the prayers and longing to be put in the grave or wish to disappear on time travel like us. Still, nobody dared complain. None of the villagers wanted to be in Grandma's bad books."

Lee was already beside himself with laughter. "I imagine the dead body taking a hike on time travel? Poof, just like that, like the way we vanished. I imagine the confusion and burial being rescheduled, or perhaps going ahead and burying the empty casket," he continued laughing.

However, as suddenly as his laughter had erupted, Lee abruptly became sad and, a few seconds later, he was quietly sobbing.

"I do not understand why you cry, Lee," I said, perplexed." You do not have to cry for my grandmother, who you hardly know."

"I know, Wairimu, my sadness is not about your Grandma. The story somehow reminds me of home and makes me wonder what my dear parents might be going through not knowing where I might have disappeared. They must be tormented trying to find me. It's irrational to think so, but I wonder whether they have given me up for dead."

"Lee, please stay here with me on time travel. Leave your wandering world alone! I am so sorry, dear. Do I quit telling the story?" I was getting concerned that the story might have been unduly stressful to him, which was surprising because he had never struck me as the emotionally fragile type.

"No, don't stop. I want to hear all of it. Continue Mau," Lee said, wiping away the tears. "That was just a passing cloud. Something aroused my pain."

"I am so sorry, Lee, about the pain. It is healthy to feel vulnerable once in a while. Being strong for others, us in this desolation, even when you suffer the same fate, does not always count for strength. To release what's bottled in you is also healthy. After all, we all have close family members who are dear to us. That is why I keep returning to my Grandma's homestead. That is where my life was shaped. Anyway, to continue with her story, no one wanted to test Grandma's patience. Rubbing her the wrong way might have meant a villager may have nowhere to buy sugar. The nearest shop from Grandma's grocery was five kilometres from our village.

"Grandma was fearless, often making me imagine her being a lioness, the savannah queen. If workers misbehaved, she could bar them from picking coffee from her husband's farm, denying them a source of much-needed income in the village back then. She was more influential than the local chief.

" Strength of a woman."

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"Your description of your Grandma," Lee replied. "It reminds me of that song, *Strength of a Woman,* by the Jamaican Shabba Ranks."

"Relax, my friend. I am not done yet," I responded as I tried to pick the story thread.

"Later, my Grandma opened bars and a wine and spirit shop. There were only three such local bars, and they all belonged to her. She, therefore, commanded the respect of her patrons, almost all of them men. She was often invited as a maid of honour at all the local weddings. She also had an eye for fashion, and most tailors in the area were her employees.

"Some Indians brought a public fair called *Gemini circus*, courtesy of her friend, Bacchu. Her husband owned the only bus in the village. The bus was known as *Othaya East Travellers*. The villagers paid bus fare to be ferried to the circus fifteen kilometres away. Agricultural farmers would swear that Grandma was the only one with connections to the higher-ups because when the country's President once visited the location, she oversaw entertainment by dance troupes at the function. When drought struck, her shops were the only ones with food supply, including rice and yellow maize flour that was once imported into the country to address hunger. She was no pushover.

"Trade brought about her fascination with the Indian guy, Bacchu. However, it might have also resulted from her mother's trade in Indian herbs. Her favourite food was Indian, which she had acquired in her interactions with Bacchu. Grandpa once told me he often took Grandma to Nairobi city to an Indian hotel called *Hotel-de-Lanka* to enjoy her *naan* bread with mutton or chicken *tikka* with rice. Grandma would always have a touch of Indian herbs in her food. I believe her claim that her life might have been a reincarnation. She might have been an Indian once."

"Maybe she was a Buddhist like me. Perhaps that is why her story resonates with me so much," Lee interjected with a smile

"She is a charming lady. I am sure you will connect when you finally meet, as I believe you will," I said as I continued with the story. "Later, they bought a ranch in Laikipia at a place called Rumuruti. They relocated from Nyeri to their new home, a beautiful castle-like house built by white settlers during the colonial period. Life was good. They even had horses to help manage their livestock while grazing in the field and the vast wheat and maize plantations.

"However, as fate would have it, the unexpected happened. There broke inter-ethnic violence between the two local tribes, the Samburu and Turkana communities in the area. As the fighting intensified, warriors from both communities raided and burnt down fields and homes and stole livestock. My grandparents were among the most affected and lost everything. They hid in a small shop within the bus terminus in Rumuruti town. The experience humbled my grandmother as it made her strong too. She and the family accepted their fate, and the next five years saw her not mention their predicament not once. She felt no resentment toward the warring communities and the destruction they wrought. Her sewing machine was the only item that survived the destruction that she could use to bounce back. She opened a tailoring shop and weaved baskets for sale. Around the same time, Grandpa returned to the village they came from, renovated their old house, and brought Grandma back to the village. Their children had left the nest by then, leaving two granddaughters, my cousin Sophie and myself. We were a good distraction for my grannies, to whom I remain grateful. By the time I was born, Grandma had long cooled her temperament as her resentment towards the forced marriage gave way to an appreciation of her husband Mwangi, who never stopped dotting on her."

"I wish I had such wonderful memories of my past Wairimu," Lee said. "I like that everything turns out well in the end. A lot of the time, some people never get back their footing again. But you, JP, and your mother are now in the USA, where things look up for your immediate family. Though I might have wanted to win your heart, Mau, I can guarantee that your life can only improve when we return to Earth. You know how to relate with people, and you love your extended family back home. I'm sure you will impact your village," Lee said with much feeling in his word.

He continued: "My mind wanders about the future as if the past and present had disappeared. I don't know how true it is, but I hear the mind wanders, allocating attention to particular periods, whether past, present, or future, in the continuum of time: twelve percent of the time, it wanders to the past, twenty-eight percent to the present and forty-eight percent to the future. In the remaining percentage, the mind remains somewhat idle. However, for you, dear, since we came to this wasteland, you have been stuck in your past. I see a book emerging from your life experience. I see you becoming legendary. If it were up to me, I would say you write a book when you return to Earth,

Wairimu. I will happily translate the text into the Korean and Chinese languages. You have Anika for the Indian and Hindi markets. Jamal can risk his life to have your book published in Qatar and his uncle's city Istanbul in Turkey.

"For Judy, the present has consumed her. She rarely spends time with us. She wakes up to a hectic day. We need to dig more about her roots back in Australia. She is a human *doing*," we laughed at making such an obvious observation. "It is not cast in stone where your focus should be at any season of this life, Mau. Let your mind wander where it will be rewarded."

"Sometimes I think about memories Lee, and I find them intriguing. You remember something that made you cry back then and made you laugh today. You remember something that made you laugh and shed tears in the same breath. Does this happen because you miss that moment? To be able to laugh at something that might have hurt you in the past is to see how time can be a healer."

"Most of the best moments are not captured by cameras but engraved in our hearts, Mau."

"The memories that make me shed tears daily are about my cousin, Sophie, Grandma, and Grandpa. They are permanently in my head. I clearly remember our moments together, yet it is in the past. I try to focus on the future daily, for I know today is already in my hands. I imagine the future will be fine and will not be in this wasteland. I will have overcome and gone back to Earth to live with my cherished people. It must have been a matter of mistaken identity to have landed here, and by now, whatever might have brought us here must have realised and are probably ready to repatriate us back. For you, Lee, and your Korean community, relocate and make this place a haven for your people. Nothing is wrong with this place. It requires a human's touch and becomes a second world for humanity."

"You know what, Mau? Life reflects your thoughts. As much as you argue we did not decide our current fate, we most likely attracted the pull that brought us here. I believe that what you desire, you attract, and it usually comes to pass. Jamal will be waiting, not because he wants to, but because he is tied to you by this attraction you focus on every minute. I have learned to live by what comes my way, Mau. If I find my Malia waiting for me, it will be good. If I find her already taken, it will be fine as well. I will search for another woman to fill the gap. I am not in control anymore. I am now a follower. Whatever life

brings, I will submit to it without a fight so long as I breathe. I am tired of fighting these life battles. They are exhausting and unpredictable. The God who chose this place for me is the God who will repatriate me back when done with me here. So much will have been lost, but it is okay. I can always start all over again. After all, I am not competing with anyone but myself. My baby steps will eventually get me to my destiny. It is complicated sometimes, but life offers alternatives that suit our desires. They may not fully satisfy our needs, but they are good enough to sustain us. We keep walking, Mau. We will find a fountain of hope one day," Lee said as he collected firewood for the evening bonfire.

That evening as we sat outside under the stars, Judy became desperate with her craving for home. Memories about her home flooded her mind, and she couldn't stop weeping. Lee held her and pointed at the starry sky. It was now his full-time job to console the two women in his camp, Judy and myself. He confessed that he never knew women could be like this, referring to what he said were our swinging moods that came without warning. He was brought up with boys, and the only woman he knew was his mother, a pillar and disciplinarian, for Lee and his brothers were quite naughty.

"My dear Judy, look at those stars. Learn from them and shine. They never seem to give up, dutiful to emerge come darkness. This place is a passing cloud. We will get back home eventually, hopefully soon. Even if we don't, we are lucky to have each other. Focus on now. Memories make us sad for reminding us what we have lost. I am a man who will give all and protect you and Wairimu. I may not have the resources to entertain you the way you would like, but being able to see each other every day is a reason to celebrate. None of us has suffered sickness. We have not slept hungry or had anything physically harming us, even though we are psychologically affected by the sadness we feel. I suggest we explore our surrounding environment up to a ten-kilometre radius. Stuck here wheeling away the time, we appear in a comfort zone. Life is unpredictable, and who knows what we might find?"

Judy listened without speaking. She had not opened up much since we got to wasteland though we understood that people are not all the same. Some are quiet, even as some are talkative. I, however, wished to know more about her to understand her likes and dislikes.

"The emptiness is real to us in this wasteland," Judy finally said." I, however, would like to think there are people worse off back home on Earth—the really

desperate people, for example, those struggling to put a meal on the table or don't know where to spend the night. But there's always hope. Things tend to look up again, and desperate times change. Our situation here is worse than the Covid-19 lockdowns they must endure back on Earth. No one can tell when, but life will return to normal. At least on planet Earth, the very idea of lockdowns suggests they will be lifted. Here we don't know when, if at all, we shall make our way out."

"I guess what is important in life is to live one day at a time, Judy and Mau. You flow with the situation when things are thick until a better season comes. Not all that wander are lost. Sometimes it is good for the next phase of life. This time travel will be engraved in our hearts forever. It might not be rewarding now, but maybe in the future, we might reflect on it as a very profound thing in our lives. I don't know how, but now that I am of age, I value the words of the old who have given us wisdom. They rebuffed much of what they thought was a waste of time in their youth but acknowledge how profoundly their younger days shaped their lives today. Let's be patient with what life presents us," Lee said.

Judy disappeared in the dark and returned with mushrooms. "Who feels like cooking today?"

"We have some leftovers from yesterday," I reminded Judy.

"Maybe we can freshen them up with those mushrooms. I am good at preparing fresh meals using leftovers." Lee picked the mushrooms and headed to the cave to cook dinner. The meal should keep us full during the exploration *safari* we agreed to undertake to see what the *neighbourhood* might yield.

CHAPTER 13

DRIFT AWAY

Game Changer

IT WAS A FINE MORNING with few clouds in the sky. Judy was busy preparing a fish dish that Compass, the dog, also seemed eager to tuck in. We owed our thanks for the fish supply to Compass, the hunter. How he was able to catch the fish, none of her masters enjoying the meal could tell. As had become a habit, my mind strayed to the land of the one I thought my master, Jamal.

"Surrounded by all the finery Jamal had accorded me, I wonder whether I was an imposter in his life or deserved every favour and the lavish lifestyle he gave me while at the University Academy," I said as we watched the sunrise. "I did what I needed to do when I cared for him without any strings attached. I relaxed and continued life as if I were part of his dynasty. I was ready for the cosmetic lifestyle, but fate knew better. I have been reduced to a less lavish lifestyle in an unforgiving place. I have no one to rescue me. All days feel the same: wake up, cook, eat, and sleep—time travel is a nightmare."

"This was an adventure for you, Mau," rejoined Lee. "Besides being in the *land of opportunities*, nothing else was different from the lifestyle I was used to in South Korea. If anything, I spoiled Malia just as much as Jamal was spoiling you. We were born with riches, but at the end of it all, that has not spared my life either. I am now living a deprived life just like many do on earth."

The clear sky and shining stars at night often trigger memories of our home village. We often lie on a grassy field looking up at the sky, trying to identify the starry constellations. I remember being taught about constellations when I was in Class Five. Our assignment after the lesson was to go and observe the night sky. My friends and I would go to an open field, lie on the grass and try to trace the constellation shapes we had learned in class hours earlier.

Today I can only remember *Aquarius*, *Canis Major,* and *Orion*. I also enjoyed looking at the half-moon, as I recalled how much fun it was to watch the moon disappear at dawn as the sun rose as I prepared for school in the village.

The school bell would ring at seven o'clock in the morning. Lateness was never encouraged. Being late even two minutes after the school bell rang would make your day very long with the punishment you'd receive. One would either be caned or told to fetch water to fill the very large kitchen tank as punishment or be assigned a collection of rubbish or sweep the school compound. The situation would worsen if the homework given the previous day was not completed.

I remembered with nostalgia this one day when we were given mathematics homework and had an inter-school soccer competition coming up in the afternoon. It was the perfect time to make friends with people like Kaka, a boy from a neighbouring school. His parents ran a grocery shop. Kaka and his sister, Wanjira, would attend school sports events with a bar of chocolate we called *Goody-goody*. It was hard to come by because it was pricy. Kaka invited me and some other girls to the shopping centre so that he could give us the *Goody-goody* chocolate and *Malaika* biscuits. We left school with her sister. The plan was to keep her mother busy, so Kaka could sneak out some *goody-goodies* to impress the girls.

I dreamed of owning a grocery shop when I grew up so that I could eat sweets and biscuits all day long as I catered to customers. Little did I know that my body would lose the craving when I was older.

But I missed the games enjoying Kaka's loot, which was quite a treat. I envied having the *Good-goody*, which I thought belonged to the privileged people in the village who could afford them. The following morning, we were still in *relaxation mode,* and most students, including me, were late to school. We got punished.

One of the girls we were getting punished with told the rest of us not to worry; she had gotten hold of the mathematics answer book from her mom, a teacher. Our math teacher, Mr Allan, was an unjust, sadistic man who enjoyed seeing his students suffer. He seemed to punish us for no reason at all. Caning seemed to be his favourite pastime during Class, and we all dreaded his lessons.

He particularly enjoyed caning us for failing math tests. I was not too bad in Mr Allan's Class, but on that day, I had not had time to complete the assignment. I had to copy the test answers from a deskmate to try to save my skin. Being young and lacking language skills can be a bad combination. Often unable to express ourselves, even in maths assignments, we would copy whole

answers, including the sentences meant to guide the teacher in marking, and got caught red-handed. The beating we received made me hate mathematics to the point of repeatedly failing tests. I had to transfer schools and repeat Class five to catch up again. I never imagined I would get to like mathematics again. I am always grateful to Wanjira, my primary school deskmate in the new school. She helped me understand simple formulas that made me the top student again.

Chores were the norm in the village; while at it, we constantly interacted with friends from school to the river, where we fetched water and then up the hill to collect firewood. After the chores, we all gathered to play hide and seek as dinner was prepared. After 8 pm, everyone would head home as it would be too dark to play. Parents would be getting impatient for us to be home and have an early dinner.

There was no TV or any form of media entertainment in those days. Entertainment would be around the fireplace having dinner as our grannies regaled us with fables and stories of their experience during the colonial times. Stories about the Mau Mau hardships and heroisms were especially intriguing. I felt pride in the freedom fighters even as it filled me with sadness that the heroic and inspiring Mau Mau leader Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi, was captured and executed at gallows in one of the colonial prisons.

I still remember how Nelson Mandela, not long after his release from his 27-year jail term under the apartheid regime in South Africa, visited Kenya.

He wanted to pay homage to the Kenya Land Freedom Army (KLFA), best known as the Mau Mau. This is how a newspaper report described it:

> Mandela was 'drawn to Kenya by three aspects of the Mau Mau: One, he wanted to visit Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi's grave; two, he wanted to see Kimathi's widow, Mukami Kimathi; and three, he wanted to meet the former Mau Mau commander, General China (real name Waruhiu Itote).
>
> 'His host, President Daniel Arap Moi and his aides were embarrassed beyond words at Mandela's request. Moi openly opposed the Mau Mau through his entire political life. But at a public rally held at the Moi International Sports Complex in Kasarani, on the outskirts of Nairobi, Mandela stung Moi with his searing comments: "In my 27 years of imprisonment, I always saw the images of fighters such as Kimathi,

China and others as candles in my long and hard war against injustice. It is an honour for any freedom fighter to pay respect to such heroes."

'Field Marshal Kimathi's often-quoted statement, "It is better to die on our feet than live on our knees for fear of colonial rule", seems to have inspired Mandela as he discarded diplomatic etiquette on that day. Mandela was angry that the Kenyan government, calling the nation independent, would ignore and actually banish the collective memory of the very heroes who made the country a beacon to other liberation movements across the globe.'

Mandela left without seeing the grave of his hero. No one knows where Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi is buried.



DEDAN KIMATHI

(31 October 1920 - 18 February 1957)

"It is better to die on our feet than to live on our knees"

The colonial authorities interred his remains in a secret location so that no one may ever know where to locate his grave. Field Marshal Kimathi was such an inspirational figure that the colonial authorities feared his grave would attract hordes of his people who likely would have made it a shrine to deepen and keep the struggle going.

I would have been one of those people intent on paying homage to Field Marshal Kimathi at the shrine.

I regret that he never survived to witness our country gain independence from Britain, which happened only six years after his death in 1957. He remains my greatest hero. He inspires me to be impactful to humanity one day in my dream to be an eco-warrior.

Some days we sang traditional songs sitting around the hearth. And, when ill-behaved, we would be put straight with tales of mythical giants and how they ate children when they misbehaved. We were warned that we couldn't hide from the giants' strangely placed eyes. We were told one of the giant's eyes was placed on its forehead and the other at the back of its head. The stories gave us nightmares. When we were younger we were careful not to be late out at night for fear of being accosted by the giants on their way to the forest to find food and gather firewood.

Sunday was my best day, especially after attending mass when Sophie and I would join my grannies at their shop. They would spoil us with French fries—we called them chips, sausage, and *mandazi,* which we'd carry home. When business was good, and they made some extra money, they would buy us shoes or a dress. My granny's business didn't make much money, but they didn't have to pay rent, nor did they have a power bill as there was no electricity. We used kerosene hurricane lamps in the days.

Laughter was of the essence in the village, and families shared the little they had.

Drama in the village was very entertaining. Men were openly ridiculed by their wives if they failed to fulfil their responsibilities. No man could say no to his wife's demands in the village lest the man sleeps hungry. Not because the food was lacking but nagging from an unhappy wife. It was easier for many men to endure hunger than tolerate a *one-thousand-words-per-minute* haranguing of an angry wife. Women of the time were talented at berating their husbands, which seemed never to make sense to anyone else but the women themselves.

The village was the place to arm children with jungle survival skills: There was no sink or tap water in the house, no TV or maids, or video games. Chores such as tilling or weeding on the farm were often the only form of entertainment, often because of the opportunity it offered to meet friends on similar assignments.

On a beautiful sunny morning, Grandma would let the goats out of their shed to join the cows near the riverbank where Grandpa would be grazing them so they could have water together. In the village, leisure is a luxury. There would be a few relaxing moments, but they were far between. Every day was a working day. Leisure would be experienced amid duties—a form of killing two birds with one stone.

We would leave home with jerry cans to come back with water for domestic use. We would also carry dirty clothes to wash in the river as family livestock quenched their thirst. We would arrive to find the kids busy fetching water from a fountain known as Gatheru, but we would engage in play, splashing water on one another half the time. Sophie and I would join the game as we showered and swam. Parents would be busy with the livestock and washing clothes. The village converged here for water as the next river was miles away.

When it was time to head home after the *water therapy*, Grandma often promised to let my cousin Sophie, and I go to the shopping centre with Grandpa in the evening to eat *mutura* (African sausage). We bid our friends goodbye and hurried home before Grandpa changed his clothes and left for the marketplace. Grandma would be in a hurry to hang the clothes to dry and rush home to prepare supper.

"If your Grandpa takes long, come back with Muiruri," she would instruct us. Muiruri was a neighbour who often passed by Grandpa for milk. The shopping centre was a place to make new friends and play some more.

I also recall the days we would pick coffee, the main cash crop in our region. We would eat the coffee berries; they had sweet juice, but since we were meant to be picking them for processing, one had to be careful not to be caught with a berry in the mouth. We would then take the coffee harvest to the factory for milling. It was so much fun. We met friends from different regions and enjoyed a cup of tea and scones together as we played in the fields waiting for the coffee to be weighed and recorded.

We had seasons in the sun that were priceless. Sometimes I pity urban children who seem limited regarding who can be their friends. In the village, there is no status quo—we share the little we have. Even duties were shared, and scarcity helped us understand how to share. That is how I won Jamal's heart by sharing the little I had with him. I miss my village life.

In the foreign land time travel placed us, I seemed to cope better because of my village upbringing than Lee and probably Judy. My village had no power. We had no good bed or shoes. I was able to survive with the little we could afford. Being in this alien land felt like being back in the village, only that I did not have my friends and grandparents.

Had we been certain when we would get back to earth, I wouldn't feel as confused as I felt. I wondered what gave Judy such grace and calmness. Despite her being so overwhelmed some nights ago, she was totally in charge at the moment.

My mind wandered to Qatar, the land of my love, Jamal. I remember JP telling me, "We will see how far this relationship with the Muslim boy will last." Of course, he was joking, but after the time travel, I wondered whether he was suspicious of my disappearance.

My grandmother once told me that men have no archive for their memories. You ask them how you were dressed the first day you met, and they can't remember. I trusted Jamal had all the memories of him treating me like a bag of cement the first day he set his eyes on me in Class. I expect he cannot forget his frustrations of sharing a desk with a kinky-haired girl. Surely he can't forget the courage he had to summon to communicate his predicament despite being an heir to immense wealth.

I still believed that one day, hopefully soon, we would be free from this punishment and find ourselves back on earth. I wished my thoughts about Jamal would give me some peace of mind. But the thoughts were coming much too often, making my stay seem hard to bear. I even saw Jamal married and moving on. I felt he would give up on all we had cultivated in our love. It scared me senseless, so I started screaming at one time. It raised the alarm with Lee and Judy, who rushed to me to find out what was wrong. Their showing concern felt consoling.

"You ladies worry too much about things beyond our control," Ji-hoon admonished. "We did not choose to be here. Instead of crying daily, why can't you shift that energy to what you can create here to improve our lives?" Then

turning to me, he said in a soothing whisper, "I suspect Jamal's thoughts have crossed your mind again, dear Mau. Do not worry. We are all in this together. No one is to blame for what happened. I am sure Jamal is waiting for your return too. You must have faith, my dear Wairimu. It is the only pillar we are all banking on. If prayers had a chance of being answered, I would ask God why this time travel happened. It is such a waste of time. I do not know when we will catch up with the rest of the world. What exactly are we here to fulfil or change? When are we going to finish college, or is this our destiny? Are we going to be sent back to earth by whoever sneaked us here?" Lee said, his anger intense.

That is a funny question. I had never given it thought until Lee mentioned it. The thought of finishing college had been secondary at that point. The primary issue was when and how to depart from the dimension.

"Come on, guys; I wish I had answers to this crisis. Wairimu, you are lucky you have Lee to hold your hand. I have to hold my hand in this strange world, convincing my soul that everything is well with me. A minute ago, you told Wairimu to hang onto faith, Lee. I don't mind some cooing as well. Is this the same good Lee, who now seems to be turning inconsiderate?" Judy quipped.

"No worries, Madam Judy, we will hold your hand too. We are a family here, including the dog. Simply because we knew each other while on earth doesn't make us more equal. We cherish and love you a lot," Lee said, hugging Judy.

"Lee, every time Judy and I are distressed, you comfort us and say, 'We are all in it together,'" I commented. "It makes me wonder whether when we console people when they lose their loved ones or are lonely, they feel our empathy or get irritated by it

"I have never given it much thought, Mau," Lee replied. "That is a fascinating question. I am sure when I come to console you. It feels much better, Mau. I mean it from the bottom of my heart, and it is the reality we are in this predicament together."

"It always does, Lee, without fail. I do not know how I could have survived without you, sweet brother. It makes all the difference. You see things from a different perspective from Judy and me. We look up to you as our man for things that are beyond women. Keep strong, our man."

"Thank you, Mau. But there is indeed a time when grief cannot be soothed. Only time can calm it down. You can feel alone amidst love, and it becomes a

personal journey full of pain, hoping for a suitable time to drift slowly out of it."

"Why can't we change the topic and prepare for bed?" Judy interjected.

"Okay, madam vet," Lee said, making light of the frustration Judy must have been feeling in her sleepiness. He took hold of our hands and led us back to the cave. We lay down to sleep as crickets chirped in the background.

"I wonder why my mind dwells too much on my childhood. I thought life was more enjoyable when you grew up compared to the days your parents were always on your back telling you what to do. I now believe being a kid is the only carefree season you have in life before responsibilities kick in. I wish children and teenagers could understand how privileged they are to be looked after," I said as I tried to sleep.

"Wairimu, being a child, is water under the bridge now. You will never be a teen again. You are the next parent in waiting," Lee responded sleepily.

"I know, Lee dear. Just the other day, I had no responsibility. Now my head is permanently invaded by this gulf boy. I miss Jamal a lot because I can never replace him with anything tangible. Lee, you forgot about your Mexican girl, probably because you are okay with us being here anyway. I am holding fast, hoping everything will fall in place one day. I hope I will eventually manage to leave this place in one piece. My mind, then, will be occupied by family and work—till death do us part. It seems that freedom must come with baggage: Family, jobs, chores..." my voice was fading. But I soon resumed.

"Come to think of it, Ji-hoon, I always thought the name '*Mom'* is my mother's name, '*Grandpa,'* my grandparent's name. It had never dawned on me that these are stages we will encounter someday when we have our children. I miss the normal stages of life back on the ordinary earth, having my ultimate family, unlike my grandma, who was married off by her dad to a man older than her parents. She never experienced any romance. For her, it was only a trip between the bed and the maternity ward. Not once, but five times—five children to feed. She wished me the life she missed out on. She must have lost it now that I am nowhere to be found on earth as we wait for an unknown fate in this desolate place."

"It is such a sad reality, Wairimu," Judy remarked as she yawned with sleep.

"I wish I could drift away from this fate. Every day I get more and more confused. I now feel the strain. The world here can be so unkind. My soul

needs to be freed from this whole predicament," I said before drifting off to continue the nightmare in dreamland.

CHAPTER 14

LIFE BUMPS

Lift my Burden

OUR LECTURER WOULD TELL US, "Success is not final; failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that count."

I wonder how life will turn out after we return to our interrupted path on earth. Is this time travel preparation for our future or a punishment for our sins? Maybe it is neither. I thought to myself. I don't think we have sinned more than everyone else we left on earth.

I remembered that I needed to always express gratitude in this alien land or back home. Despite the nature of our terrain, I considered myself very lucky to be part of the three of us—the three musketeers, I would muse to myself. I imagined if Judy and Lee hadn't shown up, my only companion would have been Compass, the dog.

I should never forget that the highest appreciation is not in utterance but in actualising the intent behind those utterances. I trusted in every word Jamal spoke to me. He better wait for me.

"Even if I get back to you when you are eighty years old, I look forward to marrying you, my love," I whispered into nothingness and committed my vows to Jamal amidst tears.

"We become stronger by learning to handle our weaknesses, Mau," Lee was saying."Your weakness is Jamal. Your flaws sustain your beauty. Find the beauty in this place. Make enough mistakes now that no one is supervising you: Jamal isn't here, neither your brother nor your mother. Learn and discover as much as you can in this land. Stop locking yourself up to the things and people you know. I also have moments when I wonder what is happening with my Malia. Did she go back to Mexico? Is there a man who replaced me? Love sometimes seems like a puzzle in which you cannot connect the dots when absent from the one you love.

"Lee, we indeed have no assurance that we are fine even though we might feel OK, nor do we know whether we will be fine or that we will ever make it

back home," I said, feeling panic rise in me. Seeing me tense up, Lee reassuringly squeezed my hand.

"Change your perspective to get the best out of this nightmare, Mau. Filter all that does not give you a peaceful day. Be like a photographer. Change your camera angle and view the world from a different vantage point, a beautiful one, to achieve the beautiful picture you desire. It is more attractive when you change the lens to one that has 3D—I mean the eye lenses, my Mau, since we don't have cameras around. I wish we could find someone to predict how soon we will return home or whether we ever will," Ji-hoon said. Half the time, it looked like he was talking to himself though I knew he was talking to me.

Judy joined the conversation. "Life has no blueprint to guide anyone navigating it, especially in this alien land. Once you understand that you are the architect of your destiny, you will wake up to that call and live like there is no tomorrow. Make the best of the now, not tomorrow. What if tomorrow never comes? Every day counts. A day is your hours, my friends. You have the liberty to decide what to do with them."

"I like your perspective, my lady," Lee applauded Judy. "I admire your happy life each day. You wake up and fill your day with activity—this is so profound, my darling."

"But I have a different perspective on life. I do not consider any time to be wasted time. Depending on the season we are in life, our needs are different. At the same dawn, some people are grieving the death of a loved one or a business that has been their livelihood gone bust, while others are on cloud nine because they just got married, have given birth, or have struck a jackpot. Seasons are all different for different people. Whatever your season is, embrace it and be in your frequency without interruption. It is your lone journey. We may all be here together, but our reactions and experiences are different," Lee concluded as Judy kissed him on his lips and dragged him back to the cave.

I sneaked away with the dog to collect some berries and give the new love birds time to be on their own. I knew the two were bound to make love. Signs of a growing hunger for each other had been plain to see for the past few days. And true to this, groans of pleasure started escaping Judy shortly after. When I sensed they were satiated with each other, I returned to the spot we were seated before, where they joined me.

I was lost in my world when Lee started talking. "Wairimu's sole desire is to return to her love, Jamal. Life was just starting for them. It has been such a

long time, but for Wairimu, it all happened yesterday. Nothing will make sense to her until she is back with Jamal. Time stops being an issue for someone who is in pain. When one loses a job, time stops being a factor anymore, and the way forward seems foggy. The same applies when someone loses love to someone else or death—time ceases to control them. What you need to be reminded of, Wairimu, is that there is a season for everything: a season to be born, go to school, play with friends and siblings, a season to love, a season to be on campus with Jamal, and me, a season for your grannies to spend old age together, a season to be in time travel with Judy—I guess all these seasons are essential to be experienced," Lee commented as if he was reading my mind.

"Experiencing loss is a good thing. Feeling lonely is not a problem. I am sure if Judy searches deep into herself one day, she will not suffer a breakdown from bottling-up pains for too long. Being with friends and other people greatly helps. Time spent with Mau and me will help you settle when you become a family woman. Otherwise, you might find yourself hanging out with your daughters to shake a leg because you failed to do so in the season you were meant to do it," Lee said.

"That is so true, Lee," Judy agreed. "I have been holding back a lot and avoided doing things that would hurt some people. But now I realise I need to spring into life and live like other humans. Maybe time away was helpful for me realise that this lone journey is not sustainable. It is time I confidently faced all the seasons that come my way and do it fearlessly."

"We will overcome, Judy, somehow. Feelings are the most delicate things in life. I try so much not to feel, especially when it comes to Jamal, but no matter how much I try, he is always the first and last thing on my mind every day. It hurts more than an open wound. It hurts so much," I chimed in.

"Judy, you have made some strides and are more of a human being than a human *doing*. For you, Wairimu, continue holding on to the dream of getting back with Jamal until the pain in your heart burns away. Better still, you never know, we might get a green card to go back home soon due to your desire to see Jamal so badly," Lee advised.

"I know—I cannot wait for that green card to get back and see my Jamal. He better be single and available by the time I get back. Otherwise, I will skin him alive. Sometimes I want to snap out of it like Judy and live as if nothing matters anymore," I said, speaking more to myself than anyone in particular. "It is not in vain that people drink their heads off. They drink for many reasons:

the fear of facing the future, some may have lost their possessions, and others are trying to keep the pain of life away. Some drink as a hobby, to feel high and happy. Some drink for fun, while others drink to follow others. You find people locked up in discos, beer, drugs, and all manner of addictions to escape something. If there were an injection that would cure mental pain, all of us would take a jab occasionally. Unfortunately, we must swim through that pain until we overcome it. It is a cold, lonely journey that all of us have to take; no one can take it on our behalf."

"I wonder whether this destiny we talk about is written for us or by us," Judy said. "How did I write what I am going through right now? I never wanted to be in this stupid land; it is so annoying. We still don't know why we are here and what we must do to regain our liberty. We wake up to nothing. What we do is just enough to keep us sane. We have no idea whether this is our life's end. If we only had the questions answered, I am sure we'd have done better than we have achieved in these three years." She said this with such a sense of frustration that her voice sounded raspy.

"Maybe Judy and I could have your babies, Lee, so we may leave descendants to deepen our mark and probably make this place more habitable. We don't know what tomorrow has in store for us. We might return to earth anytime and reunite with our loved ones for all we know. Hope keeps us vigilant though no less insecure about what might befall us here," I muttered to myself.

"Wairimu, being in the dark is the most horrifying thing in life, as in all of us. Nothing is predictable in the direction you desire and especially at this moment. We are all crying tears of disappointment, loss, grief, failure, and much more. If happiness had a price tag and we knew what to do, it would be our most sought-after product here," Judy said, though the smile playing on her face didn't reflect the frustration expressed in her words.

The horizon was bathed in a range of colours. Unlike earth, the sunset on the horizon radiated rainbow colours on this alien planet. I, however, couldn't enjoy it. I felt tired, and, for some reason, my mind felt like it was ebbing away from me. I couldn't tell if I was awake or asleep. I was hanging from a cliff with Grandma and Jamal there with me. They were frantically urging me to give them my hand so they could save me from the raging sea waters beneath. I tried hard to pull myself up, but the cliff seemed to be getting longer with every motion I made, hauling myself up and reaching them. Then the taste of

salty water hit my mouth, and I knew I was drowning. I could feel sweat and tears in my mouth as panic gripped me.

I woke up heaving and drenched in sweat. My body was hot, and I must have been wailing in my dream. Lee and Judy were at my side, afraid I had developed a fever. The expressions on their faces spoke of their concern. What would happen if I was sick and trapped in this place?

You could touch their sense of relief when I told them of the nightmare. It was also a relief for me to wake out of it. In some weird way, I took it as a signal Grandma and Jamal were searching and as concerned for me as I was eager to see them. I doused my head with cold water for relief.

My grandma wanted me to marry a handsome man, and Jamal wanted me to get him a baby with curly hair. Apprehension was always with me that none of those may ever be fulfilled. Even if I should make it out of here, when would that be? Soon when I'm still in my twenties, during my thirties, or when I am in my eighties?

CHAPTER 15

ACADEMY REMNANTS

The Finalists

BACK ON PLANET Earth, the Academy students were still generating drama. Cheng Changpu was so in love with the Indian girl student that he couldn't decide where to spend the Covid-19 lockdowns. He was debating whether to go to India, Anika's homeland, or China, his home country

He intended to surprise his people with a foreign girl—that was also Anika's dream. She dreaded marrying an Indian. In India, the tradition of arranged marriages was pervasive, and many didn't have a choice of who to marry. A few went against the tradition, like Anika, who was determined to marry Cheng. Nothing was going to change that. Fortified by her passport, she felt she could elope and marry anyone she pleased without consent from her family. She was a new generation who felt no obligation to abide by traditional conventions. Many of their parents were powerless to persuade them otherwise.

Nonetheless, Aashna Anika was back in India and had informed her parents of the intended visit by her future husband. The news was not well received. The family had already identified a bridegroom for her, and part of the dowry was paid. She, however, didn't tell her family that she was expectant.

Word had gone around that an *intruder* was coming to take Anika away as his bride. Even the appointed bridegroom had declared his intention to fight the interloper who wanted to deny his betrothed bride. His friends would escort him to meet this *Covid boy* who seemed intent on their girl.

Before Cheng left for India, he consulted his Grandpa, seeking advice on walking into India's unfamiliar and deeply held traditions.

"Why would you want to delay your desire, Cheng? Whatever the risk may be, much is gained by making that first move. I remember the girl from my visit to your school. And if all you want is to marry the love of your heart, go for it! Indians are our very close neighbours. We can always marry their girls.

"My grandson, you don't have to be reminded that a positive attitude can get you anything. She is beautiful and can expect you might not be the only

contender for her hand in marriage. The good thing is that she is expecting your baby. I, therefore, want to believe the odds are on your side," Cheng's grandfather advised him.

"I would have wanted to go with you. But on this first visit, I am going alone to get to know Anika's people and home. Then we will organise a second visit to betroth her to me. Thank you, Grandpa, for your advice," Cheng assured his grandfather.

Cheng soon discovered that his visit was not welcome at Anika's home. Upon establishing the identity of the interloper Cheng, the Indian bridegroom and his cohort of friends were upon the Chinese suitor, bullying and taunting him about how he did not deserve their girl. Predictably, Cheng couldn't take it, and soon things turned physical. The duo engaged in a fierce fight, only for Cheng to be overwhelmed by the Indian youth who joined the fight.

Cheng was saved by a Good Samaritan who took him to the Chinese embassy in New Delhi. The incident was unexpected, but he couldn't give up on the woman he loved and his baby, who Anika was carrying. Cheng bit his lip in anger, not knowing where to start. He was an orphan after his parents died in a road accident when he was an infant. He was brought up by his grandfather, who he called on his cell phone in his distress.

"Hello, Grandpa. How is China? Things have turned ugly in India," he reported, with disappointment in his voice.

"Do not worry, my namesake. All will be well. Book yourself in a nice hotel and wait for me to come. I hear the Taj Mahal is a wonderful hotel. See you tomorrow."

Cheng's grandfather quickly called several family members and friends for an urgent trip to India to salvage his granny's dream of marrying Anika. They bought gifts and boarded the next plane to India. Through the embassy, Cheng's grandfather, accompanied by a group of persuasive Chinese negotiators, requested an audience with Anika's Indian community to negotiate an amicable understanding. They were prepared to make amends, even if it meant returning the dowry they had paid to the bridegroom's family. When the meeting was arranged, Anika's family was excited that they were being paid for damages. They cooked for their guests—little did they know their girl was pregnant.

Cheng's grandfather started: "We request your noble community to accept a relationship with us. We come in the name of peace, the humanity that binds

us as age-old neighbours. Our children are your children and yours ours, including the child your beautiful daughter is carrying."

"What! Anika is pregnant?" Anika's father exclaimed as her side of the family exchanged surprised looks.

"Yes," Cheng's grandfather said calmly not to excite emotions from Anika's family members. "She is a mother-to-be. These things happen. But we are prepared to take good care of her and the child. We have the means, and she and our grandchild will be well provided. We will give her all possible support to follow her ambition in life. I am also begging for a cook, I am growing old, and this boy is all I have. At least with him married to Anika, I will have a girl to cook for me as I wait for them to give me grandchildren."

The pregnancy meant there was no turning back for Anika. She was afraid she might be made an outcast for dishonouring her family and community.

Things were, however, looking hopeful after negotiations commenced. There was sympathetic understanding on both sides. Ignoring the tradition that bound women on such matters, Anika insisted on being part of it and was adamant about whom and what she wanted. In the end, her parents had to relent. Cheng's family took the burden of paying back the dowry that had been paid to the Indian groom.

The spurned bridegroom's family was in attendance. Upon learning of the pregnancy, they could not accept Anika. And, claiming dishonour and injured pride, they said they were unwilling to return what had already been paid. It was just as well, as Anika's family was adequately compensated by Cheng's grateful delegation, which had come laden with gifts.

While at the University Academy, the *Covid boy* was a comic who liked to make fun and was, therefore, popular with his classmates. Except for Wairimu, Lee, and Jamal, who could not show up. Cheng had communicated to his friends what had transpired immediately after the fight with the unhappy groom. The classmates said they could join him to offer moral or otherwise support. They made good on their promise, only that they arrived a day after the negotiations were complete and Anika betrothed to the Chinese.

As might be expected, Anika's family was impressed by the support from Cheng for their daughter.

"I long for the day I will be an elder," said Cheng to his academy friends, "this is not a battle we could have won without the elders. Thanks be to God

that now I have a wife. My heart was broken when her family sent me away, but we were meant to be. I take this opportunity to thank you, dear friends, for finding the time to come, though you missed the action. I will be there for you when the time comes."

"Thank you, Cheng, for coming back for me. I thought you gave up on me due to the hostility you experienced," Anika expressed her relief.

"That was nothing compared to how much I adore you, my girl," Cheng replied as he planted a kiss on her forehead. "Today, I am officially your new authority. Let us return to the hotel for a restful night so we can go to our new home in China tomorrow."

"I concur, Cheng. Now I shall abide by your laws and will serve you as your wife for life. Thank you for choosing me," Anika was all smiles. As they headed back to the hotel, he opened the car door for Anika to enter.

CHAPTER 16

DIMENSIONS

Eye Opener

MY LIFE WAS BEAUTIFUL—I was living like a princess. My requests were commands to Jamal. I was driving a fine car and lived an affluent lifestyle, but suddenly fate decided I would live a life worse than that of a peasant farmer. At least a farmer has tools to work with. Lee was our knife and hoe—our axe. When not around, Judy and I would pick a species of lightwood that, lacking the density of firewood I knew on earth, kept burning out quickly before the cave was warm enough. He was the official firewood provider, and we would gather veggies and fruits. Fishing was left to Compass, the dog. He had mastered the areas with fish and would fish at night. Every morning we found four fish, one for each one of us. To Compass, the size of the fish didn't matter. On some days, she would bring one that was enough for the four of us, and the other three would be bite-sized. We would eat the big one and sun-dry the small fish to save for when the catch was not good. Compass was committed to her fishing chores, and if she had had a bad day at work, she would tell us with persistent barks in the morning, alerting us to cater for ourselves as things had not gone well that morning.

It was a typical day like any other, with not much to do except daily activities that never varied. There were no timelines here, and nothing seemed to matter. The most significant thing was that we had gotten used to repeatedly asking each other the same questions, expecting no definite answer: "Lee, how did we lose ourselves and land here on this good-for-nothing land?" I asked for the umpteenth time.

"I wonder about the very same thing, my dear Wairimu. Every move comes with some risk; it makes us vulnerable to failures and disappointments. Nothing here works according to plan. We have to rely on trial and error to make anything make sense. But we must still believe in ourselves and all we are at all times. We must believe that there is something greater inside us than all the obstacles we face here. We must remind ourselves every morning that we

can survive and make it back home safely. We need to keep moving; we can't stay in the past without a new future to look forward to. We need to evolve, Wairimu," Lee said warmly.

"It is hard to believe that life will be normal again, Lee," Judy chimed in. "I was looking forward to opening an Animal Clinic—all the necessary licenses had already been issued. That is now a dream. It took me a long time to complete my course, and now I am here in what feels like suspended animation, unable to practice my veterinary vocation. Not being able to tell how long we have been here, or shall be here, I fear I might find the technology I trained on have been redundant already."

"Judy, we all wish success happens instantly, like food cooking in a microwave. Our generation is gradually ignoring the power of timing and trusting in nature's grand design—we increasingly lose our patience on matters that require time. Each time we ignore these crucial factors, we end up with premature results that don't match what nature would have produced if we had given it the necessary timeline. One day we will look back and appreciate what the future has in store for us," Lee said.

"Why are we thinking of growth yet cannot even comprehend where we currently are?" Wairimu interjected. "Whether I will ever get the chance to be with my love, Jamal again isn't even sure to me. I wonder what is in his mind at this very moment. Does he miss me? Does he hold on to the faith that he will see me again? Will we be able to pick up from where we left off, or will it be too late, and the ship will have already left the dock?" I was already getting emotional and could feel hot tears rolling down my cool cheeks. The pain of not returning to Jamal was more than I could bear.

"My Jamal, is it as hard for you as it is for me? Did the academy close down? How long have we been away from each other? Oh my God!" I exclaimed, talking to no one and allowing my grief to boil over. "Grandma, I fear I have let you down. You may never get to see my Bacchu before you leave the world after all."

Lee tapped my shoulder and pulled me close to him. "Do not worry, Mau. All is in God's hands—one day at a time, my dear. We will get back soon. Before then, let us live in the present. Enjoy every sunrise and sunset; they are gifts from God. They have nothing to do with what we are going through. Every day counts, and although we cannot tell how long we have been in this time travel, let us try not to keep fading away slowly. I wonder whether we

need to delete from our memories the possibility of us returning to earth and embracing this place. Dominate and own the Land just like the Israelites did with the Promised Land. Nothing was interesting in that desert, but they turned it into a gold mine. Now that we are here, we stand a chance to make a difference—all of us do.

"Let us create a master plan on the way forward, guys," Lee suggested. "So far, our cave looks more like a home since we started filling it with homely items. Now we should work on the surroundings: plant flowers, improve Judy's garden, and domesticate some birds that feed on our leftovers."

"I agree," I said, my mood somewhat lifted. "I woke up this morning with gratitude in my soul. I prayed to God to bless my eyes for me to see the goodness in this wasteland. To bless my words, too, so that I could stop waking up every morning to curse the few achievements we have during the day. To be kind and compassionate to both of you since I realised that I pay very little attention to your day-to-day activities as my mind travels miles every day to meet and have monologues with Grandma and Jamal."

I walked over to Lee and hugged him. "Can we start our day today on the cliff where we collected shells? We can build a gazebo there to have fun on some days. I noticed a marula tree whose fruits we can pick from the ground and make some tasty alcohol. I saw animals feasting on the fruits, like Guinea fowls (*nganga*). We could trap them and feast on them too. They taste like chicken.

"Wow!" Judy shouted, clearly exhilarated, "When did you discover all that, Wairimu?"

"Yesterday, when I walked beyond the water with the fountain to the north," I replied. "The marula trees stood on the other side of the ridge, but I thought it was not safe to go there alone. We can collect the fruits at noon when the animals are high on the rotten fruits."

As we were speaking, I saw a butterfly fluttering about. I was mesmerised by its stunning beauty. I wondered if it appreciates its beauty or whether the beauty is for the beholder to admire. If for the beholder and nothing else, its God-given beauty would not be in vain. Perhaps that's how the aphorism "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" came about. I lost the butterfly and turned to Judy.

"What other activity is viable, Judy?" I asked, somewhat absentmindedly watching a trail of ants as they hauled home their harvest. They were carrying small bits of familiar foods like maize and what looked like wheat grains. "We are not far from a farm, guys. Look at these ants' harvest."

"We need to follow them immediately," Judy said, following the ants. We followed them until they emerged from an endless rocky tunnel. "Looks like there is something here; I don't think it is a good idea to go into the tunnel now. It would probably be best to come back tomorrow to find where the tunnel leads."

Compass had been with us, but we couldn't find him around us when we looked. Judy returned to the cave to rest as Lee, and I decided to explore further. We got tangled up in some tall weeds and crisscrossing plants with thorny stems that kept us from going deeper into them. Finally, we gave up on the mission to marula world.

"Wairimu, may I confess my affection for you?" Lee started. "I adore you and will protect you as Jamal did. If this is our destiny, do not be too hard on yourself, we will make it out alive."

Being in my bubble of thoughts, I couldn't decide whether what I had heard was what Lee had said.

"We did nothing wrong to God for us to land in this wasteland. One day we will be back home in one piece. Come on," Lee took my hand and led me deeper into the forest, searching for berries. "Even if it were a rebound relationship or infatuation, I would not mind a relationship with you, Mau. I have known you long enough. Think about it, just in case we never return or return only to find that we are too late and life dynamics are not in our favour. I wonder whether my Mexican girl will wait or choose to move on without me. Life can take unexpected twists, and neither of us can see them coming. I wonder how my family feels about this misfortune. I am especially sorry for my mother. She did not want me to leave Korea. I am sure it has hit her badly," Lee had stopped me from walking on and was staring into my eyes. I didn't have anything to say, trying to understand what Lee was going on about.

"Either God sent you to me, or I made the biggest mistake of my life to have openly taken Judy to bed. I am so inclined to make love to Judy, and I warm up to her more as the days go by. She takes the role of a wife without complaining. She cares that I eat and will check on me every single day on whether I am doing well. I do the opposite. I check on you more than I do her.

Yet, you don't have eyes for me. All your wailing is directed at the gulf. I hope Jamal will keep true to you. Otherwise, all these sacrifices you make will be a waste of time."

"I love you, Lee, much more than you can imagine, but as a brother. My eye has no sight for another man but Jamal. It is not over until it is over, my friend. Let us have faith and cross that bridge when we get back home. Patience and silence are a good combination. Judy is very good with you. Mentally, she is a brilliant lady, and as a result, we depend on her, especially the veggies we need to introduce to our menu. She loves you so much, but all your eyes focus on is Jamal's girlfriend," I said, looking into Lee's eyes coldly.

I am unsure whether Lee is attracted to me because I am familiar or it is his chauvinism that makes him feel it will be an achievement to make his friend's woman his own. It could be that I am smart and attractive to him, but Judy has the wisdom and patience. She truly likes Lee and hopes she will win his heart one day. I do my bit to encourage her too.

The forest was getting thicker, and the sun was starting to scorch our skin. We decided to start heading back to the cave, and as we did, we picked berries along the way. At the cave, we found Judy and Compass having a serious conversation and saw a chicken feeding on our food leftovers. Compass had returned with the chicken, and Judy was trying to persuade the dog to take her to where she caught the hen. When the dog saw Lee, she ran to him and started barking as if trying to tell him where she got the chicken.

Compass took off, and we followed her, but she quickly disappeared behind some vegetation. Since we couldn't follow her inside the foliage, we stood still, wondering whether she had gone into a tunnel or a hole. She came back barking and wagging her tail at Lee as if assuring us it was safe for us to follow her into the foliage.

As I looked at the section of the vegetation where Compass was leading us, I noticed some indigenous berries and wild rose flowers. A parasitic plant referred to in my mother tongue as *thĩna ndũrĩ mĩri* (poverty has no roots).

"This is a parasitic plant that feeds on other plants for survival, with its favourite being the bougainvillea bush. The parasite plant behaves like Covid or cancer—it smothers the host plant, paralysing it to death. The only solution for the host plant is the dry season that dries out the parasite. Another solution is birds feeding on the parasitic plant or building nests. However, seeds in the

birds' droppings give the parasitic plant new ground to thrive when it is moved from one area to another. Pruning by a gardener can also save the bougainvillea when manicuring a fence," I explained as I plucked a rose flower. Judy added, "From our forefathers' days, especially among Europeans, flowers were used to decorate the dining table. Men also presented them to their wives, thanking them for their care and work in the kitchen the whole day to ensure the family is fed."

We had stopped momentarily, only to veer into one of those innocuous discussions in which we seemed obsessed with relationships. This one was a bit more engaging, one of those little discussions that draw you in before quickly exhausting themselves. But it was not what Lee was saying, but what Judy revealed of herself.

Lee replied to Judy: "If there is one thing a man fears most, is the wife packing, leaving the kids behind. I think Kenny Rogers captured it best in his song *Lucille*:

'*You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille,*

With four hungry children and a crop in the field….'

"The hapless chap left by Lucille had no clue where to begin."

"Correct, Lee," Judy agreed. "I think it is house chores that scare many men. You might find a father – let's call him Ben the Gardener and say he has already brought up more than one child. But here's a fellow who still doesn't know whether his new baby's cry is because he is hungry, needs a diaper change, or is just happy to see him back in the house from work or someplace. There are men like that who have no clue, like the guy in Kenny Roger's song. But they learn, sometimes, the hard way." Judy noticed that Lee was not paying attention. Compass was at his feet, trying to get his attention to proceed. "I am talking to you, darling."

"Me?" Lee asked sheepishly.

"Not you. I am telling you about this gardener called Ben, a man you might find in Australia," Judy replies, tickled at Lee, feigning not hearing what she had said. She presses on. "The wife tells Ben: 'Remember to buy tissue, bread for breakfast, and milk for the baby. And some wine, please.'

"' Ok, love, I will do that,' Ben replies but is eager to rush to the pub to be with the boys. Ben probably didn't catch all the items he had been asked to bring with him. But his wife knows her man.' Here,' she says. 'I have written it

down for you, honey, just in case.' But Ben is already gone. After some hours with friends over drinks, it is time to go home. In his mind, he remembers to carry flowers for the wife to lower her guard. Everything else was out of his mind as he left the pub.

"This vivid description by Judy, who we didn't think had a sense of humour, makes us laugh. I want her to continue, ignoring the dog's impatience.

"Now at the door, Ben remembers that for 'Thatcher' to lower her guard, she has a whole scripture she reads for him. He scratches his head, and his memory returns: 'I told you to come with onions and tomatoes from the garden for the pizza. Just reminding you to add cooking oil to the list made you forget tomatoes? I wish you had forgotten onions instead of tomatoes. Pizza without tomatoes? How is that even possible? There is no meat, we ate the last rooster, and the last hen is incubating some eggs that will hatch next week. The only rooster available belongs to your sister. She is coming to pick it up this Saturday, so we cannot touch it.' Before Ben knocks on the door, the previous day's events replay in his head and cool his balls. What will be the drama today?"

"He dashes like a madman to the shop, hoping against all odds that the shop is still open. It was late in the night, and if he knocked on the shopkeeper's door at that hour, his wife, Serena, would yell worse than his 'Thatcher.' Serena is a hot chili. Ben wondered how his friend coped with terribly unreasonable wife, and thought it must be Serena who made him sweep the shop this late at night. He heard a commotion inside the shop. He realises it was the neighbour's cat and its kittens rummaging through the shopkeeper's dustbin. The bin had fish leftovers from his lunch and stunk to high heavens. Ben tries to remember the items he is meant to buy before the shopkeeper throws out the kittens and bangs the door without serving him. The list is not clear in his mind because he is still drunk and quickly orders a tissue paper roll, a bottle of wine, and a loaf of bread. There is a power blackout before he is given the items, and the shopkeeper lights a candle that threatens to go off. He is in such a hurry that he hands Ben the items without putting them in a bag.

"'You do not have a paper bag? I am drunk. These things cannot reach home,' Ben explains, sounding stressed.

"The candle is going off, and the cats threaten to get into the shop again to follow the bin.

"As he dashes back into the shop to get a bag, the shopkeeper requests Ben to keep an eye on the cat and the kittens to prevent them from going into the shop. Interestingly, Ben is not the only late-night shopper. Here comes Tony moving one step forward and two backward. His wife told him to bring home some salt. The wife cannot entertain the drinking habit that makes him forget shopping, so either he gets the salt or sleeps with the goats outside. When Tony talks, he can easily scare someone if they don't know him. 'I can kill someone; never joke with this son of a woman. I removed a lion's tongue with my bare hands. I am better than Samson in the Bible.'

"Before Tony opened his mouth with more nonsense, Ben handed him his shopping to hold as he dealt with the cat and its clan; they were trying to unwrap the paper bag with the fish in the bin. Ben had excellent karate skills, just like Lee here, and could fight up to ten men alone. He was also a great wrestler and swiftly swept off the cat and her clan with one kick.

"They must have flown higher than Qatar airways heading to my love's hometown, Doha," I joked as Lee burst into laughter.

"I can see those cats in the air," Lee said, pointing at some clouds.

"Ben's little dilemma reminds me of a lady in the village we used to call Wakimbo," I put in. "She had a congenital condition that didn't allow her to grow teeth, yet she could chew dry maize. She was muscular and quite strong. There was always drama with her husband, and the couple was regular at the local administrative chief's camp. Like Ben, the husband loved his drink. One day, Wakimbo beats her husband for selling her pumpkins to go and get drunk. The fight extended from their house to their fields and eventually to the neighbours coffee plantation. In the course, they destroyed the neighbour's coffee trees and the terraces. The sons, Mukungi and Muchemi, missed school for two days to help their parents repair the coffee terraces. When you left Ben's fate to our imagination, that's what came to mind. But I imagine he slept on the couch that night after an earful from the wife."

"Wakimbo's husband must have been desperate to marry a woman with no teeth. How did she smile at him back then to win the guy over?" Lee asked.

"Who understands love, how dizzyingly blind it can be?" Judy replied, and I thought the reply was very profound.

"Touché," was Lee's reply.

Then we all laughed, enjoying one of those rare moments. But the story was not finished. Judy continued narrating Ben’s ordeal, “The shopkeeper came

back with a paper bag and once Ben's items were packed, they exchanged a quick good night and he was off. Tony, who watched uncomprehendingly in his drunkenness as the shop, lost his opportunity to order the salt he had been sent. As he reached his pocket to enter the shop and buy the salt, he suddenly realized the shop doors were long closed. He struggled to lift his drunken self from the ground and knew he had a long night ahead facing. In the meantime, Ben, gained some Dutch courage and was confident he was a total man and hurried home to his Thatcher to boast his excellent memory to remember everything he had been sent. But when Thatcher opened the shopping bag, she found the milk was missing. The next thing Ben knew was a frying pan and leftover soup landing on his head. AS he tried to recover, he heard his wife screaming angrily, 'The baby will milk you tonight, I told you to note down the shopping, but you were in such a hurry to join your drunken boys and merry.'

"The hullaballoo the couple made prompted their dogs to start barking and the chickens in their coop to loudly start clucking in alarm thinking it was a mongoose coming to eat them or raid their the eggs that were about to hatch. It was chaos everywhere and to top it all, the kids woke up because of the commotion.

"Ben may have conquered everything in his life, except for one beast he could never tame – his wife. This made him wonder, 'I forgot to buy only one item and but she cannot even appreciate that I remembered the rest of the items? It is as if the whole world is coming to an end.' He resigned himself to his fate and sobered up, after realizing he would sleep hungry that night."

"Poor guy, but all women are like that; they concentrate their energy on what will boil their blood. I resonate with Ben," Lee commented.

"Milk and bread were very urgent," Wairimu reminded them amid the laughter, "the baby had nothing to drink that night. But it was also a wake-up call for Thatcher not to last packet of milk before getting more milk the next morning."

"We need to get going," Lee said as the laughter subsided.

By this time, Compass was visibly agitated, tagging at Lee's trouser cuffs and leading him towards the foliage, and the stunning discovery awaited us.

CHAPTER 17

SUPER-EARTH

The Future

THE TUNNEL WAS WELL-STRUCTURED right from the entrance, showcasing great architectural skill even to my untrained eye. The roof had openings that let in air and allowed light to flood the tunnel. It must have been air-conditioned, with the hint of a breeze that refreshed one after the heat outside.

Three hundred metres into the tunnel, we came upon seats carved out of the wall. After about a kilometre we came upon a water fountain with leaf-shaped cups and yet more seats. I was baffled as I watched birds frolicking in the fountain, enjoying what looked like a *sanctuary*. After half a kilometres, the tunnel opened to a world we had not expected. There were beautiful homes and well-tended farms, just like on Earth. Compass led us to a compound owned by a white man who appeared to be in his sixties.

"Hello, everyone. How long have you been here?" the man inquired even before we introduced ourselves.

Lee looked more excited than us and, even before saying who we were, impulsively hugged the stranger as if they had known each other all their lives. Then he introduced himself, Judy, and me, not forgetting to mention that I am a Mau Mau descendant.

"Welcome to the Super World. My name is Victor," the man said, shaking our hands after introductions and already forgetting Mau Mau but remembering Wairimu.

"Super World?" we repeated in unison.

"Yes, this is a Super World," Victor affirmed. "This place reflects the Earth, though not quite. The difference between the two is, however, minimal. Everything here is in its natural state. A slight variance is on a gravity force. You must have noticed its pull is milder, unlike Earth's?"

"I have," Lee nodded.

Judy and I looked at each other, surprised that we did not know enough to attribute our step's lightness to low gravity. It was among the first things we noticed, but we took it as another inexplicable attribute in the strange dimension we had found ourselves.

"Though it might strike one as so, it is not an alien world exactly," Victor explained. "There is no pollution here, and Seasons here are predictable, unlike what we have experienced on Earth lately. I have no idea who is behind the Super World, but everything you see was smuggled from Earth. I guess its creator, whoever or whatever it is, is doing some pilot study before moving everyone from Earth to this place. The maximum duration I have seen humans stay here is three years. It has been my choice to remain. The thought of Earth and the lifestyle with many self-inflicted problems make me not wish to return. The thing to note is that those who find themselves here but are bitter and disappointed and keep talking about wishing to return to Earth simply vanish after some time. I see the same desire to go back in your eyes. Soon you might vanish too. You may never return to planet Earth if you make yourselves comfortable, like myself. All these settlers you see here decided this would be their home. We do not know who brings people here or what triggers it, but most Super World settlers are fed up with life on Earth and were only too happy to start afresh."

"What you see in our eyes is true," Judy said." We want to return to Earth as soon as possible. Seeing all these is enticing, but we have a lot to lose. Some of us have fiancées and careers waiting and are generally happy to look forward to exciting life despite the problems of Earth."

Victor did not comment. Instead, he invited us to lunch, a meal of well-spiced meat and stew with baked bread. It was the first decent meal we had had in a long time.

"You will find everything you need on this planet if you are keen—nature has it all here," Victor said as if reading what was on my mind. The well-tended farms attested to the source of the delicious meal.

Victor's home was a castle by any standards and was a homely well-furnished dwelling. "It took a while to build, but I made it with my own hands," he explained, not without some pride.

He invited us to stay with him as we considered our next move. For the first time, we had a real idea of where we might be since we came to the wasteland. Victor even had a calendar and a clock, which gave time some structure, though

the days and hours seemed longer than on Earth. Having led such a deprived life, we quickly noticed the blankets and good bedding.

"Where did you get all these things from?" I was curious to know

"Incidentally, all these things come with different time travellers. When going back, it is hard to go with anything. One vanishes only with the clothes they are wearing. With time, items left behind accumulated, benefiting those who had chosen to remain. Some have found themselves here with their cars. A pilot not long ago landed with his helicopter. He has never looked down even once. Victor Joked as he pointed at the pilot and his predicament.

"The pilot is still staring at the helicopter, wondering whether the chopper will ever navigate its way back to planet Earth. Lee added to the joke. We all broke our limbs in laughter and recalled the feeling back then when we were in the pilot's situation for the first time.

"The first time I came here, I was thirteen years old, and, just like you, I could not tolerate this place. I badly wanted to get back to my comfort zone. Then I realised I was the only one who could comfort myself. I decided to make the best of the situation. Victor had a lot to offload, and we were all ears.

"I was alone though, and I suppose much worse off than you who've been having each other's company. But I prevailed, which I'm sure you could if you so choose," Victor assured us. "Explore the place. It has many exciting things that could help make you feel at home. Finding yourselves here might have felt like a waste of time, but I want to believe everything happens for a purpose. Mine, I suppose, was to find all possible ways to turn this place into a goldmine. I learned how to smuggle myself to Earth and return. Every time I would go back to our universe and wanted to return, I would imagine myself back here. I told my folk at home about time travel, but they had no clue what I was talking about and weren't interested in learning about it.

"To them, I disappeared from home and returned when I felt like it. They were determined to frustrate and misunderstand me, so I answered them with silence. I made friends with reasonable people who made me happy, people determined to understand me—you strike me to be such a person, Lee, and I hope you'd want to inherit the Super World with me. My friends have been passionate time travellers who land here and are curious and desperate enough to want to know this place.

"In my leisure time, I keep myself busy with a favourite hobby: mapping this world. On Earth, you have all sorts of sports, movies, the internet, and

computer games, among other things, that keep one busy. Here, the hobbies are the inventions we all engage in if only to keep ourselves alive. "Many feel lost because they have been followers on Earth, copy-pasting each other's lives. Those who find their purpose here never desire to return to Earth. From what I know, the dissatisfaction index for people here is lower. Everyone is busy finding themselves an ambition to follow.

Sailing without a map is not necessarily a bad thing. It might lead to unexpected discoveries none other has seen, making one a trailblazer in the findings adopted. This place is indeed the future, and I believe that everything and everyone in the world will move here eventually. Hopefully, you might be among the early adopters.

"Do not allow anyone to intimidate you with money and material things. That is probably why you look forward to returning to Earth—to amass wealth. A poor man today can become rich tomorrow. Change is the only constant thing when alive. No matter what you have gone through, do not give up on this beautiful place. If there is life, there is hope. You will see things differently if you look at life through my eyes. Be courageous enough to go for what you desire; you can do so much to better people's lives here if only you can focus your energies. Take the risk, life is all about risks, and if you do not take a chance, you will not achieve the desires of your heart."

I could see Lee was probably considering what Victor had just said. All I wanted was to get back home, marry my Jamal and get children before tragedy struck again. I did not care about Victor's sweet talk. I had no time for this Super World. Its opportunities were not meant for me.

I tapped Lee's shoulder to get his attention, "What do you think, big brother?"

"I can see the whole Korean peninsula being transferred here. Our country is tiny but has smart minds and a vast population. If there is a way to return to the Earth and come back, I will do it with zero hesitation. I will be one of the partakers of this *Promised Land*."

"Are you kidding me?" I wasn't expecting such an answer from Lee. "I see now how some people see opportunities while others see obstacles."

To Lee, this was a life-changing opportunity, and he knew exactly what needed to be done to make the new world work for him. To me, the Mau Mau descendant, this was *mission impossible*.

The Super World reminded me of a story I was told by a friend back home:

> Once upon a time, Bata, the shoe company, sent two salespeople to Africa to explore the market for their shoes. Let's call them Salesman A and Salesman B.
>
> Salesman A was back in America within a month with bad news. "We cannot sell shoes in Africa. They do not wear shoes," he reported.
>
> Salesman B came back after another two months and demanded a board meeting. The administrator did not understand why he needed an appointment. Yet, his termination letter was on the table because he took forever to report back to work after his assignment to Africa. Based on Salesman A's analysis, there was no shoe market in Africa. But the board decided to give the latecomer audience before handing him the termination letter.
>
> "We need to open Bata shops in Africa swiftly," Salesman B told the meeting.
>
> The MD asked why he thought it was the ideal thing to do.
>
> "Africans do not wear shoes," B replied.
>
> The MD was astonished that Salesman B took three months to realise that. The MD retorted, a bit irritated, "That has already been reported by Salesman A."
>
> Salesman B was calm. "Their not owning shoes is precisely the opportunity we seek. We will be the first company to introduce shoes in Africa."
>
> Salesman B made his point and eventually became the MD of Bata's Africa operation.

"Before you get derailed, my girl," Victor spoke to fill the silence that had set in. "We already have two thousand people living here. Maybe what you need is a tour for you to appreciate what this world offers. I understand how you feel about going back, but perhaps you can learn how to oscillate between the two worlds. You could come back here at some point."

Judy had been quiet up until that point. I could sense that she was torn between the two worlds, but then she spoke. "I have no strings attached to the other world, so if it is possible to operate from both worlds, I am good to go."

I had always suspected Judy to be a present girl; what is here and now is what matters to her. Victor had a livestock farm, and Judy probably saw an

opportunity to practice her veterinary medicine here and probably have a livestock farm of her own. And even if Lee still felt attached to his Mexican girl, Judy was warming up to him, and where Lee would be, Judy's home would be too.

"How did you get a car here, Victor?" Lee inquired.

"I came with it from Earth. That is a story for another day, Lee," Victor smiled. "The most exciting part about this Super World is the frequencies available without tampering with nature. Solar energy is efficiently tapped to power cars, homes, and industries. The energy here is wireless—we tap and consume it using this small gadget I invented," Victor explained, showing us the phone-sized device they used to tap energy.

"To call someone already residing here, you need to call out the person's name, and the call goes through to them. The conversation with the other person is crystal clear, as if in the same room. We use the same gadget to communicate via email, and we just created the first tablet, a simple device powered by solar energy. Services here are one-off purchases. We don't have monthly utility costs. We use virtual currency that does not lose value because supply and demand here are very stable, and there's no foreign exchange market to contend with. We recycle plastic and encourage the use of recyclable bags and containers to keep the environmental impact of disposables at a minimum.

"At the rate at which humans have messed with planet Earth, this Super World will be the future home for Earth's inhabitants. Climate change will get to a tipping point soon, and it is with that in mind we are making by-laws to avoid a messy state like planet Earth. The sooner we put our act together, the better, to migrate everyone on Earth here to start afresh," Victor said.

"Well put, Victor, but that will be a tall order," I put in. "Just as Noah in the Bible settled down with a chosen few, this world could also save only those who will believe and follow."

"I don't know the story of Noah because I am Buddhist, so I need to Google and understand what you are talking about, Mau," Lee remarked jokingly, stepping away from my kicks.

Victor was tickled watching us joking around, "It is good to be young. I miss running and playing the way you do. Lee, you need to read up on Noah, so I will lend you my Bible so you can read about Noah in your own time. For now,

let me take you to our local town. Today is a market day where you could meet more people."

We all got into Victor's Jeep, which was solar-powered, and in five minutes, we were in the beautiful modern town that was the market centre. It was full of life. There were young families all over—vibrant and animatedly walking around.

There was also no clutter or garbage to be seen; everything being sold was a necessity, and nothing went to waste. I couldn't see twenty cooking oil brands to choose from like on Earth. There was just one brand, and everyone seemed content to buy just that one. The people were given a chance to enjoy a monopoly in their specialty, and from what I saw, the satisfaction index appeared to be very high. People were kind to each other, and everyone seemed to have something to offer.

"Taste my fruit," one vendor said.

"Have a cup of juice," another said.

"This pizza is interesting," another vendor extended us the invitation to buy.

The Super World did seem kinder and happier, and I began to think that as long as I returned with my Jamal, I would have no problem staying. Back on Earth, money talks—few freebies if there's any tasting or testing. Victor was generous. He got us new clothes and ensured our hair and nails were done. We felt pampered.

I slowly fell in love with the new world and wished I could smuggle my Jamal and Grandma so we could live together here. However, I had to contend with the fact that I had college to finish and start a family. I was beginning to feel like I didn't know what I wanted.

"Are you okay, Mau?" Lee asked, seeing my sudden change of mood.

"I now feel torn between this world and Earth. But my immediate need is to get back home first. Once I am sober enough to weigh my options, I might consider coming back," I said.

Lee held my hand, saying, "At least you have left your options open. Some have made a good life here, while others have left for their reasons. You can always come and go, as Victor assured us."

"Lee, it has just dawned on me that it is not by chance we are in the Super World. Maybe God sent us on a mission, and I don't see that as irreconcilable with my wanting to settle down and have a family or my need to do something for humankind. The world starts and ends entirely in our minds, so let us go

back to the basics. It will strengthen our foundation as we shape the Super World. Our destiny is not written for us but by us.

"Everything will be okay, maybe not today, but eventually, it will. I need to sober up to tap into the energy of this beautiful Land and be open-minded like you, Lee. There is no reason to look back when there is so much to look forward to. Though our dreams, for now, feel blown up, the dust will still settle. It feels liberating to know we have a choice to either come and go or remain wherever one shall choose. One day we will look back and appreciate our resilience. We will inspire others through how we deal with our struggles, heartaches, and imperfections. I love your third eye, Lee. You are an early adopter. Keep it up, my darling. Let's do this—we need to map the region and learn from Victor as much as possible. He looks forward to passing on the baton to those younger at some point, and we will be those more youthful people. We need to scale up Victor's achievements and make this a home worth living in for future generations. We always need to leave a place better than we found it."

Victor hugged me, saying, "That is powerful, my girl, Wairimu. Thank you very much for understanding my cause."

Now Victor had a team. Not all was lost. No one was sent to the Super World in vain, and I had just discovered my purpose.

"Let us struggle with all that life will offer and be the change we desire," Victor remarked, looking at us with pride.

CHAPTER 18

HOME SWEET HOME

Destiny

"VET GIRL, KINDLY HELP me slaughter a chicken so we can celebrate today's achievements. I need to bake fresh bread. If I juggle the two, we might have a late dinner," Victor told Judy.

"I am happy to do that, my dear Victor," Judy replied, smiling, grateful that she could help out around the place.

"I hope you will consider being my partner in making this Super World work like Lee and Wairimu."

"In a way, yes. I have a few projects I am working on, like a book on animal husbandry. I will use the tablet you made to consolidate data on animal care. I have so far jotted down thirty pages worth of data. I am also keen on grafting some fruit trees and seeing what they produce," Judy answered, full of glee.

"I noticed you don't talk much about returning home like Lee and Wairimu," Victor said, passing the knife to Judy.

"Since I came to the Super World, I have trained myself to live in the present," Judy said. "I do not dwell on the past. The past hurts to keep thinking about the life I left behind. I do not focus on the future either, for it has been very grey. I find peace in the things I do day to day. Here I am excited to see animals laze around and eat. Reading about the drugs in your store gives me hope that there is a gap that I can fill with my expertise."

Lee and Wairimu had gone to shower as Judy and Victor prepared dinner, after which they lazed on the balcony in their nightgowns, watching the full moon and enjoying the cool evening breeze.

"This is so beautiful," I said, breaking the silence. "I wonder why it took us so long to discover this side of the Super World. We must thank Compass. Who knew such a human settlement could thrive here? And talking about Compass, it's been a while since I last saw her. I wonder where she might have gone and why."

"Maybe compass found herself a mate, Mau" we laughed as we missed our lost love.

"Life is like a river, Mau. It's constantly flowing. Since you came to this world, nothing has stopped on our planet or this one. Sometimes, the flowing water is still and, at times, stormy, forcing some to look for safety away when flooded and comfort by the riverbanks when the weather is dry. It is the way of the river for somebody to flow with it but chart a course to manoeuvre obstacles. Perhaps that's what Compass did, flowed with us and helped us chart a course here. Then his work was done, and she had to move on to find other travellers to steer probably," Lee offered.

Judy had joined us on the balcony to invite us to dinner. "I heard someone mention Compass. What became of her?"

Lee and Wairimu looked at each other and shrugged. "Let us try and find her tomorrow," Judy said before inviting us to follow her. "Guys, please step in. Dinner is ready."

Judy held Lee and gave him a warm and extended hug, cooing, "I have missed you today for some reason and have thought quite a bit about you."

"Sneak into my bedroom tonight, my dear. I miss your company too," Lee said, kissing her hand as they joined Victor and me at the dining table.

Judy and Victor's buffet was rich in colour and quite elaborate. It featured veggies, roasted potatoes, freshly baked bread, rice, goat, and chicken meat.

We said a quick prayer. Everyone started digging in and commended the chefs for the sumptuous meal. There wasn't much talk at the table. Everyone seemed content with themselves and the happy situation we were now in.

However, Lee was curious about the nuts and bolts of how to travel to and from the Super World and wanted to pick up Victor's brain on how to go about it.

However, what happened next was sudden.

As Victor was busy trying to explain, a blinding flash of light suddenly emerged from the bodies of Lee and Wairimu.

The next moment they had vanished.

Judy remained where she had been seated.

"They are gone," said Victor. And though he didn't seem surprised, he couldn't hide his sadness. "That was too soon." He had started to bond with us and was confident we would stay in the Super world.

Judy folded her arms, speechless.

Lee and I reappeared in a thick forest that I identified as the Congo Forest by the groups of gorillas led by silverback males we could see in the distance.

"We are back on earth, Lee! Thank God! We are back. We are back! We are safe, we are whole, and we are healthy! We get to see our families again. I hope they are well, including Jamal."

"Oh, my God!" Lee said, alarm in his voice. "How could we have just been plucked from Victor without knowing what to do to get back to the Super World? I thought he said one only had to wish to return to earth for it to happen. But I did not wish to come back. I was sure I wanted to remain in the Super World. That isn't very pleasant. Now it feels like it had been a dream all along."

"I know, Lee. But all is not lost. Let's see what the future holds for us. First, we must figure out how to get out of this jungle alive."

"Because where are we?" Lee asked, looking around himself.

"We are in the Congo Forest in Africa, one of the richest in flora and fauna and the second-largest tropical forest after the Amazon."

"This life has tested us, Mau. Now it has once again thrown us from a pan into the fire. Let me climb this tall tree to see what is around us from a vantage point," Lee said, scrambling to get up the tall tree.

"All I could see was tree canopies stretching into the horizon in every direction," he reported after climbing down. "I could not see any sign of human habitation, a town or a village."

"Let's not panic. We'll get out of this," I said, more pep-talking myself than telling it to Lee.

My face, however, must have betrayed my concern as Lee started speaking, suggesting he was trying to soften the situation. "This time travel experience has taught me crucial lessons that I might have ignored before: We may not get a chance to forgive the ones who wronged us, Wairimu. I remember you had *beef* with your uncle, who tied you to a school you didn't want to attend. Were it not for the anger you felt because of it, you probably could have avoided the *donkeys* you got for grades. You need to forgive and, if we make it alive from this jungle, remind him that his mean actions opened your mind and turned you into an A student. Life might never give us another chance to say *sorry* to the ones we wronged or *I love you so much* to the ones we care about. Sometimes, we lose touch through death or, in our case, this stupid time travel

experience. We may not have another chance to appreciate the little things others sacrificed that got us where we are today."

"Who said I got *donkeys* for grades, Lee?" I laughed and felt less scared of the vast jungle than Lee might have imagined. "I am African, and the Jungle is part of my habitat."

Lee reminded me of the song I once caught Grandma singing to a neighbour for attacking her, yet it was the neighbour's kids who had let their cows wander into Grandma's farm and helped themselves to cabbages.

"Tiga kũ-behave *ta ũraraga matuinĩ. Wakinya mbere yakwa hinga na ũte machabi,"* I sang for him again the reprimanding tune. The song is scolding the neighbour for feeling entitled to even apologise despite being in the wrong. Her behaviour, the song says, was like she had a ticket to heaven. It warns her that if she should enter heaven before Grandma, she should lock heaven's gate behind her and throw away the keys.

Lee delusional state of mind fearing he would lose his life in the jungle, made me think he was connecting with a higher power he could not control.

Just then, we heard people talking and possibly heading in their direction. We held hands and waited as the voices drew closer.

MR SEAN BELLOWS, our lecturer, had relocated to Africa and was now a lecturer at Kenya's United States International University, popularly referred to by its acronym USIU. He had also married Alya Bella, our former classmate at the Uni Academy. After we vanished, Sean got the urge to work in Africa since, as he would later admit, he had admired me so much for my classroom participation. He said my eloquent elevator pitch about opportunities in Kenya's capital had won him over.

Lee and I learnt then that these were the August holidays, which is how Sean had come to track gorillas at the Virunga massif in the Congo during the vacation. Thus, as the tour guide took them through the expansive jungle, they noticed a couple in nightgowns which were strange attire to be in the wilderness without any hint of a campsite nearby.

"Who are you?" a tour guide shouted.

We introduced ourselves as Lee Ji-hoon and Wairimu Ndegwa, a Korean and a Kenyan. We tried to explain the best we could what had happened to us, the vanishing from the USA and suddenly finding ourselves in the forest. Then

Bella emerged from a grove and rushed forward to hug her classmates. Neither she nor Sean and ourselves could hide our surprise at the coincidence of it all.

"Oh my God, you are back?" Sean exclaimed, "You are back, Lee and Wairimu!"

"Yes, we are," Lee said, hugging his former teacher tightly. Sean and Bella were heavily dressed. It was hard for myself and Lee to recognise them. But neither could they believe how we looked. Bella would later tell me that we looked very young and fresh with our shimmering skins from the fresh air in the Super World and the healthy farm fresh food.

"We all got devastated by your disappearance. Everything fell apart, and nothing felt the same anymore," Bella said excitedly after the meeting. "You two were clearly the string that held the beads of the Academy necklace together. The beads are now scattered everywhere. We only talk on WhatsApp while carrying on with our studies online."

"We are thrilled that you are back," Sean said. "When you disappeared, it wasn't easy for me to go on teaching in the school. I thought about you every day and had to transfer from the school to cut off the memories, but not a day passed, and I failed to make a silent prayer to see you people again safe and sound."

Sean removed packed snacks and shared them with us as we were guided out of the forest. Sean and Bella decided to cut their holiday short of ensuring that we found our way home. We were rushed to the nearest UN station for a medical check-up.

Lee took my hand in his. He suddenly felt lonely and needed comfort from someone he had grown fond of for a while. He was probably apprehensive that the sister and friend he had for the past three years would go her way soon.

Is Jamal waiting for her, or do I stand a chance with Mau?

He was also uneasy about Malia. *Is she still waiting, or does he need to start searching again?* He also worried about Judy. C*ould she have also come back and was now in Australia?*

Lee felt spoilt for choice, with the three women he cared about in his thoughts tormenting him. Yet he wasn't sure who he wanted more than the other among the three.

Assuming Malia was available and I was open, W*ho between us could he take home? Assuming I was back with Jamal and Judy came back, and Malia waited, who would*

he bring home? Assuming Judy was back and I was available, would Judy understand him and respect his decision about the woman he appreciated the most? Lee confessed to me later what was going through his mind.

The school sent an urgent message to our parents that we had been found. The news spread like wildfire and Lee and I were soon on our way to the US.

All the Uni Academy students that schooled with us were invited to travel back to the academy and give us a grand welcome.

Since Judy hadn't returned with us, the administration notified her family of her whereabouts and the fact that she was alive. Her family was thrilled to know.

CHAPTER 19

SUNSET

New Dawn

JAMAL WAS TRYING to remember where he had heard the aphorism that had sprung to his mind: "Once you cast a stone into the ocean, you don't expect to have it back." He could not remember where he had heard it.

As the aphorism struck his mind, he was brooding about his loss of Mau. At such moments, no one could get through to him when thoughts of Mau preoccupied his mind. His family had learned to let the brooding exhaust itself. Whether it took a week or a month when he would shut out the world, He seemed only to seek his own company. Because of this, his family had been praying for this mysterious girl's health so that she should show up and save their son. They no longer cared about her background. Their interest was their son's sanity.

Jamal had even bought a yacht and called it *Mau*. He would camp in it every evening, watching the sunset and dreaming of his Wairimu's return. He called Wairimu the *legend of the sea* because she disappeared on a beach, and because of his belief she would emerge from the sea.

Only his father could enter the yacht. No one else was allowed to even go near it. "It belongs to my Mau," he would say. Had he known about time travel, he would have tried all the means money could buy to get to Mau and protect her.

However, he was not the only one wondering what happened to those who disappeared. The whole world had long joined him in trying to understand the phenomenon and solve the puzzle of the disappearances. For all the world could tell, it had never been experienced before. If it had, no one had volunteered the information. Most people felt that it was worse than the Covid-19 virus, and if not stopped, none anywhere in the world could be considered safe, not even the president of the United States, who is supposedly one of the most protected leaders in the world. Everyone speculated what the

phenomenon might be. Many believed it was aliens who had snatched the duo for something unpleasant, maybe to conduct experiments on them.

Jamal would immerse himself in memories of him and Wairimu, often to the beat of Richard Marx's famous song, *Endless Summer Nights*. The song's first stanza had become an earworm he could not shake as it repeatedly kept playing in his mind:

Summer came and left without a warning
All at once I looked, and you were gone
And now you're looking back at me
Searching for a way that we can be like we were before

The memories and the song that never seemed to stop playing in his mind are how he often started and ended his day.

On this particular day, this was what was going through his mind:

Life had meaning when I met you, my Mau. I remember not responding to your 'Hello' the first day we met because I couldn't understand what you were saying. Look at me now, fluent in English because of your effort. That smile you gave me as you assured me all would be well after my Visa failed me. The generosity you showed me must be appreciated when you return. You are everything I need, and no words can fully explain what I feel in my heart. I never anticipated that I would be facing this life without you—what a tragedy. I thought this love was everlasting, my Mau. I remember your argument that Africans are the only human beings that exist and that the rest of us are humans that led a boring life. Living near game in the African Jungle, I thought you were legendary for how close your people are to nature than many of us.

I feel like I missed the opportunity to travel to Africa to appreciate the beauty of that beautiful continent with you and imagine different scenes in the wild. As I am seated here, I can see a buffalo grazing in your grandma's backyard. I see a free and open country with a refreshing breeze blowing. I see a fantastic paradise.

The rest of us in Qatar survive in air-conditioned rooms. If the AC vanishes on me as you did, I am dead meat; the heat will roast me alive. Oh, how we live in totally different worlds.

Even if time does not heal all wounds, I am determined to pick up my pieces and make the best of now. I will adopt habits to help me move on,

my Mau. I must stop criticising whatever happened to you and encourage my soul to face new possibilities.

I will initiate my way forward instead of waiting forever. And though I can already feel myself getting better, I blame it all on you, Mau. My desire for you is the source of my agony. I need to understand this predicament without judging you for my emotions.

"Are you still gazing at the ocean in this hot afternoon sun, my son Abdi?" Jamal's father interrupted his wandering thoughts.

"Hello, Dad," Jamal turned to welcome his dad to his yacht. "I suppose I have mourned Wairimu long enough. Today I feel like the burden is lifted. I feel stronger and much better. I need to fill my heart with creative energy—accept that Wairimu is engraved in my heart, but move on with my life. I need to bounce back and focus on making a difference in other people's lives. That is the man you moulded me to be, and I need to make you a proud father."

"That is profound, my son. I can't tell you enough how this prison you built and locked yourself in has been worrying all of us. All prisoners have a jail term, and I thank God your term in *jail has come to an* end," Jamal's father said, patting his son's back.

"I agree, Dad. I have chosen to create my own world and my source of happiness that no one can disrupt. This will be even more rewarding because I am now sure of my situation. It is a new season to appreciate all that I have," Jamal declared, looking into his father's eyes.

"I have been waiting to hear those words from you for a long time. Allah has answered our prayers. This trauma was to teach you how to close your heart and tough up for such storms. Over time, your heart will fully heal. Now that you have chosen to lift your head high again, things will turn around for you, my son. Jamal, you are my other self and my future. I look to you to fulfill my unrealised dreams. You can only win when you take the first step, and you will surely arrive at your desired future. We all have memories of our lives—some can be forgotten, but others cannot be erased, no matter how hard we try. The pain of life can either be used to cry or to try to gain more strength. You have cried enough, my son. Now pick up your pieces and reclaim your life."

"I hope…" Jamal started say before he was interrupted by his phone ringing.

"Is that not your phone ringing, Abdi?"

"Yes," Jamal replied as he pulled out his phone from his pocket. It showed a private number. However, when he took the call, the voice sounded familiar.

"Hello, Jamal, this is your former classmate, Covid boy Cheng. How have you been?" Cheng introduced himself, seemingly excited.

"I am well but…," Jamal had started to say, focused on pouring out his heart to his classmate about the loss he continued to feel of Wairimu.

It is then Cheng quickly delivers the shatteringly good news.

"Wairimu was back in the States with Ji-hoon! We are all headed back to the Academy to receive them!"

By that point, Jamal had stopped paying attention. All he heard was that Mau was back in the United States University Academy. He hung up the call, quickly rose from where he sat in his yacht, and hurried back home, closely followed by his father.

Cheng was left stunned that his friend hung up without as much as a thank you or a goodbye. "It speaks to his anxious state of mind," he thought. "I cannot wait to see their reaction when they meet."

Jamal got to his house with his father close behind, almost jogging to keep up. "What happened, Abdi? What was the call about," Omar had been trying to ask.

"The energy that helps me heal and grow is back. My Mau is back," Jamal finally replied, and the triumph in his voice told it all. He grabbed a suitcase and stashed his clothes in it as fast as he could.

"Who is Mau?"

"Wairimu, Dad. Wairimu is back! I am off to school to receive her." He looked at his phone. "The last flight to the US is in 1300 hours. Kindly book me the ticket, Dad. Now."

Omar had never seen his son this confident and sure of himself in a long time. Not that he ever had doubted his son loved the girl he called Wairimu. The change in him only served to confirm it.

WAIRIMU, ON THE OTHER HAND, was so confused after discovering that she had been away from earth for more than three years. She felt that surely Jamal could not have waited for her that long. She seriously doubted the chances.

Wairimu sobbed uncontrollably when Mr Sean told her that Jamal had left shortly after her disappearance. Apparently unable to cope with life without her. He was utterly heartbroken, Sean said. He informed her that his family sponsored the US Academy University generously in the search for her and that the family would follow up with the institution from time to time to check on progress. All she wanted at that moment was to see Jamal and hear everything from the horse's mouth.

Jamal arrived in the USA, and his first stop was his former school, the University Academy. He was directed to the hospital where the time travellers, Lee and Wairimu, were admitted. He did not care that Wairimu was supposed to be kept in isolation for a week. Jamal stormed into her room, coiled his body with hers, and hugged her tightly for many minutes without saying a word. Tears streamed freely from their eyes as they both enjoyed their intimate reunion after such a long time. Wairimu had no idea Jamal was on his way to see her and had been scared of even asking for him for fear of rejection. And now here was Jamal tightly embracing her.

"Mau, my dear, my mind never cleared even for one day since your departure. I have cried myself dry. I am even surprised my well is full again that I can shed these tears of joy. My heart had no room left to consider anything or anyone else as I waited to hold you again. I have waited for you for so long. I could not rest until I found you again, my soul mate. I prayed for time to be in my favour so that I would see you back in one piece within my lifetime, and now you are here. I cannot believe I have only known you for a few months. It felt like we had known each other since childhood, and then I lost you. Thank you, my love, for coming back," Jamal said.

He lifted Wairimu from the hospital bed, placed her on his lap to face him, and hugged her some more. "I hope this hug will dry up all the tears you have shed all this time that we have spent away from each other. Your memories kept me going, Mau. This reunion has given me a rebirth. We have indeed won this battle and overcome every test that stood before us. You are the woman my heart chose to love. I picked you. I am now very sure of that fact."

Wairimu was confused and didn't know what to think or ask Jamal. She couldn't ask if he had married yet. The thought scared her. She admired her handsome Jamal from head to toe as she ran her fingers through his hair and traced his face.

"Jamal, my dear, I can't even think straight now. Honestly, thinking straight for the past three years has been difficult. The only route my mind would take most days was a sorrowful one. I had to exercise often to face the next day and find relief from my frustrations. I had no power to change what befell me, which was one of my worst feelings. Sometimes I was awakened by the heaviness of sorrow weighing down on me in the wasteland. I needed to be strong, and God knows I tried and kept to all I believed in before I vanished," Wairimu tried to explain.

"All this time, I cared; I never stopped, my dear Mau, not for one minute. I hopelessly lived in my mind and tried to imagine that all the sorrow I felt was coupled with what you felt so that you lived a more comfortable life than I did. I see now that I couldn't absorb all that you felt. I tried to remain sane, but I slowly lost it. Days began and ended in my head, wondering what had happened to you, Mau. I gave power to thoughts about you, and they slowly but surely took over my life. I could have traded anything to have one more day with you, but my prayers weren't being answered. Yesterday was the first day I felt this burden lifted from my chest, only for Cheng to call me seconds later with the news that you are back in the US. What a turn of events! I took the next flight here to be with you, my love. Welcome back!" Jamal said, grinning from ear to ear.

"It was impossible to change the tide when in this unexplainable phenomenon we called time travel. What I could do was learn how to sail in the storm. And that is precisely what I did. I don't think I did it in the best way, but I did it the best way I knew how. It was mostly hopeless and pathetic, but we hoped against all odds that we would return one day. Your presence, my Jamal, emits so much light in my life. I feel so amazing, like time never passed. It is like we are back to when we would share our love at the Uni Academy. Thank you for waiting for me," Wairimu said, longingly looking into Jamal's dreamy eyes.

"I know you have a thousand and one questions for me, Mau. I am ready to answer all of them," Jamal said with his eyes fixed on Wairimu's big smile. "I have been waiting for you to come and give me a boy. I hope in this short encounter we have made one already," he said and laughed. "My bones have been screaming for you, my love. I have been a lost ship, sailing off without a map. I see beauty in everything in you, which will undoubtedly keep you looking young forever. Aging is sometimes a result of the pains we face in life.

I am happy you have overcome the most challenging phase of the life you dealt with in the alien land. Nothing can match the separation we experienced when I lost you, not even death. At least in death, there is something to bury and close the chapter. With time travel, we didn't even know what to think, let alone that something like that existed. I feel like we are starting afresh where we stopped before your time travel. I want to hear everything about what transpired in this strange land you went to."

Jamal held Wairimu's face in his hands. "But before you tell me, I know you are curious to know about me and whether I broke our vows. I have already done a few rituals to claim you as my wife. We became good friends with your family and celebrated your birthday each year you were away. Our mothers met in Qatar and are best friends now. I am sure they are looking forward to our reunion."

Wairimu sat up. She could not believe that the two mothers had already met, that things had conspired in her absence to have everything in place in anticipation of her return. *I do not have to struggle with Jamal's family about my origins. Neither does he have to beat around the bush to convince my family that it's ok for me to marry an Arabic man. It is beautiful to keep natural. Maybe this preserved me in Jamal's mind until I returned. Perhaps his feelings towards me would have been long gone had he tried to fake his behaviour. By shining my road ahead, others held back what they felt and knew that he was my man and that there was no chance for any intruder between us. That was excellent news, indeed.*

"But before you celebrate victory, my Mau, I was forced to marry after two years without a trace of my soulmate," Jamal continued, "I am a dad to a baby girl. However, I feel sad for my wife; I had no room for another woman and only married her to please my parents and satisfy cultural demands. She has been in this marriage by herself. My heart could not rest until I married you."

Wairimu turned and kissed Jamal passionately. "My darling, I do not care that you are already married and have become a father. I only care that you still have room in your heart to love, hold and cherish me. I have no room for any other man in my heart. You lingered in my heart and mind alone in that wilderness. Never did it occur to me that I needed a replacement. You are all I care about. I would not want to think that an absent lover scattered all I have been looking forward to. Thank you for waiting for me. I did not know who to blame for what happened to me, but I trusted God to preserve you until we

saw each other again. It had been hell on that wasteland every day I spent away from you, my love. I reckon we must have been on the same frequency, for I believe that must be why you waited for me, my dear. I will respect your family and do my best to uphold the good family values. I did not expect you to wait for me since there was no clear indication of my coming back anyway. My love, I know that a beautiful life does not just happen. We build it daily by the beauty we attract to it," Wairimu paused to demonstrate what she meant, hugging and kissing him. "Beauty like this kiss and this hug. Everything feels perfect. I love the way you hug and hold me. I love the way you love me, and our bonding was very rewarding now that we were both needy for each other."

The two love birds rocked in each other's arms in silence until Wairimu fell asleep. Jamal sneaked out to buy her clothes and jewellery so she would be well prepared to meet with her classmates.

On his way out, he met with Wairimu's mother and brother as they got in to see her. He hugged them so passionately that they knew that things would be well. He was happy to see them.

"When did you come, son? We should have known that you were here so we could have lunch with you," Wairimu's mother said excitedly.

"Now I know you really loved Wairimu," JP told him as he patted his shoulder.

"This girl is my heartbeat. I am thrilled to see her again. I cannot wait to come to Africa to pay dowry for her and meet the grandma she's told me so much about. She was forever on Wairimu's lips. I hope you told her grandmother that her granny is back already," Jamal said, beaming.

"Yes, we did tell her grandmother, and they did talk on the phone. She is delighted that her granddaughter is back," Wairimu's mother replied.

"I am off to buy Wairimu some clothes. There is a welcoming party by our classmates this evening. Keep her company. I will be back soon. Nice to see you again, my other family," Jamal said, hugging them once more.

"Nice to meet you too, dear. Wairimu's grandma was curious to know whether you waited for her. I told her you waited. I hope I did not lie to her, son."

"You didn't lie, Mom. It is Wairimu or nobody. I thank God she is back alive and so radiant. That time travel environment ensured she looked ten years younger than I look today," Jamal joked. "Let me run. I will be back shortly," he said and took off.

Jamal was back in no time with a bagful of gifts for everyone. As Wairimu's family helped her dress up for the class party, Jamal excused himself again. He went to see Ji-hoon, who told him everything about the time travel and their experience at the Super World, how hard life was, and how they met Victor.

"Before we could be too comfortable, we vanished and landed here, specifically in an African jungle. I am delighted to be back. But I am yet to see my parents and my darling Malia. I hope she has been waiting for me. I hope I will be as lucky as Wairimu."

"Welcome back, my dear classmate. I am thrilled to see you again after so long. It has been such a heart-breaking season for all of us. I hope it will never happen again. I imagine it must have been devastating for your family and Malia," Jamal's said, being one who deeply understood what Lee must have been going through.

"I must tell you, you have an incredible woman in Wairimu. What are your plans with her?" Lee inquired.

"That is why I am here, Lee—to straighten the boundaries. I know you guys have been very close to each other for the last three years, and maybe you became fond of each other in the process. I wouldn't blame you, but now that you are back, we need to put the record straight. I am marrying her, Lee. I am marrying Mau. She is my soulmate. I respect your friendship with her, and you will forever be my brother for taking care of her in that alien world you found yourselves in. Thank you for that and for ensuring that she was safe."

"I can assure you, Mau was not moved by time or the chaos we went through. Her heart was clear and never wavered; she intended on coming back to you," Lee said proudly. "There was no chance for a relationship between her and me. Jamal, you are a loved man. I am happy about your reunion and wish both of you the best," Lee assured his friend.

"Thank you, Lee, for your assurance. I have been a zombie without her," Jamal smiled as he looked into the distance. "I would even say she was my oxygen, and not having her has been suffocating."

Lee tried to keep his smile on. He was happy for Jamal but a bit lost in his feelings for Wairimu.

"I have bought you some clothes, a pair of shoes and a phone. I hope the shoes fit you. Mau told me your shoe size. You guys must have been close for her to know the fit of your clothes and shoe size," Jamal commented as he rummaged through his bag.

"Yes and no," Lee said as he faked a laugh. "One of the first things we did once we got to the Super World, two days before we came back, was shop for new clothes. That is how we got to know each other's clothes sizes. For three years, we were on that alien planet. We survived in the clothes we vanished in. Please do not get jealous, my friend," he joked.

"Do not mind my comments, Ji-hoon. If I were in your shoes, the same would have happened. I was told the Korean flight was delayed, so your parents are not yet here. Let that not bother you. I will do my best to take care of you," Jamal told Lee as he gave him two thousand dollars. "You are a man of honour, and I will forever owe you. Thank you for taking care of my woman Ji-hoon."

"Thanks a million, Jamal," Lee said and embraced his friend. "You are more than a brother to me, Jamal. I feel more confident going to the class party now."

"I will leave you now to get ready. We only have thirty minutes to the party. Meet you there, buddy. Let me go see if my Mau is ready."

Jamal left Lee a happy man knowing there would be no competition for Wairimu's affection.

Once the party started, everyone was excited to see the duo. With all of them there, it offered the opportunity to lobby for in-person classes to resume and end online lessons. After all, the Covid-19 lockdowns had all been lifted.

"If we are allowed back, I will also come back to class," Jamal shouted to ululation from his former classmates. "Before then, I would like to invite you all for a dowry ceremony for my Mau in Kenya next month on the 25th. It will be Mau's birthday, and I would be honoured to have you all in Nairobi to celebrate it together. Everything will be on me, including air tickets. I have sent my email address to the Academy WhatsApp group so you can send me your travel costs," he said to whoops of joy from his classmates. "Thanks, Cheng, for adding me to the group," Jamal said, raising a toast to Cheng. "Please add Mau and Ji-hoon to the group now that they have phones."

Jamal hadn't given Wairimu a heads-up on the announcement, so she was surprised to hear it. It was, nevertheless, a very pleasant surprise. She was excited by the idea of having her former classmates see the beauty of her continent, especially the wildlife. If they were lucky, they would witness the king of the Jungle take down a buffalo or giraffe for lunch, or in some instances, the lion's supposed diner striking back in a counterattack to save

itself. Sometimes the king of the Jungle gets badly wounded by the very same prey he expects to feast on.

"I will not show up. You did not come to save my neck when we were in India," Cheng joked as everyone laughed.

"Forgive me, Cheng. At that particular point in time, I couldn't think straight. But I don't take your friendship for granted. So expect Mau and me in China soon. We need to avenge your kindness."

"Excuse me, class," Sean cut short the ongoing chatter. "Let me take this opportunity to make a confession. I left the US after the disappearance fiasco and went to live in Kenya. I currently lecture at a university there and am married to the beautiful Bella, your classmate." He beamed with pride. "We have a set of twins, a boy and a girl, who I was tempted to name after Lee and Wairimu, but I thought they would find it rude after they returned without having consulting them on something so important. Now the names can be added, with their permission, of course." There was applause, and Sean continued, "I invite you all for a cocktail after Wairimu's dowry event at my home in Nairobi. Come and know where your classmate Bella disappeared to."

Another round of applause erupted, with everyone raising their glasses and congratulating Sean and Bella.

"Let us toast for all the couples in the house," Wairimu shouted as she stood up, "Cheers!"

"Thank you too for this party in our honour, Ji-hoon and myself," Wairimu continued. "We feel honoured to meet all of you again. Thank you for sacrificing so much to make this reunion possible. We missed home and family more than you can imagine. We missed you guys, the parties, and, believe it or not, Lee and I actually missed class work," the crowd chuckled as she turned to Jamal. "And, most of all, I missed my Jamal." Everyone stood up again and clapped. "May the Almighty God bless you all abundantly," Wairimu bowed and took her seat as Ji-Hoon stood to speak.

"It has been a while, as Wairimu put it. I would not wish my worst enemy to go through what we experienced. It was hell for us to be away from all that we knew. We thank God there were three of us, and though we are back, we have no idea how Judy, the Australian girl we were stranded with, is doing. We are pleased to see all of you again. We might be three years behind you, but we promise to catch up quickly," Lee ended his speech with applause and encouraging words from his classmates.

Jamal retook the floor. "Now that we will get to know Wairimu's and Mr Sean's homes, maybe, with time, we will have an opportunity to visit the others." More cheers erupted. "I cannot forget the school fraternity for relentlessly aiding the search for Wairimu and Ji-hoon. We thank God for their safe return. Let us go on with the party and mingle," he lifted his wine glass. "Cheers, good people!"

CHAPTER 20

MY CHRONICLES

Harmony

BACK AT THE UNIVERSITY Academy School, Korean student Lee Ji-hoon was reserved. Other students had taken him for granted at the beginning, only to be surprised by his karate skills when a fight broke out in the school between his classmates and other students. Lee almost single-handedly brought down the rabble-rousers. As the fighting raged, the Mexican lass, Malia, had come to cheer the University boys fighting the University Academy boys. However, as soon as Ji-hoon had thrashed the University boys with help from Cheng and other classmates, Malia switched sides and raised Lee's hand cheekily, proclaiming him the winner and her handsome knight in shining armour.

"I nickname you Lee, the Karate man. That was awesome, six men down all by yourself. My name is Malia," she said, extending her hand.

"It is actually not a nickname; it is my real name," Ji-hoon told Malia looking intently into her eyes, and, as they say, the rest is history.

When Ji-hoon suddenly disappeared in time travel, Malia had just conceived. Lee was not aware that he had left behind a pregnant woman. On the other hand, Malia was utterly heartbroken imagining she would have to raise the baby alone. She quickly turned to alcohol to numb her pain. The drinking, unfortunately, destroyed Malia. The Mexican Queen had become an alcoholic who was almost beyond redemption. Lee found her and tried to understand what had happened. He had hoped to return to a woman he could have a relationship with, not the wreck he found.

Malia explained herself to Lee: "I reported to my parents that I was pregnant, and the man responsible for my pregnancy was the same guy on the news who vanished into thin air from the University Academy. To my parents, I was irresponsible and wanted nothing to do with me or the baby. I tried to shoulder the responsibility, but supporting my education and the pregnancy proved difficult.

"Your classmate, Antonio Diego, the Brazilian, offered me a place to stay. We started drinking and abusing drugs together. His frustration came about after he lost his dad to the Covid-19 virus. Before I knew it, we were arrested and thrown in prison. I gave birth to a baby boy in jail," Malia confessed, tears flowing down her face. "When they took the baby from me, I stopped caring about everything. After my prison term, I settled in with Diego, who now runs a garage downtown. We are trying to walk on the straight and narrow now. I stay home for the time being and have started a rehabilitation program to wean myself from alcohol and drug addictions. I feel much better now and believe I will be vibrant again soon. More so, now that the one who brought me so much suffering is back, the father to my child. I want you to claim the baby and will rest easy knowing my child is in safe hands, his father's hands. I wish you well, Lee. I wish I could do more for the boy, but I can't. I don't feel it in me. Once you get the boy, remember to tell him that I love him so much. Tell him his mother is unwell and that I will be coming to see him as soon as I'm well again," Malia said, wiping tears off her cheeks as she lit a cigarette.

Lee stared at Malia and wondered about what she wasn't telling him. Why, for example, did she appear to give up her own child so easily? The Malia he knew was determined, beautiful, intelligent, and focused. The individual who stood before him was a shell of her old self. Lee also felt sorry for Diego.

"I am so sorry I made you go through such a roller coaster, Malia, from my disappearance to everything else that happened to you. It was, however, out of my hands. I…" Lee stumbled, unsure of what he wanted to say. "I wish you the best of luck in all your endeavours, dear. You are a beautiful woman. Make the best of your life. You have a long life ahead. I hope you will stay focused, and I am genuinely sorry for what befell you, including your parent's rejection. I hope that my being back helps you heal and allows your parents to see that you were not irresponsible. I love you, Malia, and will forever hold you dearly in my heart."

By the time Lee finished talking, he was already a few meters away from Malia. He was trying to hide emotions that engulfed him for the sadness he felt. He wanted to be by himself and think about what to do next. As he got into his car, thoughts were racing through his head

Why me now? Why all these misfortunes? This whole time-travel nonsense has destroyed my life. I have a child whose mother doesn't wish to have and is now in an

orphanage. How will I cope with a two-year-old child? I remember Diego for Brazil at some point while we were in school after his mother was involved in an accident, and now he lost his dad to Covid. We contributed money for him to head home. Before he was back, Wairimu and I vanished to time travel. Maybe this is where his downward spiral began. Oh my God!

After making himself known to the authorities, Lee quickly drove to the orphanage and was granted custody of his son. The boy was indeed his father's child, and the two took to each other the moment they met. Lee went shopping with his son, and later the two had their first meal together. The boy was thrilled to have his father with him. Lee could see this on the boy's adorable face.

Lee's parents waited eagerly to see their son's would-be wife, who made him delay their trip back home for two days so that he could find her. As they were enjoying the afternoon breeze from the hotel they were staying in, they saw their son from a distance approaching them carrying a toddler. They stood up and walked towards him. When Lee got to his father, he burst out crying as hugged him.

"I was late, Dad," he said, bawling on his father's shoulder. "I couldn't get back on time to save my would-be family."

Lee's mother being the intelligent woman she was, lifted the boy, who was staring helplessly at his father. She walked away with him so he wouldn't be distressed seeing his father cry.

Lee narrated his unfortunate situation with the woman who would have been his wife to his father, who assured him that he was never late in life.

"We follow life's dictates, not our own, my son. You have done your part; leave the rest to God. He is the only one with answers to all that has happened to you. Let us not make the day any worse by discussing things that are not within our control, you have given us a grandson, and we are very proud of that. Maybe Malia was never meant for you, Lee. Trust the same God that brought her your way for another woman," Lee's father said, handing him a handkerchief to wipe away his tears.

"Thank God you have this lovely child to remind you of Malia and your time together; some of us walked out with nothing. You will get another beautiful soul; God is with you, son," Lee's mother explained as she joined the duo holding their grandson.

The following day they left for South Korea together after Lee enrolled at the Academy University to finish his course.

Despite being back on earth, Lee hoped to have the opportunity to time travel again to accomplish his mission with Victor. He had told his family about the new Super World, but neither of his parents was enthusiastic about the place. Lee knew it was a "hard calling," as Wairimu had put it, and as a result of how everything had unfolded, the desire to go into this new land wouldn't be understood by all. After returning to earth and finding Malia as she was, he profoundly regretted that Wairimu had refused to marry him while in the Super World. *Maybe if she did, he thought I wouldn't have been so miserable*. His thought as he consoled himself.

"I will be waiting patiently for you," he told Wairimu before they left the wasteland. He also recalled how Judy loved him despite his desire for Wairimu while they were together. At least Judy knew Wairimu and Lee were friends before their meeting. Judy was brilliant, though. She knew that Wairimu was waiting for her love, Jamal, so she would have Lee all to herself while in the Super World. She, however, also knew that there was Malia to contend with when they got back on earth. Nevertheless, Judy's heart beat for Lee, and she was willing to risk it all for the man she loved forever.

Lee's phone rang with an unfamiliar number showing on the screen: "Hello, this must definitely be fate. Here I am, in tears after taking a route down memory lane on our time together in the Super World, and then you call. How have you been, Mau?"

"I have been well, dear. What Super world are you talking about, Lee? We arrived at the Super World at the eleventh hour. Most of our time on the alien planet was spent in the wasteland. It was the most challenging time I have ever faced in my life. Yet, when I recall it today, I cherish the experience. We became pillars to each other. Imagine Lee; it turns out the wasteland saved my relationship with Jamal. Everyone is now sober about our relationship: no more tussles between the two families due to faith or our different backgrounds. God has fought the battle for us though it wasn't for free; we have all been to hell and back."

"I know. You and Jamal suffered the painful separation for so long, though I was in heaven spending three years of my life next to you – a visionary woman. You helped me move to the next level in so many dormant areas in

my life. Without that encounter, I would have led a very lopsided life—thank you for your wisdom, Mau. The skills you learned in poverty have made you successful in your later years, and I have no doubt they will lead you to greater heights as you keep living. Jamal has a fortune in you, my darling friend."

"Thank you, Lee, for your compliments. You were also an angel in my life; you helped me survive the incubation we were going through in that hell. You are such a gifted man, and I can only wish you the best in all you do. How is life treating you so far? How are you and Malia doing?"

Just as Wairimu finished asking her question, Lee heard a knock on the front door. "Give me a minute, Mau. Someone is at the door, don't hang up."

A pleasant and unexpected surprise was at the door. On opening the door, Lee was met by a familiar face, someone Lee had grown fond of, someone he didn't think he would be seeing any time soon; it was Judy, and she was pregnant. The two young adults stared at each other, apprehension on Judy's face and bewilderment on Lee's.

"I know I was not your favourite, but I vanished seven days after you left that godforsaken planet," Judy started, tears welling up in her eyes. "It was after you left that I discovered that I was pregnant. Fortunately, I appeared at your school in the USA when I landed from time travel. The powers that controlled us must have read my mind. I badly wanted to find you. I found your address, and now here I am, Lee."

Lee was still silent, but suddenly he lunged forward and embraced Judy with such great emotion that they burst out crying. They held each other tightly.

They had heart-warming words to say to each other as they hugged.

"It is okay, my love, Judy."

"Is it really okay, Lee?" Judy was surprised.

"Yes, it is. I am thrilled to see you, my woman."

"I'm so happy to see you too, my love, Lee."

After what seemed like an hour in each other's embrace, they let go, and Lee looked deep into Judy's eyes. "It is okay, my dear. You are safe now."

He ushered her in, closed the door, and led her to the house's lounge area. He quickly made some tea, warmed three slices of pizza from the fridge, and brought them to her since she looked exhausted and had mentioned that she was hungry. He then led Judy to his bedroom and told her to rest first. He couldn't believe what was happening and was in a hurry to update Wairimu.

Checking his phone, Wairimu had disconnected the call, probably to save on the calling charges.

"A quick shower will do me well," Judy said, picking up the towel and dashing off to the bathroom. Lee followed her in, and they took a shower together.

"Did you learn from Victor how to get back to the Super World?" Lee asked Judy.

"We did not pick up that conversation after you vanished. I felt so lost after you disappeared. I needed so desperately to vanish as well and come back to earth. When I did vanish, I was in my bedroom and had locked the door. Victor must break the lock to access the room now that I am here. I Landed in a hostel compound in your school and gave my address as your address. I was brought here by the United States government. I told them that I was your wife. Without any document to back my claims, they would have quickly dismissed me, but fortunately, you had mentioned that you had left me behind in the alien land, so they believed me. That is how important you are to me, Lee: I sought you out before I looked for my own family."

The two dried themselves off and stepped out of the bathroom.

"You are most welcome here, my love. We will continue with this conversation after you have slept. You look exhausted," Lee said, kissing Judy, who needed more of his affection. Within seconds the two were making love. Within minutes, she shuddered and lay still—heaving. Lee held her until she fell asleep and tiptoed from the bed to break the news to Wairimu.

"Hello, Wairimu," Lee said and decided to hold off telling Wairimu about Judy. He chose to first continue with the earlier conversation. "I lost Malia. She got pregnant with my child just before I vanished. When she broke the news to her family, they disowned her, and her life spiralled. She became an addict and married Antonio Diego, our Brazilian classmate. They got wasted together, but they are trying to get back to the straight and narrow again and live a more responsible life. Diego now owns a garage. I hope both of them will be okay over time, but that is Malia's story. She delivered my son while in jail, and he was promptly taken to a children's orphanage. I took the boy with me back to South Korea yesterday and now intend to raise him. So, it has been such a rollercoaster for me, Mau."

"I am so sorry, Lee. All that was so unexpected. Why didn't you tell me earlier? I am sure you must have felt alone and heartbroken."

"It has not been easy. However, I have some great news too, my dear Mau. Judy is currently sleeping in my bed," Lee said excitedly.

"*Whaaat!*" Wairimu exclaimed. "Are you kidding me? What do you mean, Lee?"

"Judy, our friend and sister from the Super World, is sleeping in my bed. I am not pulling your leg, dear."

"Did she land in your backyard, Lee?"

"She landed at the USA Academy compound. It was her at the door when I excused myself to answer it during our call."

"Wow!" Wairimu was lost for words at how things were turning out. "Lee, my friend, it turns out your quickies were not in vain," she said, and they both burst out laughing as great friends would. "Now you have the boy and another baby coming. Congratulations, my friend."

"Come on, Mau. I am a man, and my balls were killing me sometimes. Her generosity saved the day," they burst out laughing again.

"You know what, Lee, she is your best bet right now. You have spent more time with her than any other woman. She may not be your dream woman, but she is the only one in this life who has given you unconditional love. Judy is lovely in her unique way. Give her your undivided attention, and you will be a happy man. To me, you have always been number two. To Malia, you do not matter anymore—life sometimes chooses the best for you without you even knowing it. Embrace Judy, and you will be able to raise your two children with so much love in your family. Any other woman might give your son from Malia a hard time, but for Judy. It is a small price to pay to have you for the rest of her life since she already knew that there was another woman in your life. Remember, she has never loved before; you are the first man in her life. I am sure you two will make a beautiful couple. You have all my blessings, comrades. Please come with her to Africa for my dowry event."

"Wairimu, you are the sister I never had. Thank you for simplifying things for me. I feel much better now. Your presence clouded Judy's beauty; now that you are miles away from me, I can focus and love her," Lee said and chuckled.

"Come on, Lee. That was your illusion from day one. I was completely spaced out and stressed beyond words. I never hinted at my affection for you in the state I was in. But yes, you are a very handsome and well-abled man. If Jamal were out of the picture, I wouldn't mind being married as a fifth or tenth wife to you," the two friends laughed. "The care you accorded Judy and me

can never be repaid. I am happy Judy has filled that gap you desperately needed to get filled. She is the only woman I can trust with you. She took care of you all that time we were in that wasteland, and we don't remember you holding back in reciprocating with goodwill. I will forever be indebted to you, my dear Lee."

Judy had woken up and sat next to Lee, stroking his hand.

"You are always welcome, my dear. Please talk to Judy. She is awake now," Lee said, handing over the phone.

"Hello, Wairimu. Three years is such a long time. How are you? How have you been? I returned to earth seven days after you. When you left me out there by myself, nothing could calm my loneliness. I now understand what you felt about your gulf boy. The greatest value I have earned from you two good people is becoming a more social being. When you left the Super World ahead of me, life was meaningless. I felt like I had lost my first love in life, my Lee. Even if I were not pregnant, I could have still looked for Lee. I missed him so much. I know for now the relationship is neither here nor there because he was returning to his love, Malia, but I do not care whether I will be his number two."

"There is no Malia in the picture anymore, dear," Wairimu assured Judy. "She lost it when Lee disappeared and got married to someone else. She had a son, though, and Lee took the baby, so now you are a mother of one already as you wait for the one in your womb."

"Wait, what are you saying Wairimu! I will be Lee's only wife?"

"Yes, my dear Judy. You are the only flower to beautify his life. The rest of us have paved the way for you, Madam Judy," Wairimu said with her voice as cheerful as ever.

"I am okay with the baby boy, Wairimu. I love babies and would take them in even if they were three. How is your gulf boy? You sound like he waited for you."

"Yes, he did; we are together and happy. It was worth the waiting, Judy."

"I am so happy for you, my darling. I respect your resilience, which also gave me Lee who I suspected had his eyes on you. Even Malia never meant anything when he was in your presence. If I were a man, I could as well have eyed you because of many things but chief among them, your wisdom. You are a very well-rounded woman and kind too."

Lee felt embarrassed knowing that Judy had seen how he was eyeing Wairimu. He grabbed her and kissed her lips while taking the phone from her. Lee then held her shoulders and made her rest on him as he finished his conversation with Wairimu. But, before he could restart their conversation with Judy, his mother walked into his room.

"Hello, my Lee. Oh, you have a guest over. You never told me you would have someone over."

"Oh, hi, Mom, this is Judy. I was with her in the Super World. Remember the lady I told you about from Australia?"

"Your girlfriend when you were there?" Lee's Mom asked.

Lee giggled nervously, "Yes, Mom, she was my girlfriend there. No need to announce it to the world, Mom. She had been left behind when we returned to earth but followed us days later. She was able to find my address and her way here. Also, Mom, she is pregnant with my child."

Lee's mother's face lit up as she moved forward with her arms wide open, "Welcome, my girl. It must have been tough for you coming here, a foreign land that you knew nothing about. Feel at home. You are home, now and our baby in your womb is safe. This is Lee's son," Lee Mom said kissing the small boy on his head. "I hope he has mentioned him to you."

"Yes, he has Mom," Judy said, smiling at the little boy. "Hello, Lee Junior?" She bent to hug the little boy, who hugged her back and tightly held on to her.

"How did you know that was his name, Judy?" Lee asked.

"I am now his mother; how can I not know my son's name?" Lee Junior beamed with joy as Judy lifted him. He rested on her breasts for some time and started falling asleep. *Their chemistry is perfect.* Lee thought as he stared at Judy and his son.

Lee's mother dashed to the kitchen to cook a feast to welcome her daughter-in-law. She was delighted that his son had quickly replaced the Mexican girl, erasing her memory. *He will now be more focused. I thought I had lost a son, but now I have a girl and a grandson.* The meal was ready in no time, and she prepared the table for all to have dinner.

Once Lee's father got home, the news of Judy's arrival and becoming a grandfather was broken to him. His excitement was palpable. He asked about her parent's phone number, and once Judy gave him, he called her parents to

notify them that their daughter was back from her time travel episode and that his son intended to marry her.

"I will be sending them soon to Australia to visit you," he said to Judy's parents and chuckled as he handed the phone to Judy.

"Hello, Mom and Dad," Judy said, tears trickling down her face. "I am sorry I chose to follow love first before returning to Australia. I landed in the USA, and since I discovered I was pregnant, I decided to find Lee, the father of my child. His family has embraced me as part of their family, and I am so happy. I really want to come home, and I will, with my husband and our children. I have one more child too. I will tell you about it."

"We are so happy for you, Judy. Now that you are back and even settling down is amazing. That is so fast, but we trust you. We have been very worried all this time, not knowing where you were or where we would start searching, but we did not give up on you," Judy's father gushed at her daughter. "We will be waiting for you to come and see us, my girl."

CHAPTER 21

THE ANCHOR

It is fine not to be okay

I SAT ON THE BED staring at the massive bag containing my belongings. My mother had it all packed after it became clear I may not return to my hostel after my mysterious disappearance. Having them packed and waiting was a clear expression of her hope that I would return one day.

I slowly started unpacking and putting what I needed in a smaller bag. Those are the only items I would carry to the new home with Jamal. The items in the bag flooded my mind with memories. Some were gifts from friends I was close to before my time travel. I picked a skirt Cheng bought me from a Chinese shop and smiled. It was a beautiful piece meant for the boys' appreciation at a time when miniskirts were the order of the day. But I was going to be married in a month, and such outfits would not show up often in my life after the wedding. I threw it among those items I wouldn't carry into my new life.

I then picked up a set of earrings that Neon insisted on gifting me. Thank God I was in good books with him. He was now the Personal Assistant to the Los Angeles Mayor. *I will close enough deals for my darling Jamal's family business through Neon,* I thought to myself hopefully. The earrings were not as stylish as they had been back in the day, but I resolved to keep them anyway. *I will wear them when I invite him for a cup of tea to remind him I still value him a lot. Such small gestures can go a long way.*

I toyed with some girly items in the bag and resolved to keep them. *I might use them to impress my baby girl if I ever get one—some I will take to my village and donate to my nieces.* I heard Jamal's car drive into the parking lot, and within a few minutes, he knocked on the door. He had come to pick me up as he had promised.

"Look at all these things. It turns out Mom kept my things after I vanished," I told him, pointing at the clutter. I told Jamal that I wanted to give away some of the items, but he did not want to hear any of that stuff. Jamal wanted me to keep everything he bought me—from the rags to bedding. To him, those items

held the memory of our time together on campus—something he didn't want to consider losing.

He promptly sat down and asked me to try on all the clothes he had bought me that I hadn't won since I disappeared, and I happily indulged him. Some fit me well, while others were just a size bigger that I'd have to put on weight for them to look good on me.

Once the love birds finished packing, I decided to call my grandmother before we could leave for Kenya. After my time travel experience, my schedule had become so tight that I hadn't found time to talk to her. I dialled her number, and once she heard my voice was so excited. "How are you, Grandma?"

"It is Mimo… oiii my girl. I am well, my dear. I prayed to God to keep me alive until the day I could see you again, my love. I no longer care whether you get married to a Bacchu or not. All I care about is your well-being. Is he still there, or hawks snatched him?" Grandma inquired, giggling.

The old can be cryptic that she should say she no longer cares whether Jamal married me while, in the same breath, wanting to know if he is still available to marry me.

"He waited for me, Grandma, just like you. Your prayers brought me back, Grandma. Life was hell on the alien planet we went to, and I missed you all so much. Every day I trusted that I would one day reunite with my loved ones. How is Grandpa? Can I say hi to him?"

"Your Grandpa is no more. He developed kidney complications and passed on last year," Grandma's voice dropped with what I knew to be sadness. It felt like a frigid blanket was thrown over me. My mood dipped.

We stayed silent for a few seconds. I tried hard not to cry but couldn't hold it for long and started sobbing. I knew I couldn't keep talking to Grandma, so I told her I would call her later and hung up.

I can't believe you are gone, Grandpa, and you will not answer my call from the other end. How do you depart before I am back from this stupid time travel? You must have been a sorrowful soul to have left without knowing my fate.

I stood up and wobbled to my room, struggling to see where I was going due to the tears welling in my eyes—I needed to cry all I wanted in peace. I curled my body into a ball and hid under the blanket. I would have loved to hear his voice on voicemail again, but Mom had gotten rid of my phone a year

ago to stop the nightmares and depressing feelings of the loss of her daughter whenever she looked at it.

I wanted to get to Grandpa and ask whether my vanishing shortened his days on this earth due to the sorrow and uncertainty of my ever coming back. I wondered how Grandma was coping alone since we had all left her alone in the homestead.

Yet perhaps she was coping just fine. Grandmother always reminded me that I came into the world alone and would also leave alone. Whatever I did, I should never measure my situation against others but myself. She also reminded me I would live alone for most of my life and that I would keep moving, from parents to school to work to marriage to children, as part of my journey through life.

"Only through our love and friendships can we create the illusion for the moment that we are not alone since, even at death, we go alone. We do not choose who will follow in death, and that is why your Grandpa had to depart without waiting to see you again," I imagined Grandma would say.

I looked back on my life and concurred with what I thought Grandma would tell me: Sophie was my childhood friend, but we had to part ways when we each went to different high schools.

She got married and has a family. I made more friends while on campus, but we parted ways after completing our courses. As we got jobs, our distance grew, and now I'm in the US, forging forward with others. I have a fiancée, my mom, and my brother as my constant companions.

Life, indeed, is an expedition. We must be mindful of ourselves since it is our life. It is also an exciting cycle; when young, we are fearless and can face anything ahead of us—we have no limits because our parents are taking care of us. However, as we grow up, life becomes more challenging. To add to that, we can't keep going back to our parents for help; we have to fight our own battles. Sometimes trial and error become our saving grace as we live through it.

I remembered my last conversation with Grandpa before my time travel: "Stop worrying about me, Wairimu. I am doing okay, better than when you left. I hope to see you next year when you close the school. Do not take forever to return; you are the youngest we had, and we miss you a lot. I hope people

there treat you with the respect you deserve, my baby. I bought you two goats that I hope will have multiplied five times by the time you are back."

That was motivation enough to make me travel home to see Grandpa. "Thanks a million, Grandpa. Take a photo of the goats for me and send it so that I can see them. I need to go now. I will keep in touch and thank you for the wonderful surprise—my love to everyone. I need to catch my bus," I remember once telling Grandpa as I rushed to catch my bus to school.

I remember thinking on my way to school at one time: *I wish I could move those goats here to keep myself busy on Sundays, but Mom has a small compound. We are not allowed to keep livestock in city residential areas in the US.*

Jamal joined me in bed and held me tightly. "I'm sorry for the sudden burst of emotions, my love. I am not usually weepy, but Grandma just told me Grandpa passed away. I knew he was unwell, but my return raised my expectations that I would find both my grandparents alive and happy to receive me back in my village. Grandpa struggled with diabetes for a long time, which eventually killed him. Before I left the village, he would struggle to walk to the market to run his business. The family passed a resolution to close the shop since Grandpa was not under pressure to make an income. His children would send him some float for his upkeep and medication. He was too exhausted to do much, but his mind was still sharp and vibrant. He would spend time watching his livestock and reading the local newspaper."

My tears flowed freely. "When I remember the sacrifices Grandpa made for me to attend school and have a decent life, it breaks my heart to know that he is now no more. I did not want to imagine he could die without knowing I had made it back. He hadn't even tasted my hard-earned money. I had promised to buy Grandpa a bicycle after his red one broke down and a new radio. I regret not having bought him the radio, yet it was not pricy in those days. I got consumed by your love, Jamal, and forgot about the small things that count. Grandpa will not even see me get married," I wailed.

"Do not worry, my love. His soul will witness everything good that will happen to you," Jamal assured me.

"You are right, my love. Now we need to head home before the same happens to Grandma."

I won't be alone when returning. I will be with my love Jamal. I know that will make you happy, Grandma, and very fulfilled.

Jamal lightly stroked my hair, and for the first time in a while, I just stared at him. It made me think of the time I visited his home in Qatar. I was surprised by who I was dealing with when I got there. Jamal was from an eccentric and popular family. His family belonged to a small group of about ten wealthy landlords in Qatar. He had married a pleasant Arabic girl called Huda. Her ambitions and desire to marry the man she was in love with were cut short by tradition when she was forced to marry Jamal. Now that I was back, she desperately wanted to marry her dream man. Jamal and Huda held a secret between them. She was pregnant when she married Jamal, but they chose to keep it a secret to avoid misunderstandings between the two families. She requested Jamal for a divorce so she could be with her true love, which was something Jamal graciously agreed to do.

No one among Jamal and Huda's families disagreed with the move, especially Huda's family: they did not want their daughter to have a co-wife. Huda and I had become good friends, especially after she disclosed her secret. She got married to her long-time boyfriend before our dowry day. He had waited for her patiently.

Jamal held my hand and helped me to my feet. He then led me out, and we walked towards the ocean, where I could see a yacht anchored.

"What do you see, *my legend of the sea?*" Jamal asked me, pointing at the yacht's side.

It looked like an ordinary yacht, so I blurted out, "A yacht. What about it?"

"Look closer, my love."

It was then I saw the name Mau emblazoned on the boat's side.

"You bought me a yacht, Jamal?" I couldn't let myself believe it.

"All for you, my Mau. That's the place I would anchor as I penned my thoughts at the end of my day. With hope, you would return to me from the sea that swallowed you when you were gone. It was such a lonely spell for me and the yacht; it didn't have its owner, and I didn't have my queen."

I was so excited. It all felt like a dream. The yacht was the definition of opulence; everything from the seats to the cushions had a Mau insignia.

"Thank you so much, my dear," I gushed over my man and held him closely.

Jamal wanted to take me out to the open ocean for a ride, something I couldn't refuse, and as he drove the massive boat, we discussed his ex-wife.

"Women, you have no secrets. We agreed with Huda that the baby would be our secret to the grave, yet she told you I am not the father," Jamal joked. "I bet that made you feel very special, huh?"

"You also felt special that I did not fall for Lee during our time travel, did you?" we both burst out laughing.

"Do not even mention that. I would have taken you back even if you had Lee's children. I thank God you waited, Mau. It would have broken my heart if you had fallen in love with anyone else. I can't even imagine how Lee felt after losing Malia."

"It was providence for him to have started something with Judy during the time travel. Otherwise, he would have been forced to start life all over again with a child to raise," I added.

"Who is Judy?" Jamal asked absentmindedly.

"The lady we found ourselves together on that godforsaken planet. I told you about her. They became darlings with Lee."

"Wow! Her presence saved me, my wife. Otherwise, if it were just you and Lee, this relationship could have been history," we both laughed at Jamal's silliness. "I will hug her tight when we meet."

"You are so funny, my dear. And you have nothing to worry about. You are the only man that saturates my mind. No one was even close to replacing you, handsome!"

Jamal stared lovingly into my eyes and then pulled the boat into the jetty. "I need to give you a tour of the land that belongs to your future husband. Then we could visit my office and see our businesses as you tour the place."

"That was fun, my dear. Thank you so much. I wish I could take the yacht back to the village and give Grandma a ride."

"I have organised for the yacht to be shipped to the US and ensured that it can do business there so that it can make you some pocket money as you study. You can use it during your free time, my Mau," he promised.

I was in awe, staring at my fiancée, completely speechless. I did the only thing my brain thought I could do. I drew in for a kiss, a very long kiss.

"You can invite Grandma to the States and give her a ride, too," Jamal said once I had pulled back to look into his eyes.

"For sure, that is what I will do, my darling."

I had so much fun driving around with Jamal to see all the places he intended me to visit, and as I did, I couldn't help but wonder, *all this for being polite… Attitude.*

Jamal's parents were also happy that he had finally found his true love. They blessed our *safari* to Kenya, promising to follow us in a week with the dowry and gifts to my family for our traditional wedding.

CHAPTER 22

THE DREAM

Amenitendea

WE WERE ON A FLIGHT to Kenya—my Jamal and me—a dream come true for both of us.

"During my long, lonely nights, I would envision the journey with you, my Mau. I did not know when or how it would happen. But the dream never faded," Jamal said as he caressed my hand.

"I feel more honoured and happy that it is happening. With the chaos and pain we encountered to make this a reality, I am thrilled we are here," I told him, looking into his dreamy eyes. "I wonder how life wraps a good dream in such grief. I am thrown into a weird time travel phenomenon, and you become a 'zombie' for missing me too much. I had to sit back and conquer all the impossible mountains—not by doing much but by reminding my soul that all would be well and that I would be with you again one day. However, that wasn't always the case. I at times imagined you forgot about me and moved on with life, making me cry for days. I convinced myself that fate does not care whether you are good or evil; when it strikes, all are thrown in the same boat: swimming or sinking is everyone's choice."

"Mau, I feel like I have literally resurrected from the dead. I had no idea whether you were dead or alive. All I knew was I felt caged in a vacuum that made me blind to all that was happening around me. I had no life. It was all squeezed out by loneliness. My senses only returned immediately after Cheng called me with news of your return. You have no idea how my soul longed for you. Maybe we were a couple in another life because this will remain a mystery to me. And also how close our families have gotten as a result of our love," Jamal told me as he gently squeezed my hand.

The plane touched down with a bump and slowed down as it taxied on the runway, then came to a halt. We landed in Nairobi at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport—JKIA.

"This place looks stunning. I did not expect to find a very modern city, my dear. You only talk of a jungle. The first thing I expected to see was a lion," Jamal joked.

I found it funny that Jamal also assumed that Kenya was just a jungle. "I know, you will see all that and more. It is a beautiful country, home to wildlife and so many other things attributable to a civilised society. We have a unique city, so much so there is a game park inside it. That is where I am taking you for breakfast, at a restaurant called *Rangers*. My cousin Sophie should be here to receive us."

We disembarked from the big jumbo jet and headed for the waiting bay where we would be received.

"I cannot wait to have our breakfast so I can eat viewing wild animals," Jamal said, beaming like a child.

Sophie was overjoyed to see us. We quickly put our bags in the waiting car and headed for the park. Jamal was wide-eyed the whole way, confessing that he had never seen any other park in the world at the heart of a city.

"Nairobi is the only city in the world with a game park within its environs," Sophie explained to Jamal.

Before we settled for breakfast, we drove through the park, where he enjoyed the experience of seeing at close quarters the Big Five animals: the elephant, lion, rhino, leopard, and buffalo. We then enjoyed our breakfast as I caught up with Sophie, and Jamal got to know her. Once we were done with breakfast, we got back into the car and started our journey to Nyeri, the land of the *Mau Mau Legend, Wairimu Ndegwa.*

Half the time as we travelled, I forgot I was with Jamal and got consumed by my home's beauty. The beautiful Thika highway, which I left under construction, was complete. I was finally home and was thrilled to hear my mother tongue being spoken around me. I could not hide my pride. I nearly missed the turn to my grandparents' house since most of the trees that lined the path were cut down, and there were new structures all over. Grandma had also erected a modern gate in her compound. I smiled some more.

We did not notify my grandma that I was coming with Jamal. It was to be a surprise, followed by another surprise when Mom and JP arrived a few days later. We had intended to arrive together, but we could not be booked on the same plane because we came to Kenya straight from Qatar, and Mom and JP

were coming from the US. Once we got to Grandma's homestead, we found her beautiful farm a bit neglected; only Napier grass seemed to grow. Her small kitchen garden was not well tended. I exited the car alone as Jamal and Sophie waited to see Grandma's reaction.

True to my expectation, she sprinted to meet me, and we hugged, tears of joy clouding my eyes. As I held her body in the hug, I realised Grandma had grown quite thin and frail. I didn't comment, but I imagined my time travel and losing her husband must have had their toll on her.

Jamal and Sophie exited the car, and there she was, happier than I had ever seen her. Grandma was thrilled. Once Grandma held on to Jamal's arm, she refused to let go. She felt like, finally, Bacchu had come to marry her. Jamal was at home with her, especially when he remembered her prophecy that Wairimu would marry a man like him. She did not care whether he was Muslim. Her Bacchu was Buddhist, anyway.

Neighbours also started flocking into her compound, curious to see me but inquisitive about what a time traveller looked like. They had heard about my predicament. Some commented how they had never seen such a good-looking guy. The day was full of eating, drinking, and merry-making as Jamal met his other family in Kenya.

The following day, Grandma gave Jamal a tour of my village school, the river we would fetch water from, and the local shopping centre. I wondered how they communicated, but they both seemed very happy. As they took the tour, I visited Grandpa's grave to mourn the man I cared so much about.

I sat down next to the grave, contemplating death. It is so final and often so sudden that many don't get to say sorry or thank you to the departed. I read my Grandpa's eulogy and thought about how much I had to tell him. He was an outstanding and selfless grandpa. His smile was sunshine to us, and his heart was solid gold. He always had a gift for us when we visited the market to help with selling his wares. He was happy to answer all the silly questions we needed to be answered. It did not matter whether we made sense or didn't. He argued that we would be the future teachers, and that his duty was to answer all our questions to prepare us for that future. My cousin and I were his closest grandchildren, and he took great care to ensure that we knew he cared. He attended our school meetings, and I remember him taking me to Nairobi to enrol in the university. He was never weary of visiting to check on how I was

doing. He was the only family that visited me during my four years at University in Nairobi.

Grandpa, you had great dreams and ambitions. I thank God for giving you so many years in this world since not everyone has the chance to grow old. I hope as you rested, your checklist was *empty. I was happy that you replaced all the furniture in the house and upgraded Grandma's kitchen to a modern one. She no longer has to cook from her outdoor kitchen at night. I am so glad I knew you as my Grandpa and a dear friend. You prepared me on what to expect in a love affair from a man's perspective, and I am really grateful. I applied your advice to Jamal. He is your replica regarding kindness and caring.* I shook with quiet sobs of sadness and gratitude as I thought this. It is what I needed to grieve my Grandpa.

"You have always been there for Grandma through thick and thin, protecting her jealously from this wild world. I admired that about you. I have no words to express my gratitude for who you were. I wish you all the stars in the blue sky until we meet again, my dear Grandpa. Rest in peace, my all-time best cheerleader."

The sorrow I felt weighed me down immensely, so much so that I felt like I had said nothing at all to him. The thought of knowing I would never have another conversation with Grandpa was overwhelming.

I planted a flower next to his grave and promised to be an excellent wife to Jamal as Grandma was to him. A thought came to me that made me smile. I remembered one evening when Grandpa went to the kitchen to update Grandma about his day in the market. He mentioned having a rough time during the day due to a running tummy. Grandma was mad at him for discussing his running stomach as we sat at the dinner table. She angrily told him to let go of the topic. An argument ensued with both grandparents trying to argue their points: Grandpa wondered why he couldn't talk about his experience while Grandma tried to explain why the setting was wrong.

Grandpa wondered out loud in Kikuyu: *"Heii…Kũri ũndũ ũtari ũndũ? Akorwo ũcio ti ũndũ nĩ kĩĩ?" (*Is there anything we experience such as a running tummy that is not human, and if that experience is not human, what is it then?*)*

We knew he was pulling Grandma's leg as we cracked our ribs with laughter. The whole incident made me laugh for days.

Another memory came to mind. One day, he ordered roasted beef for us from the marketplace while we were at his shop. His friends showed up and

started eating his portion without politely asking whether they could join in. He left the rest of the meat for them, claiming it would look odd if his friends found him sharing a meal from one plate with peasants.

"They have their money, yet they cannot buy themselves meat but wait to borrow from others," I remember him saying. I found that very funny.

I then felt someone hug me from behind. I looked at the hands, hoping to see my Jamal, but it was my brother.

"You have finally arrived home, darling brother. Did you need a pin or a map to get here? It has been so long since you visited," I said, turning to hug him.

"I know, my dear sister. It has been such a long time. Nothing looks familiar anymore. Let me see Grandpa's eulogy," JP requested, and as he read it, tears started flowing down his cheeks.

*"*Grandpa, I am so sorry I changed my name to fit in the land of opportunities. I promise you that I will change it back. I thought names had no meaning, but mine has a history and is deeply rooted in who we are as a community. I could have come earlier to ride bicycles with you and eat *mutura*. I am so sorry I didn't. I thank God you insisted that Mom takes me with her to the USA. At first, I felt disowned and forced to live away from my people, but today I am a hero who has reaped from your wisdom. You had enough burdens from Mom and aunty Nyokabi, leaving their daughters behind when they travelled abroad.

On the other hand, despite all your obligations, you showered the girls with so much love that they felt like you were their birth parents. In return, Wairimu and Sophie showered you with love and companionship, which we—those who travelled abroad—failed to offer. I hope to meet you in the Promised Land one day," JP said, wiping tears from his eyes.

He put on the grave a storybook Grandpa had bought him as a child. "When I come, we will finish the last chapter of this book you bought me. I never read the last chapter after I left for the States. Rest in peace, Grandpa."

I took his hand into mine, and we gazed at the sky as if we expected Grandpa would give us a wave from above.

"Wairimu, I now realise how all the things we chase are vanity—Grandpa is gone. Whatever possessions he had, he could not come back to claim them. Other people must decide what happens to his wealth—some of it, like his house, could actually go to waste since we have curved our journey elsewhere

and can't stay here to take it over and take care of it. We should make the best of what we believe in now: eat, drink, and make merry," JP said.

I concurred. "Our sweat affords us all we have, so we should enjoy all we have when still alive."

"But even when wealth is left, people misuse and suffer from lack too," JP added. "Older people should never curse their children. In case of delinquency, they should leave them to God for guidance on their journey. There is no blueprint for anyone that guides them on the twist and turns of this life. All they can bank on is the love and advice shared with them—everything else is up to them. If our forefathers had a chance to revisit the earth, I am sure they would die before identifying what they owned—ownership has changed hands so many times that sometimes what they owned is lost."

"Where did you leave Mom?" I asked.

"She met your Muslim boy and joined their tour to interpret what Grandma was explaining to him. They should be back soon. I thank God that you are realising your dream Wairimu. I had my doubts about Jamal marrying you. Now I know I stand a chance with my Mexican girl—Mom doesn't have a vibe for Mexicans for some reason. I guess she attracted this fate for me."

"How come you never introduced her to me?"

"We met the other day as she visited her father in the US. We had arrested him over his visa, which had expired, and hadn't formally sought its renewal. It took us some time to get to know each other, but we warmed up to each other. You can meet her when you return to the States. She works with a land multinational company in the US."

"That is really good news, bro. Looking forward to meeting her," I said as I hugged JP and held his hand to lead him to Grandma's house. "Let's get in the house so I that can serve you some food."

JP yawned as we neared the house. "I hadn't even noticed how hungry I was until you mentioned it. I miss grandma's food."

As we entered the sitting room area of the house, he stopped at Grandma's photo with Grandpa. "They look so young in this photo. I wonder when we lose our youth and give in to life's demands. I cannot wait to see you as granny, Mimo," he called me with the nickname Grandpa liked to use. I will take this photo with me to remember my grandparents."

He wrapped it with a page of an old newspaper he found on the table and packed it in his bag. He then proceeded to the guest room that used to be his

bedroom and collected all the things he could find from when he was a child. A hand-woven hat particularly amused him as he tried to imagine how his then tiny and inexperienced hands had managed to weave it.

"Memories are made of these. It cannot fit on my head, but I will cherish it for life," he murmured to himself as he packed it.

Once he was done packing, he returned to the sitting area where I had served him some food. He ate in silence, only to be interrupted by Mom, Grandma, and Jamal as they returned from the village tour. Mom picked up JP's food and started eating it. "Go for more in the kitchen," she ordered JP, who didn't look amused, though he knew Mom had said it in jest.

I chuckled. It felt like home again with family all around me, including how it was like Mom to drive JP up the wall.

I walked over to Jamal and gave him a very tight hug. "Welcome back, my dear. I hope you enjoyed the tour."

"My Mau, I am happy you understand how to be happy and satisfied. I heard about all the valuable traits you introduced to the villagers here. They greatly respect you. I visited your primary and high school, and the teachers said you were a compassionate girl. You did your best to make a difference and turned around the failure mentality around the school. My dear, you are a gallant fighter. I was told your bravery and desire to be helpful kept you helping any student who came your way for assistance. I am happy to be the man in your life. It did not matter to you that your struggles were more than those of others; you worked hard and ensured that others could shine. Everyone was free to copy from your notes. They all remembered how much you sacrificed for other students. The school now competes nationally, and I was told it is hard to get admitted there because of the high number of applicants attracted to it due to its good academic performance. Well done, Sweetheart. I am so proud of you, my Mau," Jamal said, beaming with pride. He kissed my lips warmly, and I could feel myself blushing.

"I had forgotten all I went through growing up in this place," I giggled shyly. "I guess I spiced my way to success, as they put it. One can only compete favourably and enjoy the journey when interacting with their match. I had to make more people appreciate books so that it was fun for us to be in class during those tough times."

All this time, Jamal looked at me in awe. "Your life has truly been an adventurous one. Some of us just flow with the life we are given and have no

adventure to talk about. Thank you for being my wife, my love. Your experience has taught me a lot."

"Thank you, my love. I have realised with time that consistency transforms average into excellent. I am happy all my efforts in the past yielded fruits. The University Academy class will be very proud to read my attributes once they see them on the school wall. I remember I was a prayer warrior back in the day: I prayed to God for the students to be more committed and compassionate and that they should be safe from worldly temptations that could derail them from the grades we aimed to achieve. Our motto was the phrase 'self-esteem.' We believed we would pass our exams because we deserved to, despite the needy environment around us, and we did do well. I thank God for my ability to motivate others. Life becomes more meaningful when one cannot only be able to inspire people with their presence but also live in their hearts forever. I think all this came about by being truthful in how I overcame every challenge as I envisioned more significant breakthroughs. I passed this inspiration to others who kept the torch going as expected, hence why success still rings true in the school today. It is now a form of collective responsibility. I am very proud of what I was able to do growing up. I lit up enough souls during my time. Unlike you guys, we used candles and kerosene lanterns to study and ensured that we safeguarded our environment by planting trees. It reminds me that I saw the small forest of the trees we planted while still in school, an initiative that now seems incredible that it took ten years, a few trees at a time, to be what it is now. I might not have understood it then, but I now recognise it as hope in the forest it has now become; how hope can be a tool that works magic when applied."

"Does it mean that this touch," Jamal said, lightly caressing my hand, "does not show you I care, Mau, if hope is all you believe in?"

"Come on, Jamal. Why are you changing the topic? It is not about you. It is about my school." We both laughed. I knew he was playing games with me and had become accustomed to him desiring my attention. "I know you care, and that is why I love you so much."

"I am kidding, my dear. I banked on the same hope while you were away on that Godforsaken planet you disappeared to, and it worked magic for me too. Oh, and so you know, I have donated a complete library to your high school, both the facility and books in your honour. I hope to have it built by the end of next year. You have never really given me your high school story, my love,

but today I read it on the school wall—patience truly is power. I could not believe my eyes. You graduated from such a 'dungeon,' please forgive the word, and made it to the US. You acted and resolved to excel despite hardships. I guess the season was ripe for you, my girl. Whatever principles you applied, they were totally on the mark and rewarded you well. I salute you, my Mau."

"I don't know what to say, Sweetheart; thank you. That is so profound. My *alma mater* will soon have a fully-fledged library because I stood for something. That is a big deal."

Jamal held my hand tightly. "All will fall in place in due course. While you disappeared from this earth, I convinced my heart that it was possible to lobby for this country I fell in love with as a result of meeting you. The first miracle has just happened," Jamal said.

"I remember suggesting to the University Academy class to donate a classroom for one of the schools in the country, but their response wasn't anything to write home about," Wairimu recalled. "They laughed at me because I was different, but I laughed back at them because they all shared a similar worldview and therefore thought the same. None of them hailed from a poor community or had ever experienced poverty.

"However, coming for our wedding will open their eyes," suggested Jamal, "and I am sure they will send enough donations to support the library I intend to get built for your alma mater. Spending time with you helps me understand just how 'big' life is—we are indeed from two different worlds. I have gained a lot of respect for my parents because I now see how much they sacrifice for me to enjoy the life that I live. I could not understand what you meant about your bond with your grandparents, but now I see it. They are literally your parents; you have a bedroom here, unlike in your brother's or mother's house. I guess it was your home longer than it had even been to them," Jamal said.

"You are right. My Mom stayed here for the first seventeen years of her life while I stayed for twenty-one years with my grannies. Anyway, enough of all that. It's dinner time."

I gladly served Jamal some food he enjoyed while seated with my brother, JP, who was halfway done with his. Once they finished eating, they sat together outside Grandma's granary and talked. It was nice seeing them share a conversation as friends, unlike the snob Jamal encountered before he was accepted as a family member.

CHAPTER 23

TIME & SEASON

It's Never Too Late

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, my mother woke up determined to find my father, Kiragu. Her first stop was at the home of her old friend Purity to enquire about my father's whereabouts. She got his phone number and made the call. My father was excited to hear from her and immediately decided to come and see her. He was thrilled to see the mother of his children.

"I have been missing you a lot, *Muso,* and I regret the pain I caused you, beautiful," Dad used the name he would call my mother when they were still chummy. To him, their love life started when they parted ways 30 years ago. He wouldn't miss the opportunity to pamper Mom with beautiful words. "I was out of line then, but forgive my naivety. Since you left, I felt like you took a piece of me. I only learned the other day about our baby girl, Wairimu. Why didn't you tell me you got pregnant? Why didn't you want to marry me back then? I wonder whether you told my children they have a father." There was a hint of bitterness in his voice, but he added, "I, too, have not done too badly in life. I would like the children to inherit my wealth when I am no more. You were my first love, and I hope it is not too late to pay for my sins." He paused, waiting for Mom to say something, but she just stood there, staring at him. "Why the silence, *Muso*?"

In reality, all my father said was sweet melody to Mom's ears. My mother had fantasised about hearing those words for years.

"Stop your *Musoing* right there. I am now the grandmother version of the girl you had been addressing years ago. I am not here to destabilise your marriage. My heart failed me, even though I came searching for you. I did not see the need to tell you I was pregnant with Wairimu in case you chose to humiliate me again. I love you, and being the father to my children, I have no regrets for loving you. I aimed to get two children, a boy and a girl, and that's what I got. I have never desired any other man in my life since, so I have been fine, Kiragu. My heart has only one man living in it: my children's father.

However, the pain you caused me is like cancer to my soul. I hate you, but at the same time, I miss you a lot. That is why I am here now."

"I hear you, Muthoni, and your words cut deep into me. The thing is, I got married, but up to date, I have not gotten other children. The only children I have are your children. My wife travelled to Britain after our wedding and never came back. I have remained a bachelor. Would you consider coming back?"

Kiragu had the most innocent look on his face. I couldn't help but wonder how convenient.

"I will be able to spoil you since it will just be the two of us—the kids are grown up now. I am sure no one would want to come back home and live with us, but retirement is knocking on the door for you and me. We can enjoy old age together," Dad was laying it at Mom's feet and seemed genuine about it.

"Wow! That is an interesting turn of events. But how do I convince Mom that I want to get married to the man who betrayed me? How does your family feel about it?" Muthoni enquired.

"I must say, I have been following this up for a while now. There was a discussion between our fathers before your Dad passed away—their concern was how you would react to the proposal. My parents felt that this was your home. I wronged you, but you are my destiny—the mother of my children. I want to be your anchor. I look forward to making up for the time we have lost and reviving our love for each other. I have your Dad's blessings. You can confirm with your Mom, *Muso*."

My mother was too confused to comment immediately. She was torn between going back to live with Dad and moving back with us to the States. Since Jamal and I were about to start giving her grandchildren, if she settled back in Kenya, she would miss the opportunity to spend time with her grannies. Yet she hadn't even spent enough time with me since I returned from time travel.

"I need to sleep over this Kiragu. That was unexpected. I am here to let you know Wairimu is getting married. If you like, you can come to grace our daughter's dowry ceremony."

"I heard about her time travel misfortunes from your Dad and would very much like to meet her and welcome her back. I would also like to talk to my children about your coming back to live with me. They have their lives now, and I respect that. We need a parental role that makes sense to them too, not

just us. I really hope you can forgive me, Muthoni, and be my wife. We can do our reunion ceremony after Wairimu's dowry. That way, the groom can pay her dowry to her grandmother, not me. She took up the role of being her parent in our absence and should be allowed to accept the dowry in respect of that role. After I pay your dowry, I shall be accorded the honour to pay for Mwangi's dowry as his father."

"His name is John Paul now, in short, JP," Mother corrected my father. "He felt betrayed by you and my Dad when he forced him to tag along with me when I left for the States. He needs a serious discussion to agree to this proposal."

"I know it will not be a walk in the park, but if you bite the bullet, they will be followers. I miss you, people, a lot."

"Why did you not communicate earlier? Why did you have to wait until now?" Muthoni quizzed Kiragu.

"All that time, I listened to your father, who insisted we wait a bit since you had been very sad after Wairimu's disappearance. I wish I were able to reach you then to ease your pain. Kindly come with me, Muthoni, to greet my parents, or should I call you Mama *Mimo*?" (Mimo is short for Wairimu.)

"Not too fast, Kiragu. We both failed miserably in bringing her up, so let us not take credit for who she is. However," Muthoni looked at Kiragu lovingly, "we can visit your parents, no worries. It has been a while since I saw them. It will be nice to see your mother again."

After my parents had done some light shopping, they headed to Kiragu's village. Kiragu's parents were overjoyed to see Muthoni. She informed them the whole family was there for Wairimu's dowry. They begged their grandchildren to be taken to them to say hello, and they promised to accept us.

The next stop was Grandma's home, and soon, a car honked at the gate. As usual, we thought it was more of the curious neighbours who showed up to see the time traveller. To our amazement, it was Mom and a man who looked familiar but who we had not met. When he got closer is then we realised it was our father. I could see JP in him, but Dad was a bit taller. He was a well-groomed man with a majestic walking style and a deep voice that we heard once he called our names from a distance. At a glance, one might think that it was Dad who lived in America and Mom was the villager. His clothes were

well-chosen and well-fitting, and his kinky hair was carefully pushed back. A pair of stylish horn-rimmed glasses completed his polished look.

JP and I were so surprised to see our Dad, and due to Jamal's presence, we tried our best to be as diplomatic as possible. Mom seized the moment and openly faced her fear of telling us what she felt. I stared at the two rediscovered lovebirds. They looked like the perfect couple. I could tell that our father was thrilled to reunite with his family. He told us what had conspired for him not to be together with our mother and his desire to marry her.

We looked at our mother in disbelief as she confirmed that all Kiragu was saying was the truth. She looked forward to getting back with our Dad.

"What!" we both exclaimed in utter dismay.

Her reply was cryptic." You cannot understand these things unless you experience them."

JP and I looked at each other and folded. We knew better than to try and convince Mother against anything her heart was set on.

Kiragu took charge like he had been present throughout our lives, "Your other grandparents are expecting you tomorrow. Kindly come over. They will slaughter a goat for you."

We were utterly speechless and could only follow the instructions being issued to us. For the first time, I felt like my father's child. It had to do with the way he authoritatively summoned us to be at our paternal grannies' the next day. It felt strange but very welcome. *Now I have both my parents.*

"I did not get a chance to raise you, JP, and Wairimu, but I have done what a dad would have longed to do for his children. I hope I am not too late," he removed a toy police chase car and handed it to JP, then a beautiful doll to me. The make looked dated, like something from the 1980s—but it was pretty.

"You may not believe it, but these are your childhood gifts. I bought them when I was a young man in anticipation that one day I would get a baby boy and a baby girl to whom I would present them. Now I am complete. You can pass the toys to my grandchildren when they come."

Jamal was more tickled than JP and I. He took the toys from us and thanked Dad from the bottom of his heart for us. JP took the toy car back from Jamal. He was excited—like a small boy would and hugged Dad.

Once our conversation with our parents was over, I sought after Jamal, who was outside gazing at the expansive greenery all around. "This is a different

world from mine. Thank you for allowing me to experience this side of the universe," he told me. "I am excited that your Dad has come looking for you. I am happy for your Mom, too—she has an empty nest, and getting back to your Dad is a good distraction. I wish them the best."

"I don't know what to feel about all this," JP said. He, too, had walked out of the house and, unknown to us, was standing right behind us.

"It is better than her getting married to a different man. So long as she was not coerced to do so, we should celebrate with her," I joined in. "However, he does owe you an apology, JP. For me, as they explained, Mom kept the pregnancy a secret, so he didn't know that I even existed."

"And now that you are a grown-up man, JP," Jamal added, "treat all this as water under the bridge. Just flow and move on with life. Time will heal any scars you might have and give you all the answers you demand, my dear brother."

My grandmother was very excited that Mom was finally getting back with Dad. "I prayed to God to unite the two of them one day and shame the devil. I hope your Grandpa is observing all this from heaven," she smiled. Kiragu has been coming here incessantly requesting our intervention to have Muthoni return to him. He even slaughtered a bull for our clan, but everyone agreed that we give your Mom time to heal after your disappearance."

"I am happy for her, Grandma. Let them start all over again," I told my clearly joyous Grandma.

Early the following day, Scholar was the first person in our compound. Her full name was Scholastica, but we all called her Scholar. She was my best friend at the University of Nairobi and the most unexpected guest that day. I was pleased that she came for my dowry and traditional wedding. It turns out she got to know about it from social media and traced where I was from to attend on the occasion, or so I thought.

Despite being a well-educated girl, she hadn't been lucky with men. After our brilliant performance on campus, Scholar focused on getting a scholarship to an Australian University where her then-boyfriend studied. She tried to get the scholarship without her boyfriend's help as she wanted to surprise him if she did get it and travelled there. She did get the scholarship. However, she only managed to surprise herself. When she got to Australia, she found that the man she thought was his had dropped from university and had become an interpreter in China. She also discovered that he was now married. We spent

the better part of morning with my best friend trying to catch up on happenings over the years after university.

Later that day we all got ready to visit our Dad's parents. Neighbours flocked into their compound to see the time traveller with her white man.

"I wish your Dad hadn't misbehaved. You would have been named after me. Now time has overtaken us. Nonetheless, we are proud to have met our grandchildren. We love you so much. I hope you and your husband will get many children who we expect you will name after us so that our names may live in your country, Qatar," Kiragu's mother told Jamal and me. She even seemed to implore us with her eyes, which I understood meant how serious she was with her request.

"We intend on getting twins after twins so that we get to include your name in the list, Grandma," I replied with a hearty laugh.

"Mwangi," she called out to JP.

"Yes, Grandma."

"When are you planning to get married?"

"I am already married, just waiting to carry out the formalities. I will come with my wife next time. I was waiting for Dad to put his house in order so that he could pay my dowry."

"That is exceptional, my Mwangi. He will pay for the dowry, and I look forward to meeting your wife. What is her name? Is she African?"

I turned to look at JP, who was now sweating. However, before he continued spewing more lies, Dad called him to meet his Grandpa and excused himself. As he stood up to leave, he tapped Jamal on his shoulder and asked him to follow.

I was also curious to hear the name of his girlfriend.

I turned to Scholar. "Take the chance, my dear. JP has no wife. It doesn't matter whether he is seeing someone. You might turn the tables, and he will pay the dowry for you before we leave for the States. I would love to go with you back to the States, my dear."

"He looks handsome, but will he give me a chance? He did not even give me a second glance when we met. How sure are you, Wairimu, that JP's heart is not taken?"

"My brother is a shy guy. After he met you, he came running to me, wanting to know your name and where I met you. His eyes were all over you, watching

you through the bedroom window when you were seated with Jamal at Granny's granary."

"You are kidding me, Wairimu. He looks polished and completely out of reach?"

"We will go out in the evening for a drink, and I am sure he will echo the words I tell you. JP is dying to win your love. Today will be the day you start a new life with my brother, just dream with me, Scholar. Nothing can stop us. Remember when we were on campus, and you always dreamed of making JP your man when I shared his photos with you? Every change we desire has to be a gamble, my darling Scholar. After all, you lost your boyfriend to a Chinese girl. The eyes are the windows to the soul, and your eyes have failed to see any other soul to replace the man who betrayed you long ago. Maybe that man is here right now in the form of someone you had a crush on years ago. Make a move since the opportunity is here with us. Later is for cowards. I only have Jamal because I did not wait for later. I dived into the chaos I had no idea how to solve. Now see how well rewarded I am."

"I'm so excited listening to you, but I am forever shy about men after my disappointment. How do I approach your handsome brother?" Scholar wondered, almost in tears.

"Snap out of that fear, Scholar. Look into JP's eyes intently, and don't be scared. You are miles away from home, and no one knows you here but me. If you do not cast your net now, there will be much to lose."

Without hesitation, as one possessed, Scholar walked with me in tow to where JP was having a conversation with Dad and boldly introduced herself as JP's fiancée. I echoed her and confirmed that she was my brother's fiancée. Though surprised, I could tell that JP was happy that we had saved him from further grilling. He longed to marry before me, but he was always afraid of women. I had pepped JP about Scholar, and he immediately took it up after the introduction.

"Yes, she is. Her name is Scholar, and she is Wairimu's best friend from her campus days. After Wairimu and Dad have completed their dowry rituals, we can discuss the rest later. I want Dad to be the one to get me a wife, just as Jamal's parents are committed to getting him Wairimu. Thank you, my dear, for finally laying it all out," JP turned and kissed Scholar's forehead, which she reciprocated with an endless hug.

EVERYONE WHO HAD PROMISED to come for my dowry ceremony had landed in Nairobi during the week. We had booked all of them into one hotel, The Safari Park Hotel. That would make it easy for us to deal with the logistics.

Unbeknownst to us, they had all planned to dress in African Ankara for our big day, and all looked gorgeous. I was happy that, for once, I had both my parents to receive guests.

Jamal's ex-wife, Huda, and Judy's presence made the event complete. They were happy for Jamal and me but jubilant that they, too, got their freedom to marry men of their choice.

Once the event was over, people started mingling with each other. Lee approached me and was very happy to see him. "Mau, this is one trip I did not want to miss to actualise my imagination of the 'home sweet home' you always told me about," he said, giving me a warm hug. "I wish all of us were as proud as you are about your roots, my dear. I hope we will not disappear again to that stupid time-travel thing. And let me tell you, if it does happen again, I will definitely be your time-travel husband. I hope Judy will not disappear with us this time," he gagged, winking at me mischievously.

"I am honoured to have you here, Lee. Time travel was a lifetime event that I pray will not happen to us again. If it should, it is for others to go through, not us. I now have a family to make very fast," I said, looking at Jamal, who stood a few feet away talking to other classmates. "Remember, I am marrying a Muslim man. My kids will be spaced six months apart instead of nine," Lee laughed so boisterously that people turned to look.

I quickly changed the topic to avoid any such outbursts. "Lee, I will be glad to give you a tour of all the places I promised now that we are here—from my school to the river, to my grandma's ranch where she lost her wealth in Laikipia and much more."

"I can't wait, Mau. This has to be tomorrow since we have two more days of festivities in the dowry process."

"Tomorrow sounds good. We will go to Laikipia and, by sundown, visit my village in Othaya. You and Judy will enjoy everything I have for you."

"You know what, Mau?"

"Tell me, my dear Lee."

"I now realise how beautiful life is after I have come this far. The mission to Super World was to search for my wife, Judy, and for you to stamp your marriage with Jamal. Otherwise, if we did not vanish, Jamal's family may not

have embraced you as their son's wife so easily. Today we can tilt our heads to the sky and say, 'Thanks be to God for this miracle.'"

"For sure, Lee. In more ways than we can even see, maybe that wasteland was a gift to us. I am so happy for you and Judy. I hope we will soon make a trip to Australia."

"Thank you, Wairimu. We are heading there after your event, dear. That trip should be next month," Lee said as something seemed to have come to his mind. "My parents find me to be a bit on the unbelievable side of life. I vanish and, when I reappear, I get married without their consent or blessings. Who does that, Wairimu? I guess I am a loose wire in some ways," he said and chuckled.

Judy walked over, hugged Lee, and then turned to me. "I'm thrilled I came for this event, Wairimu. Kenya is too awesome, and you and Jamal were meant to be together."

"It is fate, Judy. So many ethnicities have been brought together by us—the academy students. We are now one big family," I said, giving Judy a warm embrace.

"Mau, you never told me Kenya is full of Chinese people," Cheng came over to where we stood and, typical of him, barged in on our conversation as he was known to do. "I was shocked to meet my cousin on the streets of Nairobi. I thought your country was a jungle with no modern structures."

We all burst out laughing, with Lee running around trying to grab Cheng, who was doing a masterful job of avoiding him.

"Oh, Cheng, my dear, Kenya is now Kenchic, Kenya-China. Your country is at the front line of updating this jungle into a modern concrete jungle. I preferred to live in the real jungle myself, with beautiful forests and endless savannahs. Sadly though, natural areas are dwindling by the day," I said, trying to sound smart.

"Your country is really a cosmopolitan country," Anika said, joining us in the conversation. "I saw a lot of Indians and Europeans."

"We do have a lot of Indians here. Our country has been home to them for a long time, Anika. They were here even before the colonial government came. Indians and Arab traders gave birth to our coastal region's Swahili people from whom we get our Kiswahili language," I hugged Anika tightly.

"How is the baby? You left him in China, Cheng?" I asked.

"He is doing well, thank you. I left him with my Grandpa. Does your visit to our home still stand? When are we expecting you in China?"

"The next pilgrimage will be to Australia before we can come to China. My time travel brother, Lee, and my sister, Judy, have to wed," I explained to Cheng. "And you are missing something significant, Lee. Most of our classmates don't even know who Judy is."

Lee put on a coy look and apologised for not introducing Judy earlier. "I'm so sorry, guys. Let me introduce my wife, Judy. We landed on the Super World the same day, and now we are counting only months before we can get our second-born child. It is not that she has another baby, but for those who knew my love, Malia, she was pregnant by the time I disappeared in the time travel fiasco. She got a boy, but she couldn't wait for me and decided to move on. A couple of other unfortunate things that I won't talk about happened, but the long and short of it is that I had to pick my boy and raise him, and now I am about to become a dad again through Judy."

"Kindly help me celebrate this Australian girl before her family throws my brother Lee out, as it happened to Cheng while he was in India. Thank you, Judy, for saving my Mau from Lee. I owe you big time, my Lady," Jamal joked while everyone joined in with joyful hurrahs.

"Judy, welcome to this big family, the USA University Academy," I hugged Judy. "You two are my time travel family. I cherish you so much."

Anika stood up and welcomed Judy to the' mama's club '. "I can't wait to visit your home in Australia. I hope all will detour to China, the land of '*you need it, we have got it*.'"

As soon as Cheng opened his mouth, we knew he had a joke in mind. "That was fast, Ji-hoon, you just came back, and you are ahead of us: a dad of two?"

"I thank God, my brother, Cheng. It has not been easy, but I am getting the hang of it. We are heading straight to Australia from here. Once the preparations are finalised, we will give you the dates to join us."

I stood up to hug both Lee and Judy. "God is ahead of you in all your endeavours. Be a good husband to Judy, Lee, and Judy, my sister, continue being the perfect chef for Lee. I love you so much, my comrades."

“LEE, IT IS TIME you met my grandma,” I suggested when we arrived.

“I’ve always wanted to, Mau.”

We found Grandma busy supervising the cooking of the variety of foods for *rurachio*, the betrothal ceremony. Though she would not have said it, I knew she wanted the foreign guests to have a taste of our Kikuyu cultural foods.

"Grandma, come and meet my time travel Bachu and his wife Judy," I called her in Kikuyu, and played the role of translator between her and Lee.

"Oh my God... What a handsome dude!" Grandma exclaimed. "Is he for real?" She touched Lee to feel his soft skin. "He is so young and handsome? How did you land on such beautiful people? Is he from our planet or he vanished from that wonderland you were in to follow you here?"

"He is from this planet, from a country called Korea."

"I wish I was younger, I would have married him to be his second wife – time should have waited for me," Grandma smiled exposing her toothless gum that always made her look so adorable.

"Hi Grandma," greeted Lee extending his hand. "I was very keen to meet you, too. Not to worry though, I am already your husband. The many stories Wairimu told me about you made me fall in love with you even before we met. Here is a dress I bought for you to wear during our wedding. I bought it from a country far away. I hope it fits you."

"Being my husband I am sure you got the size right," replied Grandma, happy with the gift. "See I told you. This is what I will wear today. To hell with my *kitenge*! I want to feel young... *Suduuu!*"

Her whoop of gratitude in the expression *suduuu* sounded funny making them all laugh. Lee opened the jewellery box and handed her a necklace to complete Grandma's upgraded look.

"You look very beautiful, Mwari wa Ndegwa (Ndegwa's daughter)," I complimented her as we took photos together. After this, she showed Lee and other students to neighbours around before other guests arrived.

THE USUAL KIKUYU BETROTHAL RITUALS were carried out once everyone had arrived. I was glad to see the Qatar family was very excited to participate in what must have been exotic culture to them. They brought live goats, sixty of them, and three camels, and other gifts they presented to Grandma. The whole ceremony was more interesting for some members of my village who had never seen a camel before. All in all, the event was colourful and memorable.

Once the dowry rites were completed, my classmates stayed in Kenya for another week as they toured parks, museums, and historic sites like Fort Jesus, Mau Mau hideouts, and the places used as concentration camps by the colonialists.

In a way, I felt like I was able to market my country. My Uni Academy classmates had a chance to enjoy nature at its best. They had never experienced a community that co-existed with wild animals, something they could see with the Maasai community. They couldn't stop talking about the Maasai once they encountered them: "They can graze their cows and goats on the same grazing field as the zebras, buffalos, and lions. The lions cannot prey on their cows or goats, for they know that is a death trap. If they prey on Maasai livestock, the lions would turn prey and be hunted down. Many believe there is that mutual understanding between the herders and the hunters of the animal kingdom." I overheard Lee explaining to his grandparents on the phone.

Once we completed our *tours and travels*, everyone flew home, and I was left with my Jamal. "Our next stop is California, Mau. Here you go," Jamal said, handing me a sealed envelope. "I bought you a home. It would help if you did not feel out of place living in Qatar. I want us to live in a more cosmopolitan place. Qatar is my parents' home, just like Kenya is your parents' home. My home with you will be in America, of which we have Dad's blessings. You will be schooling from home as you take care of our family. I have also opened an office to market my Qatar family business in the USA. One more thing, can we stay with your Grandma at our house? She is old and needs a caregiver—that way, Grandma's heart will be at peace knowing that all she needs will be taken care of."

I had remained quiet until that moment Jamal mentioned Grandma. I had to clarify something. "I know my grandma," I told him. "She might agree to visit with us occasionally but cannot agree to relocate to the States. Remember, your family brought her livestock as gifts, which she must care for and attend to at all times. Even for her to pay a visit, it would only happen if she were sure the animals would be well looked after while she was away. Also, Mom is now relocating back to the village next year. I am sure she will be more comfortable here at her home than living with us in the US. But," I drew closer to Jamal and kissed him, "let us check with her. I do not want to appear to be putting words in her mouth. Many thanks for allowing me to stay near my brother, JP.

I had missed a lot to make the USA my home, 'the land that swallowed your mother,' as Grandma used to say."

We walked to where Grandma sat, greeted her, and tried telling her our plans. But she cut us off. "Before you even contemplate going back to wherever you wish, your Dad is coming to pay the dowry for your Mom next weekend. It is an event you must all witness. Today he is coming to relocate these goats and camels to his *Gobit* farm. After his dowry event, I will go with you to the states to see your home then I will come back with your Mom when she relocates to Kenya. At least I have exchanged you with her, which is good enough. I hope you will create time to visit me, *Mimo*—you and your Bacchu."

"I do will, my grandma," I responded, kissing her forehead.

"So, what did you want to tell me?"

"Nothing Grandma, we just wanted to greet you," I said as I dragged Jamal away.

"That is that, my dear," I told Jamal as we decided how to facilitate Grandma's travel.

I quickly ensured that Grandma had her travelling visa, and once Mom's dowry process had ended, they both flew to the US. For Grandma, being in the United States for the first time was a profound experience and a wonderful distraction from Grandpa's absence.

Soon, Jamal and I were settled in our new house. "Thank you, Jamal, for getting me a home here. I promise to be an excellent mother to our children and a smart business partner to you."

"I pray for our children daily. I hope they come soon," Jamal said, kissing my tummy.

I then made him touch my tummy. "I think I am pregnant with twins," I told him, watching his eyes light up.

"Are you sure about that, my Mau? Are you very sure?"

"Yes, my love. I feel very confident about that. Let's see what life brings our way. I am happy to travel this journey with you," I said, planting a loving kiss on Jamal's lips. I knew he wanted to jump around and celebrate, but, for the moment, before the twins came, he belonged to me and only me.

About the Author

Mirigo Kinyanjui is a Kenyan motivational speaker and writer. Her books aim to impart practical lessons drawn from real life experiences and close observations of family life. Where many give up because of perceived insurmountable personal mistakes and frustrations of life, Mirigo hopes the experiences portrayed in her books will manifest into positive life choices for the reader towards a better version of themselves. The author seeks to help tap into opportunities often obscured by the hardships and calamities many encounter in life.

Other Books by the Author

1. **The Cloud Between**
   Duofold's dad wished him dead for being his illegitimate child. Duofold got entangled in dark family secrets, lost his wife to his brother and, despite being cast out, would become the savior of the entire family.

2. **My Sick and Lame**
   Abigail and Joel meet as gay and lesbian adults. They discover that they are siblings, and the only survivors of their family, their parents having long died. They have a paradigm shift and decide to start a family to continue their bloodline. They are determined their generation will not end with them

3. **Transition**
   Miss Morgan is born out of wedlock by a black father and white mother. She creates her own blissful world to live in with all the enjoyment and fun that nature offers. But life seems to have had its reservations as she helps the family navigate through inheritance chaos.

4. **The Layman Entrepreneur**
   The saying, "*If you must burn bridges, build new ones*," is not an idle suggestion. A bridge is for others to cross over as they find themselves or for you to find your way back to the crossroads to rediscover yourself should you lose your way. That is the way of entrepreneurship, as we must keep recreating our paths for our business ventures to succeed.

The book draws from personal experience and tips from the business world at all levels of entrepreneurship.

5. **The Prodigal Daughter**
   Experience the resilience of a mother. The prodigal son left with wealth but came back empty-handed. The prodigal daughter left with her womb, and she brought back generations. Life is but a few moments, yet those moments last a lifetime.

6. **The Remnants**
   The book tells the story of a young man born in Kikuyuland who loves his language and culture so much that it inspires him to trace the origins of Bantu peoples to understand where his community came from. This takes him to many Bantu communities around Africa, only to later learn that his ancestors were Maasai, who are Nilotic. This was not before he had married a beauty from Cameroon after kissing enough girls across the continent.

CROSS ROADS

Legend

This story is about an African girl Wairimu Ndegwa studying at USA University Academy. Due to her kindness, she offers to assist a classmate whose Visa card failed. She feeds him with peanuts for a fortnight. She later learns that he is a Muslim Billionaire heir-apparent. They connect & one thing leads to the other. One cross-road at a time.



MIRIGO KINYANJUI

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Meet the antagonist - Watur. Like a ghost from the past, he appears from the blue to either help you complete life's puzzles or destroy the little hope you hang onto.

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